

Book review

Kohlke, Marie-Luise & Gutleben, Christian (eds.) (2017). *Neo-Victorian Humour. Comic Subversions and Unlaughter in Contemporary Historical Re-Visions*. Neo-Victorian Series 5. Leiden and Boston: Brill/Rodopi.

Neo-Victorianism, which revisits the Victorian era, constitutes a popular trend in contemporary literature and culture. It would be erroneous, however, to associate neo-Victorian literature merely with historical fiction set in the nineteenth-century. As Helen Davies states, neo-Victorian fiction “is *doing something with* the Victorian era; critically engaging with nineteenth-century fiction, culture and society as opposed to *just* repeating or nostalgically harking back to a past era” (Davies 2012: 2, emphasis in the original). Similarly, Ann Heilmann & Mark Llewellyn claim that “[t]o be part of the neo-Victorianism we discuss in this book, texts (literary, filmic, audio/visual) must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (Heilmann & Llewellyn 2010: 4, emphasis in the original). The rewriting of the Victorian period in neo-Victorian cultural texts often involves an ethical ventriloquism, understood as providing subjectivity to the subaltern, the non-normative and the forgotten. While this revision is almost always ideological, challenging the Victorian values and questioning stabilities, it does not always include postmodern experimentation with form. Yet, even if the narrative form of neo-Victorian novels includes realism of description, imitation of Victorian styles or the return of the omniscient narrator, the irony and humour often involved in those texts destabilise the seemingly stable narratives.

As some of the crucial postmodern techniques used in neo-Victorian fiction include irony, pastiche, parody, satire and black comedy, it is highly surprising that so far there has been no single critical work addressing those aspects of neo-Victorian fiction. Marie-Luise Kohlke & Christian Gutleben’s collection (a fifth instalment in the “Neo-Victorian Series” published in Brill/Rodopi) is therefore a valuable input in neo-Victorian scholarship, addressing this omission and providing a thorough examination of those aspects of neo-Victorian fiction which could generally be labelled as *humour*. In their introduction, Kohlke & Gutleben define the function of neo-Victorian comic fiction as *edutainment*: “self-conscious reflection and critical enquiry as to what’s so funny about the nineteenth century and why—and what the particular things that we find funny about the period might reveal about ourselves and our own world and time” (p. 3), which is partly the purpose of neo-Victorian fiction as such. The editors build their argument around the concept of *equivocation*, which, as they claim, is the basis of neo-Victorianism, as it constitutes “antagonistic self-differentiation *from* and affiliative identification *with* the era” (p. 1, emphasis in the original). What is more, neo-Victorian humour is also ambiguous, according to Kohlke & Gutleben, “doubly double: both temporally and ideologically” (p. 3), because it may provide a therapeutic release of anger or a carnivalesque form of empowerment for those who are oppressed in the power structures of the Victorian society and yet, by recreating those ideological discourses which were implicated in the oppressive system—albeit humoristically—these texts inadvertently draw attention to and replicate these discourses (p. 2). Thus, humour in neo-Victorian fiction is a double-edged sword, at risk of perpetuating what it ridicules.

Inherent contradictions present in the ways humour is used in neo-Victorianism are also discussed in Kohlke & Gutleben's introduction. The hilarity of employed techniques and motifs – including, as the editors enumerate: “slapstick farce; bawdy burlesque, lampoon or pantomime; tall stories; sophisticated ironies; comedies of manners or revenge; witty intertextual games, appropriations and parodies; mock-heroic epics; absurd anthropomorphism; obscene grotesqueries; carnivalesque inversions of order; biofictional impersonations and send-ups; tongue-in-cheek political satire of the Great and the Good; and the blackest of black humour” (p. 3) – does not undermine the seriousness of the themes thus satirised (p. 2). Also, when it comes to laughter as an element constituting a social contract and delineating the in- and out-groups, neo-Victorian humour is often problematised. Laughing at the expense of the Victorian forebears, presented in neo-Victorian fiction as racist, sexist and xenophobic, creates in the audience a sense of superiority towards the less-enlightened ancestors; yet, if the postmodern subjects see themselves as those who rightly reject Victorian outmoded attitudes, laughing at the middle-class Victorians' self-righteous sense of superiority towards other nations, races, working classes and other marginalised groups, these contemporary readers may replicate the same self-righteous sense of superiority (p. 8). Thus, Kohlke & Gutleben conclude, neo-Victorian humour ironically implicates the postmodern audiences in the action of Othering the Victorians (p. 11).

