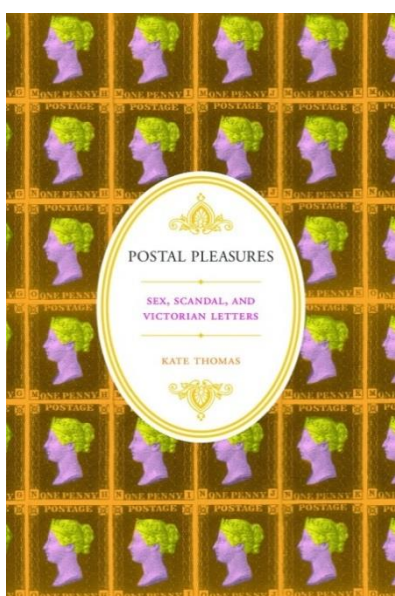


BOOK REVIEW

Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters, by Kate Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). 264 pp. Hardback, £69. Paperback, £16.99.

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Kate Thomas's richly evocative and captivating book *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters* traces the interaction between two Victorian institutions: the Post Office and the literary marketplace. Both institutions, Thomas notes, facilitated human exchange and suggested models for the organisation of personal, social, and even international relations. *Postal Pleasures* explores how the late-Victorian literary imagination responded to one particular idea offered by the modern postal service: 'that all people in all places are connected by the mail' (p. 1). It is due to this idea, Thomas hints, that the postal service was perceived as a facilitator for the

production, circulation, and proliferation not only of useful information, but also of filth. The postal service came to be perceived as a vehicle for sexually transgressive discourses and relationships, and it therefore played a crucial role in a number of Victorian scandals.

The universal penny post was introduced by Rowland Hill in 1840. According to Thomas, its accessibility, affordability, and anonymity, as well as its capacity to connect "everyone" to anyone, ensured that the reformed postal service 'was almost immediately understood to engender queer interfaces' (pp. 4-5). Her study examines a body of work which 'shows the postal network enabling a diversity of erotic interactions' and allowing 'for queer interactions to be undifferentiated and unmarked from straight ones' (p. 8). By placing texts by writers including Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, and Bram Stoker in the context of contemporary literary, postal, and sexual scandals, Thomas reveals how postal tropes could be used to imagine alternative models

of relationships – between lovers, sexes, social classes, races, and nations – models that are broader, more inclusive, and more diverse than those endorsed by Victorian literary convention. Provocative and persuasive, *Postal Pleasures* provides revisionary readings of these authors' work and makes a thoroughly convincing case for why we ought to pay attention to the letters that permeate Victorian literature.

Thomas's excellent introduction evaluates the impact of Hill's postal reforms on the late-Victorian cultural imagination. The penny post, Thomas demonstrates, was envisaged as a great equaliser (p. 17), an instrument for the construction of national – or imperial – community (p. 16), a technology that enabled corresponding subjects 'to go somewhere otherwise out of bounds' (p. 2), and an institution capable of redefining the boundaries between private and public life (p. 31). As a result, the function and representation of letters in contemporary culture and literature changed. 'Epistolary fiction gave way to postal plots', which were less interested in letters' contents than in their contexts: their circulation, the traces they accumulate on their journeys, and the connections they make, or fail to make, between correspondents (p. 2). Postal plots, Thomas explains, were shaped by the recognition that letters, and other types of mediated communication, separate messages from the correspondents' bodies and are, therefore, particularly susceptible to producing 'shifts, confusions, or cross-identification of gender and sexual desire' (p. 8). They subverted essentialist understandings of human identity, preferring to emphasise the shaping power of interaction, exchange, and intermediation.

Thomas begins her study with a compelling account of the 1885 Cleveland Street Scandal, which revealed that many telegraph boys were supplementing their income with prostitution, with public figures of the highest standing counting among their customers. The first chapter, 'Postal Digressions: Mail and Sexual Scandal', explains how the scandal's specifically 'postal implications', which have thus far 'gone unmarked', help illuminate its cultural significance and far-reaching political consequences (p. 35). Thomas teasingly explores 'the structurally erotic potential' of the postal service and of service for the post, observing that uniformed Post Office employees were perceived as both facilitators and potential objects of diverse – and possibly deviant – erotic exchanges (p. 40). 'The scandal', Thomas writes, 'derived its force from the disclosure that sexual deviance was not contained in a single residence or street, but rather circulated as widely and as easily as the post, and indeed, with the post' (p. 42). Moreover, stressing the importance of the fact that public actors and a public institution were at the centre of the scandal, Thomas interrogates how notions of privacy and publicity shaped Victorian thinking about sex and

sexuality. She raises the important point that the postal service could not only facilitate, but also allow for the policing of queer desire.

Chapter Two, “‘This Little Queen’s Head Can’t Be Untrue’”: Trollope’s *Postal Infidelities*’ contemplates the reciprocal influence of Anthony Trollope’s postal and literary work. As Thomas explains, Trollope worked as a postal clerk from the age of nineteen, before becoming a postal surveyor, responsible for facilitating rural deliveries of mail in Ireland, in 1841. Encountering a large variety of human interactions in the Post Office, Thomas argues, endowed Trollope with a ‘queer kind of sympathy’ for ‘characters who have suffered sexual and gender stigmatization’ (pp. 82, 73). In a thorough close reading of the 1879 novel *John Caldigate*, Thomas explores how Trollope ‘stages the literal and metaphorical potential of the postal system to sustain queer and irregular structures of alliance’ (p. 82). The chapter clarifies why, in the potentially ‘queering’ postal plot, the outside of a letter becomes more significant than its inside. In *John Caldigate*, a postage stamp and postmark serve to clear the protagonist of charges of bigamy, whereas the letter inside the envelope, containing evidence of promiscuity and extramarital passion, is treated with indifference. For Thomas, Trollope’s sympathy with, and lack of moral judgment for, his characters’ transgressive desires and actions discloses an ‘understanding of the postal system as a discursive machinery that can be used to police human relations, but only through disclosing the ways in which [...] diversity and deviation are fundamental to human relations’ (p. 97).

