

W. T. Stead's 'Penny Poets': Beyond Baylen

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W. T. Stead's 'Masterpiece Library' — founded with the 'Penny Poets' series in 1895, and then expanded in alliterating turn to include two further weekly series, the 'Penny Popular Novels' and, for children, the 'Books for the Bairns' — has long been recognized as holding a small but significant place in the history of reading, in the history of the book, and in the history of English literature in and outside the universities. Joseph O. Baylen's classic account of 'Stead's Penny "Masterpiece Library"', published in 1975 in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, gathered together much of their early context, and made clear the vital link and interchange between the Masterpiece Library and Stead's monthly, the *Review of Reviews*. Baylen's article, too, indicated the link between Stead's weekly penny pamphlets and the history of cheap print and popular reading begun by Richard Altick in *The English Common Reader* (1957), a history subsequently carried forward to the present in studies such as Jonathan Rose's account of *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001).¹ Alone among the vast scope of Stead's printing and publishing, it is the Penny Poets that earn him his place in the monumental *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, with Simon Eliot and Andrew Nash's observation that 'with penny editions, readers could purchase an edition of Macaulay, Scott or Byron for less than one-seventieth of the cost of the first edition of Hardy's *Wessex poems* (1898)'.² Something of that market positioning, and the market penetration to which it gave rise in the possibility of bringing canonical authors into the hands of non-canonical readers, I have explored elsewhere in thinking about how Stead's Penny Poets editions of just one poet, John Milton, might be understood within the larger patterns of that poet's reception from the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century, the period in which 'English Literature' first properly found itself as an academic discipline, partly at least through arguing about Milton.³ One might, on this historiographical account, hope that the basic facts of and about the Penny Poets should be well known — save that, in many ways, they are not. This article, then, looks again at Stead's Penny Poets, moving beyond Baylen's foundational but now significantly dated account, offering first a detailed bibliographical account of the series and its contexts, and then setting that empirical account of the Penny Poets as material texts within a larger, literary historical inquiry into the canon created by and in Stead's series.

I

If the Penny Poets have proved difficult to document and describe, this is at least partly because of the dynamic ways in which the series changed and changed again, a process apparent from its inception and on through a later tangled sequence of printing and reprinting. Stead's initial plan for the Penny Poets was for a series of forty-eight weekly parts. In the terms in which a 'Preliminary Announcement' printed in the April 1895 issue of the *Review of Reviews* announced the project, the ambition for the series was clear: 'to produce within the compass of about one hundred clearly printed pages the cream of the literature of the world.' To this end, Stead wrote with typographical reinforcement, he had nominated Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* as the first masterpiece to lead off the series — and 'we shall go to press with *a first edition of 100,000 copies*'.⁴ In due course, the first Penny Poets volume, which did indeed contain texts from Macaulay, carried the date 'July, 1895' on its title page, and announced the contents of the following volumes. Selections, an early reader would have learned, were due to follow at regular intervals

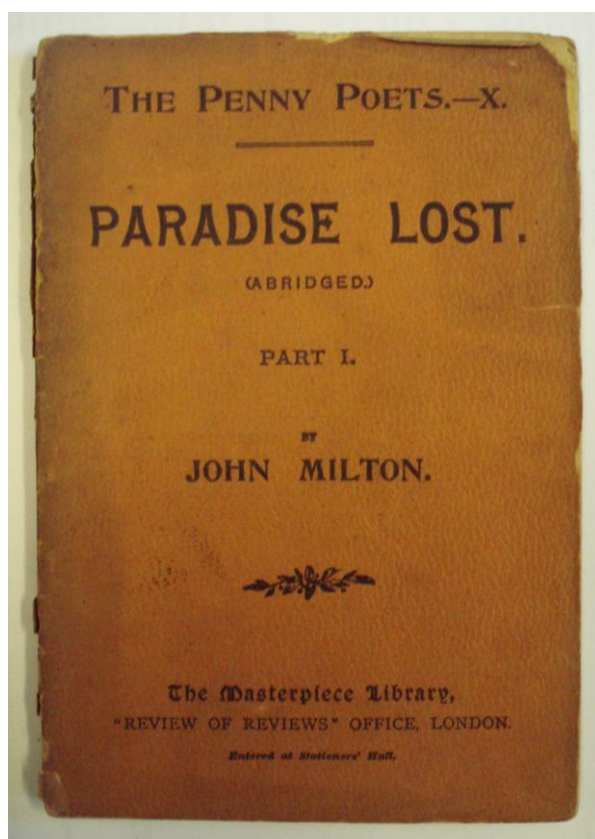


Fig. 1: Front cover of *Paradise Lost (Part I)*, Penny Poets, 10 (London: 'Review of Reviews' Office, [1895]). Author's image.

from Scott's *Marmion* (6 June), Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (13 June), and James Russell Lowell's poems (20 June). These writers were to be followed by ten others, 'as at present arranged, subject to any necessary alteration': Burns (27 June), Shakespeare (4 July), Longfellow (11 July), Mrs Barrett Browning (18 July), Campbell (25 July), Milton (1 August) (Fig. 1), Whittier (8 August), Tennyson (15 August), Shelley (22 August), and Robert Browning (29 August).⁵ Very soon, for reasons that I will explore later in this article, Stead's plan changed, with other disruptions following in turn. The volume of Shelley was pushed back to become number 28 in the first 48-issue series; and

Browning and Tennyson were pushed back even further. In fact Browning and Tennyson only appeared as Penny Poets — eventually — as numbers 52 and 66 respectively, at a period when the Penny Poets had, with number 49, *Poems for the Schoolroom and the Scholar, Part I*, moved from a weekly to a monthly pattern of publication.

