## BOOK REVIEW

*Drawing on the Victorians: The Palimpsest of Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Texts*, eds. Anna Maria Jones & Rebecca N. Mitchell (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2017). 386 pp. Hardback, $64.

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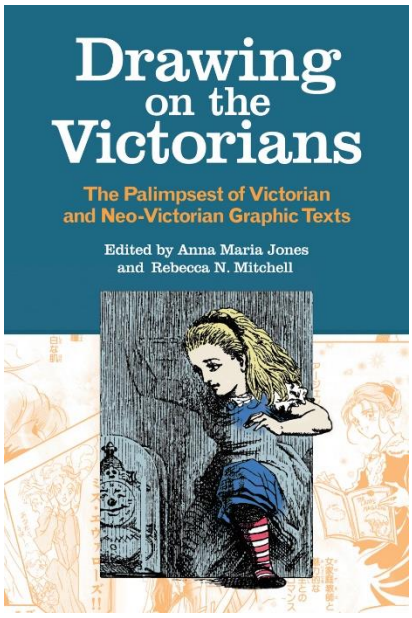


A palimpsest is a document on which the present writes over the past, which is almost all, but not completely, erased. The past remains somewhat visible beneath the present, thus creating detectible layers of time. *Drawing on the Victorians* examines the palimpsest of neo-Victorian texts writing over Victorian texts, but it also exposes layers already present in Victorian texts themselves since they are frequently self-reflexive. The collection focuses on Victorian and neo-Victorian texts that contain visual elements, such as illustrated works, graphic texts, manga, and web comics. The visual elements are materially present on the page and are meant to be interpreted in relation to the text. For editors Jones and Mitchell, '[t]he palimpsest offers a compelling image of the presence of a ghostly, partially legible past bleeding through contemporary textual productions' (p. 7). If this definition sounds haunted, gothic, gory (or Gorey), that is by design. The past remains a shadow throughout this diverse collection as it moves from science to the sacred, from British imperialism to valentines. In their introduction, Jones and Mitchell ground the collection by drawing on Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), with illustrations by John Tenniel, to help readers recognise a palimpsest and to prepare them for their own fall through the rabbit hole as they pass through layer after layer of adaptation in each of the ten essays.

*Drawing on the Victorians* is divided into five sections: Adaptations, Graphic Epistemologies, Refigured Ideologies, Temporal Images, and Picturing Readers. Each essay is consistently well-written, well-researched, and careful to carve out its distinct application of the palimpsest metaphor to, together, appeal to a range of academic fields. The importance of the visual element is emphasised in the first essay by Brian Maidment, which explores serialised illustrated fiction in the Victorian era. Maidment highlights the difference between illustrations that

are 'essentially derived from, and thus subordinate to, the text' and illustrations that speak for themselves (p. 40). Using William Hogarth's drawings as an example, he argues that visual texts are too often ruined when writers with an agenda meddle with illustrations by adding long, didactic explications, unnecessarily and inaccurately, as if readers have no clue how to decipher a visual text. Looking at Robert Seymour's illustrations of social commentary, Maidment demonstrates how clearly a visual language can speak for itself.

For readers interested in gender studies, there are several essays that will stand out for their freshness and enthusiasm. Linda K. Hughes looks at poetic-graphic texts in Victorian periodicals, namely mid-century texts that capitalise on the popular resurgence of neo-medievalism inspired by Alfred Lord Tennyson's poetry. The visual element in these poems is startling, not only because it challenges previous depictions of masculinity, especially in terms of chivalry, but also because of its featured female leads. Hughes convincingly contends that these heroic 'Pre-Raphaelite stunners' prefigure 'the lethal but sexy comic book villainesses whose martial and physical powers threaten men even as their nubile bodies lure them on' (p. 217). Perhaps the best example is Paul Gray's illustration for 'The Huntress of Armorica' (*Once a Week*, 29 December 1866) by Eleanora L. Hervey, in which a striking and athletic heroine scales a mountain to save her endangered lover. Rebecca N. Mitchell's essay on how the Victorians contemplated their own history in the Diamond Jubilee issue of *Punch* (1897) similarly brings feminist themes to the fore. Mitchell contrasts cartoons of families in 1837 with that of a family in 1897, where the New Woman rides a bicycle and has no children. Whether the New Woman's circumstances are related is not addressed, but Mitchell's neo-Victorian illustration from the steampunk comic series *Sebastian O* (1993), by Grant Morrison and Steve Yeowell, distinctly highlights how the roles of husband and wife are completely re-envisioned through the neo-Victorian lens.

