NEW MEDIA AND THE RISE OF THE POPULAR WOMAN WRITER, 1832–1860

Alexis Easley
New Media and the Rise of the Popular Woman Writer, 1832–1860
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Portions of this book have appeared in different form in my contributions to academic journals and essay collections. Portions of
To Brett and Maurice Fried
Introduction

The National Endowment for the Arts recently announced that between 2012 and 2017 the number of people in the United States who read poetry increased from 8.2 to 17.5 per cent, with the largest gains in the 18–24 age group.\(^1\) Although the cause of this spike is unknown, some have speculated that it is due to the spread of social media, which promote the sharing of texts that highlight resonant themes and sentiments in a short format well suited to a busy modern lifestyle. As Helena Fitzgerald puts it,

> Poems frequently go viral, in part because it is easy to fit one into a screenshot. Poetry mimics many of the conventions of social media: Its affinity for the ridiculous, its attention to seemingly unimportant detail, its brevity, and the skill with which it elides devastating insult and kindness.\(^2\)

After Mary Oliver’s death in January 2019, her poem ‘Wild Geese’ was frequently shared on social media, proliferating into memes, tributes and satirical tweets.\(^3\) In the same month, a video of Danez Smith reading ‘Dear White America’ reached over 350,000 views on YouTube.\(^4\) Smith’s co-created Button Poetry channel, which distributes videos of younger poets reading their work, currently has over one million subscribers.\(^5\)

The proliferation of poetry in new media is cause for celebration – not only for poets, who have the ability to reach broad audiences and manage devoted fan bases, but also for readers, who can take an active role in the recirculation of popular texts through posting and retweeting, creating memes and annotating shared content. We might like to think that this is a new phenomenon made possible by digital technologies, but the relationship between popular literature and new media far predates the present moment. Scholars such as
Carolyn Marvin, Geoffrey Pingree and Lisa Gitelman remind us that the idea of ‘new media’ is nothing new. As Marvin notes,

We are not the first generation to wonder at the rapid and extraordinary shifts in the dimension of the world and the human relationships it contains as a result of new forms of communication, or to be surprised by the changes those shifts occasion in the regular pattern of our lives.6

Gitelman and Marvin, in their studies of media history, focus primarily on the second half of the nineteenth century, when new communication technologies – film, telegraphy and phonography – functioned in complex ways to mediate the relationship between individuals, power and daily experience.7 Other studies emphasise how new readerships were created and harnessed by the New Journalism that arose with the mechanisation of print culture at the fin de siècle.8

In New Media and the Rise of the Popular Woman Writer, I examine an earlier period of media history, 1832–60. This era marked a revolution in print culture brought about by reductions in the taxes on print, increases in literacy rates, the rise of steam-driven rotary printing and the extension of railway distribution networks. This period of media innovation and change provided new opportunities for women writers to enter the literary marketplace. As the reading public diversified, women were called upon to deliver content – and to imagine themselves as active consumers of literary commodities. Family magazines, literary annuals, weekly newspapers, children’s textbooks, sheet music, literary monthlies and penny periodicals all imagined women as part of their readerships, making them ideal vehicles for women’s writing. Of particular importance were the new magazines of popular progress such as Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal (1832–1956) and the Penny Magazine (1832–45) which, as Helen Rogers points out, ‘promoted a model of citizenship which connected the observance of domestic duty with public virtue’.9 These periodicals imagined women as key participants in the project of promoting popular education, healthful entertainment and national stability. They also provided a staging ground for the development of feminist thought.10

When a new communication medium appears, Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey Pingree tell us, ‘its meaning – its potential, its limitations, the publicly agreed upon sense of what it does, and for whom – has not yet been pinned down’.11 Carolyn Marvin likewise notes that ‘it is in the uncertainty of emerging and contested practices of communication that the struggle of groups to define and locate themselves is most easily observed’.12 These periods of transition were crucial for
women writers, who were able to find openings in a field of writing that did not yet have firm rules of participation and a publishing industry that needed a ready supply of material to meet the demands of a growing body of mass-market readers. The ‘uncertain status’ of the cheap weekly paper produced what Gitelman and Pingree call ‘instances of both risk and potential’. A woman writer might achieve fame or simply disappear in a sea of print. Some authors, by virtue of their talent, good fortune or strategic manoeuvring, were able to find a welcome opening in an uncertain field, capitalising on new modes of literary production in order to establish themselves as celebrity writers and editors in a burgeoning journalistic marketplace. However, they also fell subject to gender bias, obsolescence and de-canonisation as old prejudices and hierarchies were adapted to new media formats.