As this example makes clear, a full and accurate bibliography of the Penny Poets, adequate to their analytic and enumerative complexity, remains a desideratum. Gestures towards that fuller account of the materiality of the series and its commercial history can be made, and made valuably, though to make them is to voice again the familiar, if well founded, regret about the practical difficulties involved simply in bringing together for study a complete run of these small, deliberately ephemeral 64-page pamphlets. Even research libraries, if they have the Penny Poets (which not all do), may have rebound them, or in various other ways removed them from their first publishing contexts.⁶ But to handle the pamphlets even briefly is to see also the value of such an effort of recovery, and to be reminded of how striking they must have been to their earliest purchasers and readers, crisp and sharp in the card wrappers that one of those purchasers, Joseph Stamper, memorably described: ‘pimply surface-paper, a bright orange colour’.⁷ Indeed, it might be through their orange peel wrappers that first printings of single issues of the Penny Poets could systematically be told apart from subsequent printings: the untextured orange wrappers of later printings often contain a complete list of the eventual sixty-six complete volumes in the series, information which would have been unavailable at the time of first printing.

How to differentiate a first from a subsequent reprinting remains unclear, however, and may have been from the first part of Stead’s strategy, which saw the same plates that were used to produce single issues of the Penny Poets used also to produce hard-bound monthly volumes. These monthly Penny Poets, in which four issues were gathered together, were sold as a quasi-independent publication, though advertised on the inside front wrapper of the first weekly issue (*Fig. 2*). Whereas the weekly penny parts were to be published every Thursday:

These four weekly parts, strongly bound together in cloth, will be given away — a monthly volume of over 200 pp. — as the literary supplement to the new shilling monthly — The Portrait Gallery of the Poets, — by which it is hoped to enable everyone to have a Poets’ Corner in his own home, be it ever so humble. (Macaulay, inside front cover)

There is a secular timeliness to this venture, timed as it was with the construction of the new National Portrait Gallery (it had opened formally in April 1894), which proceeded as Stead began publishing to the north-east of the well-established National Gallery. That secular timeliness is in tension, though, with Stead's gesture towards the sacred space of Westminster Abbey, a resonance in a way muffled by a typographical mistake on the front cover of the first of these cloth-bound, monthly volumes, but still clearly intended: 'OUR POETS, CORNER'. But as Stead's portrait gallery creates an

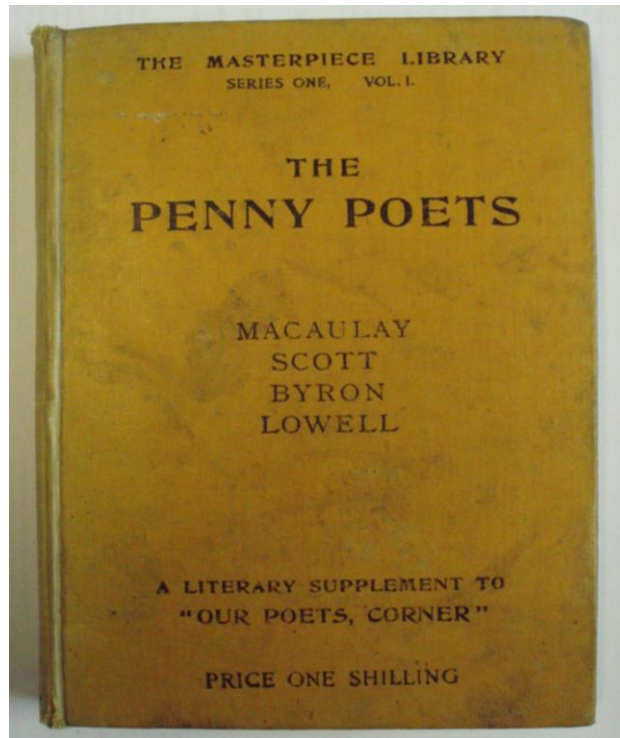


Fig. 2: Front cover of the Masterpiece Library, 1, binding together the Penny Poets, 1–4. Author's image.

affordable and accessible space in which images of writers can circulate, so does this use of plates in Penny Poets seem less to represent competition for the weekly issues than a complement, aimed at a different market. These monthly four-poet volumes from June to December 1895 have their own separate material history, which too might be followed, chromatically rather than textually, for the bindings of the 'Masterpiece Library Penny Poets' range in their colouring from yellow to postbox red, and have often since faded to all shades between; the seventh monthly volume, the first for 1896, was published in light-blue cloth boards.

Even a full account of those monthly volumes could not accommodate the over-stamped wrappers on some surviving copies of the Penny Poets. Here is visible the later, or perhaps even the last stages, of a series that at some point became 'STEAD'S POETS', with a red and white 'IMPORTANT NOTICE' fixed to the foot of their paper covers, cancelling the prices of any publications advertised and raising the price of individual pamphlets to '3^D. NET' ('Post Free 4d.') (*Fig. 3*). When, how, and why this transformation took place remains still unclear, though a fuller comparative survey of the surviving archive surely would be valuable.

