Virginia Penny's Economic Horizons: Fact and Futurity in Nineteenth-Century Women's Encyclopedic Writing

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The picture of nineteenth-century women's labor has never been so clear or so detailed, thanks to the now decades-long effort to recover women as a subject of history and to establish gender as a category of analysis. Across this scholarship—from doctoral dissertations to edited collections to monographs—one finds variations on the phrase "see Virginia Penny," a reference to an otherwise obscure nineteenth-century reformer. In the past two decades alone, citations of Penny's writing have been made by Lara Vapnek in *Breadwinners* (2009) to track the "identification of female wage workers with slaves" after the 1830s; by Laura R. Prieto in *At Home in the Studio* (2001) to document the nineteenth-century association of art with ideal womanhood; by Michael Zakim in *Accounting for Capitalism* (2018) to detail the gendered anxiety that accompanied the shift from farm labor to office work; and by Jessica Ziparo in *This Grand Experiment* (2017) to explore the "precarious financial situation" that women faced during the US Civil War.[1] Numerous other scholars draw on Penny's writing to document women's participation in traditionally male occupations, including cartography, glassmaking, portraiture, lithography, and lighthouse keeping.[2] As a writer and woman's rights activist, Penny devoted much of her life to researching the lives and labors of American women, and the spectacular achievement of feminist historiography, in a sense, represents her legacy. Yet while historians continue to mine Penny's research for data about women's work, scholars have yet to provide an account of Penny's contribution to literary history.

The relegation of Penny to the footnotes of scholarship is especially surprising, given that she was one of the earliest writers to offer a sustained account of women's labor in the United States. Born in 1826 in Louisville, Kentucky, to a family of slaveholding farmers, Penny later attended the Steubenville Female Seminary in Ohio for two years before undertaking teaching positions in Illinois and a school principalship in Missouri. The life of a schoolteacher in the

mid-nineteenth century could be socially isolating, intellectually unsatisfying, and physically exhausting, and Penny was unhappy in her work. When the death of her father, William Penny, delivered a modest inheritance, she cast off in an uncharted direction, embarking on a self-funded program of research that resulted in her book, *The Employments of Women: A Cyclopaedia of Woman's Work* (1863), the original publication of which she financed.[3] The first edition included a preface and introduction (both written by the author), followed by 533 individual entries of varying lengths addressing the surprising breadth of women's employment. It was warmly reviewed. "This volume," wrote one reader, "is a lamp to the young female venturing alone along the *misty present* without a star of hope in the *dark future*.[4] Even so, following the first edition, Penny struggled to recover through royalties the money she had invested. When her financial situation worsened, she sold the copyright to Philadelphia publisher John E. Potter and Company, which published a second edition before passing the copyright on to the Massachusetts publisher D. E. Fisk. Penny no longer earned an income from the work and, throughout her life, would struggle to achieve financial independence. It is ironic, then, that the final edition of her book that was published in her lifetime was released under the new title *How Women Can Make Money* (1870).

But if Penny never again made money from her book, she nonetheless enriched more than a century of foundational scholarship in sociology, economics, and history. Pioneering social worker Edith Abbott, in her 1909 study of women in American manufacturing, for instance, drew upon Penny's earlier research to highlight the importance of women's labor during the American Industrial Revolution.[5] Six decades later, Leon Stein and Philip Taft edited a reprint edition of *Employments of Women*, adopting the title of the 1870 edition and omitting Penny's original preface. Whereas Stein and Taft sought to bring Penny's "boundless enthusiasm

for detail" to a new audience, Christine Stansell, in her influential history of women's labor, mined Penny's work for historical and statistical data to construct a picture of nineteenth-century working-class life.[6] But while this large body of past and present scholarship is a testament to the ambitious scope of *Employments of Women*, an overreliance on historical and social-scientific methods of analysis has limited our understanding of the formal, linguistic, affective, and idealistic dimensions of Penny's writing, as well as of the importance of her enterprise to readers across the second half of the nineteenth century.

The question of how to gauge Penny's contribution to national debates about women's changing relationship to wage labor was raised in the late nineteenth century—with some urgency—by women's rights activists. In the autumn of 1890, Jane Cunningham Croly, the editor of New York periodical *Woman's Cycle*, published an appeal urging readers to contribute to a fund to provide support for Penny, who was by that time elderly and struggling financially. Croly identifies Penny as the author of "the first book ever written in the interests of the industries of American women." She explains: "Two hundred dollars will secure to her a home where she can come and go without the sense of irksome confinement . . . and it is hoped that this sum will be forthcoming from some generous hands who recognize the value of the work she accomplished in time past, and are willing to aid in securing rest and comfort to the tried spirit and tired body for the brief time it remains."[7] Penny, in fact, would live on for another decade and a half, and throughout the final period of her life would be the subject of numerous further appeals soliciting women, in particular, for money. Nineteenth-century activists recognized—and celebrated—the connections between Penny's book and the changing dimensions of women's economic lives.

This essay proposes to reconstruct those connections, and it does so by taking as a starting point Penny's invocation of the encyclopedia to describe her work. Readers who have searched *Employments of Women* for facts about working life in nineteenth-century America have done little to account for the book's form beyond regarding it as a reference work. Certainly, *Employments* aligns itself with the reference genre and, as such, provides readers with factual information about American economic life. And yet, the book's subtitle—*A Cyclopaedia of Woman's Work*—entreats readers not to overlook the text's involvement with the history of the encyclopedia medium. Furthermore, Penny in the preface announces her interest in form. The "arrangement pursued, though rather irregular," she writes, "may be . . . convenient."[8] My analysis of *Employments*, as well as paying attention to key textual features, considers the experiences of women readers. Penny's choice to engage the encyclopedia is interesting because the form structures a particular kind of relationship between author, reader, and text to produce a composite figure that I refer to in this essay as the nineteenth-century female encyclopedic subject. The organizational structure of the book matters—and this was a point about which Penny, if not her historians, was aware.