In this study, I explore the careers of a broad range of women writers – both those considered ‘canonical’ and those often classified as ‘noncanonical’ – in order to highlight the vagaries of the market for women’s writing from 1832 to 1860. The idea of canonicity is of course historically contingent. Felicia Hemans (1793–1835), Frances Brown (1816–79) and Eliza Cook (1812–89) achieved unprecedented success during the early decades of the Victorian era, yet their work was largely forgotten by the end of the century. George Eliot (1819–80) and Charlotte Brontë (1816–55) achieved canonical status as novelists, yet they began their writing careers as unknown poets working in an uncertain field. One of the aims of this study is to defamiliarise what we think we know about canonical writers like Eliot and Brontë by placing them alongside Hemans, Cook and Brown in the early years of their careers, when they, too, saw themselves as aspiring poets writing for the new audiences and popular markets that arose with the expansion of print culture in the 1840s. I am also interested in the myriad other writers – still largely unknown in current scholarship – who worked within the networks associated with popular periodicals, 1832–60. The rise of new media forms, after all, not only provided opportunities for women to enter the literary field and, in some cases, to achieve celebrity status, however contingent or ephemeral, but also enabled a large number of now-forgotten writers to quietly make a living by writing anonymously for popular magazines and newspapers. In this study, I will examine a crucial vehicle for women’s writing associated with the popular literature movements of the 1830s and 1840s – *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* – which provided women celebrities and amateur writers with remunerative work that enabled them to be, at least partly, self-supporting.
All of the women in this study to varying degrees were inspired by the idea of the ‘popular’ woman writer that took shape with the rise of cheap periodicals and newspapers during the 1830s and 1840s. On the one hand, the popular woman writer was defined by her celebrity – a visibility made possible by periodicals and newspapers that were widely accessible and shared content through the widespread practice of reprinting. On the other hand, the idea of the popular woman writer coalesced around the idea of a shared mission: to provide moral instruction and healthful entertainment to the masses. As Helen Rogers notes, many women were motivated to enter the literary field in order ‘to speak as members of “the People” and in “the People’s name”’.15 This model of popular authorship was enabled by the convention of anonymous publication in many periodicals and newspapers, which allowed women to define themselves as national instructors while maintaining domestic identities away from the public spotlight. Many women writers operated at both ends of the spectrum, alternating between signed and anonymous publication as they moved between media. The idea of ‘the People’ addressed in women’s writing of the period was not so much defined by class, gender or ideology but by habits of reading. As Scott Bennett has shown, the ‘popular’ or ‘mass-market’ audiences which arose in the early decades of the nineteenth century depended on the ‘demonstrable behaviour’ of purchasing mass-market periodicals and newspapers on a daily, weekly and monthly basis.16 ‘The hunger for knowledge was widespread and deeply felt in the 1820s and 1830s’, he notes, and this ‘was the essential pre-condition for the creation of a mass reading market’.17 The new mass-market press was also defined by its national remit, which was made possible by new technologies of printing and transportation. Many of the new periodicals and newspapers founded in the 1830s and 1840s achieved circulations in the tens or hundreds of thousands and actively shared content through scissors-and-paste journalistic practices. This made them ideal vehicles for women writers who sought to define themselves as national instructors, either through anonymous or celebrity authorship.

In addition to exploring the rise of the popular woman writer in the context of new media formation, this study examines the evolution of the mass-market woman reader from 1832 to 1860. The scrapbooking fad emerged in tandem with the rise of the cheap press. Women repurposed poetry, images, paragraphs and other print ephemera in their albums, thus assuming an active role in interpreting and re-editing found materials. In situating scrapbooks within the cheap literature movement, I, like Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and
Joshua Green, adopt a ‘hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways’ than we might imagine. Editors and publishers might determine the contents of their magazines and newspapers, but women readers repurposed these materials in inventive and sometimes subversive ways. As Elizabeth Gruber Garvey notes, ‘Clipping and saving the contents of periodicals in scrapbooks is a form of active reading that shifts the line between reading and writing.’ In the burgeoning publishing industry that emerged after 1832, women operated at both ends of the market – not only producing content as writers and editors but also actively remixing and sharing this content in privately curated collections of printed scraps.

**Historical Contexts**

A key moment in the history of new media innovation was the passage of the first Reform Act in 1832, a legislative landmark that enfranchised thousands of middle-class voters. A year later, the advertisement tax on newspapers was reduced, sparking a revolution in print. For the next two and a half decades, the remaining taxes on print were overturned, concluding with the elimination of the paper tax in 1861. As taxes fell, newspapers and periodicals became more affordable and ubiquitous, a growth that was further enabled by the rise of steam-driven rotary printing and the extension of railway distribution networks. Sunday newspapers founded in the 1830s and 1840s – for example, the London Dispatch (1836–9), the Operative (1838–9), Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper (1842–1923), the News of the World (1843–2011) and Reynolds’s Political Instructor (1849–50) – were instrumental in expanding the market for journalism. As Ivon Asquith has shown, the Sunday newspaper ‘sustained the largest increase’ in circulation of any publishing genre during the early Victorian era: ‘In 1821, the leading Sunday papers had each sold about 10–14,000; by 1843 they sold 20–55,000; and by 1854 as much as 110,000, which only 25 years earlier had been their aggregate sale.’ The Weekly Dispatch, established in 1801, led the way by offering a lively mix of radical politics, sporting news and sensational crime reportage aimed at an artisan and lower-middle-class audience.

The popularity of Sunday papers coincided with the birth of a decidedly more respectable weekly genre: the cheap family periodical. This included Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal and the Penny
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Magazine, both of which achieved circulations over 50,000 in the 1830s. These weekly magazines, priced at 1d. and 1½d., respectively, were dedicated to improving the reading habits of the same constituencies that read the penny papers, providing them with an alternative diet of wholesome reading and useful knowledge. Two family literary magazines founded in the 1840s surpassed the magazines of popular progress in reaching these new readerships by publishing content designed more to entertain than to improve: the London Journal (1845–1912) and the Family Herald (1842–1940). These titles were followed by a second generation of magazines of popular progress, including Eliza Cook’s Journal (1849–54) and Household Words (1850–9). All were affordably priced at 1–2d. per issue and achieved large circulations. The London Journal and the Family Herald had circulations of 100,000 or higher in the late 1840s, while Cook’s and Dickens’s magazines achieved readerships in the 38,000–60,000 range.21

