THE IMAGES OF influential women readers (in Harper’s), intellectual women readers (in the Cornhill), independent women readers (in Belgravia), and feminist women readers/critics (in Victoria) successfully gave women an opportunity to participate in defining literary culture and paved the way for changes in women’s education and roles in society that family literary magazines characterized as part of an inevitable, evolutionary development. These magazines provided women with a mainstream forum that invited them to develop their own ideas about literature and to engage in the kinds of critical discussions from which they were typically excluded. As a result of the phenomenon of the family literary magazine, women like Victoria’s correspondent Henrietta were confidently able to raise their voices in favor of the intellectual development of women. In her letter to the editor, Henrietta overtly expresses the message that underlies this magazine genre:

The epithets of “bluestocking” and “strong-minded” have been too often thrust in the faces of many of the most refined and modest of women, whose higher natures instinctively followed a law to which more frivolous or ill-trained minds were strangers, but which preserving the outward semblance of womanly goodness, passed muster when those others were censured and discouraged. The most capable, the most intellectual among women have ranked among the gentlest, kindest, and most devoted of wives and mothers. The largest view allowed to her, the more clearly she discerns her true sphere, her noblest mission. I know of no argument more cogent
than that of the right to grow. It ranks above all others, it is mighty for all time. I think I do not overstate a conviction founded on observation and a calm though deep-rooted interest in the subject, when I say, I think it is impossible for a woman to be “too intellectual.” I think she cannot be too highly educated. Though she were charged with the knowledge of all the world, she would be “woman” still.

(341–42)

As a genre, these magazines empowered women to read in new ways that were fervently justified as beneficial to the status of the entire middle class and the cultural health of the nation. Thus, the women who read and wrote for family literary magazines were able to influence the valuation of literary culture in important ways that were characterized as acceptable within the middle classes. Uncovering these alternative representations of women readers is crucial to our understanding of Victorian culture because it was partly as a result of such female-friendly but not female-exclusive forums that women would increasingly gain access to education and to previously male-dominated professions. These magazines reached a broad audience and effectively worked to change public opinion about women’s roles in the literary world as well as in society at large.

However, the advances in thinking represented by these magazines had evidently become invisible to early-twentieth-century writers like Virginia Woolf, perhaps due to arguments like Henrietta’s, which continued to focus on women’s education as a force that would improve family life rather than transform it. Woolf, whose father edited the *Cornhill* from 1871 to 1882, famously lamented the lack of a woman’s literary and critical tradition, apparently disregarding all of the “Henriettas” (including her Aunt Anne Thackeray Ritchie) who read and contributed to family literary magazines like the one that occupied so many years of her father’s life. In *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, Talia Schaffer argues that “Woolf was well read in the literature produced by women at the turn of the century and was indeed intimately acquainted with many of the women themselves.” However, “the woman who insisted ‘we think back through our literary mothers’” actually established modern feminism and the modernist movement by excluding her mid-to-late-nineteenth-century literary foremothers (194). In addition to the ascendance of a new generation that disregarded the activities of its immediate Victorian predecessors, several major changes in the publishing industry and the system of higher education at the turn of the century apparently muffled the voices to which
I have drawn attention in this book. The demise of the serialized novel and the circulating library, which effectively ended the dominance of the family literary magazine; the increasing specialization of magazines into distinct target audiences, which further separated male and female readers; and the development of English literature as an acceptable field for academic study, which entrenched the profession of criticism as a predominantly male pursuit, worked to exclude women from mainstream literary and cultural discourse despite the gains they had made at mid-century. These changes led to the exclusion of women from the development of the literary canon as readers, authors, and critics until the late twentieth century. However, we cannot forget that, if only for a brief time during the middle of the nineteenth century, women had a mainstream forum that invited them to create and influence culture rather than to consume it passively.

Though the modernists may have forgotten or dismissed the family literary magazines, studying such cultural texts is important not only for what they teach us about the past, but also for what they teach us about the present. In her postscript to *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, Nancy Armstrong argues that postmodernism is the culmination of the Victorian cultural modernization process that shifted “political action from government onto culture” (313). The importance of culture to women’s power in mid-Victorian society and, particularly, to the nation’s imagined identity prefigures our contemporary “culture wars” in which the identity of the nation is represented as much by its culture as by its land and institutions (ibid., 312). Thus, through the study of nineteenth-century commodities like family literary magazines, which figure cultural knowledge as status, we can trace the origins of the democratization of the public sphere that fueled the anxieties of nineteenth-century critics, elicited the rejection and suppression of all things Victorian by the modernists, and has inspired the cultural play as well as the culture wars of the postmodernists.