

**Dennis Denisoff and Talia Schaffer. *The Routledge Companion to Victorian Literature*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020. £190.00 (hardback), £35.99 (eBook) 553 pgs. ISBN 978-1-138-57986-6.**

Dennis Denisoff and Talia Schaffer's edited collection is a title in the 'Routledge Companion to Literature' series, and it provides a thorough overview of key issues and concepts in Victorian Studies. This offering by Routledge stands alongside companions such as Herbert Tucker's *A New Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, and Juliet John's *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture*, published in 2014 and 2016 respectively, though it has its own advantages in terms of both breadth and depth. This comprehensive collection has an impressive forty-five chapters, helpfully divided into six sections entitled 'Genres and Movements', 'Media History', 'Victorian Discourses', 'Formulations of Identity', 'Science and Spirit', and 'Spatiality and Environment'. It is Denisoff and Schaffer's intent that each section can 'easily be envisioned as the core of a course or the theme of an independent study'.<sup>1</sup> The chapters in this collection are written by a variety of contributors, including established scholars from all over the world to emerging critics in the field. This diversity is also reflected in the content: *The Routledge Companion to Victorian Literature* brings new material into focus through an examination of research methodologies as well as historical context, and it attempts to amplify marginalised voices through discussions of disability, race, and sexuality. As the most wide-ranging study on the literature and culture of the Victorian epoch to date, the companion sets out to explore 'the most dynamic and influential political, cultural, and theoretical issues addressing Victorian literature today'.<sup>2</sup>

The first part of the collection, 'Genres and Movements', details how different varieties of literature underpin 'the huge variety of types of work being consumed by the

---

<sup>1</sup>Dennis Denisoff and Talia Schaffer, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Victorian Literature* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. i.

Victorians'.<sup>3</sup> Whilst entries by Alison Chapman, Elsie B. Michie, Susan David Bernstein, and Sharon Aronofsky Weltman focus respectively on the well-known forms of poetry, the novel, short stories, and drama, Trev Lynn Broughton explores 'Life-Writing' and Roger Luckhurst provides a fascinating insight into 'Gothic, Horror, and the Weird: Shifting Paradigms'. Jessica Straley's chapter on 'Children's Literature' follows with an exploration of how the genre was traditionally deemed by scholars to have 'a lower rung of literariness', but it is in fact richly profound and complex. The obsession with representing and re-examining canonical texts designed for children 'promises to evoke future discussions about embodiment, performance, and adaptation'.<sup>4</sup> Then follows Pamela K. Gilbert's thoughtful exploration of sensation fiction with its focus on such tropes as bigamy, transgression, and insanity. Stefano Evangelista concludes this section of the companion with a chapter on 'Decadence and Aestheticism', which considers how the pleasures of art, desire, and beauty reach an apotheosis with canonical figures like Oscar Wilde. However, Evangelista also takes a more nuanced approach to this historical formation by highlighting how less well-known women writers, such as Olive Custance and Alice Meynell, were also important pioneers of this movement during the *fin-de-siècle*.

The following section on 'Media History' shifts the focus from Victorian literature to research methodology. Its chapters include Andrew M. Stauffer's entry on 'Book History', Karren Bourier's insight into 'Victorian Digital Humanities', and Linda K. Hughes exploration of 'Periodical Studies'. Deborah Lutz's chapter is, in this reviewer's opinion, the most fascinating, as her discussion of material culture provides an invaluable introduction to the study of representations of objects in Victorian literature. This is especially important given the rising interest in 'Thing Theory' within current Victorian Studies, as evinced by

---

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>4</sup>Jessica Straley, 'Children's Literature', p. 58; p. 65.

recent publications such as Andrea Korda's 'Object Lessons in Victorian Education: Text, Object, Image', and Jon Stobart's *The Comforts of Home in Western Europe, 1700-1900*.<sup>5</sup> Lutz engages with scholars such as Bill Brown and Elaine Freedgood in order to examine 'Thing Theory' as a critical method in literary criticism, and argues that textual representations of objects like furnishings, souvenirs, and books prompt the reader to 'wonder what sort of magic, or authentic stance, objects might have'.<sup>6</sup> The following entries in this section by Nicholas Daly, Ian Haywood, and Kate Flint on the topics of popular fiction, print culture, and visual culture are also valuable reference points for researchers interested in the methodological developments of Victorian literature and Victorian literary studies.

The immediately following section on 'Victorian Discourses' includes seven useful chapters that classify theoretical discussions within the field. The first chapter by Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, for example, asserts that 'the nineteenth century has become to seem like a bottomless resource not just for new objects of study, but for new and transformative methods of reading' in literary and scholarly criticism.<sup>7</sup> Other chapters reward the reader with highly informative entries on other schools of thought and ways of interpreting texts. This engagement with theory is highly appreciated, as it marks a departure from previous collections – namely the previously discussed works by Herbert Tucker and Juliet John, but also *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture* edited by Francis O'Gorman in 2010 – that examine Victorian literature and culture, but neglect to acknowledge any theoretical approaches in detail. In Denisoff and Schaffer's collection, Rae Greiner examines Formalism, while Elaine Auyoung explores the development of narrative theory by considering how structuralists like Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Vladimir

---

<sup>5</sup>Andrea Korda, 'Object Lessons in Victorian Education: Text, Object, Image', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 25.2 (2020), pp. 200-222 and Jon Stobart, ed., *The Comforts of Home in Western Europe, 1700-1900* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

<sup>6</sup>Deborah Lutz, 'Material Culture', p. 157.