Besides overlapping readerships, what the Sunday papers and the new family periodicals had in common was their weekly publication format. The Sunday papers included summaries of the week’s foreign and domestic news, but they did not have the time sensitivity of a daily newspaper. While in the early decades of the nineteenth century they were considered morally suspect due to their radical politics and their violation of the Sabbath, they were eventually incorporated into the domestic ideal – the weekly ritual of rest and reflection. A Sunday newspaper’s respectability was premised on its ability to appeal to a family audience that included women. As one commentator noted in an 1856 review, ‘In the Weekly Times there is not a single line that a lady might not read.’ 22 The same could be said of the new family periodicals, which imagined a female reader as part of the new market for popular print, and, as Margaret Beetham notes, ‘assumed that her domestic management provided the scene of reading’.23 Like the Sunday papers, they aimed to provide busy readers with both instruction and entertainment at the end of a long working week. Just as Sunday religious observances allowed time for self-reflection and the reinforcement of communal values, the cheap weekly periodical or newspaper aimed to structure Sunday leisure time in ways that benefited the family and society as a whole.

The rise of cheap Sunday papers and family periodicals from 1832 to 1860 has been addressed in ground-breaking studies by scholars such as Margaret Beetham, Richard Altick, Louis James, Aileen Fyfe, Kathryn Ledbetter, Brian Maidment, Lee Erickson, Andrew King and Jennifer Phegley.24 I build upon this body of scholarship by
exploring the emergence of the popular woman writer and reader in relation to the expansion of mass-market periodicals. In this study, I use the term ‘mass market’ to refer to the audiences for print that emerged as a result of the cheap literature movements after 1832. As Patricia Anderson notes, during this period the ‘printed word and its associated imagery increasingly reached an audience that was not only larger than ever before, but whose number included more than one social class’. \(^{25}\) Within this broad audience for print women were defined not only as consumers of annuals and women’s periodicals but as readers of family magazines and cheap weekly newspapers. These publications constructed a female readership by printing advertisements for domestic goods along with editorial content focused on marriage, family, fashion and the domestic realm. The short essay, fashion illustration, fiction serial, domestic advertisement, music sheet, miscellaneous column and sentimental poem became major genres of periodical content designed to appeal to women readers.

The rise of mass-market family periodicals presented new opportunities for women writers, who were seen as being uniquely qualified for supplying the content publishers and editors needed to appeal to new readerships. In an 1855 retrospective on the rise of the nineteenth-century woman writer, the *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* recounted how

> gradually, but effectually, education widened, deepened, spread; many read, many read much; then came the steam-press, which effected nearly as great a revolution in letters as the invention of printing itself; then followed the demand for food – fresh, wholesome food – to feed that living monster, and the supply was equal to the occasion. But, in order to make that supply equal to the demand, many new pens were dipped in ink, and not a few of those quills were held by female fingers. \(^{26}\)

Even though the scale of this new market for print might have made it seem like a ‘living monster’, it nevertheless provided a positive motivation for women to enter the literary field. Women writers responded to market demands by providing the kind of ‘food’ readers desired – household advice, serial fiction, useful knowledge and sentimental poetry. Significantly, women writers such as Mary Howitt, Christian Johnstone and Eliza Cook assumed editorial positions during this time period, roles that enabled them to shape the new periodical forms and genres to which they were contributing.

The rise of the popular Victorian woman writer from 1832 to 1860 was due not only to the expansion of the cheap press and its
associated short-form contents but also to the practice of scissors-and-paste journalism – the reprinting of poetry, articles and other content from one paper to another. This included a wide range of signed and unsigned material. As Meredith McGill notes, ‘In reprint culture, authorship is not the dominant mode of organizing literary culture; texts with authors’ names attached take their place alongside anonymous, pseudonymous, and unauthorized texts.’ When selecting content for reprinting, editors drew upon a wide range of metropolitan and provincial papers – an exchange economy that was national in its coverage and thus contributed to the idea of a mass market for print. Gibbons Merle, writing for the Westminster Review in January 1829, describes how the sub-editor of a morning newspaper poached content from other sources:

He then makes his selections from the provincial papers which are sent to the office; and when the evening papers are published, extracts from them also, and arranges his extracts for publication – occasionally writing an original paragraph on some subject of interest. From that time, until the paper is sent to press, which may be at one, two, or four o’clock in the morning, he is occupied in overlooking the different reports and communications as they arrive, and in selecting from them such as he thinks worthy of insertion.

Weekly newspapers, like dailies, relied on the exchange of news and scraps. In this sense, they functioned as what Katie Day Good calls ‘media assemblages’: collections of choice extracts from diverse sources created in response to ‘periods of new media abundance’. In the 1830s and 1840s, this abundance was in part due to the deluge of new content women writers were called upon to supply. The sharing culture associated with new media of the period provided a platform for women to see their work go ‘viral’ in domestic and transatlantic contexts, thus achieving a name recognition that could be converted into book publication.

In weekly newspapers and periodicals, reprinted material was often collected into miscellaneous columns aimed at a family audience. These columns were located in the back pages after the news and leading articles, which suggested their contents were meant to be entertaining and informative rather than topical and timely. It was the stuff of leisure-time reading – poetry, anecdotes, fun facts, humorous paragraphs and snippets of domestic wisdom. The miscellaneous content of these columns was alluded to in their titles: ‘Facts and Scraps’, ‘Varieties’, ‘Bagatelle’, ‘Tit Bits’, ‘Miscellany’, ‘Facts and Scraps’, ‘Varieties’, ‘Bagatelle’, ‘Tit Bits’, ‘Miscellany’,
‘Our Scrapbook’ or ‘The Scrap-Book Column’. For example, one paragraph from the ‘Facts and Scraps’ column of the *London Dispatch* recounts the story of Eliza Emery, who ‘warns all the girls out south and west – hoziers, buckeys, and all – to look out for her gay, deceiving, runaway husband, David . . . Eliza thinks he may easily be known, and, to prove it, says, “David has a scar on his nose where I scratched it!”’ Such humour was clearly aimed at both male and female readers. The association between domestic culture and miscellaneous columns further reinforced their similarity to the titles of women’s periodicals published during the same time period, for example the *Bas Bleus Scrap Sheet* (1833), *Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrap-book* (1832–54) and the *Pocket Album and Literary Scrap-book* (1832), which published a variety of miscellaneous content aimed at a female audience.

