

- Clarendon, 2000), 578. Needless to say, reliance on the surviving records of elite institutions will necessarily yield generations of elites.
13. These datasets include obituaries (see Munk's Roll), collective biographies (*DNB* and *ODNB*) and matriculation albums (see *A Cambridge Alumni Database*, <http://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/Documents/acad/2016/search-2016.html>).
  14. See Helen Kingstone, *Victorian Narratives of the Recent Past: Memory, History, Fiction* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
  15. This list also includes (among other) writers Charles Kingsley and A. H. Clough, artists William Powell Frith and Lowes Cato Dickinson (both of whom painted portraits of their coevals), the Quaker diarist Caroline Fox and cabinetmaker James Dickinson, who produced a memoir.



## Genre

MELISSA VALISKA GREGORY

IS genre a restrictive or productive mode of interpretation for Victorian literature? While twentieth-century theorists such as Benedetto Croce and Jacques Derrida mistrusted genre as a conservative edict that policed literature's borders and denied its dynamism, literary scholars who take up genre these days often contend that it is the prime source of a literary text's creative and social energy. Metaphors of activity and fluidity dominate the current scholarly discourse, framing genre as a live action event, a complex of shifting forces rather than an inert shape or static label. No longer merely a means of taxonomic stabilization that consigns a text once and for all to a proper grouping, genre is now what Carolyn Williams calls a process of "dynamic formation" or what John Frow describes as a "recurrent" performance.<sup>1</sup> Classification remains central in that genre still depends on the idea that texts can be meaningfully organized and grouped according to their shared attributes, but scholars have recast classification as generative and productive, illuminating the ways genre allows for richer modes of both literary interpretation and creation. Today's genre studies, in other words, view taxonomic groupings as shaping and producing knowledge about literature rather than

restricting it. This more expansive and subtle approach to genre invites new metaphors. “[T]hink of [genres] as swimming in a pool, a kind of generic wateriness,” suggests Wai Chee Dimock. “This medium not only allows for capillary action of various sorts, it also suggests that the concept of genre has meaning only in the plural, only when that pool is seen as occupied by more than one swimmer. . . . [G]enre is best seen not flatly, as the enactment of one set of legislative norms, but as an alternation between dimensions, mediated by vectors of up and down, front and back, in and out.”<sup>2</sup> Dimock’s pool suggests that the containment of the water within an elastic and semipermeable boundary actually creates the conditions for energetic exchanges and multidirectional movement. Genre operates here as a stimulating rather than repressive force.

Such fluid models of genre, however, have not always captured the imagination of Victorianists, many of whom spent considerable energy toward the end of the twentieth century productively erasing the divisions between texts of all kinds. Already working in a field with a deep relationship to history, Victorian literature scholars often led the cultural studies trends of the 1990s, advancing provocative readings that prioritized discourse across genres rather than examining how genre might create discourse. Perhaps it’s not surprising, then, that—as Michael Prince observes—many of “the key players” who advanced genre studies over the years have been “scholars of the early modern period . . . deeply immersed in problems of representation in the late Renaissance through Romanticism,” not those of the Victorian.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a lingering skepticism of genre as rigid taxonomy continues to surface in work by Victorianists. Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, for example, is a neo-formalist study by a scholar grounded in Victorian literature that disavows the study of genre as less interesting than the study of form because “[g]enre involves acts of classifying texts”—a narrow interpretation of genre coming from an award-winning book would seem not to bode well for the concept’s relevance to our field.<sup>4</sup> Levine’s claim notwithstanding, the neo-formalist revival of the 2000s inspired many nuanced and intelligent explorations of individual genres from the Victorian period. Recent monographs, conferences, and special journal editions from the mid-2000s to the present day suggest we are now at a moment where genre, never completely eclipsed by other questions or methodologies but for a while on the wane, is waxing once again in the field of Victorian literature. At the same time, some of this more recent scholarship also suggests that it is possible to write about genres

effectively and still leave underlying heuristics implicit or unclear. Much of the recent scholarship on Victorian genre, for example, lumps genre and form together, treating them as interchangeable terms. Although the two concepts obviously overlap and inform each other, there may be considerable benefit to pulling them apart. Genre includes a historical component that form does not, and its capacity for illuminating the active relationship between history and literature is potentially one of its most valuable contributions to our field.