In their introduction, the editors also attract the attention of their readership to the incongruities present in neo-Victorian fiction which result in a comic effect. These include anachronisms, linguistic and figurative, the most effective example of which is the “(hyper)sexualisation of the Victorian world” (p. 20). Neo-Victorian texts also often constitute examples of “comic code-breaking”, particularly when it comes to genres and their associated conventions; novel-as-mashup is one of the most vivid instances of the neo-Victorian humorous play with Victorian genres and their classic representations (p. 21-23). Finally, the neo-Victorian incongruity in terms of applied metalepsis, an “intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe” (Genette 1980: 234-235), also results in a humorous effect (p. 24). These features are typical of postmodern fictions, as the authors of the introduction also note, defining neo-Victorian fiction as an instance of historiographic metafiction, “self-reflexive in both meanings of the term: referring to its own literary or artistic nature and encouraging audiences' reflection on their own and their present's ironic implication in the represented past” (p. 29). The effect of these metafictional techniques is what neo-Victorianism sees as its main objective: evocation of empathy and second-hand trauma concerning those subjugated by the capitalist, imperialist and patriarchal discourses of the Victorian era. Therefore, the result of neo-Victorian humour is what the editors call “post-ethics”, which “playfully and self-reflexively integrates comments and discussions about the ethical problems of revisiting the nineteenth century” (p. 35).

The definition and problematics of humour in neo-Victorian cultural texts demarcated by the editors in the introduction are later recalled in particular chapters of the book, organised into three parts. The first one, titled “Humour and metanarratives”, places the selected neo-Victorian novels and plays in wider political and ideological contexts, be it the Victorian or the contemporary ones. In chapter one, “Parody after Providence: Christianity, secularism, and the form of Neo-Victorian fiction”, Miriam Elizabeth Burstein discusses three neo-Victorian novels – Robert Player's *Let's Talk of Graves, of Worms, and Epitaphs* (1975), Isabel Colegate's *The Summer of the Royal Visit* (1991) and A.N. Wilson's *Gentlemen in England* (1984) – in relation to their treatment of Christian faith and the connection between the work of Providence (or lack thereof) in the novelistic plot and the typically Victorian omniscient narration. According to Burstein, both Player's *Let's Talk of Graves, of Worms, and Epitaphs* and Colegate's *The Summer of the Royal Visit* represent a rather pessimistic

approach to the role of religion or to its lack: the former criticises Victorian Christianity for its hypocrisy and misogyny, while the latter challenges postmodern secularism as potentially devoid of values and “inhumane in [its] playfulness” (p. 68). Wilson’s *Gentlemen in England*, in contrast, is interpreted by the author of this chapter both as a comedy ridiculing the aforementioned approaches to religion, mocking the self-reflexivity of postmodern fiction, yet also as a neo-Victorian instance of a Christian acceptance of doubt.

The second chapter, “Neo-Victorian killing humour: Laughing at death in the Opium Wars”, written by Marie-Luise Kohlke, addresses the killing humour present in the selected neo-Victorian texts: a play and two novels concerning the Opium Wars. Kohlke defines “killing humour” as black humour and *Schadenfreude* that stem from the murder of the marginalised subject (p. 72), which involves both suspension of disbelief and a comic distance: “[b]racketed from reality, killing is transformed into a ‘pretend’ negation of Others’ humanity” (p. 74). Unlike black humour or killing jokes, however, killing humour as defined by Kohlke is ethically engaged when it serves as a criticism as well as testimony of historical traumas (p. 74). Thus, Kohlke analyses Peter Nichols’s *Poppy: A Musical Play* (1982), George MacDonald Fraser’s *Flashman and the Dragon* (1985) and Amitav Ghosh’s *Flood of Fire* (2015) as instances of neo-Victorian critiques of the victimisation of the Chinese in the Opium Wars. These texts pinpoint the destructive effects of Victorian imperialism and capitalism, Kohlke says, but also work as an awakening of the contemporary audience from a historical amnesia.

Chapter three, titled “Bleak hilarity in Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty*”, constitutes a discussion of Allan Hollinghurst’s novel set in the Thatcher era, written as a reworking of Henry James’s *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897). In this chapter, Dana Shiller offers a reading of Hollinghurst’s novel which focuses on its satirical aspects, as a critique of Thatcherian England, in particular its upper classes, where aesthetic beauty of objects and settings is politically and economically coded and artists are “little more than servants of the ruling class, entertaining them at their leisure, while the grimness of Soviet dissidence and AIDS swirls around outside the windows of seigneurial mansions” (p. 111). The novel then, according to Shiller, serves as a neo-Victorian pastiche of a Jamesian critique of the 1880s conservatism, its lack of moral values and its aesthetic poverty (p. 122).

