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Victorian Studies and Its Publics
Introduction

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This special issue of *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* addresses two audiences simultaneously: Victorian scholars and the university, civic, national, and global communities in which Victorian scholarship unfolds. Despite the persistence with which the interdisciplinary field of Victorian studies has engaged multiple publics from the beginning, this practice has not always been legible to Victorianists or registered in narratives of the academy written by those within or outside the discipline. The eight contributions collected here offer an alternative narrative. Collectively, they establish that Victorian studies has always had public impact and in turn has benefited from public audiences and resources. This mutuality has of course not been without its tensions

or problems (both in theory and practice); and several essays touch on the challenges posed by putting specialized scholarship and public agendas driven by budgets and non-scholarly interests in conversation with each other.[1] Still, mapping Victorian studies' appeal and debts to multiple constituencies illuminates Victorian scholarship's methods, origins, and development while also disclosing its important contributions to public life and institutions. Not coincidentally, this special issue begins with the essay of a Victorianist who holds a senior position in a government agency and concludes with an afterword by another who is a college president. In between are Victorianists who have co-curated museum exhibitions, received national or international funding for scholarly projects, directed interdisciplinary programs, and innovated public initiatives—all while continuing to publish specialized research. Since they themselves best demonstrate my claim about the scholarly and public significances of Victorian studies, I proceed directly to characterizing the significance of this issue's contributions, pausing only to express my gratitude to the scholars who accepted my invitation to share their work.

Russell M. Wyland, Assistant Director of the Division of Research at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), historicizes the American intersection of Victorian studies and public institutions by means of the overlapping beginnings of the NEH and the interdisciplinary journals *Victorian Studies* and *Victorian Periodicals Review*. If interdisciplinarity has become a dominant paradigm of curricular innovation and research programs at universities across the U.S. ("interdisciplinarity's Growing Appeal"), Victorian studies as a research field innovated this approach over fifty years ago. Wyland's account of the inaugural issues of *Victorian Studies* in 1957-1958 in his essay, entitled "Public Funding and the 'untamed wilderness' of Victorian Studies," recaptures how radical and threatening interdisciplinary study could then seem to some traditionalists. Ensuing attacks, ironically, were a gift to the nascent field, for it forced leading scholars and journal editors to articulate the methods, goals, and benefits of undertaking interdisciplinary work. One of these goals, positioning the study of history, literature, the arts, education, and urban studies in relation to the politics, social realities, and sweeping changes of the Victorian era, had public implications from the beginning. These factors, as Wyland points out, positioned Victorianists to take full advantage of new funding opportunities offered by NEH after its founding in 1965. Scholars who could clearly articulate the goals, methods, and advantages of a scholarly project enjoyed a competitive advantage relative to other applicants but also assisted NEH by shoring up the validity of spending tax dollars on scholarship, a matter demanding public accountability.

A chief beneficiary of the new granting agency was the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* spearheaded by Walter Houghton, a profoundly interdisciplinary and collaborative research project that garnered almost half a million dollars in the interval from its first grant in 1967 to its last in 1983. The *Index* was a success for Victorianists, for interdisciplinary studies, and for NEH, which could point to its realization as signal evidence of the worthwhile projects it enabled. The veracity of this claim has only increased, of course, with one of the newest developments in academic and public life, the internet and digitized scholarly resources. Indeed, the *Wellesley* has by now been "repurposed" as a digital resource within *C19*, the ProQuest database; and as digitized Victorian periodicals play an increasing role in current Victorian

scholarship and media history, the *Wellesley*'s importance continues to expand.[2]

Laurel Brake has recently co-edited with Marysa Demoor the *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism* (*DNCJ*), a compilation of 1,620 rapid-reference entries on all aspects of the British and Irish press of the nineteenth century.[3] It is a research tool that, like the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, involved hundreds of contributors, international collaboration, and crucial governmental funding—in this case from the Royal Flemish Academy for the Arts and Sciences. Rather than the forty-five periodicals covered by the *Wellesley*, the *DNCJ* surveys some six hundred. Another of Brake's recent projects has also widened access to Victorian periodicals beyond those documented in the *Wellesley Index*. Brake received a large grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the U.K. to digitize six periodicals, including the crucial Chartist journal *The Northern Star*, in a free-access, searchable database. In creating the database, she and her collaborators immediately confronted the problem of multiple editions, none entirely identical, of the same issue—a situation that did not merely pose logistical challenges but also helped foster greater theoretical and historical understanding of nineteenth-century publishing practices. She considers the insights generated by such work and the intersection of public and private, scholars and institutions, in "Tacking."

