This essay addresses how the Internet works for scholars of Victorian literature and literary history, how we work on the Net, how the concept of networks is affecting our engagements with literary history, and how we can make the Net more effective for scholarly purposes. It channels this inquiry through a consideration of Victorian writer Eliza Meteyard, whose case demonstrates how the knowledge networks on which we increasingly draw for our research have profound implications for how that research is shaped.

Meteyard, who wrote under the name of “Silverpen,” represents in many ways the opportunities that the nineteenth century presented to a woman of the Anglican professional classes. Although she felt inadequately educated, she lived independently in London on the proceeds of her pen from the early 1840s until her death in 1879. She wrote, not as a leisured lady, but as a professional author. She wrote for money because she needed it to live. She wrote a lot, both nonfiction and fiction, and belonged to the first generation of women to make a living through journalism. In other words, she represents a significant, though not a prominent, figure in Victorian literary history.1

Meteyard experienced the conflict between pursuing a writing career and being a woman that recurs throughout the fiction, poetry, letters,
and autobiographies of many women of the nineteenth century: she refused marriage and remained single all her life. The heroine in her semiautobiographical novel Struggles for Fame also declines a marriage proposal—from a lord, of course—with the assertion that “the woman who wishes to excel in literature must be alone from the cradle to the grave.” Yet Meteyard was hardly alone. Her career as a professional writer was only possible because of her position within a complex network of connections that sustained her in this new profession for women, a set of linkages that she actively developed. Meteyard wrote in 1857 of “a spider’s web of work, which necessity of ways and means compels me to do.” The locution evokes a sense of being both the spider who weaves and the one who is compelled, caught in that same web.

Meteyard’s ambivalent image of a web of work is my starting point for exploring how approaches to literary history, and with it humanities scholarship more generally, are being shaped by the Internet and more specifically by the World Wide Web. I will address how feminist literary history is changing and how digital humanities work can advance the analysis of gender and other forms of difference—weaving together the web of work Meteyard invokes to characterize her conditions of possibility as a writer, the work on the World Wide Web that is increasingly part of scholarly life, and the web of words, standards, and technological practices that supports and increasingly defines that scholarly activity.

Narrative literary history was undermined in the late twentieth century by a combination of feminist and other critiques of its conservative and canonizing tendencies, on the one hand, and by the suspicion of narrative that emerged from high theory, on the other hand. Except for focused monographs that investigate some aspect of literary history—recuperating a forgotten writer or filling in a missing context, for instance—it has dwindled into essay-based “companions” to various literary periods and genres and occasional pallid attempts at large-scale narrative history in which, as one reviewer puts it, “narrative gets shouted down by the encyclopedic.” Its encyclopedic tendencies perhaps make the Web an unpropitious medium for literary history, particularly given the charge that categories of difference have been notably sidelined within digital humanities. This paper investigates the challenges and potential of Web-based literary-historical inquiry and suggests how we might improve its prospects for doing justice to marginalized subjects, such as Meteyard.

Meteyard is hardly an eminent Victorian. During the composition of this essay, the main Google search engine reported between 81,200 and 135,000 results on her, only 5 or 6 percent of the 1 to 14 million documents it purports to find for Charlotte Brontë. The