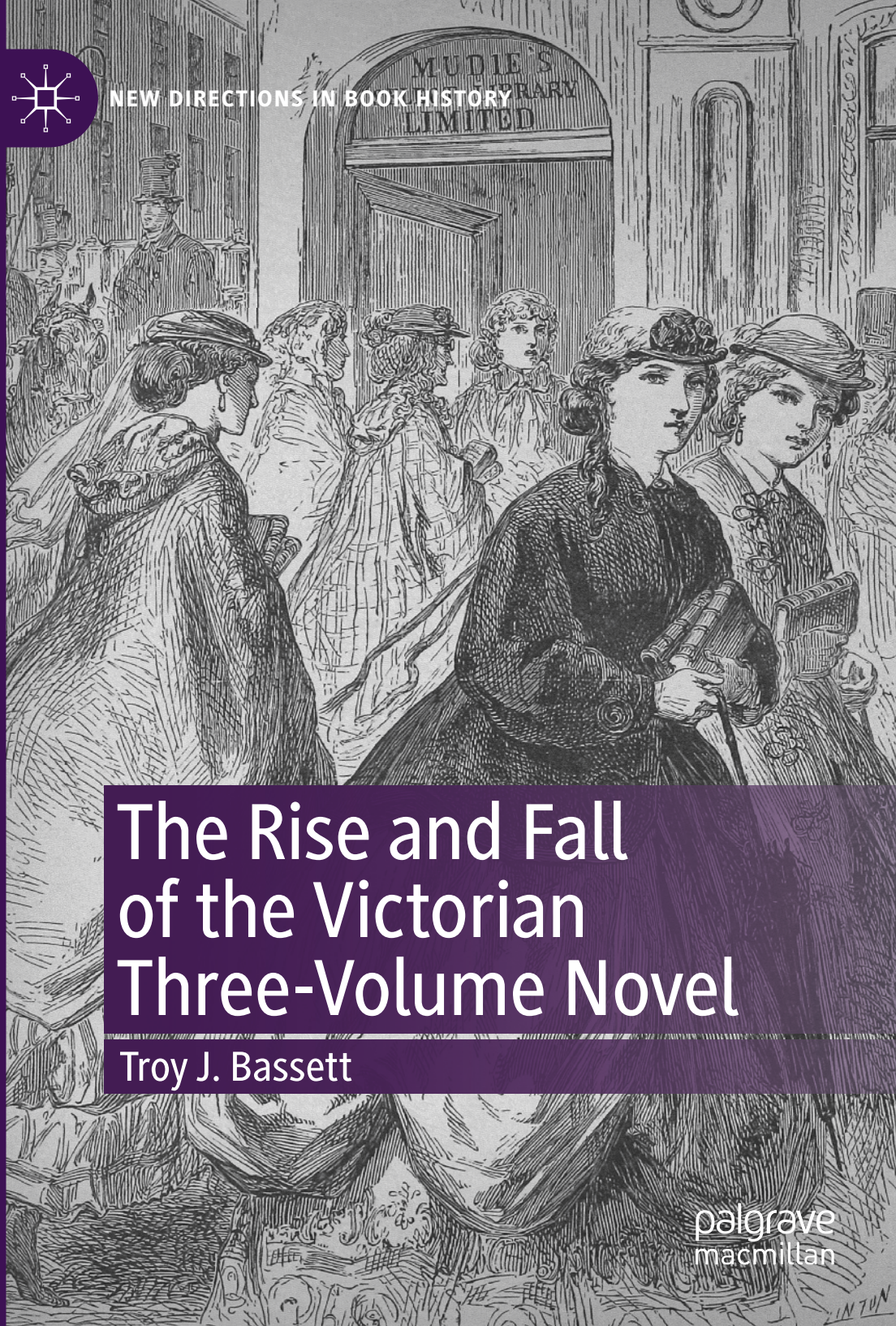




NEW DIRECTIONS IN BOOK HISTORY



The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Three-Volume Novel

Troy J. Bassett

palgrave
macmillan

New Directions in Book History

Series Editors
Shafquat Towheed
Faculty of Arts
Open University
Milton Keynes, UK

Jonathan Rose
Department of History
Drew University
Madison, NJ, USA

As a vital field of scholarship, book history has now reached a stage of maturity where its early work can be reassessed and built upon. That is the goal of *New Directions in Book History*. This series will publish monographs in English that employ advanced methods and open up new frontiers in research, written by younger, mid-career, and senior scholars. Its scope is global, extending to the Western and non-Western worlds and to all historical periods from antiquity to the twenty-first century, including studies of script, print, and post-print cultures. *New Directions in Book History*, then, will be broadly inclusive but always in the vanguard. It will experiment with inventive methodologies, explore unexplored archives, debate overlooked issues, challenge prevailing theories, study neglected subjects, and demonstrate the relevance of book history to other academic fields. Every title in this series will address the evolution of the historiography of the book, and every one will point to new directions in book scholarship. *New Directions in Book History* will be published in three formats: single-author monographs; edited collections of essays in single or multiple volumes; and shorter works produced through Palgrave's e-book (EPUB2) 'Pivot' stream. Book proposals should emphasize the innovative aspects of the work, and should be sent to either of the two series editors.