Chapter four, penned by Michael L. Ross and titled “Drainage in a time of cholera: History and humour in Matthew Kneale’s *Sweet Thames*”, focuses on the novel’s protagonist Joshua Jeavon as a representative of Victorian era’s eccentricity and belief in progress. The novel includes slapstick humour as well as comedy at the expense of Jeavon, whose obsession about his drainage scheme and buffoonery are sources of amusement for the audience. For contemporary readers, this is contrasted with our current state of knowledge on hygiene and sanitation, thus painting Jeavon – and, by extension, the Victorians – as hilariously wrong as well as eccentric. Yet, in his chapter Ross shows that throughout the novel Jeavon develops to see the folly of his old ways and the failure of his milieu: the belief in progress and entrepreneurship he once shared with other of his contemporaries is gradually replaced with the awareness of the price paid by the criminal and the impoverished classes, as Jeavon becomes a true neo-Victorian hero.

The second part of this collection of essays, “Humour and gender”, opens with Margaret D. Stetz’s chapter titled “Looking at Victorian fashion: Not a laughing matter”. It relates to the ideological implications of Victorian fashion and its second life in contemporary popular culture. Stetz illustrates her argument with a wide range of examples, from *Punch*’s Victorian cartoons ridiculing women’s dresses and hats, via its contemporary equivalents in the press and BBC’s television series *Horrible Histories* (2009-2013), to Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), and notes that Victorian female garments – particularly the corset –

evoke laughter in Victorian as much as today's audiences. Stetz diagnoses this laughter as a sign of hidden sexism and, when it comes to the audience of neo-Victorian representations, a lack of awareness of the ideologies involved in Victorian fashion and its empowerment potential.

The seventh chapter, "Neo-Victorian feminist history and the political potential of humour", written by Tara MacDonald, concerns the representation of late Victorian suffragettes in two neo-Victorian performances: Jessica Swale's play *Blue Stockings* (2013) and BBC's comedy series *Up the Women* (2013). Wondering "whether humour and silliness need be antithetical to serious feminist critique" (p. 172), MacDonald demonstrates that these representations offer a chance to debunk the stereotype of the humourless feminist and to include the feminist history into mainstream awareness and acceptance. She also examines the "affective communities" (p. 170 *nn*) created by the audiences in the theatre and in the television studio, and her comparison of the texts concludes with a remark that the liberatory, feminist politics of *Up the Women* is weakened by the caricature of Emmeline Pankhurst and the effeminate representation of the New Man it provides.

Similarly, the feminist power of visual representations of *fin-de-siècle* women is examined by Monika Pietrzak-Franger & Eckart Voigts in chapter seven, titled "Good vibrations: Hysteria, female orgasm, and medical humour in Neo-Victorianism". In particular, the authors are interested in the depiction of female orgasm and hysteria in neo-Victorian cultural texts: the web comic *A History of Vibrators* (2014) by Emi Gennis, the Broadway play *In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)* (2010) by Sarah Ruhl's, and the film *Hysteria* (2011), directed by Tanya Wexler. Like MacDonald, they see these representations as a sign that "the trope of patriarchal Victorian medicine has become conventional and that feminist critique has merged with popular entertainment" (p. 192). Yet, on closer examination, these texts offer a more problematic depiction of female sexuality. *Hysteria*, as Pietrzak-Franger & Voigts show, confirms rather than dispels the common stereotypes about female sexuality. In contrast, *In the Next Room* offers a more complex vision of Victorian medicine and women's realisation of their own bodies. The discussed representations of the Victorian vibrator as a cure for hysteria are perceived by the authors as ones with a satirical edge aimed at the stereotypically prudish Victorians, but, at the same time, ones which offer neo-Victorian post-feminist and consumerist readings of these stereotypes.

