
Susan M. Ryan’s informative and lucidly argued study examines the “moral economies” of nineteenth-century writers. This topic seems timely today, as cultural consumption relies increasingly on moral branding while the most iconic people and things may become “toxic” overnight in the public eye. Ryan’s inquiry revolves around the question of how, in the nineteenth-century literary field, prestige hinges to a large degree on a public sense of a writer’s perceived “good character” (5). This kind of “moral authority,” Ryan suggests, is defined by a number of interchangeable proxies (credibility, gentility, respectability, admirableness, decency, etc.) or negative foils (immorality, sensuality, atheism, profligacy, egotism, etc.). Ryan adapts the concept of moral economy from E. P. Thompson’s “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century” (1971), which explores how seemingly abstract calculative rationalities are shaped by cultural meanings. As Ryan puts it, the most mechanical market transactions “are grounded in deeply held—if not always explicitly examined—beliefs about social and ethical obligations and risks” (6). Thus, a writer’s “moral standing” as a person becomes “a crucial factor in the numbers of books or magazine pieces” they are able to sell. It determines how easily one might find “a publisher or a receptive magazine editor” (for whom one’s “moral capital” can figure as “a means of increasing circulation”). And it decisively shapes a writer’s access to “less tangible forms of value” such as “critical esteem, national representativeness or belovedness, positioning within early canonization initiatives like literary anthologies or encyclopedias” (7). Ryan speaks of “economies” in the plural, which allows her to focus on a variety of overlapping valuations that influence literary success in multiple ways. Her purpose is to complicate a retrospective view of the nineteenth-century literary field that relegates the idea of moral character to the dustbin of a Victorian or Gilded-Age puritanism, overstating the relevance of both stylistic innovation and strictly political (rather than ethico-moral) determinants of authorial prestige.

Ryan explores the moral economies of authorship in five well-written chapters that offer a number of instructive case studies. The first one deals with James Fenimore Cooper’s reputational trouble in the wake of a series of scandals during the 1830s. Chapter two explores the moral function of “paratexts” in antebellum literary abolitionism. A third chapter looks at how Frederick Douglass struggled with rumors about an affair with a white co-worker (the British abolitionist Julia Griffiths). Chapter four, “The Currency of Reputation,” examines the marketing of the domestic novel with regard to how an interplay of advertisements and book reviews establishes the moral force of such writers as Harriet Beecher Stowe and E. D. E. N. Southworth. The final case study concerns the collapse of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s reputation over her public denunciation of Lord Byron’s moral indecencies.

The ups and downs of Cooper’s moral capital are of particular interest. It is well known that, after *The Pioneers* (1823) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) had made Cooper a literary celebrity (in 1831, the London-based *New Monthly Magazine* noted that Cooper “is generally designated ‘The great American Novelist’” [25]), he nearly destroyed his literary prestige with a succession of novelistic flops during the 1830s, before his revival of the Leatherstocking series (with *The Pathfinder* [1840] and *The Deerslayer* [1841]) somewhat reestablished his former position. Less well-known are the ways in which Cooper undermined his stand-
ing with a string of bad image-management decisions that made him appear an egotistical and arrogant troublemaker. The first moral scandal emerged in the “Three Mile Point” controversy of 1837, a property dispute that pitted Cooper against the people of Cooperstown. It seems that Cooper overreacted when he found neighbors were picnicking on a stretch of land he owned at the shore of Lake Otsego. The incident might well have faded into oblivion if Cooper had not decided to work it into the plot of his next two novels, Homeward Bound and Home as Found (1838). When reviewers recognized his bias and schematic depiction of events and poured critical vitriol over his novels, he initiated a series of libel suits, some of which he won (in cases where judges found reviewers to have gone for the ‘person’ rather than the “author”), but these were clearly pyrrhic victories that ruined his reputation. Another characteristic moment of self-inflicted reputational harm occurred when Cooper reviewed J. G. Lockhart’s biography of the late Walter Scott in the Knickerbocker Magazine in 1838, lambasting the Author of Waverley as a mediocre writer and mendacious social climber. Ryan suggests that Cooper was acting out his impatience with the implied hierarchy in his designation as the American Scott, while fundamentally misjudging a public sense of what is appropriate in the treatment of a more famous author: “[T]he Knickerbocker article made Cooper seem both indecorous (because he spoke ill of the dead) and ungrateful (because he denigrated an author widely identified as a model and inspiration for his own work)” (43-44).

