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GARY KELLY

Fiction and the working classes

This title could mean fiction that *interested* the working classes, in the related senses *engaged the attention of* and *addressed the material interests of*. It could also mean fiction that *represented* the working classes, in the overlapping senses *depicted* and *spoke for*. There were at least five kinds of fiction circulating during the Romantic period that interested or represented the working classes. There was fiction by and for them, fiction by but not particularly for them, fiction for but rarely by them, fiction by and for the middle classes but read by some working-class people, and fiction depicting the working classes but written by and for the middle classes. There was a little of the first and second, much of the third, some of the fourth, and a good deal of the fifth. Literature being mainly a middle-class cultural institution, the last has received most attention; in fact, some have argued that middle-class fiction, whether or not it represents/depicts the working classes, can nevertheless represent/speak for them. Most have also assumed that fiction read predominantly by the working classes could not represent their interests, being mere commercial entertainment with little artistic or intellectual value, drugging its “consumers” with escapist fantasy, concealing their exploitation from them, and distracting them from their real political interests. Such fiction may, however, have its own artistry, ideology, and politics. Investigating this possibility requires turning from the poetics of middle-class literature to those of working-class print culture, from authorship to reading, from “original” to recycled texts, from history of texts to history of books, from literary criticism as disciplined or “schooled” reading for professional purposes to unschooled but not unskilled reading for everyday life.

Literary studies usually understand fiction as invented, written (and printed), secular, prose narrative. But fiction may be in prose and verse, oral and written, pictorial and verbal, sacred and secular, and during the Romantic period working-class readers welcomed all of these indiscriminately. Literary studies usually distinguish between fiction and non-fiction, but during the Romantic period working-class readers relished both fiction

and non-fiction, from saints' lives to travelogues. Literary histories usually restrict themselves to "original" works produced in a particular period, but most fiction circulating during the Romantic period had been produced earlier, working-class readers enjoyed past and contemporary fiction equally, and most of the fiction they read had been first published before the Romantic period. Finally, literary studies usually deal with fiction considered to be of "serious" import, "artistic" merit, and "enduring value," variously defined. These assumptions reproduce Romantic ideologies of authorship, originality, and "literary" value serving middle-class culture and interests. Throughout the Romantic period most working-class readers ignored such distinctions and read what they could get and what interested them – they read what engaged their interest because it spoke to their material interests.

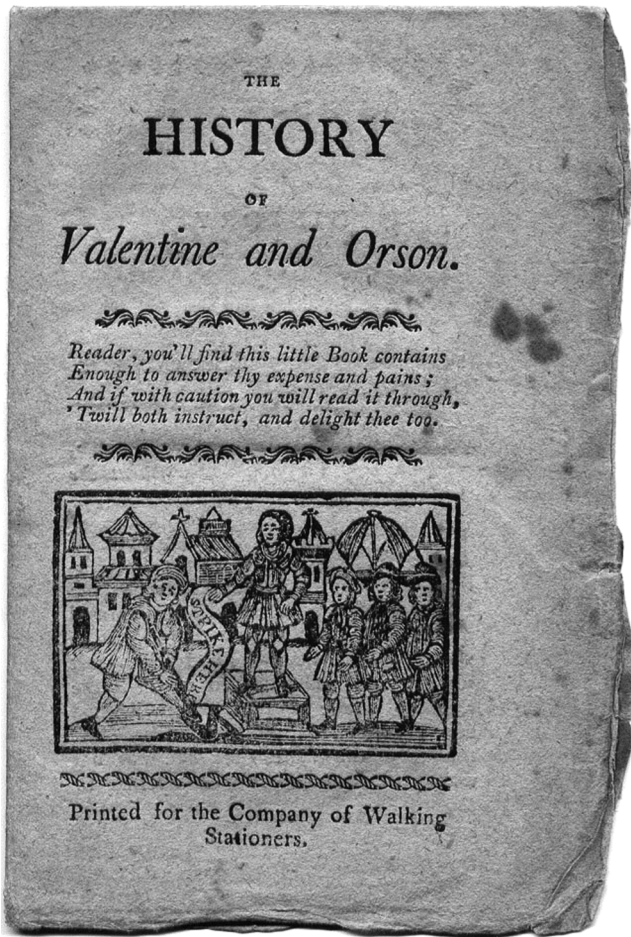
Who were these readers? The working classes have been defined variously in economic, social, political, and cultural terms, while some deny there is such a thing. The phrase "working(-)class" first appeared in print during the Romantic period, used by middle-class observers as a merely descriptive phrase. Only later did it come to indicate a social group with a particular ideology, culture, identity, and history grounded in their economic and social condition, mainly in the discourse of socialist theorists and historians. Others have preferred broader understandings of pluralized working "classes," "lower classes," "laboring classes," "plebeians," and "proletariat" or terms used at that time, such as "lower orders," "lower ranks," and "crowd." During the Romantic period these classes comprised a wide variety of skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled laborers, from printers to farm laborers, blacksmiths to washerwomen, bookbinders to shepherds, tanners to cooks, coachmen to seamstresses. They included the occasionally, frequently, or normally unemployed; the independent artisan, the indentured apprentice, and the wage slave; the proudly prosperous, the constantly struggling, and the working poor. There were also pronounced regional, ethnic, and gender differences within the working classes. There was always movement between classes, too, as individuals and families moved back and forth from hired labor, or working-class status, to independent small-scale production and commerce, or lower middle-class status. Some conditions and events mainly affected a particular social class, others affected all classes, and all would participate in certain social and cultural practices, from festivals to reading, if not in the same way. People could also entertain identities and values other than those they normally inhabited in everyday life – in fact, fiction was one important way to do so.

What then was the relationship between fiction and these working classes during the Romantic period? Working-class autobiographies from

the time give us clear indications.¹ Working-class culture retained much of the historic oral culture of folk song and folktale, and working-class readers assimilated printed fiction to this oral culture, or moved easily between them. Individual access to literacy depended on particular circumstances, especially personal or parental motivation, and availability of instruction by a parent, relative, or elderly woman at a local “dame school.” Working-class readers were often regarded suspiciously by their peers, as idlers or aspirants above their community. The few autobiographies by working-class women from this period suggest that both sexes read what they could get, fiction and non-fiction, verse and prose fiction, sacred and secular narrative. Many who could not read, and many who could, were read to or had books retold to them; consequently, avid readers often became storytellers.

Working-class autobiographers recall five main fiction formats. Most common were chapbooks of a kind circulating for generations, usually bought from chapmen, or peddlers. Around 1800, chapbooks of a new kind began to appear, mainly much shorter versions of books read by the middle classes, and bought from publishers and small shops, or possibly borrowed from small circulating libraries and pubs. Books produced for the middle classes were expensive – a three-volume novel could cost two weeks’ labourer’s wages – but working-class readers did come by stray volumes. Middle-class readers usually rented books, especially fiction, from commercial circulating libraries, but working-class readers could rarely afford the subscription and rental fees. Increasingly available were cheap reprints and books published in weekly or monthly parts (or “numbers”) and sold door-to-door, mainly for the burgeoning middle-class readership for both fashionable and “classic” literature. An increasing number and variety of periodicals aimed at working-class readers appeared by the 1810s and 1820s, mostly political or entertaining or both. Finally, there was much pseudo-popular print directed at the working classes by middle-class social reformers.