Editorial Board

Marcia Abreu, University of Campinas, Brazil

Cynthia Brokaw, Brown University, USA

Matt Cohen, University of Texas at Austin, USA

Archie Dick, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Martyn Lyons, University of New South Wales, Australia

More information about this series at

<http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/14749>

Troy J. Bassett

The Rise and Fall
of the Victorian
Three-Volume Novel

palgrave
macmillan

Troy J. Bassett
Purdue University Fort Wayne
Fort Wayne, IN, USA

New Directions in Book History

ISBN 978-3-030-31925-0

ISBN 978-3-030-31926-7 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-31926-7>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer
Nature Switzerland AG 2020

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover credit: “A Visit to Mudie’s,” London Society, vol. 16, November 1869, p. 448

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

EPIGRAPH

As a consequence, the magazine in particular and the circulating library in general do not foster the growth of the novel which reflects and reveals life. They directly tend to exterminate it by monopolizing all literary space.

—Thomas Hardy, “Candour in English Fiction” (1890)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Isaac Newton once wrote, “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” After over fifteen years of working on this book, I think I have some idea of what he meant. At every turn of my research—whether Victorian bibliography, library business practices, book publishing economics, or quantitative book history—I found works by John Sutherland and Simon Eliot had preceded me. For a large part, my work continues and expands their original lines of inquiry. In addition, they both have unfailingly encouraged and supported my work through their generous advice over the years. So, in honor of their example, I dedicate this work to them.

But they were not the only shoulders I stood upon. I have been fortunate to receive the help and support of many generous scholars during my labors for which I am thoroughly grateful, including Stephen Colclough, David Finkelstein, Katherine Harris, Leslie Howsam, Linda K. Hughes, Andrew King, Graham Law, Patrick Leary, Kirsten Macleod, Anthony Mandal, Richard Menke, Robert L. Patten, Linda H. Peterson, Jennifer Phegley, Allen Riddell, Matthew Rubery, and Cheryl A. Wilson. Over the last two decades, I received helpful feedback from presenting my work at several Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers Association, Midwest Victorian Studies Association, North American Victorian Studies Association, Research Society for Victorian Periodicals, and Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing conferences.

At the University of Kansas, my dissertation director Dorice Williams Elliott along with Peter Casagrande, Richard Hardin, and George Worthwell deserve my gratitude for both piquing my interest in Victorian literature and shepherding my dissertation (which formed the basis for Chapter 4) to completion. At Purdue University Fort Wayne, I have been blessed with supportive department and college colleagues including Hardin Aasand, Carl Drummond, Damian Fleming, Rachel Hile, Deborah Huffman, Andrew Kopec, Lewis Roberts, and Michael Stapleton.

The people at Palgrave Macmillan have been a joy to work with on this project—it is a personal thrill to be published by one of the Victorian publishers discussed in this book. I would like to thank the series editors Jonathan Rose and Shafquat Towheed as well as the manuscript referee Andrew Nash, the managing editors, and production editors.

The digital humanities project underlying this book, *At the Circulating Library: A Database of Victorian Fiction, 1837–1901*, has received generous support from a variety of sources including a Summer Faculty Research Grant and a Faculty Course Release Grant from Purdue University Fort Wayne; the Fredson Bowers Award from The Bibliographical Society; a Summer Stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities; a Summer Faculty Research Grant from the Purdue Research Foundation; and a Curran Fellowship from the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals. For their confidences in my research, I thank them.

Two sections of Chapter 1 originally appeared as articles: “The Production of Three-Volume Novels, 1863–1897” in *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, volume 102 (2008), revised and republished with permission of the University of Chicago Press; and “The Victorian Four-Volume Novel” in *The Library: The Transactions of the Bibliographical Society* volume 17 (2016), revised and republished with permission of Oxford University Press. A shorter version of Chapter 2 was published as “Living on the Margin: George Bentley and the Economics of the Three-Volume Novel, 1865–70” in *Book History*, volume 13 (2010). Two sections of Chapter 4 also originally appeared as articles: “Circulating Morals: George Moore’s Attack on Late-Victorian Literary Censorship” in *Pacific Coast Philology*, volume 40 (2005), revised and republished with permission of Penn State University Press; and “T. Fisher Unwin’s Pseudonym Library: Literary Marketing and Authorial Identity” in *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, volume 47 (2004), revised and republished with permission of the ELT Press. I would like to thank all

the journal editors and their presses for allowing me to revise and re-use these works as parts of this book.