Brake's title at once signals detailed materialist history and a theorizing of how producers of nineteenth-century periodicals—the source of so many Victorian writings still studied today—adopted mobile, entrepreneurial strategies to take advantage of multiple audiences and occasions in the news cycle as well as to ensure futurity. If a "sporting" edition of a newspaper might target readers who followed boxing matches or horse races, the practice of binding volumes composed of a month's, half year's, or year's issues fostered relationships between commercial journalism and public or lending libraries and also transformed "current" or "ephemeral" material into "historical" texts. After mapping these complex practices Brake turns to a similarly complex intersection of the entrepreneurial, institutional, and collaborative elements of current digitization of Victorian periodicals, which makes available on a scale hitherto unprecedented the writing, graphics, and publishing practices of the nineteenth century but raises further questions about permanence, multiple users, and above all access. By this means, she at once historicizes digitized as well as printed texts and asks important ethical questions. In addition to the problem of immensely costly digitization that draws upon the work of scholars yet results in expensive databases sold to corporate bodies, or of free-access materials that are unevenly available in national settings (or to potential global users who lack funds to purchase hardware), she also challenges Victorian websites to consider welcoming participation from non-experts ("public" users) on the analogy both of contemporary wikis and the historical correspondents' columns that were so marked a feature of nineteenth-century periodicals.

If Laurel Brake mentions "business models" pursued by Victorian publishers and current electronic resources, art historian Anne Helmreich draws upon her extensive research on the relation between Victorian commercial galleries and Victorian art to illuminate museum practices today. Helmreich

(director of the Nord-Baker Center for the Humanities at Case Western and recent recipient of a NEH Challenge Grant to support the Center's partnering with local cultural institutions) begins with the centrality of art exhibitions to Victorian culture, national identity, and commerce. From the early decades of the nineteenth century onward, art exhibitions intensified demand for art (hence art production as well) while the profitable expansion of art prints satisfied a love of art for those unable to afford Old Masters or purchase contemporary works. Even Royal Academy exhibitions, which claimed transcendence from commerce, operated amidst surrounding commercial dealers and art supply vendors who located nearby, and the exhibitions inevitably led to sales before, during, or after shows closed. Later in the century commercial galleries promoted the prestige of individual artists by innovating the "one-man show," as with the 1892 Whistler exhibition noted by Helmreich.

Her title, "Victorian Exhibition Culture: The Market Then and the Museum Today," signals that highly specialized archival research aimed at illuminating the economic underpinnings of the Victorian art world also sheds light on public art museums today. For the one-man show innovated by Victorian commercial galleries has remained a central feature of twentieth- and twenty-first-century museums. Current one-man exhibitions of Victorian artists, as in the late nineteenth century, likewise serve to establish aesthetic prestige and generate revenue—and Helmreich reminds us that even Victorian commercial galleries themselves often sold tickets for admission to shore up revenues. If academic art historians cannot pursue scholarship without access to paintings housed principally in museums, Helmreich in turn reveals the debt of museums to specialized academic research, as when a 2001 Tate exhibition was inspired by the 1997 scholarly monograph by Alison Smith on the Victorian nude. In surveying numerous recent exhibitions of Victorian art (both group surveys and one-man shows in Britain, North America, and Europe), Helmreich also reminds us of the popular public interest that Victorian culture continues to inspire. And in documenting the 1996 Constable exhibition in which members of the public were invited to contribute their own versions of his famous painting *The Cornfield*, she documents an instance of the possible interfaces between public non-specialists and specialist researchers akin to those proposed by Laurel Brake.