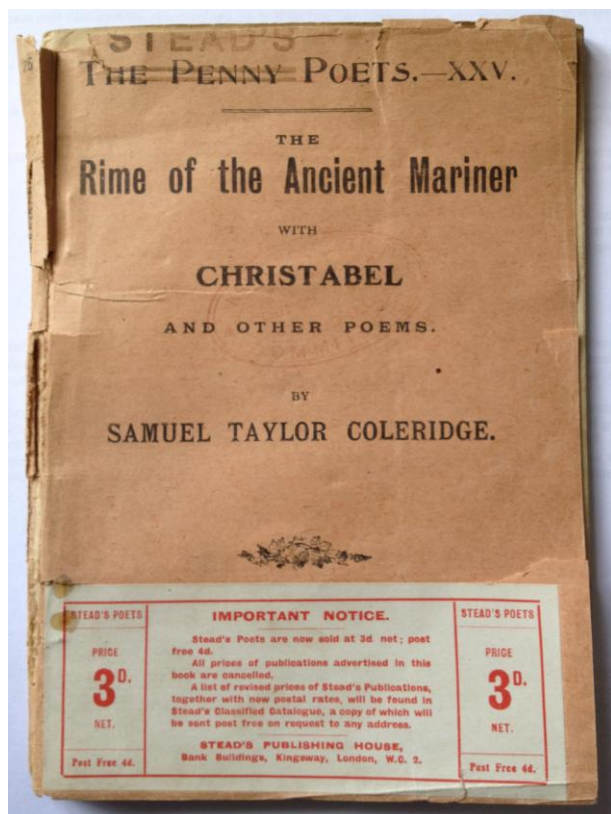


Fig. 3: Front cover of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* [...] *And Other Poems*, Penny Poets, 25 (London: 'Review of Reviews' Office, [n.d.]), with undated later over-stamping and relabeling. Author's image.

pattern 'rehearsed', to follow Roger Luckhurst's formulation, 'in nearly every project initiated by Stead'.⁸ From the first, 'The Future of Journalism' had been for Stead a matter of 'the usefulness of establishing [...] a network of corresponding associates', shaped by, and in some cases within, the Nonconformist communities of his youth; and though what he later called in *Help* a 'medium of intercommunication between all Helpers' would come by the time of the opening of Julia's Bureau to encompass communication between the living and the dead, at the time of the Penny Poets the serious materiality of the exchanges between Stead and the eager new readers of his pamphlets had rather more pragmatic ends.⁹

The dynamic of invitation and reader-response can be seen in Stead's calls, once the series had become established, for purchasers to become contributors by proposing texts for inclusion in later issues. This was particularly the case for the first of the monthly Penny Poets, *Hymns that Have Helped*, 'the announcement of which', Stead wrote, 'has created so widespread an interest throughout the English-speaking world'.¹⁰ The same

These empirical difficulties may explain in part why Baylen's account rested not so much on the Penny Poets themselves as on Stead's own regular, cross-publication progress reports in pages of the *Review of Reviews* and in the weekly 'Prefaces' to individual volumes of the Penny Poets. These reports, read in combination with the direct addresses of the prefaces, are vitally important; together they create for the Penny Poets their characteristic tone and community, and collectively they forcefully position potential readers in relation to the literary texts they introduce. In their regular invitations for readers to write to Stead they create a responsive loop between publisher and purchasers, editor and readers; what is more they follow a

habit is seen also in Stead's regularly reporting praise sent in by readers of the series, a kind of advertisement of the series (and of the self) that works to create and then to consolidate a community. In soliciting and then reproducing the voices of his readers, Stead adds another kind of 'demonstrable behaviour' to Scott Bennett's account of the opportunities opened up by describing a community 'not by a supposed ideological allegiance or social status' but instead by something that its members actually did: 'making a purchase in the mass market for reading matter.'¹¹

Nonetheless, as fascinating as Stead's own commentary on the Penny Poets may be as a matter of commercial practice, and as vital to one account of the literary sociology of the series as it undoubtedly is, working only from within the space created by his own writings had serious methodological consequences for Baylen, and for the modern scholarship that has rested on his work. In drawing so directly on Stead's own self-presentation, and his own arithmetic of sales and success, Baylen to an extent continued into scholarship that looped pattern of self-reinforcing communication that I described earlier in the interactions of the *Review of Reviews* and the Penny Poets. In particular, by using Stead's sums to quantify the numbers published of each issue — each one of a set of suspiciously round (or rounded) numbers — Baylen takes Stead at his word and at his number to a greater extent than a more sceptical critical practice might do today. To put the questions at the level of method is to appropriate and to redirect Jerome McGann's now classic critique of Romanticism, and its reiteration and reification in academic discourse — Romanticism, 'whose ideology', he writes, 'continues to be translated and promoted, and whose works continue to be taught and valued for that ideology'.¹² To put the question empirically is to ask how the Penny Poets might look if seen not through the accounts given by their publisher, Stead, but through the account books of their printers, William Clowes and Son, of Stamford Street and Charing Cross — if only those accounts had survived among the later remnants of the Clowes records now at the University of Reading.¹³ In what other ways, too, might such an account be altered if access were possible to the working records of other printers employed by Stead at different times, early and late, to manufacture the Penny Poets: Horace Marshall & Son of 125 Fleet Street, or W. & J. Mackay & Co. of Chatham?