And last, but certainly not least, I would like to acknowledge the unwavering support of my family: my parents Jim and Linda, my wife Jen, and my children Joseph and Helen. They have collectively and patiently endured numerous research trips and long monologues on Victorian publishing with loving grace.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	The Production of Multi-volume Fiction, 1837–1898	19
	<i>At the Circulating Library: A Database of Victorian Fiction, 1837–1901</i>	20
	<i>General Production of Multi-volume Fiction, 1837–1898</i>	23
	<i>Format and Price</i>	31
	<i>Authors</i>	40
	<i>Publishers</i>	55
	<i>Serialization</i>	69
	<i>Conclusion</i>	94
3	Publishing the Three-Volume Novel: The Experience of Richard Bentley and Son	101
	<i>Richard Bentley, 1865–1870</i>	103
	<i>Richard Bentley and Son, 1885</i>	126
	<i>Richard Bentley and Son, 1890</i>	134
	<i>Conclusion</i>	141
4	Buying, Renting, and Selling the Multi-volume Novel: The Economics of W. H. Smith and Son’s Subscription Library	147
	<i>The Operation of W. H. Smith and Son’s Subscription Library</i>	151

<i>The Accounts of W. H. Smith and Son's Subscription Library</i>	157
<i>The Libraries' Ultimatum of 1894</i>	171
<i>Coda: Reactions to the Libraries' Ultimatum</i>	177
5 De-monopolizing Literary Space: Alternatives to the Three-Volume Novel	183
<i>Robert Louis Stevenson and the New Romance</i>	186
<i>George Moore and Literary Censorship</i>	195
<i>J. W. Arrowsmith, T. Fisher Unwin, and Series Publication</i>	210
<i>Conclusion</i>	228
Bibliography	237
Index	247

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 2.1	Multi-volume titles published, 1837–1898	24
Fig. 2.2	Multi-volume titles published by gender, 1837–1898	47
Fig. 2.3	Serialization of multi-volume fiction, 1837–1898	78
Fig. 2.4	Serialization of multi-volume fiction and author gender, 1837–1898	91
Fig. 4.1	Label for Mudie’s Select Library 1880	150
Fig. 4.2	Label for W. H. Smith and Son’s Subscription Library 1879	150

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	Multi-volume titles published, 1837–1840	24
Table 2.2	Multi-volume titles published, 1841–1850	24
Table 2.3	Multi-volume titles published, 1851–1860	25
Table 2.4	Multi-volume titles published, 1861–1870	25
Table 2.5	Multi-volume titles published, 1871–1880	26
Table 2.6	Multi-volume titles published, 1881–1890	26
Table 2.7	Multi-volume titles published, 1891–1898	27
Table 2.8	Multi-volume titles and overall titles published, 1840–1898	28
Table 2.9	Multi-volume titles and overall fiction titles published, 1870–1894	29
Table 2.10	Four-volume novels, 1837–1878	34
Table 2.11	Most prolific authors of multi-volume fiction, 1837–1898	42
Table 2.12	Multi-volume titles published by gender, 1837–1840	44
Table 2.13	Multi-volume titles published by gender, 1841–1850	44
Table 2.14	Multi-volume titles published by gender, 1851–1860	45
Table 2.15	Multi-volume titles published by gender, 1861–1870	45
Table 2.16	Multi-volume titles published by gender, 1871–1880	46
Table 2.17	Multi-volume titles published by gender, 1881–1890	46
Table 2.18	Multi-volume titles published by gender, 1891–1898	47
Table 2.19	Most prolific Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and colonial authors, 1837–1898	51
Table 2.20	Irish-, Scottish-, Welsh-, and colonial-authored multi-volume fiction titles published, 1837–1898	52
Table 2.21	Most prolific foreign authors, 1837–1898	54

Table 2.22	Foreign-authored multi-volume fiction titles published, 1837–1898	54
Table 2.23	Twenty most prolific publishers, 1837–1898	57
Table 2.24	Most prolific publishers, 1837–1840	58
Table 2.25	Most prolific publishers, 1841–1850	58
Table 2.26	Most prolific publisher, 1851–1860	59
Table 2.27	Most prolific publishers, 1861–1870	59
Table 2.28	Most prolific publishers, 1871–1880	60
Table 2.29	Most prolific publishers, 1881–1890	60
Table 2.30	Most prolific publishers, 1891–1898	61
Table 2.31	Twenty most prolific publishers and gender of authors, 1837–1898	68
Table 2.32	Periodicals carrying multi-volume fiction titles, 1837–1898	71
Table 2.33	Serialization of multi-volume fiction, 1837–1898	76
Table 2.34	Multi-volume fiction titles serialized by periodical type, 1837–1898	79
Table 2.35	Most prolific periodicals, 1837–1898	86
Table 2.36	Multi-volume fiction titles serialized by authorship, 1837–1898	89
Table 2.37	Most prolific serial authors, 1837–1898	92
Table 3.1	Three-volume novel titles published by Bentley, 1865–1870	105
Table 3.2	Bentley's account for Florence Marryat's <i>Too Good for Him</i> (1865)	114
Table 3.3	Bentley's average costs of production for three-volume novels, 1865–1870	115
Table 3.4	Three-volume novels published by Bentley, 1885	127
Table 3.5	Bentley's average costs of production for three-volume novels, 1885	130
Table 3.6	Three-volume novels published by Bentley, 1890	135
Table 3.7	Bentley's average costs of production for three-volume novels, 1890	138
Table 3.8	Tinsley Brothers' account for Hardy's <i>Desperate Remedies</i> (1871)	142
Table 4.1	Fiction holdings of Mudie's Select Library, 1857–1894	155
Table 4.2	W. H. Smith and Son's Subscription Library accounts, 1860–1865	158
Table 4.3	W. H. Smith and Son's Subscription Library accounts, 1876–1890	161
Table 4.4	W. H. Smith net profits, 1870–1892	165