In tracking the literary value of Penny's writing, this essay draws inspiration from recent theoretical contributions to the debate over cultures of writing and reading in nineteenth-century America that have addressed the continued need to develop frameworks for understanding the relationships between literature and social change. In *The Practices of Hope*, Christopher Castiglia calls for greater attention to the "imaginative idealism" of literature, which, he argues, invites readers to question the fixity of historical reality. Literature, Castiglia writes, "inspires the possibilities of a not-yetness that makes reality into an anticipatory illumination necessary for resilience." Michaela Bronstein has made a related intervention, offering a reading practice for

understanding literary works directed toward future audiences. Urging greater attention to the relationship between the present and the future, Bronstein observes that "writing for the future, writing *away* from history, can be a progressive and even utopian act . . . doing so may change what we do in the present."[9] Recovering US women's mid-nineteenth-century economic writing can help us further understand literature's anticipatory dimensions.

My approach to Penny's writing is also guided by the work of encyclopedia studies scholars, which provides a salutary corrective to the historian's view of the encyclopedia as a repository of facts. Studies by Gillian Thomas, Ann M. Blair, Jason König and Greg Woolf, and William N. West radically complicate this view.[10] The "assumption that an encyclopedia is a collection of facts," West writes, "is only one among others."[11] These scholars, who attend to the textual, literary, social, historical, and philosophical dimensions of encyclopedias offer a useful framework within which to analyze Penny's work, which is, among other things, a rare example of a female-authored encyclopedic text. In addition to describing and publicizing observable facts about women's labor, Penny's *Employments of Women* enables individual women readers to imagine themselves as economic subjects, it produces an encyclopedic subject that constructs economic woman as a distinct class, and it evokes new forms of hope for the future of women in the changing American economy.

<A>Economic Horizons</A>

Penny's *Employments of Women* is distinct in its ambition to capture the entire breadth of working women's experiences. Numerous texts of the period concern women in the labor force. For instance, Fanny Fern's semi-autobiographical novel, *Ruth Hall* (1854), offers an account of one woman's climb up from poverty to economic independence. Works authored by poor and

working-class women, although less common, were in circulation as well. As a young woman, Penny may well have learned about *The Lowell Offering* (1840–45), a periodical edited and written by Massachusetts textile workers that purportedly gave a public voice to the first generation of female industrial laborers. Yet in contrast to these earlier works, which represent the perspectives of individual women or narrow sectors of female labor, *Employments of Women* offers a panoramic view. The text argues for an expanded understanding of women's capacities and addresses the condition of American women in general. But even as it seeks to represent women's experiences, the book also intervenes to transform those experiences. Penny writes, "The false opinion that exists in regard to the occupations suitable for women must be changed ere women have free access to all those in which they may engage" (vii). The text, then, both describes current reality and constructs new horizons of economic possibility.

In undertaking analysis of the text, it's worth noting that *Employments of Women* does not acknowledge the relationship between women's condition of economic disadvantage and white racism against Black Americans, even though antislavery activists of the period were theorizing the relationship between economic individualism and abolition. *Employments* does note the experiences of Native American, German, Irish, and Jewish immigrant women. The book also—not insignificantly—reports approvingly that a large proportion of commercial business on the "Island of Hayti" is "done by women" (106). But the question remains as to why the book makes noticeably few references to Black American women. There are numerous possible reasons for Penny's lack of attention to Black American women's labor in her book. It's possible that the omission reflects insufficient data or the absence of Black women in the occupations Penny examined. It is also possible that the omission registers Penny's latent sympathies with the Southern perspective. Penny draws from *Southern Wealth and Northern*

Profits (1860), a statistical pamphlet published by the pro-Southern economist Thomas Prentice Kettell (1811–78).[12] Also, in one of the few instances where she directly discusses the experiences of enslaved people, Penny conflates the condition of the enslaved with that of "domestics" and "servants" more generally (425). Frances Harper in her 1859 essay "Our Greatest Want" had argued that Americans must strive for more than universal economic independence. "What we need money cannot buy," Harper insisted. Penny shared Harper's commitment to "the Antislavery enterprise" and Christian devotion to "the glorious idea of human brotherhood." But if Penny shared Harper's belief that "the idea of getting money . . . should . . . subserve the cause of crushed humanity," then she did not position this belief at the forefront of her study.[13]

Nonetheless, understanding *Employments of Women*'s involvement with the concept of *horizons* invites reflection on the text's social relevance and provides an opportunity for understanding the value of literature to individual efforts to exert historical agency through imaginative acts. By anticipating women's future economic reality, *Employments* was prescient in posing questions taken up by twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist economists. In a feminist economic context, "horizon" refers to women's sense of economic futurity. Claudia Goldin, in her Richard T. Ely Lecture (since renamed the AEA Distinguished Lecture) to the American Economic Association, deploys this term to track the changing contours of women's labor force participation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The history of economic transformation, Goldin suggests, is shaped by transformations in women's self-perceptions as workers and expectations about their own individual long-term employment. For Goldin, "horizon" provides the conceptual means of measuring women's varying ability to "accurately anticipate . . . their future work lives." In other words, a woman's ability to *imagine* that she will

spend a significant part of her life in the workforce is a necessary condition for women's *actual* workforce participation. Penny was conscious that women's limited capacity for what Goldin terms "dynamic decision-making" made it very difficult for those women to see themselves as meaningful economic actors.[14] Penny's book in obvious ways remedies this perceived obstacle to economic self-actualization.

