

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor of BLACKFRIARS

“THE EFFECT OF PRINTING ON LITERATURE”

SIR,

Will you allow a complete outsider to send you a comment on Mr. Burdett's very valuable article under the above title in your December issue? All who are trying to produce *literature* to-day will agree with him upon the appalling conditions of book and magazine and newspaper publication in England at the present time. But how has it come about? Mr. Burdett deals with the psychological factor; may I call your readers' attention for a moment to the economic one?

Until the latter half of the last century publishing, though always a profit-making concern, was a thing of limited profits. In most cases there was only the firm to keep out of the “surplus value” drawn from the work of the author and the printer; that is, the business did not need to yield more than a reasonable return upon small capital. Publishing then was something of an art. From the handy little “Cook's Pocket series” of 1800 or thereabouts to—let us say—the *Once a Week* volume of 1860 with its good authors and admirable woodcuts, and the *Cornhill* under Thackeray's management later on, there is nothing to be ashamed of. The reviews, which are the test of the moral and intellectual standard of a magazine, were careful and sincere. I could show you, even in the *Gentlewoman's Magazine* of 1858—a publication mainly devoted to fashion, crochet, and cookery—some serious and excellent reviews of the books of Mrs. Norton and George Eliot, containing valuable criticism of style and tendency as well as matter.

Remember that these magazines and books were read and purchased by the middle and upper classes, the same people who read the *Bystander* and the *Smart Set* and *Pearson's* or anybody else's magazine, and perhaps the amiable, hesitating old *Nineteenth Century*, to-day. The working classes did not then, and do not now, come into touch with any of these. The decay of taste in current

Correspondence

reading matter does not arise from extended popular circulation. It has another cause.

To-day, with the enormous development of capitalism hastening on to its last stage, every publishing business has to show profits, not only for the firm, but for thousands of dividend-hunting shareholders, who have provided the large capital necessary to run a large concern. Further, newspapers and magazines depend nowadays quite as much upon their advertisements for profit as upon their circulation. And the businesses which advertise with them have also to show profits, "not only for the firm, but for thousands of dividend-hunting shareholders who . . . etc." See above. The whole thing is a vicious spiral, leading us lower and lower down!

Let us look at the large body of costly magazines and journals produced solely for the middle and upper classes. Their price makes them in a measure "esoteric"; nobody whose income is under a thousand a year dares to open them—except when they are second-hand. These, from the *Times* onward, are written for people who have been educated at Oxford and elsewhere; but we find the same intellectual timidity, the same unreliable information, comments written to order—and an overwhelming mass of advertisements—exactly as we do in the Penny Picture Press. Commercialism is justified in her children, whether they cater for high or low.

The only redeeming point is this: Many publishing firms realize that, bad as things are, it pays them to afford themselves the publication of *one* small, disinterested journal, or *one* book that is worth reading during the year. These things are a loss in terms of money, but they stimulate public confidence. A few choice spirits write them, another few read them and both have their reward.

"Demos" has spoilt literature indeed, as Mr. Burdett contends. But "Demos" means in this case Mammon and Stupidity, twin gods of the possessing class, who have stolen from the people those opportunities of education which they themselves do not use.

R. T. HYNDMAN.

(Mrs. H. M. Hyndman.)