The fiction most often and fondly recalled in working-class autobiographies was the kind of chapbook that had been circulating for generations. These were small pamphlets costing from about one to sixpence, from eight to thirty-two pages long, badly printed on cheap paper, and decorated with woodblock images not always relevant to the story. Chapbook fiction constituted a large text comprising related categories of individual texts. There were tales featuring heroes and rogues, such as *Sir William Wallace* (an early eighteenth-century prose version of a Scots poem celebrating the medieval Scottish patriot warrior), *Robin Hood’s Garland* (a collection of verse tales first published in the seventeenth century, about the legendary



6 *The History of Valentine and Orson* (early): One of the most perennially popular chapbooks in characteristic eighteenth-century format.

medieval outlaw), *Jack and the Giants* (anecdotes of a wisecracking strongman who outwits and overcomes several giants and is rewarded with lands and genteel rank), *Doctor Faustus* (about the medieval scholar-magician who sells his soul to the Devil), *Fortunatus* (whose magic implements carry him through a succession of adventures), *Valentine and Orson* (originally published in the sixteenth century and based on a medieval French verse romance, recounting fabulous adventures of two noble brothers; see Figures 6 and 7), *The King and the Cobbler* (a tale originally published in the seventeenth century in which the king, usually Henry VIII, tours his capital incognito to learn his subjects' views and hears the truth from a merry cobbler, whom he subsequently rewards), and *Bamfylde Moore*



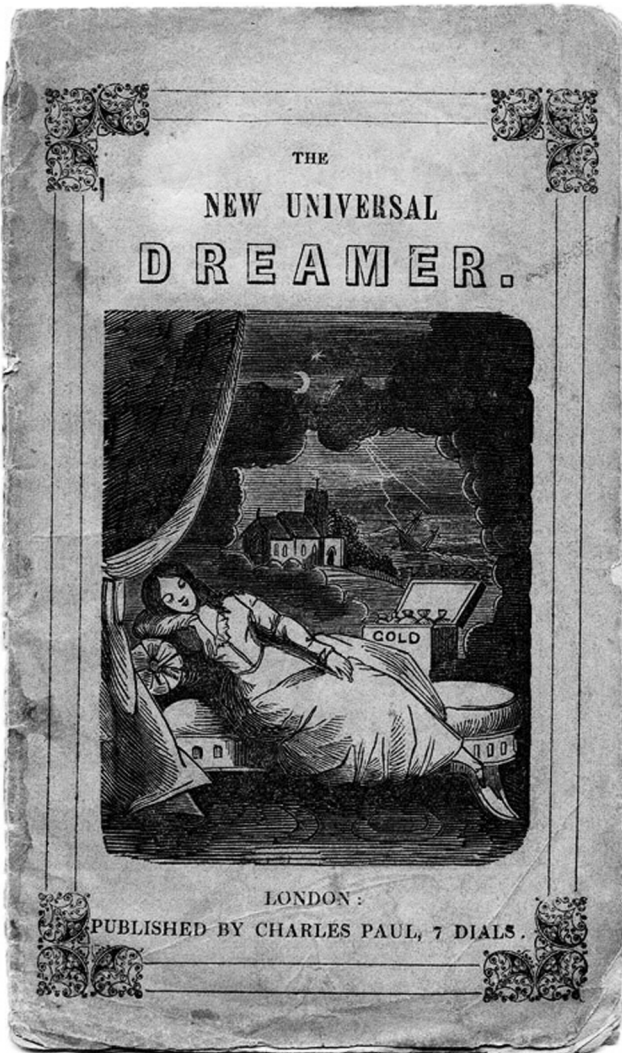
- 7 *The History of Valentine and Orson* (Goode): No “mass extinction”: the historic chapbooks did not disappear but were reissued in formats similar to those of the new fashionable chapbooks that began to appear around 1800.

Carew, King of the Beggars, a late eighteenth-century addition to the chapbook repertory. There was a smaller body of tales featuring women, including *Fair Rosamond* (based on a historical figure whose beauty attracts the king and who is later murdered by the jealous queen), *Jane Shore* (based on another historical royal mistress), *Patient Grisel* (plebeian wife of a nobleman who cruelly tests her love and loyalty), and *Long Meg*

of *Westminster* (a merry strongwoman who protects the weak from a succession of predatory and violent men). There were jestbooks such as *The Wise Men of Gotham* (a series of jokes first published in the sixteenth century about a village of fools) and *Joe Miller's Jests* (a jokebook). There were books of wonders, such as *Mandeville's Travels*. There were also "fairy tales," mainly folktales rewritten and published a century or more earlier for a genteel readership and then taken downmarket in collections such as "Mother Bunch's," a chapbook first published in 1773. These chapbooks were joined by a few longer works such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and parts of *Gulliver's Travels* that also could be read as sensational adventure stories.

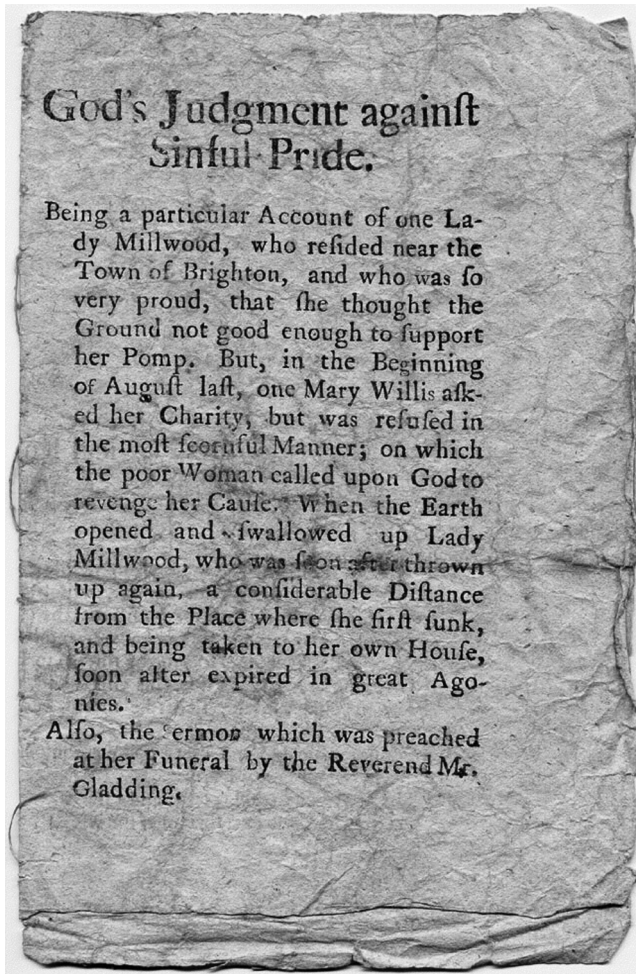
Working-class readers seemed uninterested, however, in distinguishing such fiction from a larger body of cheap print, again comprising several related categories. There were prophecy books such as "Old Nixon's" and "Mother Shipton's," books of divination by dreams, portents, physiognomical traits, astrology, etc., and almanacs, which also contained prophecies, related to regular movements of the cosmos, earth, tides, seasons, weather, and animals (Figure 8). There were books of popular science that combined ideas of natural causation, craft, and magic, such as herbals and other books of practical health and living, and *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, a seventeenth-century guide to procreation and forecasting personal destiny by bodily features (physiognomy and palmistry). There were execution broadsides and "last dying words," supposedly uttered by condemned criminals and embodying an insistent fatalism, sold to crowds at public hangings, and going back to the origins of printing. There was popular song in ballad sheets and "garlands," or chapbooks containing a number of lyrics, similar in themes and narrative form to both the prose fiction chapbooks and folk ballads and tales. There were religious or "godly" chapbooks and books, usually more sensational than pious, featuring miraculous incidents, divine retributions, heroic sufferings of Protestant martyrs, and lives of saints such as Robert the hermit, who withdraws from the world in disgust at its injustices but defends and helps the poor (see, for example, *God's Judgment against Sinful Pride*, Figure 9).

The recurring themes of this fiction and its associated non-fiction are fortune and fate, chance and opportunity, destiny and personal gifts (cleverness, physical strength, beauty), innate character (fortitude, courage, loyalty, holiness) and its eccentricities and extremes, sensational events and extraordinary characters, and magical, prophetic, or clairvoyant powers. Working-class people also read these themes into earlier kinds of fiction otherwise associated with the middle classes, such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Pamela* or religious texts such as *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and into fiction of



8 *The New Universal Dreamer*. For those with little prospect of improving their lives through hard work, self-improvement, or anything else, except winning the lottery or other strokes of luck, the ability to anticipate the future remained, as it had for centuries, a way of sustaining hope and imagining things otherwise.