For all that Stead's claims in the *Review of Reviews* need to be checked and tested (where such checking and testing is possible), we ought not automatically to undervalue those claims: 100,000 copies printed of the first Penny Poet, Macaulay; 150,000 copies of

Macaulay by July 1895, with 125,000 each of Scott and Byron; one million copies issued by the time Thomas Campbell's *Pleasures of Hope, and Other Poems* became the ninth number, 'giving an average', as Stead noted, 'of more than 100,000 for every issue'; and sales of Macaulay alone 'approaching 200,000' by the thirteenth number.¹⁴ Richard Altick long ago documented the extent of what he called 'Cheap Reprint Series of the English Classics', and the commercial pressures that saw both the cost and size of reprint series decrease over the second half of the nineteenth century, using as his example Sampson Low's Choice Editions of Choice Books, 'originally published in the late 1850s at 5s. a volume, [...] reprinted in the seventies at 2s. 6d., and again in the nineties at 1s.' The radical undercutting of even this market by Stead's Penny Poets, as Altick realized, placed the series below even the 3d. per issue charged by the National and World Libraries. Perhaps more interesting still is Altick's suggestion that Stead's 'venture, though initially successful, was short-lived and set no precedent'; the launch of J. M. Dent's Everyman Library in 1906 representing for Altick the start of the 'modern era of cheap-reprint publishing'.¹⁵ How properly to place Stead's Penny Poets in our material or discursive histories is still a question fully to be framed, and fully to be answered.

We might today contest such accounts as Baylen's or Altick's, at least in part, because the Penny Poets were never only, or never purely, a commercial undertaking. For all that the numerical dazzle of escalating sales figures might imply, the first number, with its selections from Macaulay, made clear that sales alone were never his purpose. Stead's Preface to the first part of his Masterpiece Library, dated 'MAY-DAY, 1895', announces the start not so much of a literary as a national and social project. Noting, as he had in the *Review of Reviews* 'Preliminary Announcement', that the German Universal Bibliothek had 'no counterpart in England', Stead's Preface set out to deliver with confidence to 'the English reading world' something both old and new: 'an edition of the best of our Classics in better binding, and one half the price, of the German booklets.' The community of readers possessing 'our Classics' was, in Stead's formulation, ever-expanding: these 'weekly pennyworths', as Stead conceived them, would offer texts not only to those readers already familiar with a national literature but to 'the New Reader, who is the product of the Education Act', giving those readers an opportunity to develop 'an appetite for literature'. And, coming as they did, with a dedication to the Queen (as 'HER IMPERIAL MAJESTY THE EMPRESS FREDERICK'), and facsimile letters of approval and encouragement from thirteen eminent patrons, among them Gladstone, Rosebery, and

the Lord Chief Justice, the volumes of the Masterpiece Library scarcely lacked for political clout.

This mixture of the commercial and the campaigning is, from the first, part of the cleverness of the Penny Poets: the series brings ‘our Classics’ to a developing reading nation in a pamphlet format that questioned the very nature of ‘a Classic’. Though from the first he feigned to grumble about the cost of printing these prefatory endorsements, Stead shows himself here to be an expert manipulator of paratexts and their possibilities, as he wrote in the *Review of Reviews*:

Thirty-two pages of introductory comments are devoted to the portraits and autographs of those persons who have given the enterprise their *imprimatur*. As the introduction of these thirty-two pages increases the cost of the production of the first number beyond the cost which I will receive for selling it, I shall strictly limit the numbers printed to 100,000. Those who desire Macaulay’s ‘Lays of Ancient Rome’ after the first 100,000 have been sold will have to buy it without the portraits and autographs which accompany the first edition.¹⁶

Rather than acting as dedications from the editor to the recipients, moving outwards from the book to its emblematic and elite recipients, Stead’s paratexts move inwards towards the book, always already endorsing and promoting it. The desirability of the paratextual endorsements, in Stead’s formulation, guarantees, too, the success of the project, with his expectation of future reprints, ‘after the first 100,000 have been sold’, an expectation (if we can trust the figures offered in the *Review of Reviews*) that was borne out by the demand it in part created. This was not a new marketing strategy on Stead’s part, for he had done something similar in spinning *Portraits and Autographs: An Album for the People* from the pages of the *Review of Reviews* in 1890, but it did show the acumen and the multimedia awareness with which he approached the challenge of selling the Penny Poets.¹⁷

The Penny Poets were, and after all still remain, attractive pamphlets. However cramped the printing of the literary texts, they sit well in the jostle of the overall typography, and set off interestingly against what may seem to be by current knowledge the apparent quackery of the many advertisements. It is scarcely coincidental that Macaulay’s fairly austere classicism in the *Lays of Ancient Rome* finds itself through-paginated and bibliographically inseparable from the advertisements that follow in the first pamphlet form of the first Penny Poets number: that clash of the ‘classic’ with the ‘pamphlet’ is central to Stead’s enterprise. Macaulay’s *Lays* finish on page 58 and the