The final chapter in this section, "'People keep giving me rings, but I think a small death ray might be more practical': Women and mad science in steampunk comics", penned by Dru Pagliassotti, concerns the portrayals of female mad scientists in selected steampunk comic books. The author presents a brief outline of the categorisation and history of male and female mad scientists as stock characters in literature and film. The female protagonists of the neo-Victorian steampunk comic books discussed by Pagliassotti transgress the conventions of the male mad scientist, detective, or bounty hunter, but also reject the traditional hyper-sexualised depiction of female villains from previous popular representations. Unlike their predecessors in horror and science fiction films, the steampunk female mad scientists are not confined and killed off by the patriarchal power at the end of their narratives. Instead, they seize the phallic power for themselves. The fact that these characters are not villains but positive heroines, and that they often offer a subversion of the genre expectations are the sources of humour in these texts.

The final section of the book, titled "Humour and postmodernism", invites four readings of genres and/or stylistic conventions which, being comic, are also subversive. In chapter nine, titled "'Now with ultraviolent zombie mayhem!': The Neo-Victorian novel-as-mashup and the limits of postmodern irony", Megen de Bruin-Molé examines the use of irony in Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) and other novels-as-

mashup. The author of this chapter demonstrates that in spite of the fact that mashups fail to have a ‘serious’ relationship with the Victorian past, “the way they play with the postmodern modes of parody, irony, and nostalgia means that they can still serve as useful tools in the context of neo-Victorianism” (p. 254). Accordingly, the chapter provides evidence that, irrespective of or thanks to camp humour employed in mashups, the novels in question provide ethical challenges to the nineteenth-century originals.

In the tenth chapter, “Camp heritage: Ken Russell’s *The Lair of the White Worm* as Neo-Victorian spectacle”, written by Christophe Van Ecke, Ken Russell’s horror movie *The Lair of the White Worm* (1988) is analysed as an instance of the camp variety of heritage cinema. As an adaptation of Bram Stoker’s 1911 novel *Dracula*, Russell’s film locates itself in the long string of his other neo-Victorian films, particularly as it includes numerous references to the Victorian period. It also evokes the Victorian anxiety of the New Woman, represented by Lady Sylvia March, whom critics generally associate with Thatcherism. Yet, Van Ecke argues, the link between Lady Sylvia and Margaret Thatcher can be made when their “ruthlessly ‘masculine’ killer instinct” (p. 289) is taken into account; thus the film represents a camp and comic inversion of that fear of a female power that originally inspired *fin-de-siècle* horror.

In chapter eleven, “Laughing (at) freaks: ‘Bending the tune to her will’ in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* and Rosie Garland’s *The Palace of Curiosities*”, Saverio Tomaiuolo proposes a discussion of neo-Victorian freakery, in particular its depiction in the two novels mentioned in the chapter title, Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Rosie Garland’s *The Palace of Curiosities* (2013). He presents humour and carnivalesque laughter as tools of empowerment for the female protagonists of these novels. This is done, Tomaiuolo argues, via performativity, as both characters – Sophie Fevvers and Eve “the Lion-Faced Woman” – deliberately enact their freakery for the pleasure of their audiences. Irony and laughter also allow them to question the normativity and institutional power of patriarchy. As a result, the novels propose an “alternative reading of Victorian freak history and literature through the ‘carnavalesque’ medium of humour and laughter” (p. 318).

The final chapter by Ryan D. Fong, titled “The dog days of Empire: Black humour and the bestial in J.G. Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur*”, concerns black humour as a neo-Victorian critique of British imperialism in J. G. Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973). Black humour is used in the novel to destabilise the colonial politics of the previous historical and personal accounts of the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and to show “the violence intrinsic to those discursive operations” (p. 325). This chapter is also devoted to the depiction of animals in the novel as part of its black comedy. These non-human characters, according to Fong, are parodic symbols of the instability of the British colonial institution. As a result, Farrell’s neo-Victorian novel offers a reading of the Mutiny which is an uncanny reflection of British colonial brutality.

Kohlke & Gutleben’s collection of essays is a valuable addition to the existing research on neo-Victorian fiction and culture, particularly as it is the first work dealing with irony, humour and comedy in neo-Victorianism. Moreover, most chapters included in the book offer interpretations of neo-Victorian cultural texts that have so far enjoyed little scholarly attention. The introduction authored by the editors is especially significant, as it provides an overview of the ideological tensions inherent to neo-Victorian fiction and the role humour plays in this genre, which is innovative in the field of neo-Victorian studies. It will be of interest to researchers and students of humour and comedy in postmodernist literature and popular culture. Its fresh perspective on the ideological agendas and incongruities of neo-Victorian fiction is particularly inspiring for further research in neo-Victorianism and postmodernism.

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