Table 4.5	W. H. Smith and Son's Subscription Library accounts, 1892–1896	167
Table 4.6	One-volume reprints of three-volume novels, 1870–1893	175
Table 5.1	Late-Victorian publishers' series featuring new fiction	212



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

For many students of Victorian fiction, the term “three-volume novel” conjures up the image of bulky and expensive books native only to the British Isles and the overly wordy and subplot laden texts they contained. The format served a large reading audience through the hundreds of circulating libraries which bought, rented, and sold fiction. Nearly, every canonical author of the period appeared in the ubiquitous format of three octavo volumes priced at one-and-a-half guineas, including first editions of Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Margaret Oliphant, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope. Several hundreds more obscure authors wrote the remaining novels, and another few hundred publishers sold them. The synergistic commercial and literary connections between the publishing format and circulating libraries, especially the largest Mudie’s Select Library and W. H. Smith and Son’s Subscription Library, have become popular wisdom in literary studies. Yet, the publishing format itself remains curiously under-examined. Even relatively basic questions are still unanswered, such as: how many three-volume novels were published, who wrote and published them, what were the economics of the format for both publishers and circulating libraries, why did the format last so long, and why did it end when it did? The latter question, at least, has one simple answer: the joint ultimatum from the two largest Victorian circulating libraries, Mudie’s and W. H. Smith, addressed to publishers in June 1894 calling for the end of the format. However, even the ultimatum does not completely

explain the long history or final end of the format. This study aims to address these questions and give a general cultural and economic history of the three-volume novel during the Victorian period.

When Scottish publisher Archibald Constable (1774–1827) published Sir Walter Scott's novel *Kenilworth* in an edition of three octavo volumes at the eye-catching price of one-and-a-half guineas (£1.11.6) in January 1821, he could have little dreamed that he would set a publishing standard which would last three-quarters of a century. The publishing format of the three-volume novel or triple-decker began as one publisher's calculated gamble but was eventually adopted by his rivals as the prestige format for new fiction aimed at middle-class readers. Prior to the 1820s, publishers issued novels in formats ranging anywhere from one to seven (and sometimes more) volumes in a set based mostly on the convenience or whim of the publisher. For instance, in the eighteenth century, canonical novels such as Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749) appeared in four or six volumes, Samuel Richardson's *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1764) appeared in seven volumes and Frances Burney's *Cecilia: or, The Memoirs of a Heiress* (1782) appeared in five volumes. Even by the end of the century, novels still frequently appeared in editions of five or more volumes in a set.¹ As Peter Garside and Rainer Schöwerling show in *The English Novel 1770–1829* (2000), the early years of the nineteenth century witness a gradual shift toward three volumes as the most common set size for the novel.² In the first decade of the 1800s, a novel was just as likely to appear in an edition of two, three, or four volumes. By the 1820s, nearly half of all novels appeared in an edition of three volumes, with corresponding declines in novels published in two, four, or more volumes. Of the 81 total new fiction titles published in 1829, 48 titles first appeared in a three-volume edition (59.3%). The shift did not escape the notice of readers: as novelist and reviewer Henry Mackenzie observed in 1821, "The mystical Number 3 seems in modern times to be worshipped... that being the common standard for the Number of Vols in which most of the favorite Fictions of the day are set forth."³

Garside and Schöwerling attribute the rise of the three-volume novel to three factors. First, commercial considerations motivated publishers to curb larger set sizes for editions since their larger prices prevented individual sales—the price of the three-volume novel, in the view of publishers, was the maximum purchasers would pay, around 5s or 6s per volume—for instance, Jane Austen's first novel *Sense and Sensibility* (3 volumes; 1811)

cost 15s for the set.⁴ Second, the shift to octavo volumes (with 8 leaves per gathering) from duodecimo volumes (12 leaves per gathering) progressed unevenly over the course of these years: novels overwhelmingly appeared in the latter format and more serious works (e.g., history or biography) utilized the former. The octavo format led to more imposing-looking volumes compared to the daintier-looking duodecimo volumes.⁵ Visually, at least, fiction and nonfiction looked noticeably different on the bookshelf of libraries, perhaps reinforcing the low critical regard for fiction during the Romantic period best illustrated by the Gothic fiction published by the Minerva Press in the smaller format. Last, the unprecedented success of Scott and his *Waverley* novels gave the three-volume format a cultural prestige that other authors and publishers quickly exploited. As many scholars have established, when Scott turned to fiction writing, he gave the novel genre a considerable critical and economic boost. Constable published each of his first four novels—*Waverley* (1814), *Guy Mannering* (1815), *The Antiquary* (1816), and *Rob Roy* (1818)—in three duodecimo volumes with prices ranging from 21s to 24s per set, a higher price but still the familiar format.⁶ With *Ivanhoe*, published on 20 December 1819, Constable used three octavo volumes priced at 30s per set (or 10s per volume, twice the usual price), a format and price in line with works of history and biography, with higher-quality paper and type, and generally out of line for fiction.⁷ All of Scott's subsequent novels came out in the octavo format and other novel publishers gradually shifted to the octavo format. A year later, Constable published *Kenilworth*, thereby setting a standard for new fiction—octavo volumes at 10s 6d per volume—which would stubbornly persist to nearly the end of the Victorian period. A few short years later, nearly a third of the three-volume novels published in 1826 listed at this higher price and nearly all of the 45 triple-deckers published in 1829 did as well.⁸ John Sutherland, in his biography of Scott, rightly calls *Kenilworth* “one of the most influential novels ever published in English,” a lasting cultural influence for an otherwise forgotten novel.⁹