advertisements occupy pages 59 to 64, continuing the main arabic pagination sequence rather than (as in later issues) beginning a separately printed sequence of roman numeration. Here, after Macaulay, follow advertisements for sheet music (p. 59); for ‘the new PAISLEY FLOUR’ manufactured by Brown & Polson (‘quite successful if mixed with ordinary flour’), with samples to be sent, ‘gratis and post free, to every reader who names the “PENNY POETS”’ (p. 60); and for the ‘ROCK’ assurance company (‘LEASEHOLD SINKING FUND POLICIES’) (p. 61). Other proprietary products elbow one another on the pages, alternately promising either to cure or to kill: an advertisement for ‘CYTOS BREAD AND BISCUITS’ (‘Absolutely cures indigestion’) sits next to one for ‘KEATING’S POWDER’ (‘HARMLESS TO ANIMALS’ — ‘KILLS BUGS, FLEAS, MOTHS, BEETLES’) (pp. 62, 63). If the advertisements here indicate something about their consumers’ indigestion- and bug-blighted lives imagined here by advertisers, so too were the lives of those consumers’ children: readers were offered ‘STEEDMAN’S SOOTHING POWDERS For Children Cutting Teeth’ (p. 64), and would have seen, printed on the inside back cover, advertisements for Allen & Hanburys’ Infants’ Food and their ‘VAPO-CRESOLENE’ for the relief of whooping cough (‘Vaporiser, with Lamp & 2-oz. bottle of Cresolene Complete, 6/-’).

How, if at all, are we today to accommodate Macaulay’s Ancient Rome to Stead’s 1890s commercial culture? Partly, at least, by seeing the many ways in which the Penny Poets are one with that culture by being themselves explicitly commodities, marked by their own particular place and spatial dynamic. Such, at least, is the logic of the ‘Poets’ Corner’ that Stead soon began to advertise, both in the pages of the *Review of Reviews* and in the endpapers of the Penny Poets. The difficulty was one that he described when boasting of the millionth copy issued:

As the numbers of ‘The Penny Poets’ multiply there increases the difficulty of keeping them together. There is no necessity for binding them. They are handier to read unbound. But a place for them is essential, otherwise they will knock about the house and litter in the bookshelves, and ultimately get lost.¹⁸

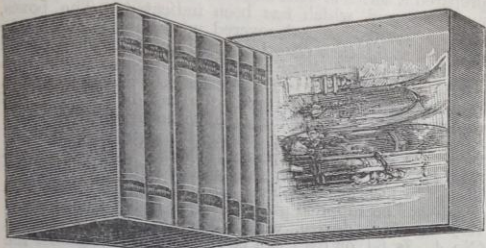
Stead, with characteristic business acumen, offered a solution to this question of the pragmatics of reading that also opened up a commercial opportunity: a range of proprietary storage solutions, from solid boxes to bookshelves, starting at 6d. for a 9 x 5½ inch storage box to 10s. for a top of the range corner bracket (*Fig. 4*). And what about the Christmas market, Stead’s readers might have asked? Cased editions of the Penny Poets as

presents, of course: 'They only cost one-and-sixpence each. They make a neat and handsome present, showing better for the price than anything in the market.'¹⁹ At such moments we might be tempted to extend even further the range of 'serial supplements' recently described by Laurel Brake to include such branded pieces of domestic furniture and cased seasonal specials: Stead's expertise in cross-publication promotion here extends even beyond the bounds of the published.²⁰

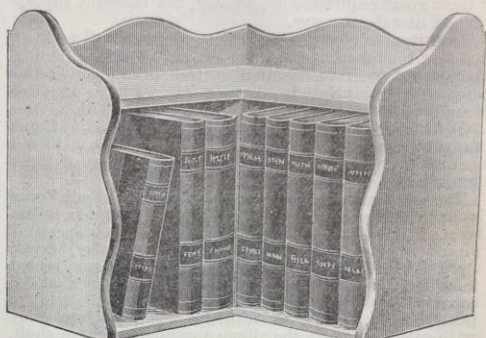
A POETS' CORNER FOR THE PENNY POETS.

I AM glad to be able to report that the sale of "The Penny Poets" continues to justify the expectations with which the enterprise was started. It is of course impossible to say how many have been sold of

inasmuch as every copy which was printed was sold at a loss, do I intend to reprint it at a penny. The two parts



No. 1. 6d.
Size: 9 in. by 5 1/4 in.



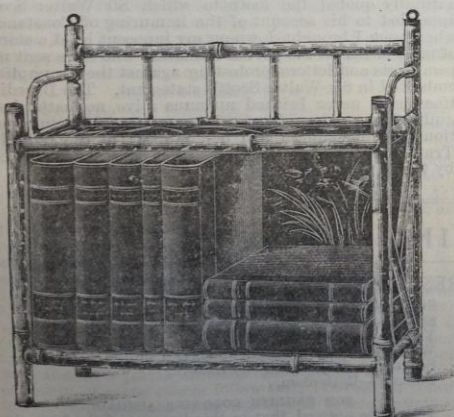
No. 3. 2s. 6d.
Size: 15 in. by 10 1/2 in.

each number, but the following are the numbers of copies printed up to date:—

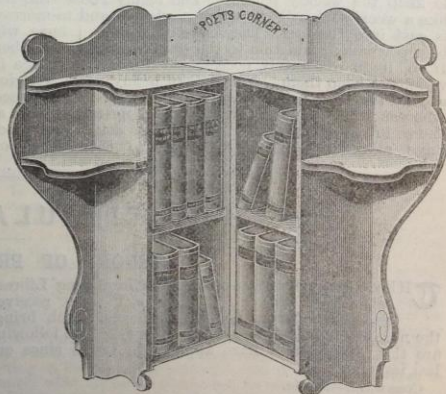
Macauley.—"Lays of Ancient Rome," 150,000.
Scott.—"Marmion," 125,000.
Byron.—"Childe Harold," etc., 125,000.
Lowell.—"Selections," 100,000.
Burns.—"Poems and Songs," 100,000.
Shakespeare.—"Romeo and Juliet," 100,000.
Longfellow.—"Evangeline," etc., 100,000.