Ryan provides valuable insights into what she calls “the currency of reputation” in the literary field, as antebellum writers negotiate the “[m]oral [p]rintscapes” (115) of their time, having to engage in a “balancing act” in which “literary status, moral authority, and popularity could be complementary—even mutually constituting—elements” (127) of their literary careers. In chapter four, she elucidates the public consensus that a piece of fiction will always betray “the real self” of its author. It is impossible, Putnam’s Magazine writes in 1853, that Dickens could have produced such memorable characters “without being himself kindred in soul to the characters he describes” (111). This is the same decade in which Gustave Flaubert (who insists that the author disappear from the page) winds up indicted for obscenity because the authorities suspect him to be morally kindred to his protagonist Emma Bovary. Ryan encourages us to rethink the modernist commonplace that moral purpose is irreconcilable with aesthetic value: “For nineteenth-century commentators, moral purpose operated within aesthetic registers: that is, it could be enacted well or badly, but its mere presence did not cast a work of its author outside the realm of literary achievement” (117). References to the “didactic” were indeed often used pejoratively—“to describe a tedious or ham-handed approach to moral instruction”—but the relation between the moral didacticism and aesthetic form was more nuanced in the nineteenth century, according to Ryan, than mid-twentieth-century conceptions tend to imply.

Sometimes moral outrage can undermine a writer’s moral capital, as Ryan points out in an illuminating chapter on the Byron controversy involving Harriet Beecher Stowe. The scandal began in 1869 with an essay that simultaneously appeared in the Atlantic Monthly and Macmillan’s Magazine, entitled “The True Story of Lady Byron’s Life.” In this essay, Stowe claimed to have learned from Lady Byron herself (who was by then deceased) the reason for her separation from her husband: Lord Byron “had, as a young man, fallen ’into the depths of a secret adulterous intrigue with a blood relation,’ his half-sister Augusta Leigh” (137). Stowe ostensibly made this public revelation to defend Lady Byron against the charge (reiterated in an 1868 biography by Byron’s Italian mistress, Teresa Guiccioli) that the couple’s separation had been caused by her heartlessness. She
also made clear that she intended to reveal the danger of Byron’s popularity in
the hope of damaging his reputation enough so as to put him out of the literary
market—this was to prevent his moral depravity from infecting less experi-
enced, younger readers. It is hard not to see parallels to the more recent moral
sensibilities in the film industry (after the publication of Ryan’s book), which
encouraged a world-famous Hollywood film maker to cut out from his finished
film an actor of universal artistic prestige who had been disgraced as a sexual
predator. From Beecher Stowe’s viewpoint, Byron’s escapades made his univer-
sally acclaimed poetry similarly toxic. As Ryan points out, however, Stowe’s
intervention produced the opposite effect: Her essay provoked an almost unani-
mously hostile critical response, which she tried to counter with a book-length
reply (Lady Byron Vindicated [Boston, 1870]) that only made matters worse. The
controversy increased Byron’s sales while Stowe came across as a libeler who
was shaming a genius author on the basis of unfounded rumors. Most critics
thought that if the incest rumor was true it should not have been dragged out
into the open (as George Eliot pointed out to Stowe in a friendly letter). As in
Cooper’s hatchet job of Scott, Stowe’s attack on the highly consecrated Byron
backfired and left her moral reputation in tatters. Ryan offers a rich picture of
the various mindsets at work in the 1860s and 1870s that led to this outcome.

At the background of Ryan’s historical analysis is a sense that we might not
have progressed as far beyond Victorian moralism as we tend to think: “authors’
personal and moral shortcomings still make good copy—and still inform schol-
arily discourse” (162). In an epilogue significantly subtitled “reputation redux,”
Ryan lists pertinent examples of how moral reputations still matter, and how
they shift across time and space: Post-new-critical scholars want Ralph Wal-
do Emerson to be not just a Poet but also an abolitionist (“Virtue’s Hero,” in
Len Gougeon’s phrase) (165). The turn from aesthetic values to “cultural work”
(Tompkins) shifts critical attention away from what texts can do performatively
to what they represent—socially, politically, but also, Ryan insists, morally (166).
The rise of ecocriticism since the 1990s, she suggests, shows well how writ-
ers’ moral awareness (or wokeness) can become a central prerequisite for their
canonicality. And while twenty-first-century critics tend to be less troubled by
Stowe’s incest charge against Byron, they now disapprove all the more strongly
of her “racial representations and appropriations” (164). Ryan’s examples ring
true, and her short epilogue could also function as a preface to a more in-depth
investigation of the larger historical and social settings of literature’s moral
economies. Where exactly does moral authority emerge today? How do moral
economies in today’s program era differ from those that shaped the Victorian
public sphere? And what is the connection between reputation redux in litera-
ture and scholarship and the rise of moral consumption in the past thirty years
or so? Ryan’s astute study of nineteenth-century authorship provides an excel-
rent framework for exploring literature’s moral economies, past and present.

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