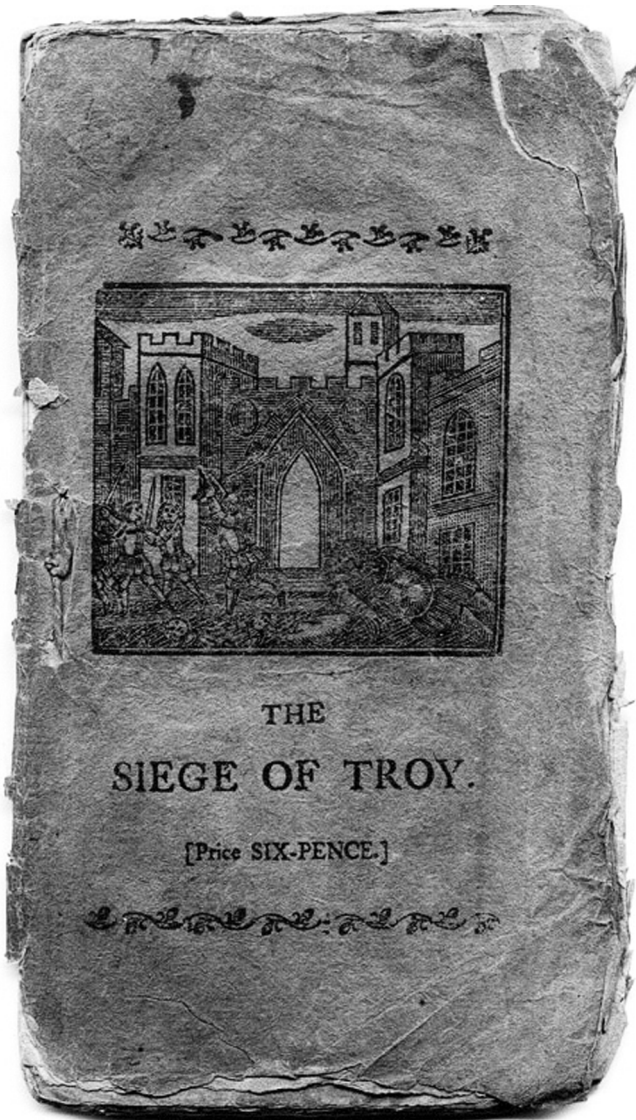
the Romantic period produced for the middle classes, such as Gothic romances and Scott's historical novels, or non-fiction such as voyage and shipwreck narratives, criminal biography from execution broadsides to the *Newgate Calendar*, lives of religious heroes and martyrs, lives of extraordinary contemporary characters such as Nelson and Napoleon, historical



9 *God's Judgment against Sinful Pride*: Ostensibly religious, this kind of chapbook (here in characteristic eighteenth-century format) was in fact highly sensational.

narratives containing heroic, sensational, and horrific events, such as the translation of Josephus's *Jewish Wars*, and chapbook versions of ancient classical adventure narratives such as the *Iliad* (Figure 10).

In form, most of these texts are characterized by brevity, paratactic structure or string of similar episodes, third-person narration, presentation of events in chronological order, styles ranging from colloquial to elevated, desultory narrative structure, repetitive plot form, few literary or learned allusions, few direct references to contemporary social or political events, stereotypical characters and formulaic characterization, stylized dialogue,



10 *The Siege of Troy*: Classical culture, again in characteristic eighteenth-century format, as a ripping yarn.

sparing description of settings, brief and formulaic representation of characters' subjectivity, little domestic realism, broad humor, proverbial expressions, and perfunctory or formulaic closure. These characteristics are also found in folktales, legends, and myths, which are less re-creations of a reality than stylized interpretations of it.

Such themes and forms interested working-class readers, listeners, and storytellers up to and through the Romantic period because they gave artistic embodiment to a culture and ideology formed in response to the realities of a subsistence economy. These realities included chronic scarcity of resources, numerous hazards of mortality, and cyclical patterns of work, social relations, life stages, church ritual and religious festivals, natural processes, and time. In this economy there was little prospect of saving for hard times, let alone of monetary or material accumulation, and little prospect of advancement in life. Just surviving required improvisation, opportunism, moral suppleness, indifference to the law, social agility, ingenuity and evasiveness before power and authority, and reliance on class solidarity and discipline, or working-class “moral economy” and “customs in common.” The cyclical, repetitive form of chapbook fiction enacted for the working-class reader, on the level of narrative structure, the patterns of his or her experience from day to day, season to season, generation to generation. Reading and rereading chapbooks with this symbolic structure enacted the same patterns in the individual’s reading practice over time, drawing readers into the kind of compulsive reading described in many of the working-class autobiographies, and still observable today. Chapbook fiction’s open-ended structure, series of similar incidents, formulaic closure, and weak denouement enacted working-class experience of life and lives as diverse but repetitive rather than cumulative, inconclusive rather than “amounting to something” – let alone producing material accumulation or rise in social significance.

In a subsistence economy life seemed a lottery, with little prospect of improvement except through luck or magic. Luck could take various forms: inborn gifts such as physical strength, manual dexterity, and beauty; aptitudes such as cleverness and opportunism, or certain skills; and fortunate coincidences such as meeting a patron or lover. In chapbook fiction, magic is usually acquired by luck and could also take various forms – knowledge of the future, influence over forces normally beyond one’s control (the weather, social superiors, the economy, love, one’s physiognomy), or perhaps power to transform reality altogether, into paradise on earth. Magic is imagining things otherwise than they are, and approaches revolutionary politics or millenarian religion – both of which erupted during the Romantic period and incorporated elements of working-class fiction. For example, Tom Paine wrote in his working-class bestseller *Rights of Man* (1792) like a politicized Jack the Giant Killer, and Joanna Southcott couched her millenarian prophecies in a fusion of street-ballad verse and chapbook fantasy. Chapbook fiction itself contained little overt social protest, moralizing, or religious piety, but much transmuted protest. Printers and distributors had to avoid offending the powerful, and working-class readers might have found that

overt protest or piety in fiction would have interfered with their use of fiction to negotiate through a difficult and uncertain world. For them, fiction registered their reality in objectified, abstract, semi-mythic form – the historic ideological and social function of popular fiction from oral folktales through chapbooks to modern romances.

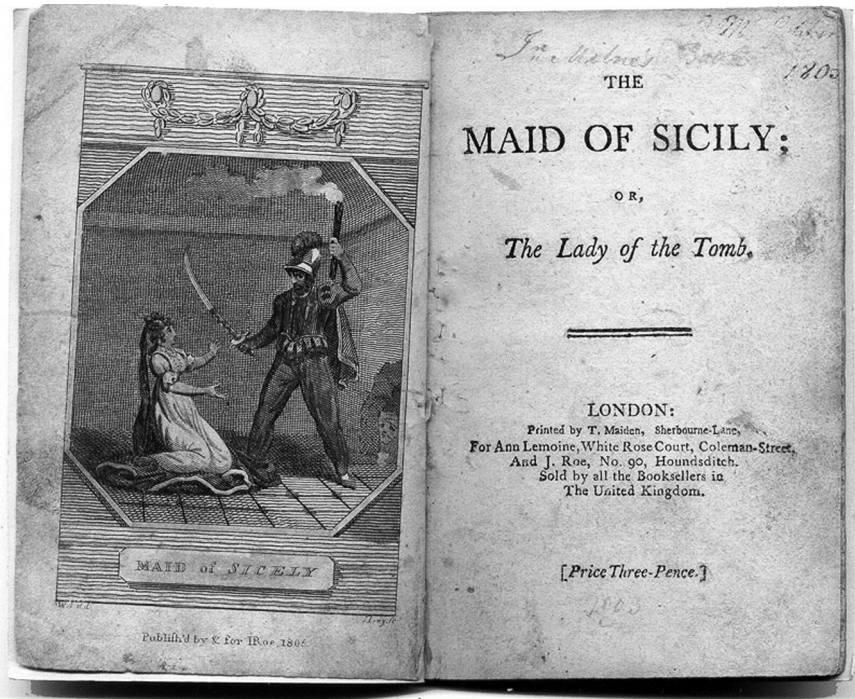
The persistence of the chapbook repertory over generations indicates the continuity of working-class experience of subsistence economy. Of course, life had long been uncertain for people of all classes; the lottery mentality could appeal to rich and poor, leisured and laboring, comfortable and indigent, though not alike. Fiction and non-fiction embodying the lottery mentality was read and enjoyed by people of all ranks, though not necessarily in the same way; and much of the fiction read mainly by the middle and even upper classes through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as picaresque novels, romances, and adventure narratives, shared themes and formal traits with working-class fiction of the same period. The hardships of a subsistence economy fell mostly to the working classes, however, and remained their daily reality, sustaining the lottery mentality, social practices, and cultural forms created in response to it.