By the 1840s, the three-volume novel became an established staple of British publishing with half as many two-volume novels produced and a score of four-volume novels. Despite periodic complaints from authors, publishers, libraries, critics, and readers, the format enjoyed continuous literary and financial success throughout the century. In fact, little outwardly changed in the appearance of a triple-decker between Scott's *Kenilworth* and the last three-volume novel, G. A. Henty's *The Queen's*

Cup (1897). The conventional story of the three-volume novel generally blames the circulating libraries—in particular Mudie’s and Smith—for encouraging their production. In economic terms, these large libraries exercised a monopsony control over the production of new fiction and created a negative feedback loop: because of high prices, only libraries could afford multi-volume novels; and because only libraries bought multi-volume novels, the prices remained stubbornly high. Accordingly, the developments of part-publication, cheap reprints, and serialization, for instance, have been seen as a means by which publishers worked around the libraries to directly reach the reading public. Throughout the nineteenth century, many critics lamented the fact that England was a book *borrowing* not a book *buying* society, for which the three-volume novel became the convenient symbol or target of their attacks. Other critics, such as George Moore, blamed the three-volume novel and the libraries for exerting an undue influence over the development and contents of English fiction—some scholars even laud Moore’s personal crusade against Mudie as partially responsible for ending the format. For these reasons and others, the three-volume novel has often been seen as a format perpetually under attack and in decline during the Victorian period, hounded by competitors, critics, and challenges from all sides. In this light, the libraries’ ultimatum in 1894 often gets presented as a quietistic act of acknowledgment by the libraries that the format had finally had its day. While this conventional story of the three-volume novel has some truth to it, as we shall see, the reality was much more complicated.

Though often mentioned in passing in literary histories or criticism of Victorian fiction, the three-volume novel format rarely garners scholarly attention on its own. In a 1957 article in *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, Charles E. Lauterbach and Edward S. Lauterbach examined 105 Victorian three-volume novels in order to determine the typical word count, number of chapters, number of pages, and other statistics and found a broad range in text length: on average, the typical length of a three-volume novel ranged from 158 000 to 200 000 words with a few examples considerably shorter or longer.¹⁰ If anything, their analysis shows the flexibility of the three-volume format: short texts could be (and often were) padded out to fill the volumes (e.g., excessive chapter breaks, large margins, heavy leading), whereas longer texts could be shoehorned into its three volumes (e.g., smaller type, additional pages). Their work represents one of a handful of descriptive bibliographical treatments of the format which however do not address the marketplace conditions

for its existence. The three-volume novel figures largely in two literary histories published in the 1960s. Royal Gettmann's *A Victorian Publisher: A Study of the Bentley Papers* (1960) dedicates a chapter to the three-decker in his history of the prolific and longtime publisher Richard Bentley and his son George Bentley. (As we shall see in Chapter 2, Bentley was the second-most prolific publisher of multi-volume fiction during the period.) Gettmann finds in Bentley's agreements with authors that the publisher encouraged them to produce manuscripts to fit three octavo volumes of about 300 pages each with 25 lines of text per page.¹¹ Some authors, he finds, struggled to meet such requirements. Gettmann observes that "a novel in three volumes commanded a substantially higher price than a shorter one" from Bentley which he attributes (without proof) to "pressure from the circulating libraries," Mudie's in particular, to produce them.¹² He later undercuts this observation when examining some correspondence between Charles Edward Mudie and Bentley from the 1880s in which the former complains about the short circulating life of many of Bentley's novels and pleads for a slowdown in the production of them.¹³ When Arthur Mudie took over from his father in the 1890s, he took a harder line with publishers such as Bentley culminating with the ultimatum in 1894. While Gettmann's study is groundbreaking for its time, it relies primarily on anecdotes rather than larger quantitative data to support its argument. Guinevere L. Griest's *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (1970) devotes more space to the discussion of the three-volume novel in her study of the largest of Victorian circulating libraries. She observes, "Novels in three volumes were naturally good business for the circulating library" since at the rates of one guinea to borrow one volume at a time and two guineas to borrow three,

Mudie could circulate one three-decker to three separate subscribers, paying a total of three guineas a year, or an entire novel for two guineas to families or to those readers who were impatient for news of the outcome of the proposal to wait until the volume could be exchanged. Works in three volumes enabled the librarian to double or triple the profit he would have from a single-decker.¹⁴

Because the business records of Mudie's do not exist, she is unable to substantiate these claims that a three-volume novel bought for a discount produced a greater profit for the library than a corresponding one-volume novel.¹⁵ Griest spends more attention on the format's effect on English

fiction: the libraries, as one of if not the chief distributors of fiction, served as de facto censors of literature, hence the “select” in Mudie’s Select Library. Thus, the three-volume novel format also imposed moral or content-based constraints on authors, especially in terms of sexual relations, that some authors such as Rhoda Broughton, Moore, and Ouida chaffed against. These attacks, in her view, contributed to the collapse of the three-volume novel culminating in the admission by Mudie that the format no longer paid its way.¹⁶ Both Gettmann and Griest, by each focusing on a single player in the three-volume fiction system, necessarily miss the larger dynamics of the publishing marketplace.¹⁷ Regrettably, both also lack any substantive quantitative data to support their claims.

