



***Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show*, by Helen Davies.**

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In *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show*, Helen Davies explores the politics of representation in neo-Victorian re-imaginings of freak show performers. The book draws upon work from both freak studies and disability studies to address the issue of bodily difference in a series of nineteenth-century and neo-Victorian texts, an area that has drawn little critical attention in the field of neo-Victorian criticism to date. Her book returns again and again to the ethical quandaries of the neo-Victorian genre – what is at stake in representing the lives of others? Particularly those others who – like the freak performer – were marginalised during their lifetimes? Neo-Victorian texts are in danger of re-enacting the historical oppression of these performers but, crucially, they also have the potential to offer a more empathetic engagement with the figure of the freak. For Davies, it is this “learning about different ways of being and living which can lead us to question our presumptions about ‘freakish’ Victorians as well as about bodily diversity in our cultural moment” (15). The key to moving beyond such exploitative relations, Davies suggests, is through metatextual strategies that encourage both author and reader to interrogate their desire for knowledge of the freak body.

In Chapter One, “Mixing (re)Memory and Desire: Constructing Sarah Baartman,” Davies focuses on the tension between representing Sarah, also known as “The Hottentot Venus” as a dignified subject and a sexualised, colonised “Other.” The nineteenth-century texts included in this chapter include legal documents, letters to newspapers, the ballad *The Hottentot Venus: A New Song* (1811), and Théaulon, Darts and Braiser’s play *The Hottentot Venus, or Hatred of Frenchwomen* (1814). These texts reflect the cultural preoccupation with determining Sarah’s status as a free woman or a slave. This ambivalence is taken up by Barbara Chase-Riboud’s novel *Hottentot Venus* (2003) and Susan-Lori Parks play *Venus* (1990). In Parks’s play, Sarah is reimagined with a level of subjectivity and interiority absent from nineteenth-century accounts of her, while in Chase-Riboud’s novel she exists as a ghostly presence. While Davies argues that ghosts are not inherently passive, she notes that Chase-Riboud’s Sarah “has remained impotent to change the course of history” (49). Both neo-Victorian texts resist offering definitive conclusions regarding Sarah’s choices and motivations. However, Davies suggests that this very ambivalence is crucial in re-asserting Sarah’s humanity.

Chapter Two, “Separation Anxieties: Sex, Death, and Chang and Eng Bunker,” reads the Siamese twin performers as a reflection of cultural anxieties toward conjoined bodies. Three non-fiction nineteenth-century accounts of the twins are included: Mark Twain’s article “Personal Habits of the Siamese Twins” (1869) and two autopsy reports (1875). However, Davies also analyses Twain’s short story *Those Extraordinary Twins* (1894). Linking these various genres is an overarching concern with the morality of conjoined sexuality – Chang and Eng’s marriage and parenthood fascinated Victorians. The analysis of neo-Victorian representations of the brothers, in Darin Strauss’ novel *Chang and Eng* (2000) and Mark Slouka’s novel *God’s Fool* (2002), is concerned with whether these texts can transcend the limitations of nineteenth-century accounts. In Strauss’s novel, Eng, the narrator is attracted to

his brother's wife. For Davies, this novel's representation of deviant sexuality repeats Victorian moral panic toward conjoined bodies. In contrast, Slouka's novel refuses to represent this sexuality as inherently perverse or transgressive. Instead, it "compels the reader to interrogate their own role as spectator," through the metatextual engagement Davies argues is necessary for ethical encounters with the past (91).