It is unsurprising, given Penny's life experiences, that she would author a text with the purpose of providing readers with a widened perspective about the current conditions and future possibilities of women's working lives. Penny's career as a teacher would have afforded her ample awareness of the precariousness of women's foothold on, in her words, a "respectable livelihood" (v). On the one hand, teaching was the only profession open to significant numbers of women during the first half of the nineteenth century and, as such, conferred a degree of mobility at a time when the majority of middle-class women secured their economic status through marriage. By training as a teacher, Penny, like other educated women, could hope to achieve for herself a degree of independence. And Penny was as well prepared as any who embarked upon the career. Her alma mater, the Steubenville Seminary in Ohio, was modeled on schools such as Emma Willard's Troy Female Seminary in New York and Catharine Beecher's Hartford Female Seminary in Connecticut, pioneering institutions that blended moral, religious, and intellectual training.[15] On the other hand, teaching was emotionally and physically demanding, poorly remunerated, and (perhaps worst of all) rarely afforded women any degree of long-term security. Rural schoolteachers hired only to teach during the summer months sometimes supplemented their income throughout the year by joining the ranks of industrial workers in textile mills.[16] Immersed in this world, Penny would have come into regular contact with the wealthy, even while confronting the very real risk of herself sliding into poverty.

Penny's experiences as a teacher would have provided only a shaky foundation upon which to build an autonomous sense of self, and a handful of references to Penny in the periodical press cast light on the challenges she faced. Shortly after publishing *Employments of Women*, Penny was prosecuted for assaulting one of her pupils. A newspaper reported on the incident: "The boy disobeyed the teacher's orders, and she whipped him, [he] was impudent afterward, and she whipped him again—excessively." The court found that Penny's actions were "excessive" and "maliciously inflicted," but she was ordered to pay a fine of only "one cent."[17] On the one hand, such a public reprimand, despite the lenient penalty, must have been embarrassing for a woman who valued "refinement" and who had earlier proclaimed that "the desiderata for a most excellent teacher" include "perfect command of temper, unwearied perseverance, [and] patience that never flags" (36). On the other hand, considering the prosecution incident alongside Penny's writing hints at the painful contradictions that Penny—and women like her—faced in their working lives. Teaching was regarded as a natural fit for women seeking a living. And yet Penny's discussion of female-coded forms of labor acknowledges that such work is an awkward fit for some women. Under the lemma "Teachers of Infant Schools," Penny writes, "Teaching is interesting to those that love children." She continues: "But let not those without patience and tenderness, or those whose feelings [can] in an hour change from the boiling to the freezing point attempt to teach young children" (43). Without passing judgment, Penny simply cautions women who are temperamentally unsuited to teaching to look elsewhere for employment.

Of course, Penny was conscious that viable forms of alternative employment for women were limited, and she uses her book to explore the prospect of a new society in which women can visualize a role for themselves in the formal economy and comprehend the particular

intellectual and physical demands such participation might require. *Employments* seeks to extend women's horizons via its function as a guidebook and by promising to assist women in finding employment for which they are personally suited. Indeed, *Employments* appears to be less concerned with making a case for admitting women to every sphere of labor than it is in providing them with the opportunity to determine for themselves whether they are fit for a given profession. It describes the necessary requirements of various fields. "For a postmistress," Penny writes, "we might enumerate the qualifications of quickness of eye, strict integrity, a retentive memory, and patient industry" (408). Training as a lawyer requires a different set of skills: "if a lady will practise law, she will need great clearness of mind, a good insight into the motives of others, fearlessness in expressing her convictions of right, and ability in refraining from saying more than she should" (18). To become a successful newspaper reporter, a woman must possess a different set of abilities yet again: "A reporter . . . has to move and write with railroad speed," Penny writes, "everything needs to be done with a rush" (34).

Additionally, *Employments of Women* offers readers insight into the mechanisms of the wage labor market. It does so, primarily, by providing an overview of the financial cost of a wide range of technical and professional training programs. A woman hoping to practice medicine, for instance, should know that $175 would cover "the cost of two or more courses" at the Pennsylvania Female Medical College. Should a prospective student set her sights on "a *good* medical education"—including study in Europe—she ought to expect to pay a good deal more. In this case, "a lady should be able to command $2,000 during the four years" of study (29, emphasis original). Furthermore, the text alerts readers to the ways in which social values play a role in determining how much an individual can expect to be paid. Just as "social and political bonds" cultivated among men in fraternal organizations account for the "way in which so many

men get situations as teachers to the exclusion of females," so the amount of money paid for newspaper articles will depend upon the gender of the writer: "When an article . . . is known to have come from the brain and the pen of a woman, ten to one, her compensation will be the smaller for it, and in many cases it will be rejected" (38, 15). The text, in this way, casts light on both the formal and unspoken rules of the market. In doing so, it substantially demystifies the economy for female readers who could be presumed to have only a limited understanding of such operations.

As a guidebook for finding employment and as a work of economic demystification, Penny's *Employments of Women* envisions new futures for individual women and for the economy. Noting these elements, we begin to see that the book provided an opportunity for women readers to understand themselves in relation to new economic contexts—and to imagine a future trajectory that departs from the current status quo.

<A>A Cyclopaedia of Woman's Work</A>

I should like to extend my reading of *Employments of Women*'s anticipatory dimensions by examining Penny's invocation of the encyclopedia to describe her work. The genre has widely recognizable characteristics, including compilation, alphabetized listings, cross-referencing, and comprehensiveness. At the same time, scholars note that these features, in and of themselves, are not sufficient. Comprehensive works that present segments of information under lemmata—or headings—are not necessarily encyclopedias, as Robert F. Fowler observes. Encyclopedias—whether propaedeutic encyclopedias (such as business encyclopedias) or more wide-ranging ones (such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*)—all purport to offer "information that is reliable and accurate, true as it can be" about the universe or a segment of the universe. Additionally,

encyclopedias hold in common a commitment to human progress. The encyclopedia, Fowler writes, "is a moral project; it is a collection of *useful* knowledge that will improve the world."[18] Penny shares this commitment to moral progress. She writes in her preface, "I hope much anxiety of mind and uncertainty . . . will be prevented by my book, and many precious hours thereby saved for active, cheerful employment" (x). The characteristic hopefulness of the encyclopedia form would have been particularly useful to Penny, I think, because it complements her optimism that promoting access to remunerative labor will practically improve women's lives.