In the subsequent decades, several scholars have discussed the three-volume novel from a cultural materialist or economic point of view which later became the vanguard for the new History of the Book field. But even within this broad field, approaches range from the empirical to the theoretical. Chief among the former approach, John Sutherland produced several works examining the Victorian fiction marketplace based on significant archival work. His book *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* (1976) examines the publishing history of several novels by exploring the interactions between the authors (Ainsworth, Dickens, Eliot, Hardy, Kingsley, Lever, Thackeray, and Trollope) and their publishers (Bentley, Blackwood, Chapman and Hall, Longman, Macmillan, and Smith, Elder) to show how their novels were “materially influenced by the publishing system, for good or ill” which includes contracts, editing, format, and serialization practices.¹⁸ Several of the books he considers appeared as two-, three-, or four-volume novels, and he traces how the influence of the publishing format pervaded the chain of production from libraries to publishers to authors. In a short article from the same period, Sutherland’s “The Economics of the Victorian Three-Volume Novel” considers the economics of the format based a handful of publishers’ accounts and argues that the three-volume novel persisted because it was “commercially safe.”¹⁹ His investigations culminated in *The Stanford Companion to Victorian Fiction* (1989; revised 2014): though mainly intended as a reference book, its 1606 author, genre, periodical, publisher, and title entries create a thorough economic, literary, and sociological literary history of the Victorian novel. As he writes elsewhere, “Despite fifty years of intense, academically-sponsored research into the form [of Victorian fiction], we still make do with only the sketchiest sense of the infrastructure of Victorian fiction—how the bulk of it was produced; who originated, reproduced, distributed

and consumed the product.”²⁰ Following his lead, the research into Victorian publishing history has increased significantly.²¹

Eschewing the archival work of Sutherland, N. N. Feltes’s *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (1986) takes a much more theoretical approach to “understand historically the material conditions for the production of Victorian novels generally.”²² His five chapters, spaced at roughly twenty-year intervals, each examine one novel and one mode of production (part-publication, three-volume novel, magazine serialization, bi-monthly publication, and one-volume novel, respectively) in order to argue for “the importance of such details as format as being the concrete mediations of the historical in the production of novels, determining in complex ways the actual production of a particular novel and tracing themselves in its text and its own production of ideology.”²³ The chapter on the publication of Thackeray’s *Henry Esmond* (1852) considers the three-volume novel. Compared to the part issue of Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers*, the publication of *Esmond* represents a pre-capitalist, petty commodity mode of production where “the dominant ideology of mid-Victorian publishing was that of the ‘commodity-book.’ The commodity which this whole system [e.g., publishers, libraries] was constructed to produce was the *book* rather than the *text*.”²⁴ Whereas Dickens and his publisher anticipated the fully capitalist mode of production (producing what Feltes calls the “commodity-text”), Thackeray and Smith, Elder persist in continuing with the older, traditional format. Feltes pairs his discussion of Thackeray’s novel with a consideration of the Booksellers’ Question of 1852, an episode which pitted the major publishing houses (including Smith, Elder) against “free traders,” the two sides representing the pre-capitalist and fully capitalist ideologies, respectively. Feltes’s approach serves as a reminder of the myriad of ways Victorian fiction appeared; however, his five case studies focus on rather atypical examples despite his claim that “the canonicity of the novels [chosen] is irrelevant to [his] study of their production.”²⁵ Inadvertently, his five chapters present a stately transition from the commodity-book (e.g., the three-volume novel) to the commodity-text (e.g., the 6s one-volume novel). His final chapter considers the end of the three-volume novel in the 1890s as “a radical transformation of the literary mode of production” in favor of the “capitalist publishers” without exactly explaining why it happened when it did and not earlier as may have been expected.²⁶ In his follow-up study *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel* (1993), Feltes considers the 1880s and 1890s in more detail as a tension between

traditional publishers (e.g., Bentley) and entrepreneurial publishers (e.g., William Heinemann) through an examination of several case studies such as the rivalry between romance and realist writers. But again, his theoretical level of analysis based on case studies (“moments”) precludes any quantitative considerations or support for his claims.