Margaret Stetz, a specialist in women's studies and the literature and culture of the fin de siècle who has, like Anne Helmreich, co-curated museum exhibitions, points out that non-specialists' involvement in Victorian material culture is already widespread if we know where to look for it—on their bodies. In "Would You Like Some Victorian Dressing with That?" she details the sampling, recycling, and recombination ("mashups") of Victorian fashion in contemporary dress from goth street culture to retail outlets purveying riding jackets or corsets to glossy high fashion spreads in magazines. This most visible sector of public engagement with things Victorian, she remarks, is allied to brisk sales of art posters of Victorian art or reproductions of Victorian wallpapers and textiles (especially William Morris designs) for home décor. And the encounters between Victorian and contemporary culture also play out on imaginative terrain in neo-Victorian novels and film adaptations both of Victorian and neo-Victorian literary narratives. Stetz singles out *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles and the 1981 Karel Reisz

directed film it inspired among other possible examples.[4] As her illuminating analysis demonstrates, fashion is a key erotic and historical signifier in both film and novel. She also argues that the curiosity about the Victorian past such work generates can be tapped by scholars not only to energize their own historical research and teaching but also to connect to audiences beyond the academy—if scholars will avail themselves of the opportunity.

Stetz tellingly contrasts the widespread interest in Victorian material culture—especially fashion—visible on streets, movie screens, commercial websites, and brick-and-mortar store shelves with the surprisingly sparse landscape of fashion scholarship within Victorian studies. Despite the groundbreaking *Fashion and Eroticism,* published by Valerie Steele in 1985, and Steele's own ability to integrate rigorous scholarship and public impact in her roles as historian, museum curator, and New York icon, Victorian studies scholars have been surprisingly slow to embrace a research topic that opens directly onto some of the most compelling preoccupations of Victorian studies in recent decades (sexuality, gender theory, material culture) and that has the power to attract interest both from specialists and a public eager for the information that scholars are best equipped to document and share.[5]

Interchange between the academy and various publics can sometimes occasion tension, even cooptation, if enthusiasms, social utility, or profits threaten to override the best practices of scholarship. Miriam Bailin acknowledges these potential pressure points while clarifying (by historicizing) the longstanding exchanges between the academy and a series of public societies founded to promote study of individual authors. "A Community of Interest—Victorian Scholars and Literary Societies" emerges from her ongoing study of author societies as reading communities and participants in the creation of cultural history (a project supported in part by a NEH summer fellowship). Yet another nineteenth-century invention, author societies remain a flourishing phenomenon today, with over one hundred registered in the U.K., many boasting international memberships. Their emergence, Bailin observes, was roughly contemporaneous with debates about the suitability of English studies for a university curriculum. Late nineteenth-century university debates were concerned to differentiate degree candidates from mere "common readers," and numerous academics today remain ambivalent about associating with "enthusiasts." But then, as Bailin wryly observes, members of author societies can also express skepticism about scholars and the critical and theoretical terminology they adopt.

Bailin's principal thrust is not what scholars and author societies have to fear from each other but their mutual interdependence. Author societies, not universities, were usually the first to gather personal papers and letters that were to prove so vital to later scholarship; often society members—amateurs by academic standards—produced the earliest textual studies or collected editions of authors as well. Moreover, society publications evolved in many instances into academic journals of record that today provide information crucial to scholarly research and offer outlets for peer-refereed essays. Additionally, author societies often sponsor conferences that occasion fresh scholarly investigations and networking opportunities for specialists.[6] Yet author societies in turn find university scholars and scholarship indispensable.

University scholars have served on boards and offered lectures to author societies such as the Brontë Society almost from the beginning; and university affiliation of some sort is crucial when author societies seek funding, often in league with civic or local institutions, to support conferences or literary festivals, since university credentials can lend assurance that the content or "product" will be substantive. Author societies, Bailin concludes, thus represent both a public audience for scholarship and a bridge between scholars and even wider publics in the forms of local history studies, museums, and that wider but elusive general public interested in matters literary and Victorian.