During this period, however, long-term structural transformations and particular events increasingly challenged historic formations of working-class ideology, social relations, and culture, including fiction. Modernization based on increasingly systematic application of capitalism introduced new technologies and wage relations, integration of local into national and international economies, urbanization and economic specialization, development of commercialized consumption based on novelty and social emulation, increased social surveillance and control of the lower classes by the upper and middle, and formation of a middle-class investment mentality emphasizing self-discipline and the accumulation of moral and intellectual capital. During the Romantic period, these larger changes were experienced through particular events, including the crisis of the American Revolution, the French Revolution panic and Napoleonic wars, resulting economic and social crisis, consequently accelerated politicization of middle and working classes, government repression of such movements, coalition of middle- and working-class elements for political reform, postwar economic downturn and social conflict, and the institutional and constitutional reform crises of the 1820s and 1830s.

Both long-term transformations and particular events were articulated through fiction – the form of print, apart from newspapers and magazines, most widely read by all classes. In the later eighteenth century new kinds of fiction were developed by and for the middle classes embodying their interests, characterized by most or all of the following: much greater length than

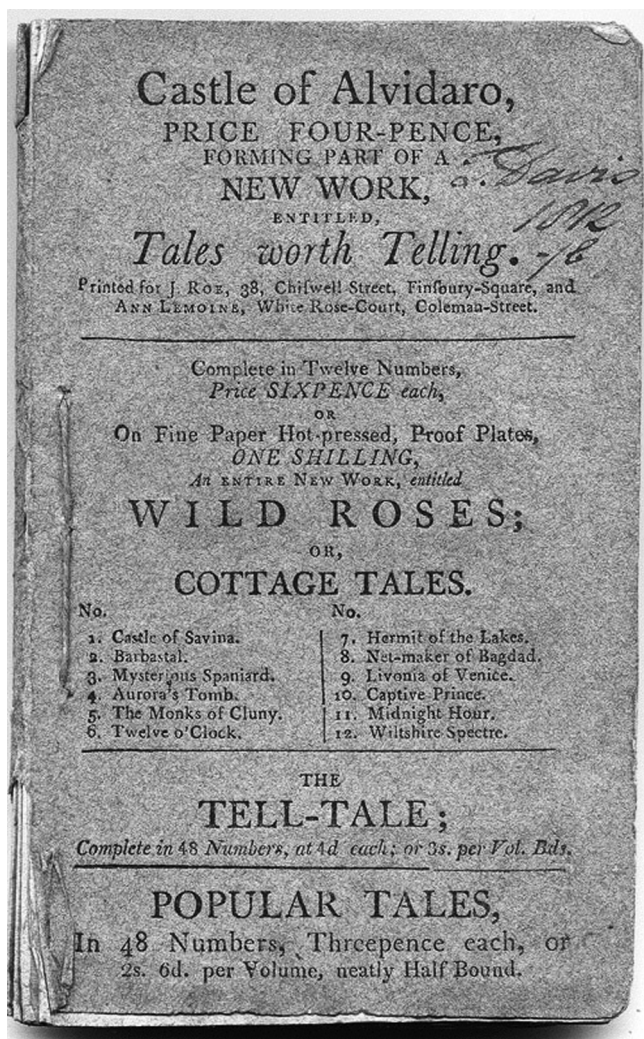
the chapbook; hypotactic structure based on events connected as cause and effect; stories beginning *in medias res*; progressive plot form; much first-person narration and new hybrid third-person narration with free indirect discourse (or reported inward speech and thought of a character); representation of characteristic speech and of class and regional dialect; references to contemporary social and political events and conditions; highly individualized characters; detailed representation of subjective states; lengthy dialogues and detailed descriptions; detailed portrayal of everyday and domestic life; and emphatic closure resolving conflicts and assigning justice. Such fiction became increasingly popular, in the sense of widely read, among the middle classes because it embodied the investment mentality central to their developing class consciousness and identity. It did so by emphasizing the importance of disciplined subjectivity to a progressive life-plot in a world of comprehensible causes and consequences. Yet fiction in general retained its low status in middle-class culture because of fears that it stimulated dangerous desire and fantasy and so obstructed accumulation of moral and intellectual capital.

The commercialization of cultural consumption during the Romantic period created a world of material culture, including forms of fiction, adapted to different class interests and identities. A new kind of working-class chapbook fiction related to middle-class Romantic popular fiction began appearing around 1800, and rapidly marginalized the traditional chapbooks (see, for example, Figure 11). The new chapbooks were usually from thirty-two to seventy-four pages long and cost from sixpence to a shilling – the price of a meal or a cheap theatre seat. The majority comprised fiction of three main kinds: shortened versions of the three-volume Gothic romances, historical novels, and sentimental tales produced for the middle classes; original novelettes or stories from magazines, in the same genres; and novelettizations of popular plays, melodramas, and even poems (see, Figures 12, 13, and 14). These chapbooks purposely differed in appearance from the earlier kinds – more carefully printed, bound in attractively ornamented blue or yellow paper covers, and with hand-colored frontispieces depicting a sensational incident from the story (Figure 15). Such chapbooks were among the fashionable novelties, from clothing to entertainments, increasingly demanded by the working classes as cheaper versions of those purchased by the upper and middle classes in the expanding fashion system of consumption based on social emulation. The new chapbooks were more expensive than the earlier kind, indicating a readership spanning the working, lower-middle, and middle classes and corresponding to an emergent coalition of the same social elements for purposes of achieving political reform. This indication is reinforced by the new chapbooks' contents.



11 *The Maid of Sicily* (1805): By Sarah Wilkinson, one of the few writers of the new chapbooks who put her name on her work (on the next page of the chapbook) – she published scores of these.