Consider the book's entry on female architects, which invites readers to envision an American society transformed into a place of order and goodwill—particularly regarding relations between men and women. Scholars of the encyclopedia have recently noted the "potential of encyclopedism to hint at other ways of organizing and representing the world."[19] In Penny's writing, this desire to reorder the world is particularly noticeable when the text breaks with historical fact. The entry on architects incorporates a passage copied from a tract attributed to nineteenth-century historian Elizabeth Fries Lummis Ellet:

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> We scarcely know to what extent this branch of knowledge [architecture] may come within the province of woman. Yet it is as practicable, perhaps, as some we mention. The author of "women artists" mentions . . . "The wife of Erwin von Steinbach materially assisted her husband in the erection of the famous Strasbourg cathedral; and within its walls a sculptured stone represents the husband and wife as consulting together on the plan." (51)

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By copying into her encyclopedia Ellet's claim about the medieval husband and wife architectural team, Penny offers a vision of gender relations that, while appealing, is historically inaccurate. As art historian Leslie Ross explains, little is in fact known about the Steinbachs except that a myth grew up around them, thanks to the German statesman and writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who praised the family "in rapturous terms" in his 1773 essay "Concerning German Architecture." According to the myth, which became the subject of plays and paintings in the nineteenth century, it was Steinbach's daughter, Sabine, not his wife, whose name is thought to have been inscribed on one of the sculptures.[20] But historical accuracy is beside the point. By reproducing a revised version of the Steinbach legend, Penny envisions for her readers the prospect of an intelligent and skilled woman working alongside her husband to produce monumental structures. That her account pictures a husband and a wife, rather than a father and a daughter, is significant. At a time when female creative talent was widely regarded as incompatible with ideals of marital unity, the picture of husband and wife undertaking a joint venture replaces the proprietary standard of marriage with an ideal of men and women uniting in creative effort.

What we know of Penny's life suggests that this hopefulness—this faith in the salvific potential of economic progress to create a new order—was intensely personal. Later in life, Penny penned a broadside, *To the Voters of Jefferson County*, challenging the appointment of her brother Alexander as trustee of the Penny family fortune and attacking the judge responsible for overseeing this "illegal" process. The broadside alleges that many "vile, mercenary, dishonest" individuals with "bad motives" played a role in the property grab. And Penny accuses the "villains" involved in the "infernal conspiracy" with arranging to have her institutionalized in the state asylum for the insane and, later, attempting to murder her.[21] Penny's account of the

machinations of a cabal of bad actors—including county court judges, lawyers, doctors, and a support cast of local henchmen and ne'er-do-wells—is astonishing indeed. Undoubtedly, the purpose of the broadside was to shock and provoke, but it is rambling, and it lacks the restrained tone and rational appeal of *Employments of Women*.

Contrasting the chaotic *Voters of Jefferson County* to *Employments* provides a clue about how Penny viewed her actual society—that is, as corrupt, avaricious, and overrun by officials who fall short of their responsibilities for upholding the public good in law and business. *Employments of Women* offers a very different vision. Whereas in actual society individuals able to exert their will are exclusively men, *Employments* presents a world in which women share in decision making. And whereas in real life men commit fraud against weaker members of their communities with impunity, in the world of *Employments*, men and women commit themselves to pursuing occupations to benefit both themselves and their communities at large. If the definitive feature of the encyclopedia is its hopeful commitment to progress, then *Employments of Women* is a powerful example of the genre.

And yet, even while *Employments* is hopeful, it is not naively idealistic. The text is interested in establishing *what might be* in the future, certainly, but it pointedly represents *what is*. Consider the entry on "Postmistresses." In this segment, Penny summarizes correspondence she received from "Mrs. W. who was for nearly two years" at the New York General Post Office. Penny's correspondent "found many advantages but many disadvantages, arising from her position." The entry continues:

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In the first place it yielded her and her child a support, the salary being $600. She was treated with respect by all the attaches of the office except two—one of whom was

> immediately dismissed and the other removed . . . there were about fifty clerks immediately around her, and altogether in the office around between two hundred and three hundred. They were men of all classes and nations. The office is one influenced by political motives, and a man has the advantage by gaining the votes of his friends. She says she was always kind and courteous, but found it necessary to be very decided, and keep at a distance from everyone. The men in the office did not like it, because they had to guard their tongues. (407)
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The postmistress reports that women's presence in the workplace affects both men and women alike, albeit in different ways. Men unused to working alongside women will be forced to reform their behavior—to be resocialized. Women newly employed in traditionally male occupations will be challenged to navigate new kinds of social relationships. To do so, women will need to improve their skills and even adjust their personalities. This entry—really a compiled description of firsthand experiences—suggests the importance of equipping women with the foresight to navigate hostile terrain currently dominated by men. And it suggests that men, too, have work to do in striking gender equilibrium in the workplace. Even as *Employments* hopes for a new future, it turns a spotlight on economic life as it currently exists.

