Nineteenth-century book production is largely a story of publishers meeting reader demands for bigger, better, and more frequent illustrations. Lorraine Janzen Kooistra is building a sound reputation as the authority on illustrated poetry, and the present volume will complement her other important studies of fin-de-siècle illustrated books and Christina Rossetti as well as a fascinating electronic resource titled The Yellow Nineties Online, which she co-edits with Dennis Denisoff. Expanding on her influential essay about poetry and illustration in Blackwell’s 2002 Companion to Victorian Poetry (edited by Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison), Kooistra now reminds us once again that popular poetry was a profitable business, and that illustrated gift books successfully competed with many other books and periodicals within a broad expanse of media traversed by Victorian consumers.

The gift book’s ancestors were literary annuals most popular from the 1820s to the 1840s. These expensive, elegantly bound and illustrated books of poetry and prose appeared each fall for purchase as Christmas gifts, and they rescued many publishers from an economic depression in the book trade. Noted authors such as Tennyson published in the annuals, and titles such as The Keepsake, the Forget-Me-Not, and the Literary Souvenir intimately introduced their work to new readerships of women at a time when the publishing industry was soon to be heavily influenced by women writers, readers, and feminine sensibilities. But as other kinds of illustrated books began to dominate the marketplace, competition among publishers of literary annuals stifled the genre. In its place flowed a stream of alternatives, including periodicals, novels, and countless books on a great variety of topics.

Kooistra persuasively argues that in the 1860s, the illustrated book of poetry became one of the most important literary commodities of the third quarter of the nineteenth century. With great clarity and depth, she articulates the central relevance of ornamental, illustrated poetic gift books to literary culture, British identity, and the place of poetry in histories of authorship, reading, and publishing. This “middlebrow art form,” as the author calls it, belongs with an “endless” list of nineteenth-century illustrated books. Yet its “aesthetic and ideological features” represent the “middle-class home itself, and its most cherished values, while also marking boundaries of inside and outside, public and private, female and male, individual and community, nation and world” (5). We cannot properly comprehend the Victorians without understanding the place of poetry in their culture.

Pictures and poems shaped the discourse of their world, and Kooistra’s book will further revise our notions of what, why, and how people read poetry during that era. Since we were, and are, highly influenced by pictures, we should naturally consider how visual images shaped the impact and reception of the texts they accompanied. All Victorian texts should also be re-evaluated in light of recent discussions about publishing histories, readerships, commercial contexts, and commodity theory. Furthermore, regardless of a lingering distaste for sentiment inherited from previous generations, we should explore books and periodicals that were edited, written, and read by women in light of their own aesthetic. This kind of literature is exemplified by the Victorian illustrated gift book of poetry, an artifact familiar to every collector of nineteenth-century books. Though large and originally expensive to produce, such books are now readily affordable because commonly available. Yet the genre remains as an elephantine clue to authentic Victorian culture.

Using carefully selected examples, Kooistra makes her case for the importance of gift books in five well-illustrated chapters followed by a thoughtful, concise coda titled “Poems and Pictures in the Modern Age.” Beginning with James Burn’s Poems and Pictures: A Collection of Ballads, Songs, and Other Poems Illustrated by English Artists (1846), she explains the marketing, reception, and production of gift books published up to 1875. The early gift books of the 1840s, she shows in Chapter One, exemplify the nineteenth-century process of “elevating the image and the reader and detaching the author from the work” (2). Gilt-edged pages, elaborately decorated bindings, and reproductions of art constituted a “hybrid form,” a “domestic object” that helped to shape “ideologies and identities based on gender, class, ethnicity, age, and nation” (27). Ornamental, illustrated books of poetry produced for the Christmas season attracted a middle-class, consumerist culture needing refinement: “Prominently displayed on the drawing-room table, the poetic gift book represented a middle-class aspiration to acquire cultural currency in the nation’s poetry and art--or, at least, the desire to display a luxury good that attested to the owner’s taste, cultivation, and disposable income” (25). The books thus linked visual art with social elevation and domestic industry.

In Chapter Two, Kooistra supplements previous work on the famous Moxon Illustrated Edition of Tennyson’s Poems (1857), which featured work by Pre-Raphaelite artists. Highlighting a fascinating moment in Victorian visual culture, she links this edition to the cultural economics informing the Manchester Exhibition of Art Treasures of the United Kingdom in
1857. Heightening middle-class readers' awareness of Pre-Raphaelite art, this event led them to appreciate the Moxon edition long after critics rated it a commercial failure. Kooistra contrasts the interpretive and artistic styles of its older illustrators (Thomas Creswick, William Mulready, Clarkson Stanfield, J.C. Horsley, and Daniel Maclise) with the work of its three younger ones, all Pre-Raphaelites: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt.