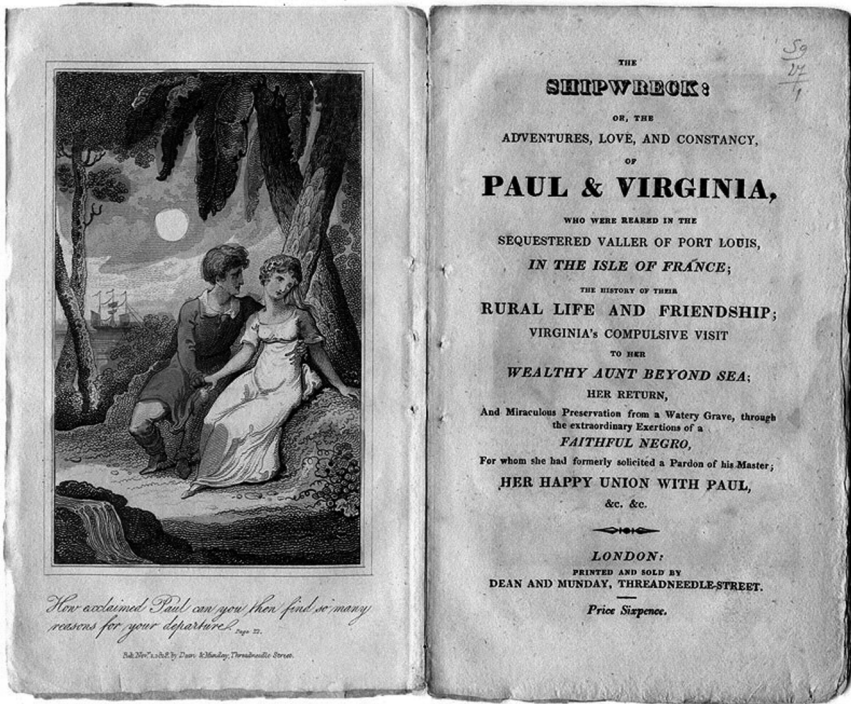
For these chapbooks differed less from the old than they seemed to, containing elements of both traditional working-class fiction and fashionable middle-class fiction. Chapbook versions of three-volume novels retained such features as basic genre conventions (for example, of the Gothic), beginning *in medias res*, purple patches, hyperbole, and occasional moralizing, but lacked the detailed representations of subjectivity, extensive descriptive passages, lengthy social scenes, and literary allusions often found in their sources. Such reductions render the chapbook version a desultory, fast-paced, action-oriented, incident-packed narrative more like the traditional kind of chapbook and folk narrative. The original chapbook novelettes and novelettizations of melodramas have similar traits. Like the traditional kind of chapbooks, the new rarely have an author's name on the title-page, and rarely mention a source if there was one, except for the novelettizations of popular plays, where stating source and author could be a selling point. In style, the new chapbooks, like the old and like folk narrative, also rely on conventional language and formulaic phrases to stylize and



12 *Castle of Alvidaro*: The fashionable new chapbooks that began to appear around 1800, cut-down versions of Gothic triple-decker novels consumed by the middle classes, here in small format as part of a series and literally a “blue book.” This publisher also issued historic chapbook titles in the new format.

generalize representations of characters, places, and events, giving them the quality of mythic narrative.

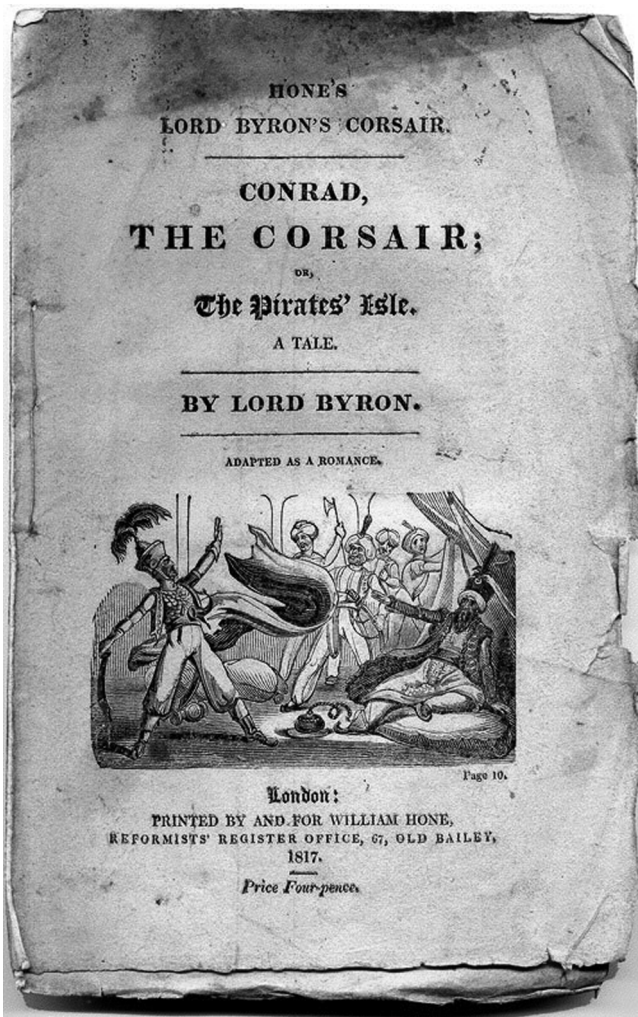
This approximation in form and style of the old and new chapbook fiction is affirmed by the presence of both kinds in publishers’ lists. For example, the London firm of J. Bailey published long-familiar chapbook tales such as *Jane Shore*, *Blue Beard*, *Nixon’s Prophecies*, *Friar Bacon*, *Jack Sheppard*,



13 *Paul and Virginia*: The fashionable new chapbooks, like Harlequin Books swallowing Mills and Boon in the twentieth century, reached far and wide for titles to reissue – here Bernardin de St. Pierre’s best-selling sentimental novella.

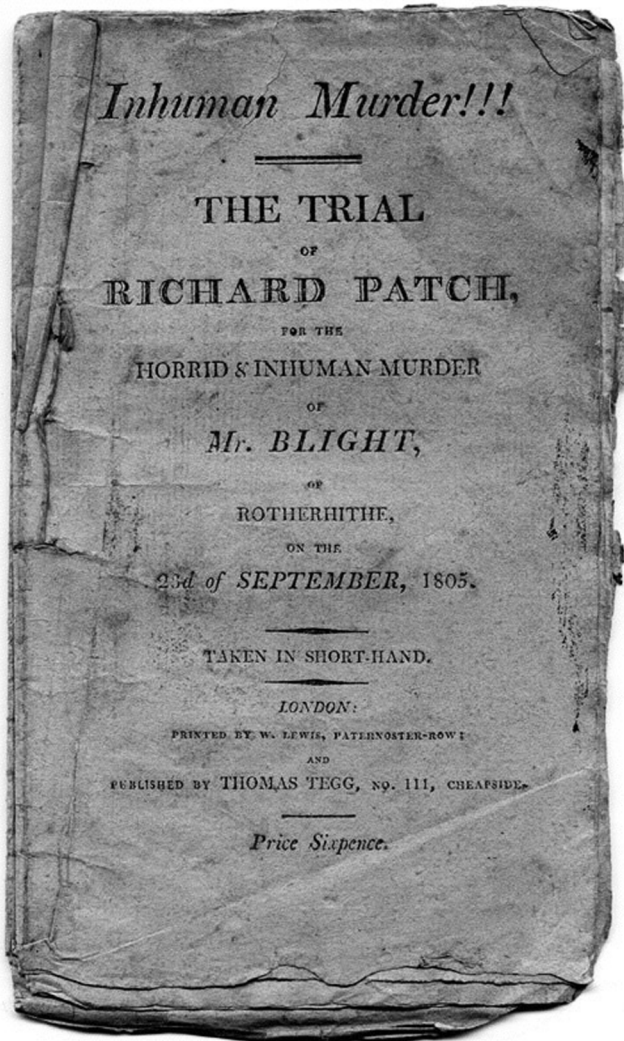
Bamfylde Moore Carew, *Sir William Wallace*, and *Ali Baba and Aladdin*. These were, however, given contemporary-sounding long titles, colored frontispieces, and a format uniform with that of Bailey’s longer list of fashionable fiction, which included Gothic chapbooks such as *The Night Hag* and *The Tomb of Ferrados*, sentimental but sensational romances such as *Love in a Mad-house* and Goethe’s *Sorrows of Werther*, and chapbook versions of bestselling Romantic novels, such as Scott’s *Rob Roy* and *Ivanhoe*. For example, the old favorite *Sir William Wallace* reappears as *The Hero of Scotland; or, Battle of Dumbarton, an Historical Romance; in Which the Love of Liberty and Conjugal Affection Are Exemplified in the Characters of Sir William and Lady Wallace* (1825). Other London firms such as T. Hughes, Fairburn, Fisher, and Kemmish and provincial firms such as Richardson of Derby, Swindells of Manchester, Robertson of Glasgow, and Smyth of Belfast published similar lists.

