

REVIEW

ADAM ABRAHAM. *Plagiarizing the Victorian Novel: Imitation, Parody, Aftertext*. Pp. ix+282 (Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Hardback, £75.

‘Originality is nothing new’, begins Adam Abraham’s witty, informative, scrupulously researched, and delightful book. Focused on three important Victorian novelists, Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer Lytton, and George Eliot, *Plagiarizing the Victorian Novel* argues that we cannot fully understand the great novels of the century without including in our sense of each work its aftertexts—both in the sense of coming after and styled after. This is not only because writers are only original if they are imitated, but because for nineteenth-century readers, Dickens, Bulwer Lytton, and Eliot were not only authors. They were objects of desire. To the extent that an object of desire is, in Lauren Berlant’s formulation from *Cruel Optimism* (2011), a cluster of promises that reflect all that is elusive and enigmatic about our attachments, plagiarisms, piracies, adaptations, parodies, sequels—all that might fall under the heading of imitations—offer readings that expose some of those attachments, embodying many of the things that mattered most to nineteenth-century readers.

In the context of these attachments, counterfactuals can become counterfictionals, as Abraham puts it, exaggerating dimensions of the original whereby, for example, the homosocial bonding of the *Pickwick Papers* bodies forth in the more explicitly gay attraction featured in the anonymous ‘Winkle’s Journal’; or the allusive Jewish identity of Samuel Pickwick is reimaged in *The Penny Pickwick*’s overt anti-Semitism; or the proto-Zionism of *Daniel Deronda* is essentially cancelled in favour of a deeper, or more fantastical, doubling down on Gwendolen Harleth’s English story. Thus, Abraham returns from his spelunking adventures in the cave of the no-longer-read-or-even-heard-of books with a set of fascinating specimens that not only flesh out figures who had hitherto been little more than biographical footnotes (Thomas Peckett Prest, Rosina Bulwer Lytton, and Joseph Liggins, to name just a few), but that demonstrate the role aftertexts played in the formation of Victorian authorship: in response to a veritable circus of imitators, Dickens thematized, Bulwer Lytton rewrote, Eliot reimaged. If diffident copyright laws pitched the tent for nineteenth-century writing careers, the sideshows that played out alongside its main acts dramatize professional authorship as emerging from a kind of apprenticeship in imitation.

Without quite making it explicit, Abraham conjures this metaphor of a peculiar apprenticeship by recounting a paradigmatic coinciding: During the dark and cold winter of January 1847 (indeed, it was a harsh winter), William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* began serialization in monthly parts while his satirical *Punch's Prize Novelists* concluded with an especially unforgiving parody of Edward Bulwer Lytton's florid writing style. Arguably the most important novel of Thackeray's career thus seems to have germinated in the soil of satirical imitation. Fascinatingly, Abraham notes, Thackeray parrots the voice of the unfortunate Bulwer under the pseudonym 'George de Barnwell'. For many Victorianists, that name will ring a bell: isn't George Barnwell the Hogarthian protagonist of George Lillo's 1731 *The London Merchant*, the play poor Pip, then a blacksmith's apprentice, is subjected to when Mr Wopsle accusingly reads it at him in Chapter 15 of *Great Expectations*?! Isn't that the play about the apprentice gone astray, misled and mistaken in his companionship with a prostitute, induced to murder his uncle and eventually hanged on the gallows?! To me, this detail—that the emerging novelist Thackeray impersonated another popular novelist in the disguise of the iconic Apprentice Gone Wrong—illustrates the central complexity of Abraham's provocative argument: apprenticing in the craft of nineteenth-century authorship required acts of imitation that honed stylistic technique at the same time as they bordered on unethical—or, as Dickens would have it in *Nicholas Nickleby's* warning to pirates, criminal—conduct.

In this sense, novel craft emerges as an acquired skill developed in a mastery of antecedent—the medieval guild's sense of an apprentice's 'masterpiece'—and a reminder that the Anglo-American nineteenth-century literary marketplace, with its insatiable consumers and anti-Romantic copyright laws, conditioned authorship as a collective and collaborative endeavor, iterative, imitative, and appropriative. 'There was no need to praise anyone for writing a book,' the narrator of *Middlemarch* wryly remarks, 'since it was always done by somebody else' (Finale). Eliot's ironic grievance notwithstanding, Thackeray's choice of this waggish pseudonym at the beginning of his career in novel writing gestures at the radical politics coursing through the workshops of so many unauthorized reproductions, whether in penny weeklies, the Chartist press, or on nonpatent stages. That Thackeray rehearses the role of author as an apprentice *gone wrong*, however, anticipates a set of moral and aesthetic discriminations that have buried a vast swath of influential nineteenth-century writings. *Plagiarizing the Victorian Novel* is an illuminating, stylish, and necessary archeology of some of these lost works. Its argument that we can read imitations as responses that expand our understanding of books we already know and love makes sense; its demonstration that imitations changed how Dickens, Bulwer Lytton, and Eliot evolved as novelists in response to these adoring, annoying, pugnacious, presumptuous, and graspy writers makes a critical contribution to the fields of Victorian studies, copyright history, and adaptation studies as well as indispensable reading for anyone interested in Dickens, Bulwer Lytton, Thackeray, and Eliot, not to mention their shadows.

A keen close reader, Abraham identifies the formal characteristics that allow imitative works to signal imitation. Here is just a taste. Along with the excessive capitalization, impenetrable periodic sentences, and stagey apostrophes that marked, for

example, Bulwer Lytton's style, he traces a pattern of sententia (the use of aphoristic statements), periphrasis (unconventional syntax), and paradiagesis (narratorial intervention) through Thackeray's parodies, Rosina's appropriations, and even periodical reviews that begin as imitations but devolve into parodies. Similarly, Abraham tracks the phrase 'Everybody knows' from Thackeray's worldly narratorial posture to Henry Hewitt's January 1844 plagiarism of Dickens's December 1843 *A Christmas Carol*: "[E]verybody, as the phrase goes, knew the firm of Scrooge and Marley," begins the plagiarism, because, as Abraham points out, everybody had already read about it in Dickens (p. 82). Such details thus unfold alongside Abraham's own chatty, amused and amusing style, rendering what might have been a somewhat dry recitation of plots and figures into a playful journey led by a knowledgeable and personable companion.

Such formal analyses are matched by robust theorization, from Gérard Genette's palimpsests to Robert Macfarlane's distinction between the *sui generis* originality of *creatio* and the recombinative rearrangements of *inventio*. Abraham's own encyclopedic mind pairs Henry Bergson's ideas about automation in comedy with Harold Bloom's theories of influence, provocatively meditating on parody as a procedure of synecdoche whereby a stylistic excess, like capital letters or metalepsis, is exaggerated in order to stand in for the now objectionable whole. With impressive dexterity, Abraham keeps all of these balls in the air: literary history, expert exegesis, theorization, and fun.

Monica F. Cohen
Columbia University