The observation that encyclopedias simultaneously reference and remediate knowledge helps us to appreciate why authors of fiction and their critics have found the form so inviting. Northrup Frye in his 1957 study *Anatomy of Criticism* read Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) as an encyclopedia of cetology—that is, a textual summing up of what was known at the time about whales. Edward Mendelson two decades later extended this analysis by proposing we read *Moby-Dick* as an example of the "encyclopedic narrative" genre, which also includes

Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1308–21), Goethe's *Faust* (1810/1833), Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). These encyclopedic texts, Mendelson writes, "attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets knowledge." Whereas Frye presented encyclopedic writing as a digest of what is known, Mendelson argues that encyclopedic narratives expose and question a culture's processes of knowing. Both critics attribute encyclopedic features to just a small number of texts, but Mendelson's account of the encyclopedic impulse might constructively be applied to the narrative and even nonnarrative writing of numerous American authors.[22]

Penny's *Employments of Women* as a female-authored encyclopedia is atypical, and, as such, it provides occasion to consider how, why, and to what effect women writers have engaged the form. Encyclopedic writing, in comparison with most other literary forms, has been hostile to women. In her study of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Thomas points out that encyclopedic projects have afforded women—both as writers and as subjects—only "meagre representation."[23] For instance, the tenth edition of the *Britannica*, published in 1902, saw the proportion of female-authored entries rise to 2 percent.[24] Just as prominent encyclopedic projects obscure the experiences and intellectual contributions of women, so encyclopedic narrative has been a male preserve, both in terms of authorship and content. "Compared with other works by the same authors," Mendelson writes, "encyclopedic narratives find it exceptionally difficult to integrate their women characters." Just as women have only intermittently forged identities outside of their socialized roles of wives and mothers, so women's creative work has often emphasized the relation of self to family, as numerous scholars of women's writing have observed.[25]

Encyclopedic texts, importantly, are thought to push away from the personal and the ephemeral. They "assert the claims of a grander imperium than love or the family," in Mendelson's words.[26]

Employments of Women can be read as one woman's ambition to participate in the heroic, masculine-coded work of textual world-making that encyclopedias and encyclopedic narratives represent. Reflecting on the great quantity and range of compiled information, Penny in the book's preface invites readers to contemplate the magnitude of her undertaking. "I have made the study a specialty for three years," she writes, "and spent an almost incredible amount of labor and money in doing so." She continues, "I have visited factories, workshops, offices, and stores, for the purpose of seeing women at their vocations. I have gone through wind and snow, cold and rain" (viii). Prefaces, let us recall, can function as a peritextual threshold to the text and, as such, serve to aid and direct the reader. Penny emphasizes the difficulty of her undertaking and thus calls attention to her own agency. Her use of emphasis (her journey was "incredible") and her description of the project as a journey ("I have gone through wind and snow, cold and rain") enable the reader to see Penny herself as the hero of her own story. If the preface serves as an interpretive threshold, then readers who pass through it are encouraged to interpret the text itself as an episodic quest. Penny, as she's figured in the text, becomes a kind of Virgil guiding the reader from one world to another.

So far, my analysis of *Employments of Women* has called attention to the text's self-conscious desire to remediate knowledge and its involvement with heroic narrative genres. I suggest that such features provide a clue about how the text might have interpellated its nineteenth-century readers. In presenting Penny as a hero of a quest narrative, the text invites its readers not only to read but to journey, to travel, and to discover. In responding to this invitation, the reader may find that the individual entries exceed their function as informational essays.

Rather, they can be read as chapters contributing to a larger story about women. But if these entries produce a story, it is one marked by productive contradictions. The entry on "embroidery makers" observes without comment that women embroiderers must travel to sell their wares. But the entry on mapmaking explains that this enterprise would present significant problems for women precisely because it demands solitary travel. "Women could not well travel about to obtain information of localities," Penny writes—apparently without irony! What might a woman be and do? To what new economic identity might women, as a group, stake a claim? If we read the text's prefatory remarks about Penny's quest alongside descriptions that appear in the entries themselves, we see that *Employments of Women* does not answer such questions but, rather, presents them to the reader as a problem for consideration.

Employments of Women thus engages the reader in an act of co-creation, and we can see further evidence of this if we note the instances in which the text addresses the reader directly. The preface, as I've noted, establishes Penny herself by using a first-person voice: "*I desire* to present"; "*I strongly advocate*"; and so on (viii–ix, emphasis mine). But the reader's sense of herself and her own involvement with the project of the encyclopedia grows stronger as she reads across entries because of the text's frequent use of the second-person pronoun. Addressing would-be "magazine contributors," the text first identifies the talents needed to succeed in the occupation using the third-person voice: "The true poet is a gifted person; a heaven born talent does he or she possess." But the passage that immediately follows makes a second-person appeal to the reader: "If you have good descriptive talents, you can write stories . . ." (21). *Employments of Women* here and elsewhere invites into existence a second-person subject position. But, strikingly, this second-person subject is a relational subject who experiences herself as always

and already implicated in instances where first-, second-, and third-person subject positions converge.

Reading for pronouns, as I am doing, reveals that *Employments of Women* structures a relation between author, reader, and text. Mary Franklin-Brown in her scholarship on medieval encyclopedias describes this dynamic relation as the text's constitution of an "encyclopedic subject." Importantly, the encyclopedic subject mediates the relationship between information and knowledge. This subject is "a fugitive and protean being," Franklin-Brown writes. She continues: "When traversing citations," the encyclopedic subject "must assume varied positions, identifying with the first person of some, with the second or third person of others, or assuming a critical distance, or simply flipping handfuls of manuscript leaves whose extracts offer too much challenge or too little interest."[27] We cannot know how actual readers used Penny's book. But granting that women readers might have responded to or felt moved by the text's interpellation allows us to speculate that Penny's book afforded opportunities for learning, self-reflection, and even flights of imagination.