Of course, the term ‘scraps’ suggested ephemerality and unimportance – the kind of reading material designed to fill an idle hour. However, the pairing of ‘scraps’ with the word ‘facts’ in the titles of some miscellaneous columns suggested that reading could also have an educative function. An anecdote published in an 1836 issue of the *Weekly Dispatch* uses humour to imagine how reading a newspaper might prompt women to increase their store of useful knowledge:

A HAPPY COUPLE. – Wife (reading a newspaper) – ‘My dear, I very often read in the papers of imported, exported and transported, &c; now what do they mean?’ Husband – ‘My love, imported means what is brought into this country; exported means what is sent out of this country; transported means, in one sense, the same as exported, &c, otherwise of joy, pleasure, &c. Now, my chick, an example: if you were exported, I should be transported!’

The humour of this passage is clearly at the wife’s expense and perhaps conveys broader anxieties about the disruptive effects of women’s domestic reading practices. Yet it simultaneously references what must have been a commonplace domestic scene: a woman reading a newspaper and needling her husband with questions that arose in the process. The cheap weekly newspaper or periodical, like the miscellaneous columns it published on a weekly basis, provided women with a conduit to a broader world of knowledge.

Of course, the growing market of women readers was in part produced by commercial interests. As Virginia Berridge has shown, the ‘increasing commercialization’ of weekly newspapers led to them being redefined ‘as sources of profit rather than as centers
of radical feeling’. Indeed, the appearance of miscellaneous columns in weekly newspapers and periodicals corresponded with the proliferation of advertising content directed specifically to women. The same issue of the *Weekly Dispatch* in which the ‘Happy Couple’ appeared also included advertisements for ‘cheap novels and romances’, ‘silk cloaks’, ‘new shawls’ and a ‘cottage silver tea service’. The frequency of such advertisements suggests that women readers were imagined as consumers of both cheap print and a diverse array of consumer goods. This meant that definitions of respectable femininity narrowed into forms that were acceptable to a broad middle-class audience. As James Curran puts it, ‘Advertising exerted pressure for popular papers to move into the middle of the market’ in order to remain competitive.

Examining miscellaneous columns and practices of scissors-and-paste journalism in a commercial context leads to a more nuanced understanding of the forms of writing that enabled the rise of the woman author from 1832 to 1860. Studying the viral texts produced and shared in new media of the period leads us to focus less on their consecrated status than on what Ryan Cordell calls their ‘social life and rhetorical power’.

Cordell raises compelling questions for analysing a viral text:

> How far and in what forms did it spread? In which communities did it circulate? How was this text modified, remixed, responded to, or commented upon? To what extent did this text saturate a given network? How does the spread of this text compare with that of others? And, finally, but perhaps more importantly, what textual, thematic, or stylistic features allowed this text to be easily shared?

In this study, I address these questions while drawing attention to the unique opportunities and challenges women faced as they operated within a male-dominated publishing industry. I explore how forms of mobile textuality enabled women’s careers during a period of new media innovation, when the hierarchies and rules of participation were not yet firmly established, providing women with a host of opportunities as they entered what seemed to be a wide open and ever-expanding literary field.

At the same time that new media and scissors-and-paste journalism provided a platform for women to construct public identities and achieve fame, they also problematised notions of literary property and autonomous authorship. Literary copyright law had difficulty keeping pace with ever-proliferating forms of textual sharing and
reprinting. On the one hand, scissors-and-paste journalism constituted a form of literary theft: due to ambiguities in the copyright law governing newspapers and periodicals, women were not paid for reprintings of their work in the popular press. In many cases, editors snipped away an author’s name before reprinting due to editorial policy or space restrictions. The lack of international copyright law informing the reprinting of British writing in American and other contexts made it even more difficult for women to benefit financially from the transatlantic circulation of their work. The laws governing copyright thus had uneven effects on women’s literary careers – providing them with new openings for literary activity and celebrity status yet simultaneously appropriating their intellectual property without credit or remuneration.

The increasing visuality of the popular press also had a significant impact on women’s literary careers between 1832 and 1860. One of the most marketable features of the *Penny Magazine* was its use of wood-cut illustrations. As Richard Altick notes, ‘Even the illiterate found a good pennyworth of enjoyment in the illustrations each issue of the *Penny Magazine* contained.’ A decade later, the more expensive middle-class *Punch* (1841–2002) and the *Illustrated London News* (1842–1989) also capitalised on new technologies of illustration, thereby making reading a richly visual experience. This innovation made it possible for women writers to be visualised as never before through widely disseminated author portraits. Indeed, sub-editors sometimes poached author portraits from competing magazines, producing viral visual images. This of course supported women’s efforts at self-marketing, yet it often also had the effect of imposing rather narrow definitions of the ‘feminine’ writer stereotype. Indeed, many women writers were edged out of the market when editors no longer favoured the personae they had constructed in popular periodicals of an earlier day.