So far as can be seen at present there has been the greatest run on Macauley, but that is due to the fact that it was the first, and still more because the first number contained thirty-two pages of portraits and autographs,

are, however, each reprinted, and can be had separately at a penny each. Portraits and autographs contain the facsimiles of the letters and the latest portraits of half a dozen of the most distinguished men in the country, from Mr. Gladstone and Lord Salisbury downwards. "The Lays of Ancient Rome" by themselves are also published at a penny. We stock sufficient quantities of the poets in order to be able to fill orders for the series from the first. Byron so far has been the least popular of the numbers issued up to date. This was, however, to be



No. 2. 5s.
Size: 13 in. by 15 in.



No. 4. 7s. 6d. and 10s.
Size: 21 in. by 25 in.

which of course only appeared in that number. I am continually being asked for No. 1 with the portraits and autographs. I have to state that it is out of print, nor

expected. "Childe Harold" has nothing like the popular charm that is possessed by "Marmion" or the "Lays of Ancient Rome." I am sending copies of Lowell

Fig. 4: 'A Poets' Corner for the Penny Poets', *Review of Reviews*, July 1895, p. 83. Author's image.

II

Attractive as Stead's shelving units may have been, the question of where and how to place the Penny Poets in present-day accounts is, as I have suggested, both more difficult and more productive. I argue in this section that we might profitably see Stead's series in tension between the book trades on the one hand and a developing higher education academy, seen as one part of a wider literary and educational context, on the other.

The first of those tensions is seen clearly in Stead's difficulties with copyright. He quoted hopeful correspondence from Edmund Gosse on the final page of the 'Portraits and Autographs' supplement that accompanied the first Penny Poets, reporting 'sympathy' and a 'desire to facilitate the enterprise' on Gosse's part, and his belief 'that the circulation of this cheap series would not injure in the least degree the sale of copyright editions'. Indeed, Stead was able to quote Gosse directly, Stead's compositors not so subtly emphasizing the clubbable literary circles in which his project was being discussed and approved: 'I remember being told by my friend, Mr. COVENTRY PATMORE, that the issue of the Cassell edition of the "Angel of the House", of which an enormous number was sold, positively and immediately increased the sale of the 5s. edition.'²¹ But the situation, as Stead discovered, was very different when it related to authors other than Patmore. If, as we saw, the initial plan for the Penny Poets had been to include Tennyson and Browning in their first ten issues, that plan, described retrospectively in issue 48, had developed in different directions. Stead wrote:

I had expected to have been able to close this weekly series of Poets with specimens of Tennyson and Browning. In the preface to the preceding number I explained the ill-success which had attended my efforts to make Tennyson accessible to the million. This week I have to report a similar fate for the Browning number. Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co., with more courtesy, but with equal decision, have refused permission to quote any of the Poems of Robert Browning in this series. This, however, is a matter of small moment. The copyright of most of his best poems falls out after December 12th next. It will, therefore, be a pleasant way of keeping Christmas and of beginning the New Year by issuing a Penny Browning. ('Preface', *Adventures of Britomartis*)

As recent work in this and other periods has amply confirmed, copyright has always been one commercial reason to maintain a literary canon, as this was embodied both in serials in particular and in publishers' series more widely.²² Stead's plans for the Penny Poets show his sensitivity towards the network of issues radiating out around the canon and

copyright, just as the responses of other publishers show the equal sensitivity of copyright holders to his series. Seen against the larger history of copyright across the century, it is at the least curious that Macaulay should have been the first author printed both in the Penny Poets and Penny Popular Novelists. It had been Macaulay who, in 1841, had been primarily responsible for the defeat of Thomas Noon Talfourd's efforts to reshape British copyright legislation; the 1841 defeat was, in fact, only the latest setback to a bill first introduced in 1837, and which only became law in 1842.²³ Stead's difficulties in reprinting Tennyson and Browning in the 1890s need to be read against moves by the Society of Authors in 1890 and from 1896 to 1897 to amend and consolidate existing copyright legislation, moves that would rumble on in the face of government opposition, and of a competing bill drafted by the Copyright Association in 1897, without resolution through the remainder of the decade (Seville, p. 218).

But Stead's Penny Poets might be read, too, against the development of 'English Literature' as a subject in its own right and with its own boundaries to police — the social, as well as the professional, mission traced out in Chris Baldick's foundational account.²⁴ Here again, at least at first glance, we can see the characteristic positions Stead adopted, central to them his determined defence of the many against the few, whether those few represent the restrictive interests (as he might see them) of publishers clinging to their copyright, or those proto-academics policing the borders of the canon and those seeking access to it. As he wrote perhaps most colourfully in number 14 of the Penny Poets, introducing its abridged and modernized text of the *Canterbury Tales*:

This edition is not for students of Chaucer. It will only make them wild and dispose them to homicide. But they are few and feeble folk at the best. What I hope this booklet may do is to multiply their number by the hundred and the thousand.²⁵