Here, I wish to suggest that the mid-nineteenth-century female encyclopedic subject was constituted in the interstices of the sexual and the economic. Thirty-five years after the publication of *Employments*, another feminist economic writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, would define what she termed the "sexuo-economic relation," arguing that barring women from participating in the formal economy arrested women's development, transformed them into sexual sycophants, and degraded society as a whole. Gilman, like Penny, traveled extensively and observed myriad forms of working life. She saw that widening women's participation in the workforce would involve a wholesale reconsideration of domestic life and childcare. Gilman wanted to see "well-served apartment houses for professional women with children."[28]

Employments envisions "houses of protection and comfort provided in our cities for respectable and industrious women when out of employment" (x). Such houses, Penny writes, might be funded by local governments and would be "a refuge to the weary, a home to the oppressed, a sanctuary to the stranger in a new land" (x). Later feminist arguments for structural change would be forged in contexts, such as Progressivism and Fabianism, that Penny in the 1860s could not have anticipated. And yet *Employments of Women* does anticipate the call for new domestic arrangements for working women.

Furthermore, *Employments* partially represents women whose stories would be brought into plain sight by Gilman and others of her generation: single women with children. A woman reader with artistic talent might find her curiosity piqued by Penny's account of a "photographist" who was, Penny writes, "very poor when she commenced, but, while engaged in it, supported herself and children, and educated them, and left $3,000" (90). This winning account of female economic mobility contrasts sharply with the description of female "rag-gatherers." Women doing this form of work, Penny observes, "spend all the hours of daylight on their feet." The rag-gatherer's children, who "follow the pursuit" of their mother, are to be seen at "the dirt heaps where carts of dirt from town had been emptied" (467). *Employments of Women* accounts for the world of children, care, and parental concern that her interviewees and her readers inhabit. At the same time, the text juxtaposes images of health and success to ones that are insalubrious and provoking. For a reader with children, the former would be cause for hope, while the latter would terrify and appall.

Employments of Women, in sum, makes visible the nineteenth-century female encyclopedic subject. This subject is Penny herself, boldly and heroically claiming the encyclopedic project as her own. But the encyclopedic subject also encompasses women readers,

whose acts of moral interpretation bring "text and personal narrative into some perhaps temporary, perhaps fortuitous, perhaps strained alignment."[29] This encyclopedic subject is forged, moreover, in the interstices of the sexual and economic. She can be found in the woman gainfully employed "in a savings bank in Boston" or in the fume-filled jewelry manufacturers of Providence, Rhode Island, where women worked in clouds of "saltpeter, alum, and salt" (7 and 237). She can be found in the postmistress managing new kinds of relationships with men, or in the "photographist" and the "rag-gatherers" caring for their children as they work (407, 90, 467). Most importantly, she can be found in the reader imagining herself into a new economic relationship with the world. This encyclopedic subject is situated at the intersection of every type of labor performed by women across the United States, and she is cognizant not only of her own fears and her own potential but of those of women in history, in myth, and in the future.

<A>"I Have Rejoiced in the *Manyness* of Us More Than in Almost Anything Else"</A>

By the time she published her 1890 appeal to raise money for Penny, Jane Cunningham Croly was an established journalist, editor, and public figure. She had contributed to *Godey's Ladies Magazine*; had established the Woman's Press Club of New York in 1889; and, two years following the publication of her appeal, would be appointed professor of journalism and literature at Rutgers University.[30] At the time that her appeal went to press, Croly was writing her own book about women's work, *Thrown on Her Own Resources*.[31] Croly, like Penny, was cognizant of the relation between social and economic forces, and she makes this clear in her appeal. Despite Penny's lifetime of "labor and patient research," Croly argues, she has not received appropriate remuneration for her "pioneer" encyclopedia. Penny, Croly writes, has "spent her life in a hand to hand fight with all the forces that make war on upon those who work

for daily bread." Surely, women of means who "recognize the value" of Penny's past work will step in to provide the financial security that the author might have achieved had she not been forced to sell her copyright.[32]

Croly was not alone in making an appeal. In subsequent years, Eliza Archard Conner, a fellow member of the New York Woman's Press Club, published appeals on Penny's behalf. Conner, like Croly, characterizes Penny as a victim of economic misfortune. She also points out that her female readers owe Penny a debt as she conducted her work in an age when women's labor was poorly understood. "Miss Penny was full of enthusiasm for her own sex at a time when working women were not the fashion, as they are now," Conner writes, proceeding to draw a connection between Penny's mid-century encyclopedia and the opportunities enjoyed by some American women at century's close: "Happy women are following in the paths [Penny] pointed out, some of them earning $3,000, $5,000, and $10,000 a year. Women owe it to her to make Virginia Penny's last days comfortable, and it must be done at once."[33] The similarity of Croly's and Conner's appeals is striking because they were linked by a shared institutional mission.

In addition to being colleagues in the Women's Press Club, Croly and Conner were leading members of Sorosis, the first women's club in the United States, founded in 1868 with the aim of unifying for the first time "women of different minds, degrees, and habits of work and thought."[34] While Croly served as the club's first president after 1869, Conner was characterized in the press as "the Chauncey Depew of Sorosis."[35] This depiction aligned Conner approvingly with the lawyer, politician, and noted raconteur.[36] By the 1890s, these clubwomen had multiple potential motivations for intervening to improve Penny's condition, including, most straightforwardly, a desire to help a friend. In addition to teaching and writing, Penny was a noted woman's rights activist. As an elected vice president of the American Equal Rights

Association, which was active in New York, Penny worked alongside some of the most influential activists of the nineteenth century, including Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Frederick Douglass.[37] As such, Penny and the Sorosis women moved in the same social circles and attended the same lectures. It is possible, then, that Croly and Conner simply considered it their duty to generate public support for a valued comrade at a particularly difficult time in her life.