Like the older chapbook fiction, the new also participated in a larger body of literature addressing the personal, social, commercial, and political



14 Title-page of Byron's "The Corsair" as novella (1817).

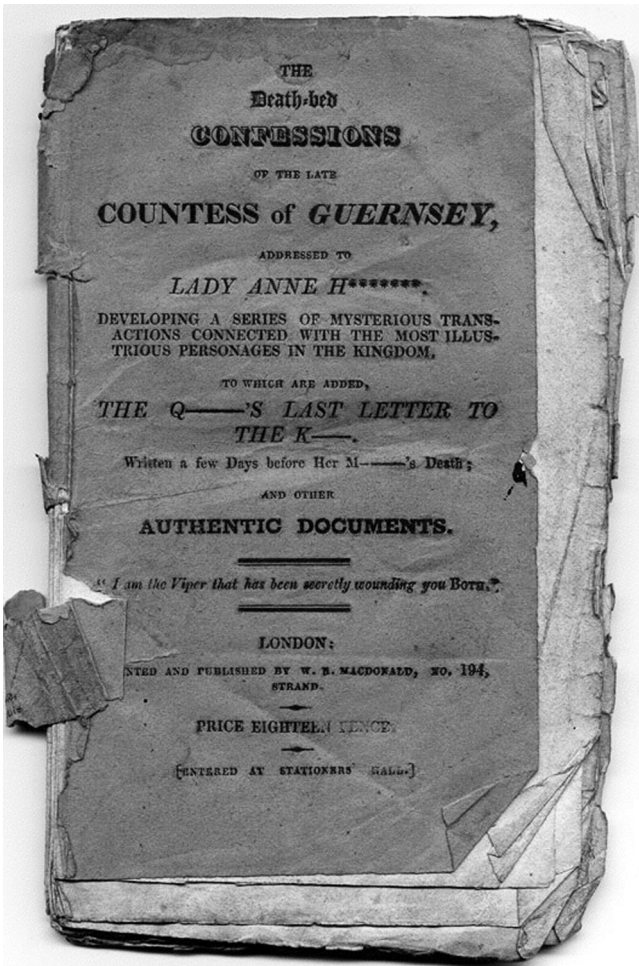
interests of its reading public. For example, J. Bailey's non-fiction publications comprised three broad groups. There were entertaining chapbooks, including children's books, travels, songsters, true crime, divorce trials, accounts of shipwrecks, an Indian captivity narrative, and a book of oddities (Figure 16). There were chapbook manuals on diverse topics including cookery, housekeeping, exterminating vermin, swindler's tricks, stowing goods on shipboard, measuring and surveying, "gentlemen's" and "ladies'" letter-writers, a Valentine writer, courtship, religious instruction, heathen mythology, legerdemain, conjuring, Hoyle's rules of games, riding,



16 *The Trial of Richard Patch*: Publishers issued chapbook fiction alongside real-life trials and scandals that embodied similar elements.

Unparalleled Act of Human Butchery . . . (1820) and Wollstonecraft's, the *Life of Jemima; or, The Confessions of an Unfortunate Bastard, Who, by the Antipathy of Her Parents, Was Driven to Every Scene of Vice and Prostitution!* . . . (1800).

Such convergences occur elsewhere in working-class print of the period. An edition of *Joe Miller's Jests* included witticisms attributed to the pro-Revolutionary writer Tom Paine and *Tom Paine's Jests* appeared in 1793. In



17 *The Death-Bed Confessions of the Late Countess of Guernsey*: Scandals in “high life” also paralleled the sensationalist new chapbook fiction.

allusion to *The Wise Men of Gotham*, the popular jestbook depicting a village of fools, the unpopular Prince Regent was satirized in political chapbooks as the “Prince of Gotham” and “Emperor of Gotham.” Another satire on the Queen Caroline affair, *Jack and the Queen Killers* (1820), alludes to the well-known chapbook hero Jack the Giant Killer. The conflict between the Prince and Princess was transposed into a burlesque chapbook romance as *The Wife and Mistress; or, The Italian Spy: A Domestic Tale* (1820). The chapbook hero Tom Thumb, already appropriated by Henry Fielding in a theatrical satire on the government of his day, was so appropriated again to

satirize the Regency government. Napoleon, self-proclaimed master of his own destiny, was assimilated to traditional popular print of fortune-telling in chapbooks purporting to disclose his secret knowledge of how to direct destiny. Regardless of genre or topic, the new chapbooks had similar format, appearance, and price range.

Together, working-class fiction and print culture in both old and new forms continued to serve their readers' interests through the Romantic period, giving artistic form to working-class ideology, registering and objectifying central features of working-class reality, and enabling readers to imagine things otherwise. This fiction and print culture participated in an emergent literary, theatrical, and musical culture that was popular in the sense of widely distributed, appealing not only to the working classes but also to the lower middle classes and many in the middle and upper classes, but also popular in the sense that it called its reading public into being as "the people" – the reformed political nation. Middle-class ideologues, cultural police, and moral reformers recognized these important functions and developments of working-class fiction and responded in several ways.

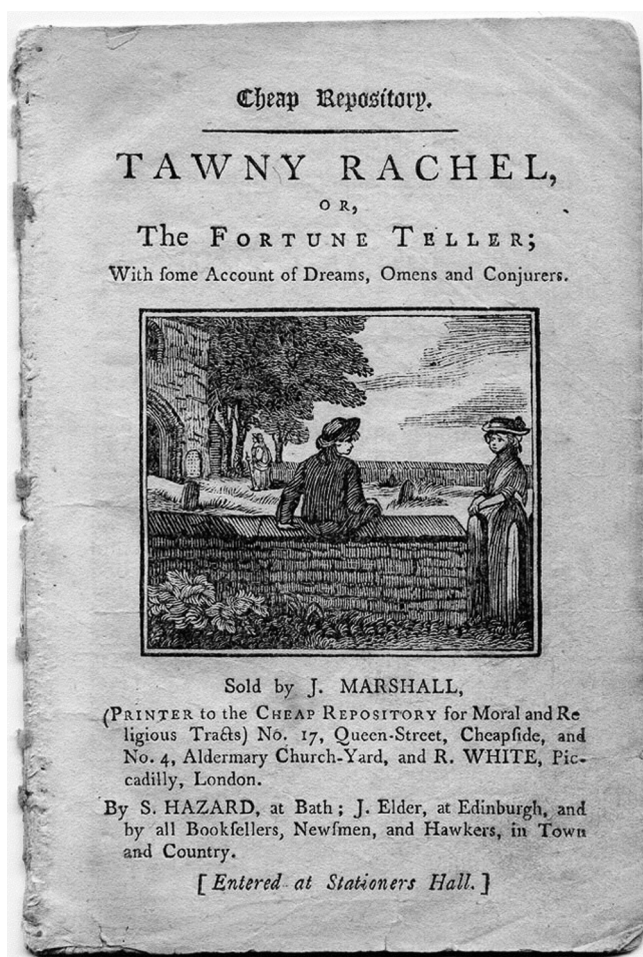
From the 1780s they increasingly urged middle-class parents to replace working-class fiction – the historic chapbook repertory – as reading matter for their own children with books embodying middle-class values and representing middle-class realities and interests. The result was an explosion in children's books, some by leading middle-class ideologues, intellectuals, political writers, and literary artists such as Anna Letitia Barbauld, Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth, William Godwin, and Walter Scott. The new middle-class children's literature used fiction reluctantly and insisted on its being factual and realistic, and opposed working-class fiction by denigrating the lottery mentality, showing the ill effects of succumbing to immediate gratification and the disastrous consequences of ethical flexibility and petty moral lapses, and urging the accumulation of moral and intellectual capital, or moral self-discipline and "solid and useful" knowledge for adult middle-class life.