Continuing in the theoretical approach, Lee Erickson’s *The Economy of Literary Form* (1996) argues that economic considerations, such as marginal utility, help explain the prevalence and popularity of certain genres of literature at certain times:

It would appear that when the cost of books is high, readers will prefer a work in a literary form which will provide the most pleasure upon rereading and has the most satisfying verbal texture. Conversely, when the cost of books is low, readers will care less about the pleasure of prospective rereadings and prefer a work in a genre that gives the most immediate pleasure.²⁷

As an example of the former situation, the sales of poetry flourished in the early years of the 1800s, a time of expensive books due to the war with France, since poetry bears rereading (that is, it continues to yield positive marginal utility) due to its relatively higher literary complexity. In a chapter considering Austen and the economics of novel reading, Erickson argues that circulating libraries and the three-volume novel “reflected the relatively low marginal utility of rereading novels for contemporary readers, the general view that novel reading was a luxury” available only to wealthy readers who could afford to buy or subscribe.²⁸ In his view, libraries “effectively pooled the demand of many people for books only a few could afford” and thus facilitated the consumption of otherwise expensive fiction by middle-class readers, especially women.²⁹ Fiction, due to its format and distribution, gained a reputation as ephemeral: books to be borrowed, read once, and returned. In another chapter on marketing the novel, Erickson considers the use of part-publication, cheap editions, inexpensive one-volume editions, and serialization as attempts by publishers to sell fiction directly to readers by opening up new markets and audiences. That most of these attempts to lower the cost of fiction only succeeded with already popular novelists or outright failed confirms his claim about the low marginal utility of fiction—readers preferred the steady stream of new novels from the libraries rather than buying or owning them. Erickson’s study helps explain the Victorian view that England

was a book borrowing country: why should readers buy an expensive (or even less expensive) novel to be read only once? However, despite the economic focus of his approach, he utilized little to no actual economic data to support his claims, whether publisher or library records, that fiction was produced and consumed in such a way.³⁰

In the last twenty-five years, most research on Victorian publishing history generally and the novel in particular has heeded Sutherland's call for more empirical research in the writing, publishing, distribution, and consumption of fiction. Broadly speaking, the development of the History of the Book as an academic field has fueled the attention paid to the Victorian production of fiction. Robert L. Patten's *Charles Dickens and his Publishers* (1978) uses contracts, correspondence, and publishers' ledgers to trace the market forces shaping the production and consumption of Dickens's works in the Victorian period from serials to first issue to reprints to collected editions. Simon Eliot has produced a number of works utilizing a quantitative approach to Victorian publishing, chief among which is *Some Patterns and Trends in British Publishing, 1800–1919* (1994). In it, using statistics from the *Publishers' Circular* and other contemporary sources, he traces the steady, if not exponential, growth in the number of books published in the British Isles over the long nineteenth century. Additionally, he tracks the simultaneous rise of fiction as the dominant genre in British publishing and general decrease in the price of books in the marketplace. Such data confirm the anecdotal observations of many Victorians themselves and later scholars. Following his lead, Alexis Weedon's *Victorian Publishing: The Economics of Book Production for a Mass Market, 1836–1916* (2003) examines the publishing records of a dozen publishers to trace the growth of publishing and the diversity of books produced during the period. In particular, she concentrates on the development of a mass market—selling a large number of inexpensively priced books—in the shadow of the expensive three-volume novel and library system. As her chapters on Wilkie Collins and Ouida show, many of these cheap books were reprints of library novels.

The business practices of the circulating libraries have garnered more attention since Griest's study of Mudie's. Eliot, in three articles, has himself addressed several interrelated issues relating to the libraries' financial success. In "The Three-Decker Novel and its First Cheap Reprint, 1862–94" (1985) and "Bookselling by the Backdoor: Circulating Libraries, Booksellers and Book Clubs 1876–1966" (1995), he considers the chief complaints of the libraries toward publishers in their ultimatum: that is,

the appearance of cheap reprints of three-volume novels affecting their circulation profits and re-sale market. In the former article, Eliot samples a number of titles to find that the first reprints of three-volume novels varied widely in price (ranging from 2s to 6s) and time of issue (from a few months to a few years) but generally the “premature issue of cheap first reprints” of the popular authors he examines (for instance, Braddon, Ouida, and Wood) had become “commonplace” by the 1890s.³¹ Eliot’s second article considers the business model of Mudie’s Select Library and W. H. Smith and Son’s Subscription Library (whose records partial survive) and argues the libraries depended significantly on sales of no longer needed copies of three-volume novels to bolster their bottom lines, “an activity which frequently determined the difference between a profit and a loss.”³² This re-sale business depended on the initial (and lasting) popularity of the title and the potential competition with cheap reprint editions. Tellingly, Smith’s library posted a loss in 1893–1894, the period immediately preceding the ultimatum—more than a coincidence in Eliot’s view—which serves as an immediate motivation for the libraries’ ultimatum. A third article by Eliot, “Fiction and Non-Fiction: One- and Three-volume Novels in Some Mudie Catalogues, 1857–94,” finds that the library’s stock depended heavily on fiction and on the three-volume format in particular, thus adding evidence to the close relationship between the libraries and this particular publishing format.³³ Stephen Colclough’s article “‘A Larger Outlay than any Return’: The Library of W. H. Smith and Son, 1860–1873” (2003) also examines the Smith records to track the development of the library to its establishment as a profitable enterprise by the 1870s. In particular, he untangles the details surrounding a potential partnership between Mudie and Smith that floundered before Smith decided to start his own independent library.³⁴ David Finkelstein’s article “‘The Secret’: British Publishers and Mudie’s Struggle for Economic Survival 1861–64” (1993) uncovers the details of how several major publishers—including Blackwood, Hurst and Blackett, Longman, John Murray, and Smith, Elder—combined to financially prop up Mudie’s after “over-expansion and private extravagance led to near-bankruptcy.”³⁵ Ultimately, self-interest motivated the publishers to keep Mudie’s in business, both to recover the monies owed to them and to ensure the continued existence of their chief means of book distribution. These works and others on the circulating libraries build significantly on Griest’s work and illustrate complex inter-connections between publishers and libraries in the Victorian period.³⁶