The expansion of print culture not only shaped the idea of the celebrity author but also provided women readers with opportunities to participate in fan culture and to redefine authorship in creative ways. They copied, cut and pasted material from newspapers and periodicals – selecting, copying, arranging and editing these cuttings into scrapbook albums. In doing so, they actively engaged with print culture rather than passively consuming its pleasures. As Elizabeth Siegel puts it, scrapbooks ‘force us to rethink the concept of the artist in the first place, from one who invents completely to one who amasses, rearranges, and embellishes source materials’. At the same time that scrapbooking constituted a form of fan culture, where the
writings or portraits of favourite authors might be enshrined on hand-embellished pages, it was also a practice that challenged the notion of individual authorship. Scrapbook creators were just as likely to engage in celebrity worship as to remove authorial bylines entirely. The sentiments conveyed in the poems and prose excerpts were often more important than their authorial source or cultural status. Thus, the scrapbook, like the cheap periodical, simultaneously promoted and challenged the idea of literary celebrity and unitary authorship.

What I am arguing overall is that the history of women’s writing during the early and mid-Victorian periods must take into account the dynamic movement of texts from one zone of display to another – and the active roles both writers and readers played in enabling the formation of literary celebrity in an emergent mass-media environment. Like Ryan Cordell, I am less interested in ‘static textual objects’ than in the ‘ways texts moved through the social, political, literary, and technological networks that undergirded nineteenth-century print culture’. This definition of a mobile textuality anticipates our own engagements with media ‘scraps’ and celebrity culture in the twenty-first century. Metaphors of posting, cutting and pasting from the Victorian era have carried over into contemporary social media, which similarly rely upon an exchange economy of snippets and scraps. I do not aim to draw a direct causal relationship between the development of Victorian new media practices and current new media forms; rather, following Katie Day Good, my aim is to ‘show historical continuities in the public and private practices they have promoted for users, and the methodological challenges they produce for researchers’. That is, I aim to trace affinities and resonances, not evolutionary relationships, between Victorian and contemporary engagements with digital media.

It is also important to note, given the broad remit of this project, that I am primarily interested in investigating women’s poetry and short-form prose – the kinds of ‘scraps’ that were ubiquitous in scrapbooks as well as in the miscellaneous columns of popular newspapers and periodicals. Since the study of serial fiction has been the subject of significant scholarship, I have chosen to largely omit it from this study. More interesting to me are the other, more sharable, titbits that could be consumed in a single sitting. While titbit culture is often associated with the New Journalism, recent work by M. H. Beals and others has shown that processes of sharing and reprinting scraps far predated the fin de siècle. These shorter formats fit well into women’s busy lives; they also helped editors fill their weekly pages, either by commissioning original content or reprinting material from competing newspapers.
In my investigation of titbit culture of the early and mid-Victorian periods, I pay some attention to women’s periodicals, which, as Margaret Beetham, Kathryn Ledbetter and others have shown, were instrumental in the rise of the mass-market woman reader, writer and consumer. However, my primary focus is family periodicals and cheap newspapers of the period, which were directed to both male and female readers and played a crucial role in defining mass-market readerships. The scale of these periodicals – with circulations in the tens or hundreds of thousands – is essential to my argument about the democratization of writing and reading, which enabled the rise of the popular woman writer ‘of the people’ and simultaneously defined women as readers who consumed and repurposed cheap print, operating in textual spaces juxtaposed and sometimes overlapping with those occupied by their sons, husbands and brothers.

**Plan of the Book**

*New Media and the Rise of the Popular Woman Writer, 1832–1860* begins with chapters focused on the opportunities for women authors that arose with the expansion of the popular press in the early decades of the nineteenth century – especially in the field of poetry writing. As Lee Erickson has noted, poetry book publication declined after 1830 due to the popularity of literary annuals aimed at women readers. During this time period, poetry also circulated more broadly in a wide range of other periodicals and newspapers – from literary monthlies to children’s magazines and religious weeklies. In 1840, for example, over 16,000 poems were published in the provincial press alone. For early Victorian readers, poetry was an expected part of their weekly diet of reading material. As Linda K. Hughes notes, editors were keen to print poetry because ‘its inclusion could enhance the cultural value and prestige of the periodical itself’. Cheap weekly periodicals and newspapers, in both the metropolis and the provinces, commissioned poetry from women writers but also reprinted their work from more expensive annuals and book collections. These poems also migrated into devotional periodicals, hymn books, recitation textbooks and a host of other publishing media. This practice flourished due to ambiguities and gaps in copyright law, which offered few protections for authors, especially in transatlantic publishing contexts. The practice of reprinting was nevertheless democratic in the sense that it provided access to poetry for readers who could not afford to purchase expensive monthlies and annuals.
In tracing the reprinting of poems and other short-form content in periodicals, newspapers and popular books, I conducted keyword searches of digitised texts in several open-access and subscription databases: British Periodicals I & II, HathiTrust Library, Google Books, American Periodicals, British Library Newspapers, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, America’s Historical Newspapers, Gale NewsVault and the British Newspaper Archive. I also hand-searched titles such as the Weekly Dispatch that have not yet been digitised. I then listed all iterations of individual works on spreadsheets, noting publication dates as well as variations in title and byline, along with attributions of original publication locations or other editorial alterations of the original text. This allowed me to approximate the reprinting histories of poems and other short-form periodical content in the British and American press, with some attention to periodicals distributed in the British Empire. Such histories can only be approximate since the vast majority of periodicals and newspapers have not been digitised and those that are available in digital form are often compromised by dirty OCR or are difficult to excavate due to the deficiencies of search algorithms. Still, my accounts of the histories of reprinting should provide a start, if not the final word, on how select poems and other short-form content were reprinted during a period of major expansion and change in Victorian print media, 1832 to 1860.