Bailin notes in passing that the Charles Dickens Fellowship in Britain was founded in 1902. "Victorian Studies' International Publics: The California Dickens and Global Circulation Projects," by Regenia Gagnier, opens on the scene of the twenty-ninth Dickens Universe, an annual week-long event affiliated with the University of California Dickens Project that brings together scholars and members of the public in Santa Cruz to study a novel of Charles Dickens in depth. In 2009 the gathering convened after the Dickens Project had been defunded by a state in financial crisis, and scholars suddenly turned into public supporters and donors to keep this vital institution going.

Gagnier, Professor of English and Director of the Exeter Interdisciplinary Institute at Exeter University as well as President of the British Association for Victorian Studies, has long been known for probing the ethics and social impact of art and aesthetic experience. Part research report, part position paper, and part theorization of new approaches to global literary studies, her essay details a new project supported by a large grant from the British Academy to study the global circulation of Dickens beyond Eurocentric or Anglophone countries within a context that accords as much emphasis to what African and Asian translators, readers, and writers produced as what they received. Sampling the questions and methods such studies propose and some preliminary results regarding Dickens's significance to twentieth-century China, Gagnier also prods scholars to realize the current potential public impact of their own research and to learn to articulate it to an array of administrative, governmental, and social audiences. If she urges scholars to think globally and publicly, she likewise pays tribute to the continuing importance of excellent scholarship that can move and engage those both within and beyond the academy.

Teresa Mangum, Associate Director of the Dickens Universe Summer Seminar, is also a specialist on New Woman writing and Victorian representations of aging, and she recently concluded a 2009 symposium on public humanities supported by an Imagining America Critical Exchange Grant. Her contribution to the special issue, "The Many Lives of Victorian Fiction," is a pedagogy essay and think-piece about how innovative humanities teaching can lead simultaneously to public involvement and new interpretive practices for students, interested members of the public, and scholars. As in all sound scholarship on pedagogy, she both reports a particular example and theorizes its significance, by this means inviting other Victorianists to invent new practices that serve the interests of scholarship, pedagogy, and non-specialist readers in a common enterprise and learning community.

Specifically, she recounts teaching *Votes for Women!* (1907), the suffragist play by transatlantic author and actress Elizabeth Robins, while simultaneously partnering with a colleague in the theater department to stage a reading of the play, and with a local chapter of the League of Women Voters whose members volunteered as women in a crowd scene and sponsored a succeeding panel on the role of women voters during an election cycle involving the first viable woman candidate for president.[7] Mangum's students not only read the Robins play along with five other Victorian novels that probed women's social and legal status, but also completed research to provide the historical context for the play's production, to argue for which scenes should remain or be cut, and to write the program notes for the performance. Merging reading and interpretation with embodied practice and real-world use was pedagogically productive, since students had to think through what audiences in 2007 needed and wanted to know, e.g., the role of clothing in signifying characters' status and audiences' ability to interpret their encoded significance (cf. the essay in this issue by Margaret Stetz). The project's public ramifications were likewise significant, since it generated an innovative, richly rewarding partnership between Victorian studies and local civic institutions and inspired many students to become involved in election campaigns. For all participants, whether inside or outside the academy, Robins's text became a contact zone between the present and past, between the humanities and public sectors, that spurred or renewed interest and inquiry.

As President of Smith College, Carol T. Christ must daily negotiate the intricate, deeply-embedded relationship between higher education and a range of public constituencies and institutions, while as a longstanding Victorianist she has an intimate grasp of current issues in the field. Like Russell Wyland in the essay that opens this special issue, Christ in her afterword looks back to the founders of *Victorian Studies* and to Walter Houghton and emphasizes their shared commitment to interdisciplinarity. She also underscores their historicist scholarship and suggests that their impetus toward historicizing was anticipated by leading Victorian writers and thinkers, who historicized their own present and asked what it meant to be "Victorian." Christ thus reopens recent scholarly debates about whether "Victorian" is an apt or desirable term to characterize the field and lets Victorians themselves, so to speak, sit at the table. She concludes that an interchange between past and present has always been foundational to Victorian studies. For this reason, she contends, the field still has much to offer academic and public audiences today: if Victorian studies continues to whet interest and repay curiosity, it also commands the vital potential to illuminate contemporary issues that preoccupy specialists and non-specialists alike, from adapting to rapidly changing technologies to conceptualizing the role and status of the modern university within society.

