

BOOK
REVIEWS

Adam Abraham. *Plagiarizing the Victorian Novel: Imitation, Parody, Aftertext*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 282 pages. \$99.99 (cloth).

Adam Abraham's meticulously researched, expertly theorized, and engagingly written *Plagiarizing the Victorian Novel* upends traditional conceptions of the canon by arguing that the oeuvres of Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer Lytton, and George Eliot were shaped by the allographic "aftertexts" that not only followed chronologically after, but also aggressively "came after" their works. The playful epigraphs he threads throughout the book—citations from Daniel Defoe to Umberto Eco—remind readers: "Unoriginality is nothing new" (1). Yet Abraham harnesses this unoriginality to offer new readings of Dickens's novelistic form, Bulwer Lytton's narrative style, and George Eliot's authorial persona.

After deftly outlining the histories of "second order" texts and synthesizing the theories that Gérard Genette, Marjorie Garber, Linda Hutcheon, Terry Castle, and David Brewer use to define them, Abraham settles on "aftertexts" as the umbrella term encompassing texts that "simulate and interrogate their predecessors" (19). Though oddly prominent in its title, the book only addresses plagiarism and copyright briefly, focusing instead on various (if not always consistent) subsets of aftertexts: "prostheses," texts that (in the case of *The Pickwick Papers*) "expand *Pickwick* beyond the limitations set by Dickens's narrative" (30); parodies that not only imitate and critique, but also alter the originals; and "imitations" that replicate narrative style and proclaim their authenticity. Though these terms do not always satisfy or remain consistent across chapters, the strength and importance of

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Abraham's groundbreaking book lies not in offering up new terminology but in reconceptualizing canonical novels and rewriting the histories of their authors.

The Pickwick Papers, Abraham's readers learn, is anti-Semitic, racist, and sexually explicit—at least when we take the aftertexts into account. This first chapter on “The Pickwick Phenomenon” seeks to “expand the literary work that is *The Pickwick Papers* to include aftertextual production—that is to say, the work done by *Pickwick* (generating aftertexts) and the work done to *Pickwick* (their literary-critical evidence)” (56). *The Penny Pickwick*, *Pickwick in America*, and “Winkle's Journal” transformed the “Jewish undercurrent” and latent racism available in Dickens's novel into a riptide of Jewish and Jim Crow stereotypes (49). And “if sex in *Pickwick* is a loaded but unfired pistol, then the Pickwick prostheses pull the trigger,” Abraham quips as he highlights Pickwick's counterfactual roles as an aggressive lover and adulterer (55). These aftertexts enter the culture text and contribute to readers' understanding of what it means to be “Dickensian.” The opening chapters on *Pickwick* establish the fundamental argument of the book: “originating novels shape their successors, yes, but those successors in turn shape their source material” (184).

Wielding a combination of precise book history and scrupulous close reading, Abraham convincingly argues that aftertexts influence the content of an author's future novels. Was it a coincidence that Dickens “plunged little Oliver into a den of thieves” just as Dickens's earlier novel was being “pilfered” by adapters (70)? Or that *Nicholas Nickleby* rails against plagiarism? Or that Dickens embeds *The Old Curiosity Shop* in a framework that confounds imitation? Abraham's reader, confronted with exhaustive evidence and impeccable analysis, must conclude: No. The timing is just too perfect: Dickens crafted Oliver's descent into the criminal underworld immediately following *Pickwick's* first unsanctioned appearance on stage; Oliver robs Brownlow (dressed in the colors of *Pickwick's* monthly parts), just after Chapman and Hall failed to halt the publication of *The Penny Pickwick*. One such parallel is easily dismissed, but the dozens that Abraham reveals definitively position Dickens's oeuvre as a response to and a product of the aftertexts. Dickens was only one author among many determining what it means to be “Dickensian.”

Abraham is even more persuasive in his argument that aftertexts shaped Edward Bulwer's and William Makepeace Thackeray's distinctive narrative styles. He distills Bulwer's style into a specialized cocktail of techniques—the periodic sentence, excessive capitalization, hyperbation, apostrophe, sententia, periphrasis, and paradiagesis—and explains that Bulwer's extreme sensitivity to parodic ridicule prompted him to revise his novels, pursue new narrative modes, and infuse them with retroactive defenses espousing his theories of the novel. Moreover, Abraham credits parodies with generating Thackeray's narrative style—not, in this case, as the parodee, but as the parodist.

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By analyzing the language Thackeray used to lambast Bulwer in the press, Abraham determines that “Thackeray appropriated the Bulwer style in order to mock it and in order to develop and distinguish his own novelistic voice” (120). Tragically, Rosina Bulwer Lytton—known for marrying and parrying Bulwer—did not achieve the same success with her imitations. Abraham seamlessly merges exquisite close readings with almost sensational biographic storytelling, painting her as “an identify thief . . . her husband’s doppelganger, the secret sharer, a part of the self that he firmly rejected, which returned, again and again” (124). He further delves into authorial biography in the section on George Eliot, demonstrating that the “Eliot persona” (more than her style or content) “commanded emulation” (179). Joseph Liggins, credited by many Victorians with writing *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*, assumed Eliot’s identity because he too “had literary pretensions” (149). “Joseph Liggins and Edith Simcox—one an imposter, the other a fan—each wanted to be or become George Eliot: life as aftertext,” Abraham concludes (179).

While Abraham primarily relies on book history, narrative analysis, and biographical research, he also nods to those who study readers and their responses. “This book offers a new kind of reception history,” Abraham explains. “Along with sales figures and reviews in periodicals, literary imitations tell us a great deal about how a novel is received by its initial audiences” (19). After all, “each imitation necessarily records at least one reader’s response” (19). And while the “imitative authors discussed in this book were not necessarily the world’s most elegant writers . . . they were excellent readers” (184). Abraham only briefly acknowledges possible connections to fan culture in his postscript, and I expected to hear more about Victorian readers’ demands for and responses to these aftertexts. Nevertheless, after reading *Plagiarizing the Victorian Novel*, this reader has nothing but a positive response and declares herself Abraham’s biggest fan.

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Rhiannon Bury. *Television 2.0: Viewer and Fan Engagement with Digital TV*. New York: Peter Lang, 2017. 135 pages. \$95.80 (cloth). \$48.00 (paper).

In the mid-1970s, the eminent Marxist theorist, academic, novelist, and cultural critic Raymond Williams wrote on television as both a technological and cultural form (to borrow from the title of his 1975 book). Williams’s work was seen as a departure from the popular view of television as simply a mass media communication tool; his writing and ideas emancipated television as