BOOK REVIEW


Reading the title of this book, one might presume that it consists of a number of essays treating Homi Bhabha’s notion of postcolonial hybridity. However, the editors make clear in the introduction that the book considers “the rich implications of ‘hybridities,’ which go well beyond” Bhabha’s “cross-cultural yokings” (3–4). In fact, only five of the fifteen essays deal directly with postcolonial issues and, even there, the essays mostly avoid the usual suspects. Divided into three sections of five essays each, all of them limited to the length of a twenty-minute conference talk, the collection gives a sense of the range and inventiveness of current studies of Victorian literature and culture. Its focus on a variety of texts, not all literary, that “amalgamate contraries” and “mimic … the multivoiced exchanges of the Victorians themselves,” yields some intriguing, sometimes surprising insights.

The first section in the collection, titled “Formal Hybrids,” includes five essays on well-known literary authors, four of them poets, who experimented with hybrid genres. In C. D. Blanton’s “Arnold’s Arrhythmia,” the genres are, not surprisingly, poetry, specifically “Empedocles on Etna,” and the essay, in this case the preface that justified the suppression of the poem in Arnold’s 1853 volume of his collected verse. The hybridity embodied in the preface, argues Blanton, simultaneously elides not only this poem, but poetry, while bringing it back in the prose, linking Arnold to the Modernists to come. A discussion of Robert Browning’s poetry would seem a natural place to look for hybrid poetic forms, but in “Browning’s Gifts,” Linda M. Shires instead does an effective close reading of Browning’s letters to Euphrasia Fanny Haworth as hybrids of lyric and drama, as well as of genres and gender. Amy Billone’s well-researched contribution, “Elizabeth Bar-

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rett’s and Alfred Tennyson’s Authorial and Formal Links,” traces similarities in the lives and poetry of these two prominent authors. One of these similarities is that both poets notoriously experimented with hybrid genres; how the juxtaposition of the authors’ lives embodies hybridity is a bit less clear. Christine Chaney offers a brief but insightful account of Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* in “The ‘Prophet-Poet’s Book.’” Chaney’s reading of the “self-portrait” in the first few lines of the verse novel is an example of the best kind of literary close reading. Danielle Coriale finishes the section on “Formal Hybrids” by exploring the tension between hybridity and narrative coherence in Dickens’s *Sketches by Boz.* Though unable to contain the “disruptive effects” of the inherent hybridity of the sketches, the process helped Dickens to develop the narrative method that would characterize his more famous novels.

Part 2, “Discursive Hybrids,” moves the notion of hybridity into even less familiar territory. Michael Hancher begins the section with an essay examining an unusual text: a pirated and radically abridged version of Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol.* Reading the margins as well as the text of this unauthorized and inherently hybrid text, Hancher gives us a fascinating peek at what we might consider the underside of Victorian print culture. Alan Fischler unpacks the “hybrid adjectival form” of “Gilbert-and-Sullivan” opera by exploring the ideological and social class differences between W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, showing that not only were their comic operas hybrids in a variety of ways, but the collaboration itself was a yoking of unlike elements. “Anonyma’s Authors,” by Rachel Sagner Buurma, considers a group of anonymous yellowback novels about women of the London demimonde in the mid-1860s. Instead of focusing on the authors, content, or form of the novels, however, the essay addresses the author function as it was filled by anonymous or pseudonymous attributions that referred to one another (“by the author of . . . ,” etc.) and generated desire for more texts. Heather Morton’s “The ‘Spasmodic’ Hoaxes of W. E. Aytoun and A. C. Swinburne” examines the hybrid form of the periodical review, a genre both Aytoun and Swinburne used to debunk poetry they had themselves invented for the review. Morton notes that every successful poetic review is a collaboration that depends on both genres and argues that these hoaxes give a certain power to the marginal poet. Jonathan Smith’s “Domestic Hybrids: Ruskin, Victorian Fiction, and Darwin’s Botany” finishes off the section on discursive hybridity by demonstrating that Darwin’s work on the sexual crossing of plants gave Ruskin the language for his rejection of novels, particularly sensation fiction, as hybrid and too morbid (and sexual). The connection he makes between the language of Darwin and Ruskin in relation to plants and novels is ingenious, showcasing the cross-fertilization of authors and genres.

“Cultural Hybrids,” the topic of the third section, deals more directly with the type of hybridity with which Bhabha is concerned, but none of the
essays are simple applications of Bhabha’s theories. Focusing primarily on Robert Louis Stevenson’s novella *The Beach of Falesa*, Ann C. Colley argues that Stevenson’s South Seas fiction unsettles any simple notion of colonized and colonizer, or some combination of the two, by creating all sorts of hybridity. This multiplying hybridity creates shifting tenuous new states of being instead of reinforcing colonial power or the centrality of the metropole. “Florence Marryat’s Female Vampire and the Scientizing of Hybridity” is the subject of Brenda Mann Hammack’s contribution. She explains how what was known in the Victorian period as “imaginationism” or “maternal impression” was viewed as responsible for human-animal hybrids or monsters. Such monsters were linked to controversial subjects in late-century Britain such as the New Woman, including female sexuality and feminism, and, especially, people of mixed race like the “vampire” of Marryat’s novel *The Blood of the Vampire*. Deborah A. Thomas’s essay deals not with postcolonial peoples but artifacts such as the Assyrian hybrid bulls brought to England by Austen Henry Layard, as well those portrayed in John Tenniel’s illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland* and in a children’s novel by Edith Nesbit called *The Story of the Amulet*. All three used hybrid forms to figure British xenophobia while also domesticating the foreign. Thomas’s readings of these examples are fascinating, though it is not clear why children’s literature specifically is read alongside Assyrian archaeological artifacts. Jeffrey L. Spear’s “A South Kensington Gateway from Gwalior to Nowhere” does actually address Bhabha directly in its discussion of the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition. The huge Gwalior Gateway, originally part of the 1883 Calcutta International Exposition, was a hybrid of Hindu and Muslim designs from different periods that filled a different function when it was reconstructed in South Kensington, serving as a parable of empire that emphasized an “ahistorical ‘traditionalization’ of India that served to naturalize British Rule” (168). The gateway led to a display that remolded and promoted the village arts and crafts of India as timeless, replacing the Indian “high arts” of sculpture and painting with Western models that made “real India” into a hybrid of different Indian cultures, unified by their relation to Britishness. Finally, coeditor U. C. Knoepflmacher addresses “Kipling’s ‘Mixy’ Creatures,” discussing Kipling’s ambivalent use of hybrids in texts both for adults and children. Kipling, argues Knoepflmacher, saw both possibilities and liabilities in people of mixed races and languages, but after the Great War turned back to favoring Englishness and racial purity in his fiction.

*Victorian Hybridities* does not offer any new definition, or indeed a coherent account, of hybridity. In fact, there is no theoretical introduction or conclusion to frame the collection. Like the conference panel from which it developed, it gives a taste of a number of different research projects rather than fully elucidating a concept. It is, however, a fascinating group
of variations on a theme that can be productively read as a whole or by sampling the individual essays.

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