In the third chapter, "Excessively Feminine? Anna Swan, Gendering Giantesses, and the Genre of the 'True Life Story' Pamphlet," Davies explores the links between monstrous and feminine bodies. Nineteenth-century textual representations of Anna Swan, a giantess, include an anonymous pamphlet: *The Nova Scotia Giantess, Miss Anna H. Swan, A Brief Account of her Birth and History* (1894), Edward S. Wood's book *Giants and Dwarves* (1868) and a newspaper article from 1865. Davies argues that the pamphlet reinforces Anna's femininity despite her masculine proportions. Wood's book and the newspaper account take this approach further, by emphasising the passivity and weakness of giants, which is not dissimilar to Victorian ideals of femininity. These intersections, between freakery and femininity, are explored in relation to two neo-Victorian novels: *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (1983) by Susan Swan and *Among the Wonderful* (2011) by Stacey Carlson. While Swan's novel affords Anna a degree of sexual agency, its conclusion reinforces repressive Victorian gender ideologies. Carlson's novel is more ambivalent: "Ana" authors her story but it is then posthumously appropriated. Davies suggests that this refusal to be definitive enables reflection on neo-Victorianism's appropriation of freak bodies.

Chapter Four, "Innocence, Experience, and Childhood Drama: Charles Stratton and Lavinia Warren," explores the lives of these two short-statured performers. Historically, dwarfism connotes both innocence and sexual knowledge, an anxiety reflected in the nineteenth-century texts Davies analyses: Albert Smith's play *Hop O' My Thumb* (1846), a pamphlet (1863), P.T. Barnum's account of Stratton, Lavinia's *Autobiography of Mrs Tom Thumb* (1979) and Sylvester Bleeker's *General Tom Thumb's Three Year Tour Around the World* (1872). These themes remain important in Jane Sullivan's novel *Little People* (2011) and Melanie Benjamin's *The Autobiography of Mrs Tom Thumb* (2011). For Davies, the key difference between Victorian and neo-Victorian representations of Charles and Lavinia lies in the latter's invocation of contemporary discourses surrounding child abuse and trauma to account for the lived experience of Charles and Lavinia as performers. Despite this, Davies concludes that both Sullivan's and Benjamin's novel struggle to move beyond nineteenth-century stereotypes of dwarfism to give Lavinia and Charles any real agency.

In Chapter Five, "The Strange Case of Joseph and Jack: Joseph Merrick and Spectacles of Deviance," Davies pairs Joseph Merrick, also known as "The Elephant Man," and Jack the Ripper to explore Victorian anxieties concerning sexuality and the link between physical deformity and moral depravity. She focuses on a single twentieth-century text: Frederick Treves's memoir *The Elephant Man and other Reminiscences* (1923). Treves, a London surgeon, feminises Merrick by constructing him through the fallen woman rhetoric often aligned with prostitution. Despite casting himself as Merrick's saviour, Davies argues that Merrick's "degraded, victimised identity is not fully rehabilitated" (171). She draws on a range of neo-Victorian texts with a common theme: Merrick's status as victim or villain. These include: Bernard Pomerance's play *The Elephant Man* (1979), David Lynch's film *The Elephant Man* (1980), Ian Sinclair's novel *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (1987), the graphic novel *From Hell* (1999) by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell and its film adaptation (2001) by the Hughes Brothers; BBC TV series *Ripper Street* (2012). Each appropriation selects a different target for villainy: sexual repression (Pomerance), the working classes

(Lynch), the medical profession (*From Hell*), and Merrick himself as a Hyde-like double for Treves (Sinclair). However, Davies argues that Merrick's characterisation in *Ripper Street* confers the most agency upon him by eliminating Treves from the narrative and imagining Merrick as "witness...rather than...spectacle" (192).

In an Afterword, "The Neo-Victorian Enfreakment of P.T. Barnum," Davies examines neo-Victorian representations of the American showman. This survey leads Davies to conclude that, in contrast to medical representations of bodily difference, which tend to be fixed and (supposedly) objective, freak shows have the potential – though this is not always realised – to offer multiple and fluid identities and interactions to both performers and audiences. While Davies is optimistic about the genre's capacity to redress historical silences, she cautions that such representations are necessarily inflected by our own anxieties and desires. As such, texts which are self-consciously aware of this danger, and which encourage the reader to question their own assumptions toward freak bodies are, Davies suggests, best placed to offer an ethical engagement with the period. *Neo-Victorian Freakery*, in its nuanced pairing of nineteenth-century and neo-Victorian texts, will be of interest to Victorian and neo-Victorian scholars alike, as well as those interested more broadly in the cultural construction of bodily difference.

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