Perhaps my favourite essay concerning gender studies in the collection is Jennifer Phegley's exploration of working-class women reading valentines in the periodical, *Bow Bells* (1862-1897). Phegley does not skimp on historical background, which is completely necessary and never dull, detailing how the Penny Post fundamentally changed Valentine's Day by making courtship via the postal service affordable for all classes. The avidity with which women were portrayed in illustrations, awaiting their coveted valentines, plainly reveals that marriage was the ultimate goal for working women hoping to find 'a good man who could provide both emotional and financial fulfilment' (p. 286). In other words, there was a lot riding on cupid's arrow, and the ability to read the visual subtext of a valentine became essential for working women. The plight of the working woman continues in Anna Maria Jones's analysis of the Victorian governess in the contemporary manga series *Lady Victorian* (1999-2007) by Moto Naoko. Jones shows how Naoko draws on what is already known about the figure of the governess in Victorian literature by way of the Brontë sisters and

Henry James, only to reflect on the role by creating layers of literary appropriation. In Naoko's text, the main character and governess, Bell, reads an issue of *Lady's Magazine* that contains the story 'Governess Laura', a narrative about another governess who falls in love with her employer. The result is a governess narrative within a governess narrative. Naoko's text complicates gender expectations in terms of romantic outcomes, but Jones reveals further complexity relating to 'transnational neo-Victorianism' (p. 306), where Japanese and British cultural traditions are carefully considered.

For those who did not get enough of Lewis Carroll, Monika Pietrzak-Franger adds another layer of depth to Jones and Mitchell's introductory analysis of Carroll and Tenniel by examining the 'global expansion of the Alice industry' (p. 67). In particular, she shows how new graphic wonderlands have challenged or criticised imperialist elements present in the original text. Pietrzak-Franger looks at Jerzy Szlak's Polish text *Alicja* (2006) and Nicolas Mahler's German text *Alice in Sussex* (2013) to demonstrate how Alice's story can be appropriated to meet different cultural agendas. Szylak's text uses sexual and political violence (presented in a disturbing illustration of rape) to mythologise Poland's traumatic national past. In Pietrzak-Franger's words, Mahler uses Alice (with illustrations that are not sexually explicit) to encourage 'an imaginary journey through the intellectual landscape of world philosophy and literature as a counterpoint to the boredom of the everyday' (p. 81).

Of course, any Victorian collection worth its gruel, plum pudding, or starveling street urchin must feature Charles Dickens. Heidi Kaufman examines Will Eisner's *Fagin the Jew* (2003), which brings Dickens back to life in graphic novel form so that he can learn the full story of his character, Fagin, and confront Victorian anti-Semitism. Kaufman contemplates the idea of a temporal palimpsest when she claims that 'Eisner's interest in considering the Holocaust in this novel about Fagin reminds us that neo-Victorian novels have the power to imagine the past as an accumulation of histories rather than as a historical relationship linking contemporary readers and Victorians' (p. 153). In that way, Eisner's visual text, contrasted with George Cruikshank's illustrations for *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839), alters the way readers study Victorian depictions of Jews by looking at history not as two points (Victorian and neo/now), but rather as a palimpsest that accumulates everything in between. Jessica Straley then focuses on representations of dying girls in Victorian texts, specifically Little Nell in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), in conjunction with Henry Peach Robinson's photograph *Fading Away* (1858), determining them to be 'cloying and false', 'beautiful, sentimental, and contrived' (p. 182). Countering these maudlin displays of decay are neo-Victorian interpretations by Edward Gorey and Roman Dirge, whose macabre and darkly humorous illustrated texts have 'revived the dead and dying Victorian girl for their audience's amusement' (p. 176).

The pseudo-scientific and sacred are explored in essays by Peter W. Sinnema and Christine Ferguson. Sinnema reveals how cartoons can explain complex geophysical theories, such as those put forth by Edmond Halley and Cyrus Reed Teed, who believed that the earth was hollow. Moving from the Enlightenment to the nineteenth-century, Sinnema shows how illustration was utilised not simply to explain hollow-earth theories, but to render them more popular and believable. Similarly, Ferguson examines pseudo-spirituality in the illustrated spiritualist text *A Stellar Key to Summer Land* (1867) by Andrew Jackson Davis and Olivia Plender's 2007 comic adaptation of the same title. Ferguson successfully establishes how spiritualist art can help explain complex, if bogus, spiritual theories. In this case, the theory being explained is not a hollow earth, but the 'resmelting' of humanity post-mortem, leading 'to ultimate Union with the Divine' (p. 125). Perhaps the most surprising and offensive illustrated concept in Davis's text is the idea that while Indian Removal Acts in America were unfortunate, they ultimately led to a positive influx in the spiritual realm. Unnervingly, Davis identifies genocide as having a silver lining, namely dead Native Americans coming to reside in Summer Land to share their 'ancient wisdom' (p. 130).

The afterword by Kate Flint offers a satisfying culmination to this image-and-text investigation of the palimpsest. Flint uses examples of photography, such as Yinka Shonibare's *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998), to reveal layers of time and subtext. *Drawing on the Victorians* is inarguably a scholarly text; however, the large number of illustrations provide a more accessible and enjoyable reading experience than many a denser, artless tome. To apply yet another palimpsestuous metaphor, Jones and Mitchell's text is like a puff pastry, maybe a croissant or a Danish, with layers of flaky crust that are as enticing and intricate as they are tasty.