But there is another reason for their intervention, one that enables us make sense of why both women sought to induce female readers to perceive their obligations to the aging author in terms of both "debt" and "duty." By recalling Penny's earlier encyclopedia, Croly and Conner invite female readers to understand the work of the woman's movement in a temporal and literary context. In 1863, Penny hoped that new avenues of economic possibility would soon open up to women. "There is no man that is not involved in what affects woman," Penny wrote insistently, and women's economic well-being "should therefore be a subject of paramount interest to all" (vi). Penny's use of modal verb "should" here conveys a hopeful anticipation—but not conviction—that society will care more about women's experiences. Thirty years later, Penny's hopes had been partly realized. In 1891, the economist and Progressive leader Richard T. Ely wrote, "Our age may properly be called the Era of Woman, because everything that affects her receives consideration."[38] By recalling an earlier time—"when working women were not the fashion"—Croly's and Conner's appeals remind women readers of everything they have gained. What Penny yearned to achieve for herself and for women as a whole had become, or at least was on its way to becoming, material reality for numerous American women. Writing in 1863, Penny had imagined an economic regime in which women were full and active participants. She had attempted what Bronstein describes as an effort to "write away from

history."[39] Conner recognized this fact, noting that Penny "pointed out the path" for other women to follow.[40] Conner's line of argument of course deemphasizes the significance of structural economic transformations, including the expansion of industrial capitalism, which drew significant numbers of young, unmarried women into the low-wage workforce. But highlighting the historical force of a particular woman's agency linked late nineteenth-century activists with the future imagined for them by a predecessor.

The Sorosis women, like other activists of their generation during this period, were conscious of the importance of constructing links between the present and the past. During the 1880s, veteran women's movement activists Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage undertook an intense program of research and writing as they collaborated to produce the first volume of the *History of Woman Suffrage*. Their aim in writing the *History* was, in Lisa Tetrault's words, "to give younger women a source for learning about—and understanding—the [women's] movement's legacies, objectives, and strategies."[41] Croly shared in this effort to provide a new generation with a collective historical memory. In her 1886 account of the founding of the first women's club in the United States, she cautions that young women are at risk of growing indifferent to the struggles of older generations of women. Croly urges junior colleagues in the club movement to understand that the freedoms and social supports enjoyed by women in the present are not inevitable:

<EXT>

> The young members of to-day will wonder why all this fuss could have been made about a mere society of women. But they must remember that eighteen years ago social and secular organization among women did not exist. There were no State Aid Societies, no Women's Exchanges, no Kitchen Garden Associations, or Industrial Unions, or

> Workingwomen's Clubs, no Church or Missionary Societies officered and carried out exclusively by women . . . and it was doubted, by many good men and women, whether a secular society of women, of different tastes, habits and pursuits, and with no special object to bind them, could hang together for any length of time.[42]
>
> </EXT>

Here, Croly recognizes the unlikely emergence of women as a class—an emergence that Penny's construction of a female encyclopedic subject had partly enabled. Croly's twofold argument is clear. Institutions embodying feminist sentiment exist today where none existed before. And whereas the idea of solidarity among women as a class exists today, the basis of that solidarity is not natural but political, and it ought not to be taken for granted. Considering Croly's desire to connect past action and present efforts enables us to recognize her appeal on Penny's behalf as one of several attempts to spark what Rita Felski calls a "flash . . . of trans-temporal connection."[43] In other words, Croly provides readers with an opportunity to build a mental connection between Penny's past act of envisioning a better future and the more favorable conditions enjoyed by some women in the present day.

Croly and Conner, in recalling Penny's work, reached back in time to a book that reached forward to their own time. They sought unity across space and time, as much as they sought to bridge other forms of division. Indeed, Croly's commitment to reciprocity was well known. Following her death in 1901, then-president of Sorosis Dimies T. S. Denison wrote, "Her perception of the value of unity, of the advantage of organized effort, was remarkable."[44] When she penned her appeal on behalf of Penny, Croly was undertaking work that would earn her this reputation. In 1889, she used the club's twenty-first anniversary as an opportunity to bring its mission to the national stage by linking it to the General Federation of Women's Clubs. The

planning stage of the General Federation brought together representatives of sixty-one regional women's clubs, all "eager to seize the opportunity for individual and collective advancement" of women, as Croly would later recall.[45] Members such as Mary Eastman "rejoiced in the *manyness* . . . and the great love that comes from so many." Meanwhile, the General Federation enshrined this sentiment by adopting as its motto a phrase suggested by the poet Ella Dietz Clymer: "We look for unity, but unity in diversity. We hope that you will enrich us by your varied experiences, and let us pledge ourselves to work for a common cause—the cause of womanhood throughout the world."[46] Penny's *Employments of Women*, written a quarter century earlier, had contributed to this collective effort. It had pictured for women readers new horizons of possibility, linking them not only to better futures that they might imagine for themselves but to a better future for women as a class.

<A>The Far Horizon</A>

Throughout this essay, I have argued that by attending to the textual features of Virginia Penny's *Employments of Women* and its nineteenth-century reception, we can begin to understand the text as more than a compilation of economic facts. Certainly, facts matter. Women writers in the nineteenth century recognized the political importance of building a factual record of information concerning women's lives and experiences. In 1846, historian Elizabeth Ellet addressed the difficulty of documenting the experiences of her mother's generation, given the paucity of extant manuscripts and correspondence, but she nonetheless staked a claim to the factual accuracy of her work: "It need scarcely be said that the deficiency of material has not been supplied by fanciful embellishment."[47] Penny, who drew upon Ellet's work, would have been familiar with this assertion. Decades later, in their preface to the first volume of the *History of Woman*

Suffrage, Stanton, Anthony, and Gage characterized the work as "an arsenal of facts" supporting women's reform demands.[48] In 1882, Stanton addressed the Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage, and this "arsenal of facts" made an impact on even the most conservative members.[49] Penny's *Employments of Women* similarly memorialized facts. Her work provided information that translated into knowledge and, in this way, contributed to the project of constructing for the first time a collective historical record of women's labor experiences in the United States. Her undertaking made possible the numerous scholarly histories, sociological studies, and economic analyses that constitute our present-day record of American women's history.