President Christ cites no current historians, but she could have pointed to the work of Niall Ferguson or Catherine Hall, who adopt strikingly divergent outlooks on Victorian imperialism (in *Empire* and *Civilising Subjects* respectively) but share the conviction that studying Victoria's empire has much to tell us about the exercise and effects of global power today. An earlier special issue of *RaVoN* devoted to *Victorian Internationalisms*, co-edited by Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Julia M. Wright, likewise realizes the potential of rigorous specialist scholarship to enrich "an era acutely focused on its own globalizing momentum"

(“Introduction” ¶ 1). Other recent work taking up the interface between elements of Victorian culture and our own include Jay Clayton’s *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace*, a recent forum devoted to Victorian studies and interdisciplinarity in *Victorian Review* (Chapman et al.), and Dinah Birch’s *Our Victorian Education*. Birch, for example, cites John Ruskin’s conviction that “‘You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him’” (*The Stones of Venice*, qtd. in Birch 140) to articulate the dangers of over-regulating contemporary higher education, of treating it principally as a knowledge industry, and of excluding from it what cannot be easily assessed: individual differences, creative engagement with learning that can result in unanticipated connections, and education of the whole person.

Collectively such scholarship, to which the essays in the current issue of *RaVoN* make an important addition, suggests that Victorian studies is both historically and inherently positioned at the intersection of academic teaching and research and multiple constituencies among various civic, national, and global publics. In clarifying this positioning, this special issue also tacitly responds to recent concerns about humanities’ significance and utility at a time of diminished revenues and changing terrain in the academy.[8] In a 19 February 2009 opinion piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Andrew Delbanco, Director of American Studies at Columbia University, asserts that “if educators hope for renewed public trust in the value of liberal as opposed to practical or vocational education, we have to come to terms with the utility question one way or another” (Delbanco). Delbanco and other commentators articulate the crucial contributions made by the humanities largely along the lines set forth by Dinah Birch: in fostering imagination and creativity (Ayoub and Goldstein, Harpham), educating the whole person (Delbanco), and strengthening the knowledge of history and critical thinking needed to sustain an educated citizenry (Delbanco, Harpham).

Certainly in the case of literature such linking of humanities to a larger public good long precedes even the Victorian era. Aristotle associates poetry with the highest forms of truth in the *Poetics*; Horace links the pleasures of literature with forming character in “*Ars Poetica*” (since poetry both delights and instructs); and in “The Defense of Poesy” Sir Philip Sidney synthesizes Aristotle and Horace in praising poetry as a nurse of civilization and source of universal truth that thereby helps teach virtue. For reasons familiar to Victorianists and others, such rationales no longer suffice to legitimate humanities within the academy or with public sectors. Several alternative narratives of humanities’ significance are available, however. In terms of literary study, some contemporary scholars point to the importance of current book clubs—a form of public, social reading (Ross et al. 221-38) that creates “cultural democracy” (Farr 101-5)—or to the constitutive role of storytelling and interpretation in human cognition and evolutionary development (Gazanniga 203-40, Boyd 188-208). This special issue of *RaVoN* adopts a different approach. For it documents, theorizes, and historicizes strong partnerships between Victorian studies at its best and diverse public audiences and institutions both in the past and present. Though not always acknowledged within or beyond the academy, Victorian studies has long had public audiences and significance, and the essays collected here further suggest that rigorous scholarship pursued as an end in itself and as a means to innovative teaching can likewise attract and serve wider public audiences as well.