Many of the major novels of the mid-Victorian period were published within a 20-month period in 1847–8, including Ann Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1846–8) and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848). Both Garrett Stewart and Leah Price have recently paid attention to the way in which the reading of newspapers, tracts and novels is represented in paintings and novels from this period. As Price argues, these ‘embedded’ texts often ‘perform an antiquixotic function: everywhere present in the hands of characters, but nowhere read’ and she wittily argues for her own work as a study of ‘rejection’ rather than ‘reception’.¹ In part, the new cultural authority that was being claimed by the novel at this moment was produced through images that imagined the rejection and negation of other forms of reading. If religious tracts continued to berate the novel reader, the novel made ‘the dullness of tracts a foil to its own pleasures’.² Stewart and Price are mainly concerned with images of ‘pseudoreading’ in which the participants hide behind newspapers, or daydream while reading novels. Despite the frequent appearance in such images of the material text as an object large enough to provide a shield against social interaction, the texts in which they feature often figure the actual response of readers as an immaterial act in which the text becomes ‘disembodied’. As Price notes, Elizabeth Gaskell is just one author from this period who opposes the ornate text bought for show (such as the ‘great, large handsome Bible, all grand and golden’ in *Mary Barton*) with the ‘immaterial’ text actually read.³

However, two novels published within those vital 20 months of the 1840s, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847–8), contain images of embodied material texts that are subjected to an anti-social or disobedient (non-)reading practice that
leads to their near destruction. Becky Sharp’s violent return of a gifted dictionary and Catherine Earnshaw’s rending of a book from its binding as she throws it into a dog kennel, represent more than just the triumph of the pleasures of the novel over older, more respected, genres. In these instances the rejection and attempted destruction of reference works and theological texts are figured as rebellions against restrictive intellectual ideas (especially as applied to female readers). However, while Thackeray’s novel goes on to celebrate the anarchic reader, Brontë’s return to the notion of book destruction in the final chapters of *Wuthering Heights* appears worried at just how vulnerable texts are to vengeful mishandling. Catherine’s library is particularly vulnerable as it is famously ‘select’. This essay concludes by examining images of book destruction associated with the most well-known circulating library of the period, Mudie’s Select Library. Mudie’s is often negatively associated with the ‘ephemeral’ nature of mid-Victorian print culture, but these essays celebrate texts destroyed – ‘read to death’ – by subscribers as signs of the successful operation of the machinery of distribution.

*Vanity Fair* was published in monthly numbers between January 1847 and July 1848. The first chapter contains two episodes which represent the use and abuse of books. This novel is, of course, famous for the range of different readers and audiences invoked by the narrator, but it begins by targeting a specific minority audience – the gentleman reader perusing the monthly number in his club. Thackeray imagines that his text will be rejected by ‘Jones, who reads this book at his Club’ because the latter ‘admires the great and heroic in life and in novels’. Thackeray’s ‘novel without a hero’ is not for this kind of reader who is warned to ‘go elsewhere’. Nicholas Dames has argued that Thackeray was ‘perhaps uniquely obsessed with the imagining of the consumption of his own work’. Dames’s reading of this passage and its accompanying illustration (also by Thackeray) contrasts Jones’s striking of ‘a reading attitude’, in which he aims to display a ‘distanced attention from the text that he reads from behind an almost literally upturned nose’, with the absorbed ‘raptly attentive’ reader often depicted by Thackeray with his or her head buried in a book and thus screened from our inspection. Dames points out that both rapt and dismissive reading practices are frequently criticised by Thackeray, the one for inattention to the world outside the text, the other for its inattention to the text itself, so that we must not think of Jones’s “bad reading” – distracted, distanced, unable to focus for long – as diametrically opposed to a ‘good’ attentive reading. Indeed, Garrett Stewart has argued that Thackeray’s image of Jones is ‘like a fun-house mirror in which you resist recognising the