But even if viewed so positively by Stead, this multiplication of actual readers keyed into a wider cultural anxiety particular to the closing decades of the nineteenth century: that the newly literate students of Board Schools would, in the words of an 1895 *Fortnightly Review* article quoted by Anna Vaninskaya, follow 'their natural inclination [...] to read what is not good for them' ('Learning to Read Trash', p. 6). Even if priced far below the general trend of 'English Literature' being made available to new readers, the question of whether Stead's multiplying Chaucers, Shakespeares, and Miltons would serve to neutralize the far more widely available penny dreadfuls was strongly felt.²⁶

Indeed, even Stead's canon, his personal and in many ways emblematic choice of writers from Macaulay onwards, itself is a subject of inquiry.²⁷ It is not, perhaps, that Stead's selections of and from authors in the Penny Poets represent either a deliberate attempt to create a new popular literary canon or, contrastively, an opportunistic reflection of a literary canon that was being shaped elsewhere in the new institutions of 'English Literature'. What we see in Stead's Penny Poets is both more interesting and more complicated. The series offers, instead, a view of a process of canon formation that runs alongside, and sometimes in contrast to, the collaborations between new university English departments, the academics working in them, and the academic publishers newly keen to publish their work. That process, as the foregoing account has argued, is partly pragmatic and partly commercial, partly high-minded and partly economic, partly a matter of literary taste and partly a shrewd estimate of what might sell.

Keats, to take one example, posed an explicit problem for Stead. His inclusion in the Penny Poets was a celebration of the centenary of his birth, Stead wrote, and the seventy-fifth anniversary of his death. And yet...

Keats has never become a popular poet, as Byron was, as Scott is, and as Shakespeare has been, is, and ever will be. Whether it is possible to induce the penny public, which is the nation and the race, to read Keats is one of the most interesting questions which experience alone can answer. Of one thing, however, there is no doubt — it would never do to try the public with 'Endymion' in full. It is his longest poem; it is full of beauties. But the most devoted of the poet's worshippers would feel that Keats was not having a fair chance if 'Endymion' were to be thrust butt-end down the public throat.²⁸

In Stead's formation one canon is predicated on an underexplored conception of literary value: the 'beauties' of which *Endymion* is said to be full are neither described nor the aesthetic criteria by which they are judged disclosed. But alongside this runs a canon predicated on an equally underexplored conception of 'popularity', an authorial condition that may change across time ('as Byron was, as Scott is') but, equally, may seem not to ('and as Shakespeare has been, is, and ever will be'), historicized or timeless as the rhetorical circumstances may require. Whatever the mode of reading Keats these two pressures may describe, it seems scarcely to be one of 'full-throated ease'; nor, quite, does it seem one that Stead himself had perhaps fully assimilated to his own mind either. At the moment that the Penny Poets address most directly educational concerns, it is perhaps not coincidental that they did so through an editor other than Stead: it fell to R. S. Wood to edit the two parts of *Simple Poems for the Schoolroom and Scholar* (Penny Poets, 49 and

54), as well as *Dramatic Scenes for the Schoolroom and Scholar*, and *New Scenes from Shakespeare for the Schoolroom and Scholar* (Penny Poets, 56 and 60).

If this article returns attention to Stead's Penny Poets, it does so with a sure sense that many questions beyond those framed here remain to be explored. Much work remains to be done. Further investigations might well address the network of collaborators with whom Stead worked, taking Laurel Brake's cue to map these literary networks within the wider journalism networks of Stead's other publications.²⁹ Stead's text of Chaucer, for instance, was prepared for him by 'Miss Edith Johnstone' (as he described her), the author of popular novels, including *The Girleen*, which, with its brightly advertised illustrations by Paul Hardy, describes her as the 'author of *Gladys, Daphne &c*'; his 1890s text of Spenser, a text that had a particular challenge even in Spenser's own 1590s due to the deliberate archaism of his style, was partly modernized and partly novelized through the use of J. E. Rabbeth's book, *The Story of Spenser's Faerie Queene*.³⁰ The Penny Poets might, too, form the focus of an investigation into Stead's religious culture, for the ways in which his inclusion of hymns in later numbers of the series mounted an implicit defence of their literary as well as spiritual value.

But such an account might need also to explain what may have seemed to Stead the failure of the Penny Poets, even allowing for their partial success. Looking back in September 1906 in a pamphlet, *A Plea for the Revival of Reading* — a pamphlet, as its subtitle made clear, 'With a Plan of Campaign' — Stead spoke not of change effected, and a readership newly created, but of battles still to be fought, and a new future of reading still to be fashioned:

Ten years ago, encouraged by the success which had attended the publication of the 'Penny Poets', I ventured to publish in the *Review of Reviews* some practical suggestions for the promotion of a Reading Revival. War and Reaction arrested the execution of this plan of campaign. But as we are now once more re-beginning the onward march of peaceful progress, I hark back to the proposals of 1896, in the hope that after ten years the time has come for carrying them into effect.³¹

The historical no less than the personal ironies that attend upon such a harking back are too apparent, today, to need setting out in full. But today, at least, we might see a little more clearly how Stead's Penny Poets were part of the carrying into effect of wider changes whose shape and effects we are still continuing to understand.

¹ Joseph O. Baylen, ‘Stead’s Penny “Masterpiece Library”’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 9 (1975), 710–25; Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

² Simon Eliot and Andrew Nash, ‘Mass Markets: Literature’, in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, ed. by John Barnard and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999–), VI: 1830–1914, ed. by David McKitterick (2009), pp. 416–42 (p. 441).