These themes recur in the multitudinous pseudo-popular print produced in the Romantic period by middle-class social, moral, and religious reformers. During the 1790s, print's power to promote working-class interests was disclosed by huge sales of Paine's *Rights of Man*. Middle-class anti-Revolutionaries responded by attempting to supplant both reform literature and fiction read by the working classes with reading matter embodying middle-class values. The major initiative was the "Cheap Repository" (1795–8) organized and written by the Evangelical campaigner Hannah More and her sisters. More described traditional chapbook fiction as a "sans-culotte library," after Paris's *sans-culottes*, or working-class

Revolutionaries. A decade earlier, middle-class educators and parents had realized that working-class fiction obstructed the inculcation of middle-class values in their children. More, too, saw the connection between the attitude and style of fictions such as *Jack and the Giants* and those of Paine's *Rights of Man*, and saw that chapbook fiction, though usually lacking overt social protest, provided an ideological and cultural basis for working-class politicization and mobilization. Yet More and her supporters turned to fiction only reluctantly, recognizing that it enabled readers of any class to imagine things otherwise.

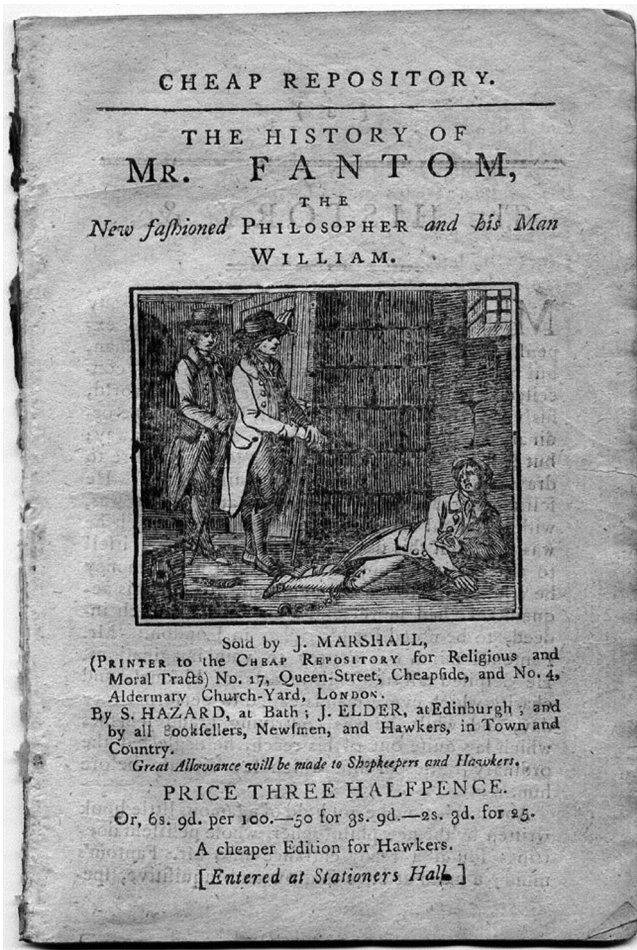
More's campaign was systematic and comprehensive. Cheap Repository included most genres of traditional chapbook fiction, imitated both their contents and style, and took up their central themes. But Cheap Repository relentlessly attacked the ideology and culture of traditional working-class print and the overt politics of pro-Revolutionary writers. *Tawny Rachel* attacks the historic plebeian culture of economic opportunism, indifference to the law, and belief in luck, fortune-telling, and magic (see Figure 18); *The History of Mr. Fantom* attacks Painite politics (Figure 19); *The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain* promotes submission to divine providence and social superiors and imitation of middle-class self-discipline and frugality. More also imitated the appearance of the traditional chapbooks, engaging an established publisher of such material, Marshall of Newcastle. She and her supporters used persuasion, threats, and bribery to get chapbook sellers to replace their traditional wares with Cheap Repository. She promoted use of Cheap Repository as work for welfare and training in small-scale capitalism: the indigent would be given a quantity of Cheap Repository material to sell, keep part of the proceeds for necessities, and put the rest into purchasing new stock for further sales. More also urged dispensers of charity to make it conditional on reading Cheap Repository.

There is no evidence these tactics worked. The huge sales of Cheap Repository probably depended on middle-class distributors – prices for bulk quantities appeared on the covers and More's middle-class correspondents called for editions of “superior” quality for their libraries. Cheap Repository's main readership was likely middle-class people receptive to a fantasy of the working classes as god- and employer-fearing, submissive, and quiescent. Nevertheless, middle-class social reformers, censors, and police continued to believe in the efficacy of pseudo-popular print. Cheap Repository was often imitated and was republished in times of working-class unrest, such as the late 1810s. After More and her sisters abandoned Cheap Repository in 1798 as too burdensome, its program was adopted in 1799 by a committee of clergymen as the Religious Tract Society and expanded enormously through the nineteenth century.



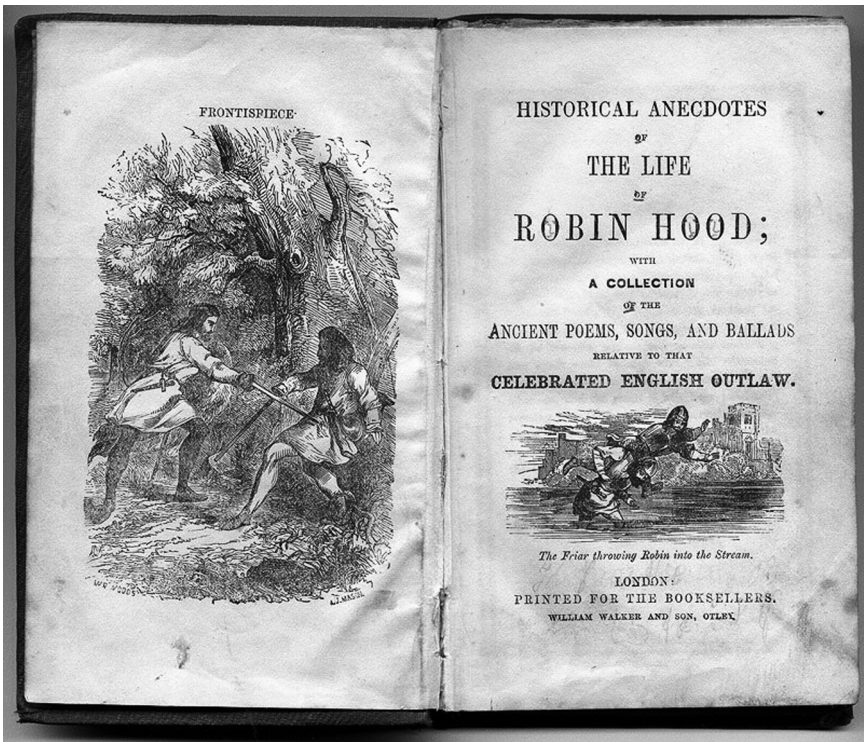
18 *Tawny Rachel*: Pseudo-popular print – Hannah More’s Cheap Repository tracts, attempting to displace the historic street literature of the common people, here attacking fortune-tellers, central figures in the lottery mentality of the common people.

In the secular sphere, middle-class intellectuals, antiquarians, scholars, writers, and publishers attempted to disarm popular fiction and print as an ideological, cultural, and hence political force by subsuming it into middle-class literature in various ways. Antiquarians, local historians, clergymen, and literary amateurs collected lower-class oral and print culture, many predicting its imminent disappearance, some deploring it as vulgar “superstition” nevertheless showing how to reform the plebeians, others celebrating it as the simple and natural if childlike cultural expression of the common people, and some preserving and editing it as a primitive part of the



19 *The History of Mr. Fantom*: Pseudo-popular print – more Cheap Repository, here an attack on English Jacobin “new philosophy,” sensationalized in attempted disguise as a crime chapbook.