Chapter 1 focuses on the career of Felicia Hemans (1793–1835), one of the first women writers to achieve widespread fame as a mass-market poet. I focus on a canonical writer in this opening chapter not to privilege her work on aesthetic grounds but in order to situate her meteoric rise to fame within the burgeoning print culture of the early Victorian period. Her shorter poems were among the most ‘viral’ texts in Victorian print culture, appearing in newspapers, books and periodicals aimed at new niche readerships and mass-market audiences. I begin with an exploration of developments in print culture that coincided with the years of Hemans’s active publishing career from 1808 to 1835. I argue that her engagement with print culture anticipates and defines the market for women’s poetry that emerged in the later years, 1832–60. She provided a model for writers of the succeeding generation, who saw her as an example of how popular success could be achieved within emerging forms of mass media.

Annuals and prestigious literary monthlies were important vehicles for Hemans and many other women writers who began their careers in the early decades of the nineteenth century, yet the cost of these periodicals made them inaccessible to most readers, who were
more likely to encounter women’s poetry in cheap periodicals and newspapers, which frequently reprinted verse in their weekly poetry columns. Hemans had little control over how her work would be appropriated by the editors of mass-market periodicals and newspapers, yet these unauthorised reprintings enabled her to achieve widespread fame, both at home and abroad. In the second part of the chapter, I take Hemans’s poem ‘The Better Land’ as my case study, demonstrating how it was reprinted in a wide range of books, periodicals and newspapers aimed at mass-market audiences and niche readerships. Because her poems often highlighted domestic virtues and Christian values, they were frequently adapted to music and reprinted in books and periodicals aimed at juvenile, religious and family audiences.

In the third section of the chapter, I explore how Hemans attempted to establish copyright editions of her poetry in America in order to capitalise on the popularity of her verse in a transatlantic context. I close the chapter by tracing the publication history of a posthumously published poem, ‘To My Own Portrait’. This poem did not go viral, perhaps because, as an ekphrastic poem, it relied on an accompanying engraving of a portrait by William Edwards West. Images were more difficult to reprint than poems since they relied on reproducing plates, rather than just re-setting type. Nevertheless, the editor of the Garland solved this problem by reprinting the poem with a different engraving from a portrait by Edward Robertson. In this way, the Garland, like many other periodicals of the early Victorian era, played a significant role in fashioning and aestheticising women’s public identities. For Hemans, the loss of authorial control produced feelings of awe and self-alienation, as recorded in ‘To My Own Portrait’ and illustrated through its brief publication history. Hemans’s poetic career anticipates our own new media moment, where texts are reprinted in ways that exceed any individual’s knowledge or control.

The fact that Hemans had published over 350 poems in magazines and annuals suggested a path forward for literary aspirants seeking fame. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth examination of the career of a writer who followed in Hemans’s footsteps: Eliza Cook (1812–89). Cook’s meteoric rise to fame has much to tell us about the opportunities presented by a rapidly changing literary marketplace during the 1830s and 1840s. After publishing her first book, Lays of a Wild Harp (1835), Cook submitted verse to the Weekly Dispatch and soon thereafter became its house poet. As one of the most popular Sunday papers of its time, the Dispatch provided Cook with a platform for disseminating her poetry and establishing her
celebrity identity. After her poems first appeared in the *Dispatch*, they were frequently reprinted in newspapers in Great Britain and the United States. Their sentimental themes, short length and uncomplicated formats made them ideal for sharing and reprinting. By 1847, Cook was serving as editor of the *Weekly Dispatch*’s ‘facts and scraps’ column, a position that enabled her to hone her editorial skills and publish the work of fellow women writers.

After the *Dispatch* distributed Cook’s portrait to its 60,000 subscribers as a free gift, she became a household name and her iconoclastic image was inseparable from the newspaper’s gender-inclusive brand. Her masculine appearance violated the poetess norm of the period as set out by Felicia Hemans and other women poets of the previous generation. Her romantic partnership with American actress Charlotte Cushman likewise disrupted gender norms, yet her iconoclasm seemed to enhance her image as an eccentric yet accessible poet of the people. In 1849, she parlayed this fame into the founding of her own *Eliza Cook’s Journal*, a weekly magazine that initially surpassed Dickens’s *Household Words* in popularity. Yet as the 1840s gave way to the more conservative 1850s, Cook was frequently the target of gender-based attacks in the popular press, which defined her as a sexual deviant on the one hand and a second-rate poet on the other. This notoriety may have been one factor that forced her to retreat from the public eye in 1852 – a move that anticipated her gradual disappearance from literary history. For Cook, as for Hemans, celebrity and popular appeal did not translate into canonical status as the years wore on.

