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Even Better than the Real Thing? Victorian Literary Imitations

Plagiarizing the Victorian Novel: Imitation, Parody, Aftertext: by Adam Abraham,
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, x + 282 pp., £75 (hardback), ISBN 978
1 108 49307 9

As Adam Abraham points out in the Prologue to this intriguing study of Victorian literary imitations, many of the words we commonly use to describe imitative works carry negative connotations (pastiche, plagiarism, counterfeit and so on). Some of the most important such terms, including plagiarism, adaptation and parody, are placed in their historical context by way of introduction to the book, but Abraham also proposes his own, non-judgemental term for such productions: ‘aftertext’. Much like Gérard Genette’s ‘paratext’, this is a useful label for works which are on the edge of literary history, perhaps meriting a footnote or brief mention in accounts of the career of major writers – as when Thomas Peckett Prest is named as a prolific plagiarist of Dickens for instance – but which are rarely placed centre stage. The Victorian aftertexts Abraham focuses on respond to, and cast light upon, three major writers: Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer and George Eliot. As Abraham puts it, these works were ‘published after – that is to say, chronologically – and many are “after” the manner, sense, style, or creative ambitions of some earlier text or writer’ (p. 18), but some of them are also “after” their sources in a more aggressive way, as in the threatening phrase “I’m coming to get you” (pp. 18–19).

The core argument of the book is that plagiarisms and imitations are more than just literary rubbish accumulating at the feet of great writers. Rather, aftertexts function as a kind of mirror to their originals, one which to use the words of Eliot from *Adam Bede* is ‘doubtless defective’, offering a reflection that is ‘faint or confused’, but nonetheless telling.¹ According to Abraham, ‘anonymous, hackneyed, and unoriginal writers are part of the literary history from which they have long been excluded; they shaped that literary history and influenced – in a seeming reversal of cause and effect – three iconic novelists of the nineteenth century’ (pp. 20–21). Though they might be derivative writers, such plagiarists are often ‘excellent readers’ (p. 42). They were also, as this book shows, often emphatically unignorable by the writers they by turns mocked and profited from. Such an approach, ironically enough, provides an original angle from which to consider canonical Victorian novels. While Abraham builds on previous studies such as Alexander Welsh’s *From Copyright to Copperfield: The Identity of Dickens* (1987) and more recently David Roh’s *Illegal Literature: Toward a Disruptive Creativity* (2015), his sustained attention to the details of the imitative texts under consideration, and the ways they enter into dialogue with their originals, gives the book a distinctive identity.

The first chapter takes us back to the immense explosion of interest in *The Pickwick Papers* in the 1830s and 40s – the ‘Pickwick Phenomenon’ (p. 23). This was a novel whose very form, as well as its vast popularity, seemed to invite continuation. In the first place, its depiction of ‘the phenomenon of British club organisations and homosocial grouping in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries’ (p. 32) opened the way to a range of short penny

¹ George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 165.

weeklies on the same model, with names like *The Wonderful Discovery Club* and *The Magnum-Fundum Club* (p. 32). These cheap ‘club imitations’ (32) replicate not only the central formula of *Pickwick*, but also Dickens’s stylistic practices. They even at times alight upon some of Dickens’s as-yet unwritten obsessions, such as *The Magnum-Fundum Club*’s fascination with wooden legs (p. 37) and Warren’s Blacking warehouses (p. 38). In the second place (and continuing the wooden leg theme), Abraham identifies a group of “‘prostheses” – artificial extensions to the *Pickwick* corpus’ (p. 42) that took advantage of the episodic and open nature of the original text. *The Penny Pickwick*, which prompted legal action from Dickens’s publishers, is the longest and best-known of these, but Abraham also delves into *Pickwick in India*, *Pickwick Abroad; or, The Tour in France*, by G. W. M. Reynolds, and *Pickwick in America*. The latter includes racist African-American stereotypes (p. 50) and makes overt the ‘subterranean sexuality of *The Pickwick Papers*’ (p. 52).

While *Pickwick* originated the greatest flurry of works that were derivatively ‘Dickensian’ (a word Abraham dates back to 1840 (p. 59)), Chapter Two shows that the ‘Pseudo-Dickens Industry’ was sustained well into the 1840s, with multiple imitations of *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Master Humphrey’s Clock* appearing. Among the most ‘audacious’ (p. 63) of these was *Nickelas Nickelberry*, written by Prest under the name ‘Bos’ (p. 63). The first number appeared on the very same day in 1838 as the work it intended to imitate, so that ‘Prest was compelled to plagiarize a work that he had not yet read’ (pp. 64–65). Like at least one hastily produced dramatic adaptation of Dickens’s novel (William Thomas Moncrieff’s *Nickleby and Poor Smike* of 1839 (p. 71)), Bos was ‘alert to the structuring principles of Dickens’s narratives’, intuiting after two monthly parts ‘a connection among Ralph Nickleby, his nephew, the schoolmaster, and an unnamed boy’ (p. 67). Abraham’s focus throughout the chapter is on Dickens’s response to his imitators, which he suggests was already taking place within the later parts of *Nickleby*, as when Nicholas scolds a ‘literary gentleman’ for taking the ‘un-completed books of living authors’ (p. 71) and carving them up for his own purposes. While *Master Humphrey’s Clock* was also copied, it was Henry Hewitt’s ‘A Christmas Ghost Story’ in 1844 that prompted Dickens to take out a series of Chancery suits in pursuit of redress. Abraham convincingly argues that Dickens felt particularly stung in this case because he was paying printing costs for *A Christmas Carol* from his own pocket, so that he took legal action primarily ‘as a publisher whose copyright was threatened’ (p. 84) rather than as an author.