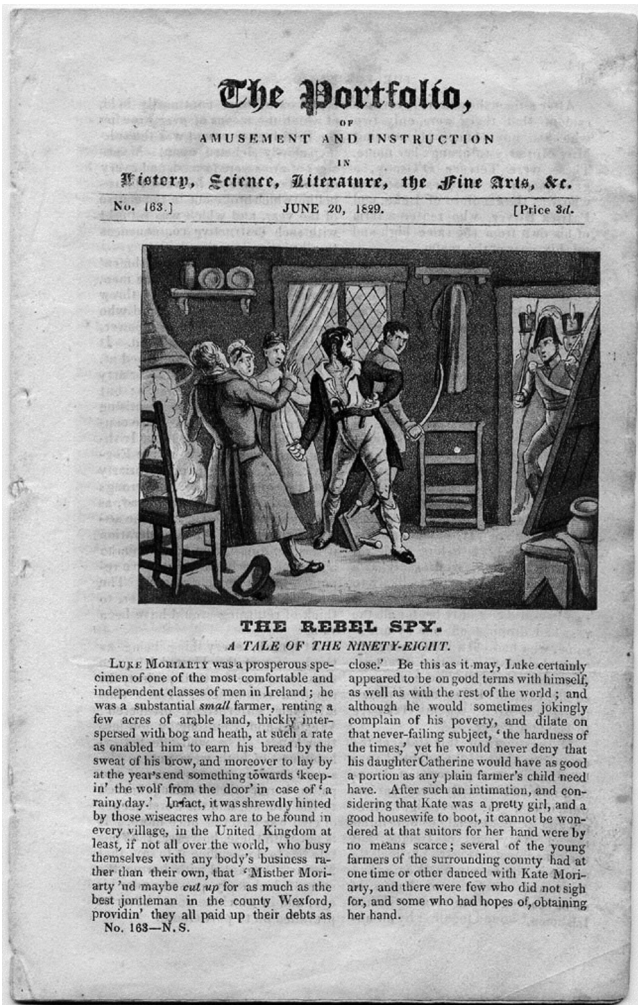
“national” literature. Much of this material was later termed “folklore,” a category isolating the plebeian within middle-class cultural, social, and academic discourse. Similarly, scholars edited various popular texts, from *Valentine and Orson* to *Robin Hood*, providing introductions, notes, and historical context, and pointing out sources in chivalric literature (Figure 20). Writers of middle-class children’s books adapted many popular chapbooks, expurgating and altering when they thought it necessary. Even some working-class radicals condemned traditional chapbook fiction, or any fiction, for puerilizing its readers, and publishers of new fashionable chapbooks often grouped republished traditional chapbooks with their “juvenile”



20 *Historical Anecdotes of the Life of Robin Hood*: Joseph Ritson's abduction of the most famous English folk and chapbook hero for an "English Jacobin" national literature.

publications. Historic working-class fiction, like the working classes themselves, was being categorized as childlike or childish. This movement corresponded to middle-class literary and political characterizations of the working classes. Middle-class novelists usually represented the lower classes as childlike – impulsive, undisciplined, feckless, unreliable. Conservative upper- and middle-class politicians similarly characterized the working classes in order to discredit a potential coalition of working and middle classes that threatened to effect radical reform, if not revolution, at various moments from the French Revolution debate of the 1790s to the Reform Bill debates of the late 1820s and early 1830s.

In response, during the 1820s middle-class reformers and publishers created pseudo-popular print projects to replace both old and new forms of working-class fiction with "solid and useful" reading. These projects were aimed at the "mechanics," or male artisans, perceived as most likely to become politicized and challenge the coalition of upper and upper middle classes for power, but also those most likely to respond to a discourse of



21 *The Portfolio of Amusement and Instruction* (1829): An example of the widely deplored – by middle-class do-gooders and proudly working-class activists alike – cheap magazines of sensational fiction, similar to the new format chapbooks.

meritocracy defined by middle-class ideology and culture. Many of these projects were serials, designed to engage working-class readers in disciplined self-education, and to displace both cheap political serials such as William Cobbett's *Weekly Political Register* (1802–35) and cheap fiction serials such as *The Tell-tale* (1810–?) and *The Portfolio* (see Figure 21). Pseudo-popular print included series of “libraries” of “useful” and “entertaining” knowledge, such as those edited by Charles Knight. More prominent were cheap

periodicals such as Knight and Lacey's *Mechanics' Magazine* (1823–9), H. Fisher's *Mechanic's Oracle* (1824–5), and the *New London Mechanics' Register* (1824–8). The last was associated with the “Mechanics' Institutes” organized by well-to-do reformists to provide adult education to the working classes. The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was founded in 1828 with similar leadership, motives, and publishing projects, such as Charles Knight's *Penny Magazine* (1832–5). These publications purposefully excluded both fiction and politics.

Finally, during the Romantic period certain writers countered both working-class and middle-class popular fiction by developing a specifically “literary” kind of fiction addressing the upper- and middle-class social coalition that would dominate state and empire through the nineteenth century. This fiction was diverse and written from differing ideological and political positions, representing various factions within the middle classes, by writers as different as John Moore, Ann Radcliffe, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson, Walter Scott, Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, John Galt, and Edward Bulwer-Lytton. Most of this fiction, despite differences, shared traits that could include some or all of the following: numerous literary allusions and quotations; incorporation of material from non-fiction and learned discourses such as travel literature, historiography, archeology, philosophy, the arts, and cultural studies, often supported by footnotes; extensive descriptions, often based on observation or research, again often footnoted; invocation of discourses of taste, discrimination, and distinction circulating among the upper and middle classes; detailed depiction of complex subjectivity; discrimination of social types and their speech, customs, and behavior; attention to the cause and effect relationship between character and incident; progressive plot leading to complex denouement and closure; and stylistic markers of the “literary,” such as “poetic” language, elaborateness of construction, and effects that would be considered “original” rather than either formulaic or merely novel.

Literary fiction had several functions – to make money for its authors and publishers, to legitimize a genre widely regarded at the time as trivial and trivializing, to intervene ideologically and politically in the public sphere, to circulate among its readers a body of socially, culturally, and politically empowering knowledge, and especially to distinguish itself and thus its readers and writers from working-class fiction and middle-class popular fiction and their readers. In doing so, literary fiction helped constitute its authors and readers, in their own minds and in the public culture, as a vanguard and elite at a time when such status had important social, political, and professional benefits and made important claims for them in Britain's formation as a modern liberal state. Romantic literary fiction underwent

various fates through the nineteenth century. Some had an impact at the time but dropped from sight or sustained a marginal fame. Some was immediately successful and influenced later novelists, but slid downmarket and became popular middle-class and “juvenile” literature. Some began obscurely but rose steadily in critical esteem and readership. In the twentieth century, professional critics, scholars, teachers, and publishers installed some of this fiction in a canon of texts they promoted as literature, or works supposedly of serious moral purpose, high artistic quality, and lasting value, embodying and reproducing, through compulsory reading in schools, both the “national” identity and culture and “universal” and “human” values, though Marxist, feminist, and post-colonialist critics have argued in recent decades that these values, if broadly liberal, were predominantly middle-class, patriarchal, Eurocentric, nationalistic, and colonialist.

Meanwhile, through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the working classes continued to read kinds of fiction developed from those devised for them and the popular reading public during the Romantic period – adventure stories, crime fiction, the dime novel westerns and detective fiction created in the United States, romances, newspaper novels, pulp magazine fiction, pocket books. For about two-thirds of the nineteenth century, many in the working classes continued to read the traditional, centuries-old chapbook fiction, though mostly in the provinces. In the course of the next century and a half, huge and technologically innovative popular culture industries, including mass illustrated print, music recordings, film, radio, and television, cast fiction in new media. These kinds of fiction continued to be ignored by the increasingly well-organized and militant middle-class literary institution, which was steadily and more widely imposed on all classes through state education, and then higher education, state subsidies, literary prizes, arts councils, and so on. Many in the working classes did read literary fiction voluntarily, but probably did so, as they always had, from their own point of view. For in the end, working-class fiction is any fiction read in a working-class way. About that we still have much to learn.

NOTE

- 1 Here I draw on the autobiographies of Thomas Holcroft, John Binns, Thomas Carter, Eliza Fox, John Clare, William Lovett, William and Robert Chambers, Hugh Miller, Thomas Cooper, J. A. Leatherland, Mary Smith, Thomas Frost, Benjamin Brierly, Jesse Collings, and Ellen Johnston.