³ Tom Lockwood, ‘Milton in the Twentieth Century’, in *John Milton 1608–2008: Life, Work, and Reputation*, ed. by Paul Hammond and Blair Worden (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2010), pp. 167–86.

⁴ ‘The Masterpiece Library — Preliminary Announcement’, *Review of Reviews*, April 1895, p. 386, emphasis in original.

⁵ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The Lays of Ancient Rome, and Other Poems*, Penny Poets, 1 (London: ‘Review of Reviews’ Office, [1895]), inside front cover.

⁶ Scott Bennett, ‘The Golden Stain of Time: Preserving Victorian Periodicals’, in *Investigating Victorian Journalism*, ed. by Laurel Brake, Aled Jones, and Lionel Madden (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1990), pp. 166–83; Nicholson Baker, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (London: Vintage, 2002).

⁷ Joseph Stamper, *So Long Ago* (London: Hutchinson, 1960), p. 162, quoted in Anna Vaninskaya, ‘Learning to Read Trash: Late-Victorian Schools and the Penny Dreadful’, in *The History of Reading*, ed. by Shafquat Towheed and others, 3 vols (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), II: *Evidence from the British Isles, c.1750–1950*, ed. by Katie Halsey and W. R. Owens, pp. 67–83 (p. 76).

⁸ Roger Luckhurst, ‘W. T. Stead’s Occult Economies’, in *Culture and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Media*, ed. by Louise Henson and others (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 125–35 (p. 128).

⁹ W. T. Stead, ‘The Future of Journalism’, *Contemporary Review*, November 1886, pp. 663–79; quoted in Luckhurst, ‘W. T. Stead’s Occult Economies’, p. 128; ‘Julia’s Bureau: An Attempt to Bridge the Grave’, *Review of Reviews*, May 1909, p. 433.

¹⁰ ‘Preface’, *Adventures of Britomartis, The Lady Knight of Chastity, from Spenser’s Faerie Queene*, Penny Poets, 48 (London: ‘Review of Reviews’ Office, [n.d.]).

¹¹ Scott Bennett, ‘Revolutions in Thought: Serial Publication and the Mass Market for Reading’, in *The Victorian Periodical Press: Samplings and Soundings*, ed. by Joanne Shattock and Michael Wolff ([Leicester]: Leicester University Press, 1982), pp. 225–57 (p. 225).

¹² Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 3.

¹³ The surviving records are now at the University of Reading Library, Archive of British Publishing and Printing, MS 5330, and contain mainly business rather than editorial or production records. I am grateful to Danielle Mills at the University of Reading Library for her assistance.

¹⁴ ‘The Masterpiece Library — Preliminary Announcement’, p. 386; ‘A Poet’s Corner for the Penny Poets’, *Review of Reviews*, July 1895, pp. 83–84; ‘The Penny Poets: A Million Copies Issued’, *Review of Reviews*,

August 1895, pp. 180–81; ‘The Penny Poets and Poets’ Corner’, *Review of Reviews*, September 1895, p. 259.

¹⁵ Richard D. Altick, ‘From Aldine to Everyman: Cheap Reprint Series of the English Classics 1830–1906’, *Studies in Bibliography*, 11 (1958), 3–25 (p. 11).

¹⁶ ‘A Friendly Lead by Leading Men’, *Review of Reviews*, May 1895, pp. 479–80.

¹⁷ *Portraits and Autographs: An Album for the People*, ed. by W. T. Stead (London: ‘Review of Reviews’ Office, 1890).

¹⁸ ‘The Penny Poets: A Million Copies Issued’, pp. 180–81.

¹⁹ ‘The Poets as Christmas Presents’, *Review of Reviews*, December 1895, p. 546.

²⁰ Laurel Brake, ‘Lost and Found: Serial Supplements in the Nineteenth Century’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 43 (2010), 111–18.

²¹ ‘Portraits and Autographs’, supplement to Macaulay, Penny Poets, 1, p. xxxii.

²² Gordon B. Neavill, ‘Canonicity, Reprint Publishing, and Copyright’, in *The Culture of the Publisher’s Series*, ed. by John Spiers, 2 vols (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), I: *Authors, Publishers and the Shaping of Taste*, 88–105.

²³ Catherine Seville, ‘Copyright’, in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, VI, 214–37 (p. 218).

²⁴ Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848–1932* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

²⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, Penny Poets, 14 (London: ‘Review of Reviews’ Office, [1895]), p. 62.

²⁶ Anna Vaninskaya discusses ‘English Literature’ in, Leslie Howsam and others, ‘What the Victorians Learned: Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Schoolbooks’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 12 (2007), 262–85 (pp. 276–81).

²⁷ On the wider questions of the canon and canonicity see John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).

²⁸ John Keats, *Poems*, Penny Poets, 19 (London: ‘Review of Reviews’ Office, [1895], p. 120.

²⁹ Laurel Brake, ‘“Time’s Turbulence”: Mapping Journalism Networks’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 44 (2011), 115–27.

³⁰ Edith Johnstone, *The Girleen* (London: Blackie, 1896); J. E. Rabbeth, *The Story of Spenser’s Faerie Queene* (London: Bell, 1887).

³¹ W. T. Stead, *A Plea for the Revival of Reading: With a Plan of Campaign* (London: Stead, 1906), p. 43.