In Chapter 3, I examine the early poetic careers of George Eliot (1819–80) and Charlotte (1816–55), Emily (1818–48) and Anne Brontë (1820–49) – writers who entered the literary field in the 1840s, situating themselves in the burgeoning market for popular verse in the periodical and newspaper press. Eventually they all became well known as canonical novelists, yet their early engagements with the poetry market tell us much about their genesis as writers. In her 1834 school notebook, George Eliot copied down twenty-two poems from books, periodicals and newspapers. She was, in a sense, a poetry fan who was keenly interested in collecting – and in some cases, altering – found texts. Her notebook demonstrates the fine line between copying and composition, an active form of critical reading that ultimately led to her own attempts at original composition, including her first published work, ‘Knowing That Shortly I Must Put off This Tabernacle’, which appeared in the *Christian Observer* in 1840 under the initials ‘M. A. E.’ The Brontë sisters, too, began their careers as
poets. However, unlike Eliot, they chose book rather than periodical publication when seeking an outlet for *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* (1846). They nevertheless possessed a keen understanding of the periodical marketplace, as shown in Charlotte’s letters from the 1840s. Critics often assume that the publication of *Poems* was a disappointing start for the young writers as they began their literary careers. Such accounts overlook the afterlife of the Brontës’ poems in the periodical and newspaper press during the 1840s and 1850s. Following the scissors-and-paste practices of the day, the editors of popular periodicals and newspapers often reprinted the Brontës’ verse, both before and after their rise to fame. The Brontës’ poetry thus had a broader circulation than has hitherto been assumed. After her sisters’ deaths, Charlotte publicised their names and life stories, which in turn led to further reprints of their verse.

The publication and republication of poems by Eliot and the Brontë sisters demonstrate how women could take advantage of new openings in print culture. Yet the fact that they had to adopt gender-neutral pseudonyms, writing as M. A. E. and the Bell brothers, respectively, demonstrates their reticence about assuming female public identities. As I noted in my first book, *First-Person Anonymous*, this strategy to some degree enabled women’s literary careers since it allowed them to publish their work without having to assume feminine identities or write about conventionally feminine subject matter. Some magazines of popular progress formed during the 1830s and 1840s, such as *Howitt’s Journal* (1847–8), did encourage signed publication, which enabled women writers like Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Gaskell to assume public identities as national instructors.

Magazines of popular progress were also important in fostering communities of women writers. As Gitelman and Pingree point out, the ‘emergence of a new medium is always the occasion for the shaping of a new community or set of communities, a new equilibrium’. Analysing the rise and evolution of the literary circles that arose around the magazines of popular progress that flourished after 1832 leads us away from the study of individual authors and towards what Susan Brown calls the ‘complex networks of social, intellectual, and literary relations, and their imbrication with material historical conditions’. That is, rather than defining networks strictly as a system of relationships between individual actors, we can identify them as interrelationships between individuals and the structures, innovations and restrictions imposed by new printing technologies and media formats. This approach relies on what Nathan Hensley, following Bruno Latour, calls ‘distributed agency’ – a ‘chain of visible or material interactions among human and
nonhuman entities: a flexible configuration of actors that itself becomes endowed with agency within a new, yet larger, system of interrelation. In Chapter 4, I investigate the networks of women writers associated with *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* through an analysis of its ledgers and correspondence files. These archival materials reveal that between 1839 and 1855, 136 women contributed to the journal, writing on a wide range of topics and in diverse genres. I detail their contributions, writing locations, rates of remuneration and working relationships with the editorial staff in order to shed light on the role *Chambers’s* played in the emergence of the popular woman writer in the early decades of the Victorian era. I link the work of individual writers to the editorial policies and generic conventions of the journal, which constructed ‘modern’ women as key players in the popular literature movement, both as readers and writers. *Chambers’s* provided a venue for prominent women writers such as Anna Maria Hall (1800–81) to reach broader audiences than ever before and for up-and-coming authors, such as Dinah Mulock (1826–87) and Julia Kavanagh (1824–77), to establish themselves in a burgeoning literary marketplace. *Chambers’s* also provided opportunities for many other amateur and unknown authors to pursue their craft anonymously without name or fame. Written in part by and for women, *Chambers’s Journal*, by the 1850s, became an important vehicle for debates on the ‘Woman Question’, bringing issues of female education and employment to a broad audience of artisan and middle-class readers.

In Chapter 5, I focus on one of the most prolific contributors to *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* in the 1840s: Frances Brown (1816–79). Like Eliza Cook, Brown was working class, but her impoverished upbringing as the daughter of a postmaster in a remote Ulster village placed her on a lower rung of the social ladder than Eliza Cook and with fewer resources at her disposal. When she was eighteen months old, she lost her sight to smallpox and subsequently educated herself by listening to her siblings’ lessons and having family members read aloud to her. Once she began writing, her sister Rebecca (and later a paid secretary, Eliza Hickman) served as her amanuensis. Brown’s careful navigation of the market for poetry reveals the importance of cheap media formats (with differing levels of copyright protection) in fashioning a poetic career. Even though Brown’s poetry was often repurposed by scissors-and-paste journalists as if it were free content within the public domain, she was successful in establishing a celebrity identity and publishing her work in book form. However, she struggled financially throughout her career. Her case demonstrates the vagaries of
a literary marketplace, which, as Meredith Gill points out, had a ‘tendency . . . to shift the ground on which [writers] stood’. Her case also highlights the limitations of the ‘author’ as a unifying concept for a body of work that was reprinted and repurposed without copyright protection or authorial control.