The first two chapters of *Postal Pleasures* establish how the cultural imagination linked ‘postal exchanges and digressive sexual relations’ (p. 4). The third chapter contemplates how the queer relations engendered by the postal service, and by work with ‘postal technologies’, may have helped shape modern understanding of women’s civic and personal duties (p. 36). In “‘A Queer Job for a Girl’: The Communicative Touch in Trollope, Hardy, and Lynn Linton’, Thomas analyses narratives about women who work as telegraph operators, and who, through this work, become involved in quasi-marital same-sex relationships. Contextualising her readings within nineteenth-century debates about redundant women, marriage, and female employment, Thomas suggests that ‘[p]ostal routes allow these women access to alternate erotic and social routes’ (p. 101). With thorough attention to textual detail, she reveals that the texts under discussion ultimately conceptualise both the Post Office (the biggest employer of women in the nineteenth century) and homosexual bonds as ‘pedagogical space[s], through which the girls can pass, emerging unfallen and still marriageable’ (p. 128). Yet, Thomas convincingly suggests that all three writers (Hardy in particular) indicate how postal and queer experiences enable

their female characters to move beyond traditional, patriarchal understandings of marriage, towards a more progressive and egalitarian model for the organisation of heterosexual relations.

Discussing Hardy's *A Laodicean*, Thomas emphasises that 'the network of telegraph wires runs counter to the individuated lines of blood and title' (p 139). In 'All Red Routes: Blood Brotherhood and the Post in Doyle, Kipling, and Stoker', Thomas pursues the idea that the postal service may have been capable of promoting blood relations of a much broader and more inclusive kind than those accommodated by an individual family tree. Postal communication, Thomas explains, was supposed to play a crucial role in establishing peaceful relations between Britain and the United States, by helping to create a sense of universal brotherhood. In original readings of canonical texts, including Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Rudyard Kipling's *The White Man's Burden*, Thomas argues that '[t]he homosocial and often homoerotic structures of imperial bureaucracy and postal networks came [...] to uphold and further the project of Anglo-Saxonism even more effectively than strained languages of heterosexual family structures' (p. 157). More importantly though, Thomas also acknowledges that, for these writers, 'racial fraternity trumps colonial collectivity' (p. 15); their work, she notes, shares the conviction that '[b]ad imperialism' results from circulation systems' that are 'overextended', or, in other words, too inclusive, comprehensive, and indiscriminate (p. 177). Thomas's analysis gradually exposes that the concept of universality which permeated nineteenth-century postal rhetoric is, in fact, highly problematic, since the unity forged by postal connections tended to imply the exclusion of anyone who was perceived as too radically 'other'.

In lieu of a conclusion, Thomas offers a brief but nuanced reading of Henry James's novella 'In the Cage'. For Thomas, this text is the 'apotheosis' of late-nineteenth-century postal literature – more interested in networks, technologies, and media of communication, as well as in the people and systems who mediate personal exchange, than in the contents of personal messages. Thomas ends her study by reminding us that postal plots were not only capable of evoking the diversity of human relations, but that they also permit diverse readings and interpretations. 'If the nineteenth-century network served to disclose and materialize social, geopolitical, racial, and sexual webs of interchange that were inherently plural', she writes, 'it similarly did not command a single ideological inflection: it was neither consistently liberationist nor was it resolutely repressive' (p. 223). Importantly, Thomas never loses sight of the fact that nineteenth-century literature bore witness to, and drew on, the postal system's 'capability to enable and engender connections between people,

and also to police them' (p. 223).

Thomas's study offers an extremely welcome contribution to the developing field of enquiry into the interaction between Victorian literature and Victorian media, technologies, and networks of communication. Thomas's book complements and adds to studies by Richard Menke, Elizabeth J. Golden, Laura Otis, and Jay Clayton.¹ What distinguishes *Postal Pleasures* is its unique focus on the ways in which nineteenth-century authors drew on postal tropes to formulate and disseminate alternative models for social and interpersonal relationships. Thomas effectively integrates postcolonial and queer theoretical frameworks in her striking analysis of letters in nineteenth-century literature and culture. Thomas's book is not only thoroughly informative; it is also elegant, engaging, and entertaining. Thomas relishes in wordplay, in teasing out sexual innuendos, and even in commenting on the 'implausibly diverting name[s]' of the boys involved in the Cleveland Street Scandal (p. 44). Her study maintains the perfect balance between wit and scholarly rigour. In fact, the subtle humour that runs throughout the study bears testimony to Thomas's close engagement with late-nineteenth-century postal rhetoric and literature, as she draws on, and thereby illuminates, the double meanings and imaginative possibilities that stimulated the Victorian imagination.

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¹ See Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Laura Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Catherine J. Golden, *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009); and Jay Clayton, *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).