I would argue that genre's role within history is where Victorianists have the greatest opportunity to advance genre studies. Marxist scholarship, particularly by way of Fredric Jameson and, more recently, Franco Moretti, has suggested that theories of historical ideology are incompatible with traditional, transhistorical definitions of genres: Jameson's astute use of history as the only cultural framework for genre, for example, effectively argues that aesthetic choices should be reconceived of as historical practice, while Moretti's use of software to achieve "distant reading" aggregates data to highlight the rise and fall of genres as they appear in print, revealing that the traditional critical practice of focusing on individual authors may obscure our understanding of how genre functioned for readers and book-buyers within history.<sup>5</sup> But these approaches exclude formal considerations from the study of genre altogether. Jameson's famous statement that genre criticism is "thoroughly discredited by modern literary theory and practice" in many respects lays the ground for Moretti's decision to define genre through the publishing industry and the book market (which is not how most genre theorists have generally defined it), with both approaches rejecting the role literary form may play in producing knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Victorianists have an opportunity to ensure that the break between historical and formal considerations need not be final. Scholars who study Victorian literature have already established a long tradition of thinking about the relationship between literary texts and their historical context in ways that allow for more of a balance between genre, history, and aesthetics than Marxist approaches often do. With their deep knowledge of history, Victorianists can show how genre alternates, as Dimock suggests, between multiple dimensions, producing knowledge about both aesthetics and historical formations simultaneously. Levine suggests that history stabilizes genre, explaining that without historical interpretation, "One might not be able to tell the difference between a traditional folktale and a story recently composed for children or to recognize a satire from a distant historical moment."<sup>7</sup> But genres aren't historical artifacts to be dusted off and

exhibited on permanent display, dutifully accompanied by curatorial notes about their original use (“This one is a children’s story”). Rather, as Michael Cohen argues in the recent introduction to the excellent special edition of *Nineteenth-Century Literature* on the ballad, genres are “historical agents.”<sup>8</sup> They move through history as actors and operatives, performing in multiple registers and often pursuing multiple missions.

For a brief example of the way a historical understanding of genre complicates our understanding of how a literary text might function, opening new questions rather than shutting down the conversation, consider the following untitled text about the loss of an infant:

A baby’s cradle with no baby in it,  
A baby’s grave where autumn leaves drop sere;  
The sweet soul gathered home to Paradise,  
The body waiting here.

Without knowing that Christina Rossetti wrote the above as a poem for *Sing-Song*, her 1872 volume of original verse for children, we do not automatically know what this text is, what social work it might do, or what aesthetic effect it might be expected to have. Identifying the category to which it belongs—genre as an act of historical interpretation—gives us a starting point. But the knowledge that Rossetti’s work can be classified as Victorian children’s poetry hardly puts the matter of genre to rest. Rather, the question of genre proliferates in relation to this text, branching off in a number of new directions. Like all children’s literature from this period, particularly that aimed at preliterate readers, Rossetti’s poem would most likely have been read aloud by an adult woman to a child, thus placing it into the category of live performance. Such a category invites a variety of questions about the means of public circulation for women’s poetry, including how Rossetti may have discovered strategies for bypassing the all-male reading and reception that inaugurated her most famous earlier poem, “Goblin Market.” Moreover, this poem could just as easily be placed into the category of lament or elegy, but a close study of it in relation to other elegies from this period invites us to question some of our most basic assumptions about how and where the Victorians expressed mourning, particularly for brief lives that have no obvious public value. And, since the volume was released in December 1871, *Sing-Song* also belongs to the category of the Victorian illustrated Christmas gift book, a material genre with a host of social and economic implications related to gender and social class. The poem within its historical context, then, does not demonstrate or confirm one fixed genre so much as activate a series of overlapping identities,

performing more than one genre at once and signifying a text's ability to move in multiple directions simultaneously. Attending more closely to any one of the above generic categories would surely yield a rich series of claims about the poem's interpretation and use, both for Rossetti's readers and today's, but my main point is to sketch the ways in which genre becomes more dynamic as it functions within history, not less. Developing an increasingly sophisticated sense of genre, including its relation to form, can allow Victorianists to play to one of our chief strengths: our detailed and conscientious sense of historical context.

#### NOTES

1. Carolyn Williams, "Genre Matters: Response," *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 2 (2006): 517–20, 295; John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 15.
2. Wai Chee Dimock, "Genres as Fields of Knowledge," *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (2007): 1379–80.
3. Michael B. Prince, "Mauvais Genres," *New Literary History* 34, no. 3 (2003): 452–79, 454.
4. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 13.
5. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013).
6. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 105.
7. Levine, 13.
8. Michael Cohen, "Getting Generic," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 71, no. 1 (2016): 147–55, 155.



## Global Circulation

REGENIA GAGNIER

**I**N May 2017, I co-hosted a conference at the India Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, with a call for papers that read "Scholar-participants are expected to address and examine questions that . . . cut across at least two linguistic cultures. Papers that are too narrowly monolingual in their