Utilizing publishers' archives when existing, scholars have furthered our understanding of the Victorian publishing business, especially as it relates to the fiction marketplace. Several recent studies have focused on Victorian publishers. Leslie Howsam's *Kegan Paul, A Victorian Imprint* (1998) chronicles the development of the specialist publisher which began as the minor publisher Henry S. King. Peter Newbolt's *William Tinsley (1831–1902): "Speculative Publisher"* (2001) focuses on one of the major fiction publishers of the mid-Victorian period: though Tinsley's records sadly do not survive, Newbolt marshals numerous contemporary sources in his history. Finkelstein's *The House of Blackwood: Author-Publisher Relations in the Victorian Era* (2002) draws on the largely complete Blackwood archives to trace authorial contracts and sales.³⁷ These works and others show, to use Sutherland's words, the shaping influence of contracts in the production of fiction. In addition, some scholars have concentrated on a single author or novel, such as Patten's *Charles Dickens and His Publishers* mentioned above. Peter L. Shillingsburg's *Pegasus in Harness: Victorian Publishing and W. M. Thackeray* (1992) examines Thackeray's career from literary dilettante to hack to professional through his interactions with his publishers in order to determine the how the market shapes an author (or vice versa). Linda H. Peterson's *Becoming a Woman of Letters* (2009) shows through the careers of several women authors, notably Charlotte Brontë, Margaret Oliphant, and Charlotte Riddell, how they navigated the literary marketplace, especially how they achieved both financial and critical success. This work reminds us that gender and class also affect the production of literature. More recently, several works discuss the impact of the three-volume format on individual authors, including Pierre Coustillas's *The Heroic Life of George Gissing* (3 parts, 2011–2012), Graham Law and Andrew Maunder's *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life* (2008), and Andrew Nash's *William Clark Russell and the Victorian Nautical Novel* (2014). All three authors—Collins, Gissing, and Russell—proved prolific authors of three-volume fiction and all had marked success with the format, though Gissing is perhaps best known for his criticism of the format in his (three-volume) novel *New Grub Street* (1890). Several edited collections of essays also attest to the interest in Victorian publishing history, such as John O. Jordan and Robert Patten's *Literature in the Marketplace Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices* (1995), Elizabeth James's *Macmillan: A Publishing Tradition from 1843* (2002), and Finkelstein's *Print Culture and the Blackwood Tradition 1805–1930* (2006). All of these works (and

many more not mentioned here) take both the literary and the economic as determinatives of value and see the production of books as a part of a larger cultural production.

This study of the history of the three-volume novel builds on these earlier works. Whereas some have examined the literary form of the triple-decker, none have attempted a comprehensive study of the format as a literary and economic product. To that end, this study begins with a general bibliometric overview of the format before turning to the economics undergirding their existence, from both the publishers' side and the libraries' side. Then, it will turn to the end of the three-volume novel, especially the development of alternatives deliberately positioned in the marketplace to serve as direct rivals to the library novel. In particular, the new romance and series publication will be considered as key to establishing England as a book buying instead of book borrowing market.

Chapter 2 takes a quantitative approach to the three-volume format to determine statistics for their overall production during the Victorian period. Based on the data collected in the digital humanities project *At the Circulating Library: A Database of Victorian Fiction, 1837–1901* (2007–present), basic questions can now be answered about the format, including how many multi-volume novels were produced, who wrote them, and who published them. Continuing the bibliographical work of Garside, Shöwerling, and Anthony Mandal, the data show a steady increase in the overall number of two- and three-volume titles published during the century, up to and including the year of the libraries' ultimatum. On the surface, then, the expensive format seems much more successful than many previous scholars have thought—perhaps representing a quarter of all fiction titles published during the years of its existence. Looking further into the numbers, the data show at any one time a relatively small number of publishers dominate the production of multi-volume fiction, even though some 200 publishers produced at least one title. Some 2200 identifiable authors wrote at least one multi-volume title, but a smaller number of authors, about 400, wrote the majority of titles. Margaret Oliphant herself contributes 10 two-volume novels and 61 three-volume novels during her long career. As we shall see, such prolificacy extended to both men and women authors, but women authors did pen the majority of multi-volume titles, dominating the last quarter of the nineteenth century, giving some credence to Gettmann's droll definition of a three-decker as “a novel written by Mrs. Henry Wood, Mary Elizabeth Brad-don, Rhoda Broughton, or Ouida.”³⁸ In addition, the data show nearly