<sup>7</sup>Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, 'Victorianists and Their Reading', p. 198.

Propp influenced ways of reading text through modes like plot, narrative structure, and semiotics. The following entry by Rebecca N. Mitchell argues that subjective emotions such as empathy, compassion, and understanding help to moralise approaches to Victorian literature, while well-balanced entries by Supriya Rajan, Catherine Gallagher, and Helen Small all consider different themes of economics, historical context, and the question of individual liberty in literature in ways that mirror the cultural, social, and political undercurrents of this period.

The next section, entitled ‘Formulations of Identity’, comprises seven chapters that discuss how theories and approaches associated with issues of identity emerge from, and are used to read, Victorian literature. Schaffer outlines the origins of feminist criticism in Victorian literature, drawing upon germinal works by American feminists like Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Mary Poovey, in order to identify how ‘white middle-class heterosexual female norms’ began to diversify after the introduction of second-wave feminism in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> Martha Stoddard Holmes’s discussion of ‘Disability Studies’ and the sub-fields that were formed within it, such as literary disability studies, and Irene Tucker’s examination of race – amongst entries on established areas such as gender and class to newer developments within animal studies – are richly informative yet concise in their negotiations of alternative identities in Victorian discourse. As such, these chapters seek ‘to explore the Victorian through the eyes of the marginalized and disenfranchised’ by considering the ideological standpoints that shaped Victorian writers and their literary creations.<sup>9</sup>

The penultimate section on ‘Science and Spirit’ explores how scientific developments and religious beliefs informed Victorian thinking. Anne Stiles’s chapter focuses on the

---

<sup>8</sup>Talia Schaffer, ‘Feminism and the Canon’, p. 275.

<sup>9</sup>David Denisoff, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

intersections between cognitive science and literature as a ‘hot topic’ in Victorian Studies.<sup>10</sup> Stiles shows how nineteenth-century pseudoscience – in the form of phrenology and physiognomy – piqued the interest of many Victorian writers, who ‘took part in rich interdisciplinary conversations about psychology and brain function and dabbled in pseudoscientific hobbies’.<sup>11</sup> Other chapters in this section by Richard Menke, Suzanne Keen, Kathy Alexis Psomiades, and Ralph O’Connor each draw upon technological, psychological, anthropological, and geological influences in literature, while the final two entries by Christine Ferguson and Mark Knight examine how religious and spiritual identities were simultaneously shaped and shaken by the scientific developments that stimulated doubts in faith during this period.

The final part of the collection considers fundamental issues in subject formation such as patriarchy and the home, travel, and the environment. This scholarly focus on environmental issues is particularly welcome, as the recent ecocritical turn in Victorian Studies continues to explore the role of the industrial revolution in accelerating and impacting ongoing concerns about climate change.<sup>12</sup> The subtitle ‘Spatiality and Environment’ signals the attention paid to ideas of space and place from both physical and metaphorical perspectives. The section opens with Melissa Valiska Gregory’s account of domesticity. Gregory analyses issues of gender, but she also considers the domestic sphere as an anchor for Victorian perceptions of the family. Gregory exposes the weaknesses of this paradigm, however, as domesticity in literature has been drawn upon ‘as an ideological force to be challenged and subverted’ and also as primary ‘evidence of women’s frustrations with and resistance to dominant patriarchal paradigms’.<sup>13</sup> In an alternative thread, Lynn Voskuil

---

<sup>10</sup>Anne Stiles, ‘Brain Science’, p. 368.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 371.

<sup>12</sup>See, for example, Wendy Parkins, *Victorian Sustainability in Literature and Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018) and Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison, eds., *Victorian Environmental Nightmares* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>13</sup>Melissa Valiska Gregory, ‘Domesticity’, p. 440.

engages with the concept of environment and nature through her methodological focus on ecocriticism, while connections between Victorian literature and geology are tested in Jesse Oak Taylor's chapter on 'Victorians in the Anthropocene'. Moving from the global to the local, Mary Ellis Gibson's discussion of regionalism and Andrea Kaston Tange's chapter on 'Travel Writing' each focus on provincial concerns of the British Empire and a Victorian fascination with tourism and foreign encounters. In particular, Kaston Tange states that the latter is evidenced in the Victorian period through the 'author's rambles in foreign places, diaries and letters, memoirs, and journalistic reports'.<sup>14</sup> Sukanya Banerjee and Tamara S. Wagner's chapters go on to explore the importance of the postcolonial subject and colonialism in Victorian literature and culture, while the section ends with Siobhan Carroll's discussion of the Industrial Revolution and how this historical event impacted the lives of the Victorians.

Overall, *The Routledge Companion to Victorian Literature* is a richly informative text that draws upon the works of leading scholars in order to establish foundations and signal new directions for the study of Victorian literature and culture. The chapters are generous in their exposition of clear examples, and each author offers 'a short list of key critical works addressing their subject' in order to inspire the reader to research the topic further while still remaining highly accessible.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, the collection is a fantastic resource for undergraduates, postgraduates, teachers of Victorian literature, and academic researchers new to the field who seek to learn more about diverse, exciting, and thought-provoking approaches to Victorian literature and culture.

---

<sup>14</sup>Andrea Kaston Tange, 'Travel Writing', p. 473.

<sup>15</sup>Denisoff, 'Introduction', p. 8.