Forgery and Imitation

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Debates on forgery in the Victorian period were inseparable from questions of personhood. In part, this was due to the fact that until the 1832 and 1837 Forgery Acts, individuals charged with this crime would lose their personhood through the death penalty. But the act of forgery also had the power to redefine the identities of the living in significant ways. In her pivotal book on the topic, *Forgery in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture,* Sara Malton writes, 'As it exposes the fragility of a financial system that grants increasing agency to its individual participants, forgery thus becomes centrally implicated in changing ideas of selfhood.'[1] She goes on to argue that 'forgery poses acute challenges to deeply held cultural beliefs about the primacy of individuality, identity, and origins'; Pip's formation into adulthood in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1862), for instance, is fueled by counterfeiting and modes of deceptive self-fashioning.[2] In my book about faking, *The Deceivers,* I explored multiple ways in which art forgery act generated complex vocabularies 'for defining persons as well as things.' The artistic practices of copying, forging, restoring, and fraudulent dealing constructed new categories for thinking about identity along gendered, social, racial, and national lines, which reached far beyond the aesthetic sphere.[3]

The essays in this issue of *Victorian Network* challenge us to think about the interconnectedness of forgery and human identity from a number of novel perspectives and frameworks. As Victorian scholars, our tendency is often to ascribe the fascination with fakery to the fin-de-siècle, as expressed through the aesthetic celebration of deception, artifice, masks, and other modes of inauthentic self-fashioning.[4] In their study on Oscar Wilde's profound interest in the eighteenth-century forger Thomas Chatterton, Joseph Bristow and Rebecca Mitchell describe the 'range of ideas Wilde cultivated about artful criminality:

[1] Sara Malton, *Forgery in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture: Fictions of Finance from Dickens to Wilde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 8.
[2] Ibid., 15, 12.
[3] Aviva Briefel, *The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 11.
[4] In *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), John Kucich already warned us about the false assumption that a belief in the effectiveness of lying was exclusively a fin-de-siècle phenomenon. He argues that 'middle-class culture, too often reduced to an ahistorical flatness and homogeneity, depended precisely on internal instability, incoherence, and stratification, instantiated by a symbolic logic of transgression, to produce and maintain its claims to cultural authority' (3).

from the rollicking endorsement of unabashed deviance in 'Pen, Pencil, and Poison', to the dialogic reasoning of the positive value of lying in 'The Decay of Lying', to the depiction in his stories of the ways that artifice can encourage affection and even altruism.'[5] The essays in this issue of *Victorian Network* direct their attention to earlier moments in the Victorian period, focusing on texts that, while rarely espousing a Wildean celebration of fakery, demonstrate a shared belief and investment in the intimate relationship between forgery and identity formation. What follows are five distinct takes on the ways in which Victorian literary and financial culture developed new models for representing the tenuous distinctions between the real and the fake, the authentic and the insincere, the person and the thing.

The issue begins with Rebecca Nesvet's 'The Bank Nun's Tale: Financial Forgery, Gothic Imagery, and Economic Power', an essay that discusses the personification of anxieties around financial forgery and its punishment. Nesvet traces the literary history of 'Miss Whitehead, the Bank Nun', a legend that emerged in the Victorian period—and persists today— about a woman who haunts the Bank of England after her brother's execution for financial forgery in 1812. While the brother in this story is based on a historical person, Paul Whitehead, the subsequent gothic narrative was inspired by two fictional texts: the serial *Streetology of London, or the Metropolitan Papers of the Itinerant Club* (1837) and James Malcom Rymer's penny serial *The Lady in Black, or, the Widow and the Wife* (1847-48). Whereas in using the image of a vindictive nun the earlier text revives a gothic trope based on vengeance and villainy, the later one reverses this trope to represent a version of the nun as victim to a gothic plot. Nesvet argues that these two intersecting yet differing representations 'enlist Gothic imagery to debate the impact of financial forgery, its prosecution and punishment, and the economic empowerment of women and working-class people.' The nun in these narratives thus emerges as a physical embodiment of the nefarious practice of forgery *and* of the excessive punishment with which this crime was met through the first decades of the nineteenth century.

Jakob Gaardbo Nielsen explores the ethics of personifying abstract concepts in the ensuing essay, titled, '"I am born": Writing Corporate Personhood in Victorian It-Narratives'. The essay focuses on the idea of corporate personhood, which was instantiated by a series of Company Acts in the 1840s-1860s and whose relevance to our own moment was revived by the 2010 Supreme Court ruling *Citizens United V.* FEC, Nielsen identifies Victorian object narratives that problematise what it means to consider corporations as people. Both Edward P. Rowsell's novella *The Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company* (1861) and Laurence Oliphant's anonymously published *Blackwood's* essay 'Autobiography of a Joint Stock Company (Limited)' (1876) offer their reading

[5] Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell, *Oscar Wilde's Chatterton: Literary History, Romanticism, and the Art of Forgery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 215.

publics a 'way of thinking about incorporation that allowed them to see the ethical ambiguity underlying the principle of personhood.' The fact that these are both Victorian 'it-narratives', derived from an eighteenth-century literary genre that gave voice and agency to objects, allows for a more direct challenge to notions of corporate personhood than do financial realist novels of the period, such as Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848), Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875), and Margaret Oliphant's *Hester* (1883). As Nielsen argues, object narratives 'present a more radically disjointed vision of a fragmented, rather than cohesive society' as their genre allows them to '*perform* rather than *describe* corporate personhood.'