The following two chapters address the frequently parodied Edward Bulwer (later Lytton), whose overwrought style and reliance on repeated rhetorical tropes, including ‘sententia, periphrasis, and paradiagesis’ (p. 95), attracted imitation from reviewers as well as the professional ironists of *Fraser’s Magazine*. The latter waged something of a war on Bulwer through the 1830s, including 1832’s ‘Elizabeth Brownrigge’, which mocked the author’s style in *Eugene Aram* with asides such as ‘ejaculated the uxorious apothecary’ (p. 105). Bulwer was aware of his reputation, and, like Dickens, occasionally responded in his own writing, sometimes recognizing his own reliance on recycling earlier texts: ‘I cannot claim the merit of originality’ (p. 108) he wrote in 1847.

The two most significant imitators of Bulwer are discussed in Chapter Four: William Thackeray and Rosina Bulwer Lytton. Abraham’s contention is that both ‘developed their narrative voices by parodying the style of Edward Bulwer’ (p. 114). Thackeray looked down on many of Bulwer’s works – *Eugene Aram* was ‘humbug’ (p. 116) he claimed – but also wrote a

series of Bulwer imitations, using them as a ‘booster rocket’ (p. 119) to launch his own career. He even parodied Bulwer’s famous opening of *Paul Clifford* in a passage of *Vanity Fair* that was later removed (p. 119). Rosina, by contrast, throughout her career wrote in the shadow of the estranged husband who ‘systematically persecuted and tormented her’ (p. 121), most famously by incarcerating her in a lunatic asylum for a month in 1858. In Abraham’s reading, Rosina not only took advantage of the Bulwer name to sell her novels, but had a remarkable ability to write as ‘her husband’s doppelganger, the secret sharer’ (p. 124), ridiculing his family and self-importance by speaking in his own voice. There are moments where she seems on the verge of greater originality, as in *The Budget of the Bubble Family*, where her writing ‘approaches an independence from Bulwer’s’ (p. 135) and moves towards domestic fiction, but ultimately she is shown to be unable or unwilling to escape Bulwer’s orbit as Thackeray had done.

As Abraham admits, George Eliot is a less obvious candidate for parodic imitation than Dickens or Bulwer, but he shows in Chapter Five that *Adam Bede* in particular gave rise to an imitative drama that echoes through her later works. Eliot was for the rest of her life ‘haunted by Joseph Liggins’ (p. 143), the otherwise inconsequential figure who was championed in the press as the real George Eliot in the late 1850s. Abraham’s careful archival research, evident throughout the book, here becomes most prominent, as he gathers up the few, often overlooked, scraps of available evidence about Liggins’s life and motivations, including a previously unpublished letter by Liggins apologizing for financial indiscretions during his unfinished education at St Catherine’s College, Cambridge (pp. 152–53). This detective work gives rise to speculation that Liggins was a frustrated writer who ‘may have felt that he *could have been* George Eliot, if things had turned out differently’ (p. 150). Perhaps most interesting in this part of the book are Abraham’s readings of Eliot’s later writings as delayed responses to the drama of the 1850s. Latimer in ‘The Lifted Veil’ is reinterpreted as ‘Eliot’s earliest vision of a Liggins figure’ (p. 161), while *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* is ‘clearly concerned with plagiarism and appropriation’ (p. 165), ventriloquizing a plagiarist in the chapter ‘The Wasp Credited with the Honeycomb’.

The level of scholarly detail in *Plagiarizing the Victorian Novel* is impressive, as is usually the case with the *Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* series, and Abraham also includes moments of humour and wit; an underrated side of academic writing. Sex in *Pickwick* is a ‘loaded but unfired pistol’ whereas ‘the Pickwick prostheses pull the trigger’ (p. 51); Prest is ‘the inevitable Bos’ (p. 63), playing on Dickens’s nickname of the Inimitable; Bulwer employs ‘Excessive Capitalization’ (p. 95). There are, on the other hand, moments of speculation that perhaps stretch limited evidence rather far, as with the suggestion that ‘*Pickwick* was so potent to its earliest readers that they intuited some of Dickens’s secrets’ (p. 38), or the question ‘did Joseph Liggins let it be known to an Aylesbury barmaid that he, of all people, was the author of *Scenes of Clerical Life*? Was he trying to impress her, to bed her?’ (p. 151). This is a minor issue however, since on the whole this is a detailed and engaging study of a relatively under-explored area of Victorian print culture. It succeeds in making the case that we should pay more attention to the imitators if we want to better understand the originals.

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