In Chapter 6, my focus shifts from women’s roles as writers to their roles as readers and consumers of the cheap weekly press, 1832–60. I base this discussion on an analysis of scrapbooks held by John Rylands Library and the Harry Page Collection at Manchester Metropolitan University. These scrapbooks provide intriguing details on middle-class women’s reading practices: the periodicals, books and newspapers they read; the poems, articles and scraps they found valuable; and the creative ways they remixed, embellished and edited found materials. In this sense, they were what today we might call do-it-yourself ‘makers’ who participated in print culture by engaging in creative play and the remixing of found materials. I first explore some of the methodological challenges of studying scrapbooks. Because the albums that have been preserved rarely include the names of their creators or identify the original sources of their contents, scrapbooks are often difficult to interpret as documents of Victorian reading practices. However, by searching databases of full-text magazines, books and periodicals, I was able to identify some of the original publishing locations of material excerpted in a selection of scrapbooks. In the chapter, I survey a range of examples before focusing on a particular scrapbook from the 1850s that provides a revealing look into one woman’s reading practices. I also focus on the frequent use of poetry as content for scrapbooks, which corresponded with the prevalence of verse in popular periodicals and newspapers of the same time period. Sentimental poetry was ubiquitous in both periodicals and scrapbooks because it seemed to invite reader identification and response. Popular verse of the early and mid-Victorian eras was what Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green call ‘spreadable’ content – material that ‘leaves open space for audience participation’ and ‘become[s] a meaningful resource in their ongoing conversations or which offer[s] them some new source of pleasure and interest’. The publication of poetry in family newspapers and periodicals inspired women to write while at the same time providing them with content for editing their own collections of found verse. The scrapbook and the cheap periodical thus co-evolved as interdependent genres that linked women readers and writers and blurred distinctions between both categories of engagement with print culture.

In a coda, I take the careers of Eliza Meteyard (1816–79) and Rose Ellen Hendriks (1823–?) as my starting point for reflecting in broad
terms on the rise of the popular woman author, 1832–60. During the early and mid-Victorian periods, women writers were able to take advantage of changing media technologies – the expansion of cheap newspapers and transnational press networks – to promote the recirculation of their poetry and prose in ways that made it seem continually fresh and relevant. At the same time, the ubiquity of women writers’ portraits, works and life stories in the popular press often resulted in a loss of intellectual property rights and a loss of status within emerging canons of British literature. Yet even though most of the ‘popular’ women writers in my study were de-canonised by the end of the nineteenth century, some were rediscovered in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, thus reminding us of the temporary, contingent nature of any writer’s or textual object’s disappearance from the historical record or from public view. Today, de-canonised texts and manuscripts recirculate once more via blog posts, web pages and scholarly databases – and are thereby rediscovered as content that is once again ‘new’. The recirculation of Victorian women writers’ texts, portraits, book covers and ephemera in social media decontextualises and repurposes these materials for a variety of ‘popular’ social, commercial and artistic ends. ‘Posting something on the Web today’, Lisa Gitelman asserts, ‘means publishing into a continual, continuous present that relies more on dates of access and experiences of “WELCOME” than on any date of publication’.59 An investigation of the afterlife of early and mid-Victorian women’s writing in today’s new media thus reminds us of the mobile, shifting relationship between popular writing and new media, both in the nineteenth century and in our own time.

Notes

3. Ibid.
5. Button Poetry channel, YouTube, edited by Neil Hilborn, Danez Smith, et al., est. 11 March 2011, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5D-H3eN81b0RGj7Xj3fsjVg
8. See, for example, Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges*, chapter 5, and Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?*, chapter 8.
13. Ibid.
17. Ibid. p. 251.
28. In her study of nineteenth-century American print culture, McGill notes that ‘reprinting is a sophisticated instrument for projecting an image of a nation that is at once colonial and imperial’ (*American Literature*, p. 23).
31. The phrase ‘to go viral’ is of course a twenty-first-century neologism. See Cordell, ‘Viral Textuality’, for a genealogy of the term. Jenkins, Ford and Green propose using the metaphor ‘spreadable media’ in place of ‘viral media’ since the latter phrase invokes the idea of ‘passive audiences becoming infected by a media virus’ instead of ‘[acknowledging] that audience members are active participants in making meaning within networked media’ (*Spreadable Media*, p. 20). For discussion of the role of reprinting in building literary reputations, see Gruber Garvey, who points out that ‘book publishers also noted an
author’s popularity in newspaper exchanges as a sign that the writer’s reputation was substantial enough to carry a collection of the pieces into a book’ (Writing with Scissors, p. 35).

32. ‘Western Love Letter’, p. 3.
35. Advertising page, p. 11.
37. Cordell, ‘Viral Textuality’, p. 32.
38. Ibid.
39. Easley, ‘Nineteenth Century’; see also the essays on copyright published in a special issue of Victorian Periodicals Review, 51.4, winter 2018.
40. Altick, English Common Reader, p. 335. For further background on illustrated journalism during the early decades of the nineteenth century, see Anderson, The Printed Image.
42. Cordell, ‘Virtual Textuality’, p. 32. See also McGill, who explores a ‘literature defined by its exuberant understanding of culture as iteration not origination’ (American Literature, p. 4).
43. Good, ‘From Scrapbook to Facebook’, p. 558.
44. See, for example, James, Fiction for the Working Man, and King, London Journal.
46. Beetham, A Magazine of her Own?; Ledbetter, British Victorian Women’s Periodicals.
47. Erickson, Economy of Literary Form, pp. 26–32.
50. For discussion of the problems associated with keyword searches of available databases, see Leary, ‘Googling the Victorians’, and Cordell, ‘Q i-ibt the Raven’.
51. In this sense, her verse was typical of much sentimental periodical poetry of the period, which, as Ledbetter notes, ‘aims for connection to the emotions of its readers, not innovation that impresses a few’ (British Victorian Women’s Periodicals, p. 11).
52. Gitelman and Pingree, New Media, p. xv.
53. Brown, ‘Networking’, p. 61. See also Peterson, who draws attention to the ‘complex web of forces’ informing individual authorship, including not only ‘editors, publishers, reviewers, and readers, most obviously, but also printers, booksellers, advertisers, and other middlemen’ (Becoming a Woman of Letters, p. 63).
56. For background on the DIY maker movement, see Hatch, *The Maker Movement Manifesto*.
57. See Gruber Garvey, *Writing with Scissors*, p. 50.