Plagiarizing the Victorian Novel

Imitation, Parody, Aftertext

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How can we tell plagiarism from an allusion? How does imitation differ from parody? Where is the line between copyright infringement and homage? Questions of intellectual property have been vexed long before our own age of online piracy. In Victorian Britain, enterprising authors tested the limits of literary ownership by generating plagiaristic publications based on leading writers of the day. Adam Abraham illuminates these issues by examining imitations of three novelists: Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer Lytton, and George Eliot. Readers of Oliver Twist may be surprised to learn about Oliver Twiss, a penny serial that usurped Dickens’s characters. Such imitative publications capture the essence of their sources; the caricature, although crude, is necessarily clear. By reading works that emulate three nineteenth-century writers, this innovative study enlarges our sense of what literary knowledge looks like: to know a particular author means to know the sometimes bad imitations that the author inspired.