



***A Terrible Secret. Or,  
Don't Believe the Critics:  
See for Yourself.  
The Material Reality of Victorian  
Popular Reading: a Workshop***

Andrew King  
Professor of English  
University of Greenwich, London

martedì 25 giugno 2013  
h. 16:30, Sala rotonda, Coro di notte

We all know that literary history has been written with all the condescension of posterity: E.P. Thompson reminded us of that fifty years ago. Victors write history.

But even while we know that, we are still largely subject to the marketing tactics of a very few Victorian publishing houses and their adjuncts the critics who through canny alliances with educational establishments determined what “quality” was and remains for us. We study Dickens at university or at least know we should, but who has heard of J.F. Smith? Yet an obituary claimed that he “had a thousand readers where Dickens had ten or Thackeray one. He was the people’s chosen author” (*Athenaeum*, 15 March 1890: 343). Similarly, while Dickens’s weekly periodical *Household Words* managed at most a circulation of 40,000 a week, there were publications that outsold it regularly by a factor of 10. Such popular reading matter is of course trash – at best a guilty pleasure. We all assume that and assume too that we know what that trash is. The victors have told us.

The workshop will explore our presuppositions along with those of some critics, and compare what we think we know with the material realities of popular texts themselves.

**Andrew King** is delighted to return to visit the University of Catania after 23 years. He is now Professor of English at the University of Greenwich where he teaches everything from Shakespeare to Arundhati Roy. He has, however, two main research focusses. The first comprises neglected Victorian periodicals at either end of the popular--exclusive spectrum: the mass-market weekly and the specialist professional (e.g. *The Banker’s Magazine*). Having just finished guest-editing a special number of *Victorian Periodicals Review* on the theme of “Work and Leisure,” he is about to start on the *Ashgate Companion to British Nineteenth-Century Periodicals* and a companion volume of case studies. His other area of publication is Victorian popular fiction, most recently Ouida, an Anglo-French writer who lived in Tuscany for the last 30 years of her life. He’s just completed editing a collection of essays on her as well as written two more articles. He has a contract for Ouida’s biography with a too-ambitious timetable.