And yet neither the tools of the historian nor those of the social scientist are sufficient to understand the imaginative force of women's economic writing in the nineteenth century. Rather, combining historical with literary approaches, as I have done in this essay, enables us, today, to begin to read along the lines marked out for us by nineteenth-century readers. Shortly after *Employments of Women* was published in 1863, a writer for *Arthur's Home Magazine* characterized Penny's text as "a work of more than usual importance." The review reproduces passages from Penny's preface, highlighting her "perseverance" in battling "wind and snow and cold and rain" to uncover the conditions of women's labor in the United States, and it invites more extensive engagement with the text so that its "scope and use may be more clearly understood."[50] My analysis of Penny's *Employments* complies with this reviewer's recommendation and, in so doing, reveals the nature of the text's invitations to read, to recognize, and to reimagine. *Employments* guides women toward potentially fulfilling employment opportunities, it casts light on the formal and unspoken rules of the wage economy, and it conceptualizes new professional norms. Beyond that, the text's interpellation of readers invites them to engage in forms of moral interpretation that allow a new collective female subject

to emerge. Attending to these textual and moral features of Penny's book can help us better understand why nineteenth-century readers regarded *Employments of Women* as a "star of hope" for women confronted with an otherwise "dark" future.[51]

The methodology I have adopted here, which involves reading Penny's work as a literary text and as a specific example of the encyclopedia genre, offers readers today a means of discerning the relationship between Penny's textual exploration of women's economic potential and the reform movement in which she played an active and significant role. Clubwomen such as Croly and Conner shared Penny's concern with constituting women as a collective force. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, they wanted American women to remember what society was like before the existence of secular institutions devoted to women's interests. These clubwomen's efforts to sustain Penny's life were congruent with their ongoing efforts to foster among their followers a sense of what they often called "unity," a term that pointedly did not denote essential likeness among women but, rather, reckoned with the obvious social and political differences among activists. In 1889, as members of regional clubs came together to form the General Federation of Women's Clubs, Mary Eastman reflected on the significance of the national institution as a new chapter in women's history. Recognizing "the vast intellectual wealth" of members, Eastman said, was "like a shock of electricity." And yet, striking a cautionary note, she urged those assembled to consider what might yet be achieved: "We must learn sympathy, learn unity, learn the great lesson of organization . . . I am sure we never have begun to dream of what will yet appear."[52]

Employments of Women—and, as I have argued, Penny herself—took on the challenge of constituting women as a distinct class capable of exerting historical force, a project that we, today, may choose to regard with suspicion. Croly's and Conner's appeals of the 1890s pay

tribute to Penny's intellectual contributions to the reform movements that were, by that point, under way. Penny, Croly, and Conner were white, middle-class, liberal Protestant women who devoted their life's work to organizations headquartered in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Even as I argue that Penny's encyclopedia constituted an element of these women's intellectual lives and contributed to their reform agenda, my conclusions about how women readers outside of this demographic may have apprehended Penny's work necessarily remain speculative. Additionally, *Employments of Women* is invested in the liberal promise of progress through education and throughout the text we find ample evidence of the author's hope that women will strengthen their claims to competitive individualism and private property. In the 1850s, the decade in which Penny conducted her research, other female authors published texts that today's scholars, such as Kristie Hamilton, regard as tales of "possessive individualism" for women.[53] One could argue that Penny's book, by drawing women into the sphere of waged labor, straightforwardly participated in the historical process that cultivated a relation of identification between women and capitalism, especially if one views the text from our present-day vantage point, when such a process seems all but complete.

However, by reading Penny's *Employments of Women* as a work of literature, we are newly able to see how the text itself bid nineteenth-century female readers to imagine themselves into a new relation with the past and future. By appealing to readers in this way, it inspired new creative forms of feminist activism. The book generated hope that a new reality might be possible and created a history of imagined futures upon which activists in Sorosis, the regional women's clubs, and the General Federation of Women's Clubs could draw. These institutions were an embodiment of feminist sentiment. And they were, as the clubwomen well knew, called into being by the strength of collective recognition among reformers of the need for institutions

"officered and carried on exclusively by women," in Croly's words.[54] Penny's encyclopedia told stories about work, and these stories intersected with the subsequent institutionalization of meaning. They, in short, invited readers to imagine themselves into relation with their work, with their future, and with each other.

Finally, I believe that an important interpretive frame is recovered by dwelling with the very strangeness of Penny's encyclopedic impulse, to begin with, and the productive contradictions of the text she authored. I attempt to dwell with such dimensions here, and in doing so, find myself wrestling with idiosyncrasy and irregularity, just as other encyclopedia studies scholars have done in their writing. König and Woolf, noting the textual diversity of knowledge-ordering texts, advise us "focus on encyclopaedism as a phenomenon."[55] Penny's work provides opportunity to locate this project in the context of nineteenth-century women's writing. For me, reading it today delivers a shock of discovery. Penny was a pioneer in acting on her encyclopedic impulse to gather information and transform that information into potential knowledge. By transforming information into knowledge, Penny's book enabled its readers not only to learn but to reflect on and imagine potential futures. We might use our reading as an opportunity to note that the encyclopedia gender gap persists today as it did in the mid nineteenth century. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, 84 percent of English *Wikipedia* editors were men. In 2011 *Wikipedia* itself revised this number up to 91 percent and acknowledged that "male editors also edit more than female editors with far more total lifetime edits compared to female editors."[56] A large majority of today's encyclopedia editors are men, and the percentage of male-authored content is higher still. Recognizing the value of Penny's encyclopedia in bringing women as a class into being reveals what we are missing in a world in which encyclopedias are not imagined as literature and in which women seldom write them. My effort

to recover the literary history of Penny's *Employments of Women* is at heart an argument for the inherent value of literary inquiry. Understanding the gendered dimensions of knowledge ordering projects of the nineteenth century and of the present remains work to be done, and literary scholars have much to contribute.

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