The older artists, she says, "produced illustrations in a familiar language, one whose well-worn graphic lines had been familiar companions to the illustrated book of verses at least since Turner's engraved vignettes for Rogers's Italy in 1830" (46). For instance, Stanfield's "Ulysses" (above, scanned by George Landow), distances the viewer from the poetic subject. Indeed, Ulysses is indistinguishable from other men in the scene, which stresses the "overall effect" rather than the human emotions expressed by the poem. Furthermore, writes Kooistra, as the "blurred lines of the vignette" dissolve into the printed page, "so too does the reader's personality fade into the author's during the reading experience" (48). But the Pre-Raphaelite artists seek not so much to represent the author's vision as to project their own reading of the poem. With framing devices that emphasized and enclosed detail, rather than dissolving it, they exemplified--Kooistra suggests--what T.S. Eliot would later call the objective correlative. In pictures such as Rossetti's illustration for "The Lady of Shalott" (below), she writes, they "designed the foregrounded figure or figures and the details of the symbolic setting as a visual means of embodying the particularity of the poem's affective experience" (49). Pre-Raphaelite illustrators thus construed the emotive impact of a poem as a work of art.

Kooistra further contrasts the two groups of illustrators by juxtaposing what Millais and Stanfield each do with Tennyson's "St. Agnes' Eve."
Occupying over half the first page of the poem, Millais’ headpiece (above top, scanned by George Landow) dominates the text, prompting the reader to contemplate the nun’s state of mind: “Far from disappearing into the textual page in the blurred edges of a vignette,” writes Kooistra, “the framed picture presents itself as a black square on the page, an interior space into which the viewer is invited before entering the speaker’s subjective display of her own interiority” (53). The result is a modern focus on “speaker, symbolic detail, and atmosphere” (53). By contrast, Stanfield’s tailpiece (above bottom, scanned by George Landow) encodes the nun’s vision in the romantic, gothic aesthetic familiar to readers of literary annuals. In a scene that distances the reader from the nun’s emotional experience, she is dwarfed by the convent and the moon. “Sketchy in both graphic style and pictorial detail,” writes Kooistra, “Stanfield’s tailpiece functions as an atmospheric textual decoration anchoring the poem in its scenic effect rather than its psychological effect” (53).

Turning next to the wood engravings of the Brothers Dalziel, Chapter Three compellingly probes their much-respected book illustrations. In a well-researched, generous discussion of how they illustrated poetry for middle-class readers of periodicals, Kooistra reminds us that the “common materiality of wood engraving brought the world, and its representations in pictures and print, into recognizable view and tactile apprehension” (86). Since illustrative poetry in periodicals could be easily translated into luxury gift books for middle-class readers who could afford them, the Dalziel brothers found a ready market for their “Fine Art Books.” Volumes such as their elegant Poets of the Nineteenth Century (1857) sprang from similar works published in popular illustrated periodicals. Long familiar with such periodicals, middle-class readers could easily interpret the language of wood engraving in gift books, which at Christmas were often presented to women by their husbands and fathers. Such a book would be cherished and read in the drawing room as an important cultural artifact. “Uniting form and content,” Kooistra observes, “the gift book’s elegant architecture put a miniaturized home into the hands of its domestic audience, who had the pleasure of viewing idealized images of themselves in its beautiful pages” (111).

Chapter Four studies three popular underrated women poets: Eliza Cook, Adelaide Anne Procter, and Jean Ingelow. In placing these three at the center of mass Victorian readerships, Kooistra stresses the powerful role that sentiment played in Victorian culture while explaining why these poets were also essential to dominant domestic ideologies embedded in feminist agendas. Expressing the sentiment and traditions of domestic experience, their poetry became part of the everyday lives of women throughout the empire, and in elegant illustrated gift books of poetry by each of these three, publishers enshrined the pleasures of home and family. In, for instance, John Gilbert’s illustration for Eliza Cook’s sentimental and highly popular “Old Arm-Chair” in her Poems of 1861, the image of the mother and child idealizes the maternal: “Like most fantasies,” Kooistra notes, “this image mystifies the actual labor involved in child-rearing and household responsibility” (144). As Kooistra explains, Cook’s own mother had eleven children with a husband who was an “urban artisan,” and her life “bore little resemblance to [that of ] this Victorian Madonna.” Yet this and other pictures in these volumes of illustrated poetry work “iconically to inscribe an ideology of universally sanctified motherhood across class lines, and indexically to connect these verses of loss with the personal life of the poet” (144).
Returning to Tennyson and the many illustrated editions of his work, Chapter Five further examines the Laureate's relationship to his publishers. From his early years of publication in literary annuals, the poet feared surrendering artistic control to illustrators. In Kooistra's insightful history of the illustrated Tennyson, she confirms our view of the poet as the maker of his own misery: anxiety and enthusiasm forced him onward, widening the gap between his poetic vision and the artist's mechanized interpretation. In the later decades of the nineteenth century, Kooistra astutely suggests, Tennyson's reputation suffered from the recycled and mass-produced volumes of his illustrated poetry. As widely distributed pictures of his home, his family, and his silhouette became iconic possessions of publishers and consumers, he lost control of both his poetry and his public persona.

According to Kooistra, the elegant Christmas gift book of the 60s and its "hybrid" form challenged "romantic notions of individual creators and consecrated canons" (249). The challenge was short lived. Like the literary annuals of earlier years, gift books of the 1860s faced a combination of competition, the stale rehashing of best sellers, and prolific production of cheap reprints. Yet for the first time, Kooistra examines the genre through wide-ranging research, clarity, and understanding. There is nothing stale about her contribution to book history studies.

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