In the issue's third essay, 'Coining Counterfeit Culture: Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*,' Nicole Lobdell focuses on the threat that forgery poses to the domestic sphere as a sacred site of middle-class female personhood. She expands critical discussions that treat Rossetti's 1862 poem as being about sexual corruption or various modes of deception (i.e., food adulteration, false advertising) by suggesting that through the deployment of contemporary slang, it provides a coded narrative about the 'fraudulent subculture' of coining and forgery. The poem's language and imagery evoke the production and proliferation of false coins in the culture at large, representing the goblins as forgers who labour to deceive Lizzie and Laura, sisters who emblematise Victorian womanhood. Lobdell makes the persuasive claim that 'counterfeit slang' takes on a dual meaning in the poem: 'to describe both slang about counterfeiting *and* slang that does not look or sound like slang' (emphasis in original). Like the 'it-narratives' discussed by Nielsen, *Goblin Market* thus enacts what it describes, giving readers a direct experience of the 'perils of deceit' that define a culture of forgery. Within this context, Lizzie and Laura signify the human consequences of succumbing to this culture and the possibilities of resisting its seductions.

The next two essays shift to considering literary characters and narratives that do not resist forgery's deceptions and inauthenticities but find strategic ways of inhabiting them. In 'The Doctor-Coquette Nexus in *Middlemarch*, *Villette*, and *The Woodlanders*,' Emma Rayner discusses the coquette as a model of performative personhood that 'cultivates a self-presentation that resists penetrative reading.' Embodied by Rosamond Vincy in George Eliot's novel, Ginevra Fanshaw in Charlotte Brontë's, and Felice Charmond in Thomas Hardy's, the coquette is an 'adept director of her own performance on the social stage' as she challenges notions of stable or natural identity through her role-playing and excess. The ideal audience for the coquette, Rayner argues, is the male doctor with whom she becomes paired narratively and often romantically. This middle-class professional deploys a way of seeing that insists on locating a natural essence within female identity, and he thus becomes both frustrated and mesmerised in his interactions with the coquette (we can think of Lydgate

imagining Rosamond as a basil plant, which 'flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains'). In trying to demystify the coquette through his scientific surveillance, the doctor ultimately helps to produce her; as Rayner argues, 'It is the doctor's specular defect which equips the coquette with the understanding of artifice she requires in order to realise that biological sex and true character might be things apart.'

The final essay, Derek F. Stewart's 'The Secret Theatre of Suburbia: Identity and Roleplay in Wilkie Collins's *Basil*,' expands on the theme of inauthentic selfhood, this time as depicted in sensation fiction. Stewart illuminates the nexus between the artifice of the city, of theatre, and of identity in the Victorian period, which lies at the heart of Collins's novel about deceptive selves. The essay's author argues that like his friend Dickens, Collins was fascinated by the fakeries of urban life and theatrical melodrama, a combination he explores in *Basil* to 'address anxieties related to identity and selfhood' in modern life. Stewart takes us on a tour of Victorian theatrical conventions, focusing specifically on the stock characters and extreme gestures and emotions of melodrama, and traces their reconfiguration in *Basil*; this work of sensation fiction, he proposes, represents that 'city as a site of roleplay, where identity is fluid, and is easily adopted and constructed by his characters.' As in Rayner's discussion of the coquette, audience reception and collaboration are crucial to these artificial figures, both in terms of the reading public of sensation fiction and the diegetic characters who engage with each other's fakeries.

Given our current concern with 'fake news' and its potentially devastating effects on real persons, it is enriching to read a series of essays that demonstrate the nuance with which Victorians approached fakery. Indeed, whether they viewed forgery and imitation as a cultural threat or as an opportunity for relinquishing fixed notions of identity, the nineteenth-century texts discussed here share an investment in taking fakes seriously. They demonstrate that forgery and imitation are never homogenous acts or discourses, but instead that they encompass a multiplicity of strategies for thinking about identity within financial, aesthetic, and social systems. Studying fakes reminds us that our own identities are always being forged—both in the sense of being produced and fictionalised—through a confluence of self-fashioning and external influences. The more we take these complex productions (both ours and the Victorians) into account, the more we may develop a strategic presentism for living, and resisting, in this, our post-truth moment.