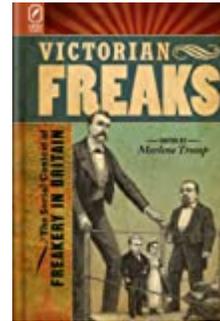




**Marlene Tromp.** *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008. xiii + 328 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-1086-4.



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## Disciplining Victorian Freaks

Since most of the history of Victorian Britain is now taught and written by historicizing literary scholars rather than guild historians, it is worth pondering the differences in how they do it. Though history may be, as Gareth Stedman Jones once put it, "an entirely intellectual operation that takes place in the present and in the head," historians generally subscribe to an ethos that resists the tempting corollary that the past should therefore serve present needs alone.[1] With little overt theorizing we have developed methodologies and rules based on the belief that the past is significantly accessible "on its own terms" to scrupulous research, and that presentism can and should be contained. No other discipline, I believe, shares this ethos. Literary scholars may have converted en masse in the last few decades to what they call historicism and have renounced their traditional disciplinary commitment to canonical masterpieces, but they still adhere to the idea that traditionally justified the canon, that the masterpiece is by definition a work that transcends time and space and can speak directly to us in our own here and now. The timeless masterpiece will al-

ways endure presentism's critical ingenuities and preoccupations. That is its purpose. But what about the past's non-canonical texts?

*Victorian Freaks* is an interesting collection of essays, two by historians, eight by literature scholars, and two by interdisciplinary, or undisciplined, scholars. The difference between the historians and the literature scholars is not particularly striking. The chief qualitative difference is between these ten and the other two, whose pieces want disciplinary rigor. As the collection's subtitle suggests, the literary majority (which includes the editor) are making what for them is a significant effort to keep their subject "in context"—that is, either to resist presentism, a particular temptation where the subject is Victorian freaks, or explicitly to justify it. For a number of literary scholars studying freaks in the past is historical groundwork for a distinctly contemporary preoccupation, that of disability studies. The freak offers one of the earliest and most striking examples of identity construction and its complications. Aided by the dialectic of Michel Foucault and other scholars the freak, once a statistical (and

uncanonical)dust-speck beneath the wheels of History, has become a vital parameter in creating the statistically enormous and hugely un-Real concept of normality. As the theology of cultural constructivism expands and the territory of the body left under the sign of the physical and natural shrinks, the freak becomes—to adapt Claude Levi-Strauss—âgood to think with.â

To the credit of this bookâs contributors they largely avoid the practice of beating up the Victorians for being who they were—that is, not our politically correct selves—a propensity to which devotees of postcolonialism are often prone. The bookâs editor, Marlene Tromp, subscribing to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivakâs claim that âwe must read every Victorian text as a commentary on imperial relations,â (p. 157) discusses the thirty-seven-inch-tall Mohammed Baux and Laloo, an East Indian boy with a parasitic twin embedded in and partially protruding from his abdomen. Ingeniously if somewhat unconvincingly she reads the latter as a metaphor for the relationship between India and Great Britain (and manages also to work in a reference to 9/11). Undeniably many exhibited freaks were of non-Western origin, such as âKrao, the Missing Link,â the subject of the historian Nadja Durbachâs essay. The publicists for this southeast Asian girl covered in hair who was exhibited as âLiving Proof of Darwinâs Theory of the Descent of Manâ emphasized that she was not a freak at all, but âa regular production in the regular order of natureâ and a valuable living lesson in ethnology (p. 139). Heather McHold, the collectionâs other historian, also situates her discussion within the context of Victorian fears that the exhibition of freaks threatened public morals, a concern that she argues led showmen to increasingly emphasize the âhumanity of freaksâ (p. 31). Although the Chinese laborer Hoo Loo, the subject of Meegan Kennedyâs contribution, was not exhibited publicly as a freak, the spectacle of an operation to remove an enormous fifty-six pound tumor from his scrotum drew an unprecedented crowd to the Guyâs Hospital operating theater, where he died from massive blood loss under the knife of a leading surgeon. Kennedy suggests that he was the victim of the surgeonâs misplaced sympathy in pausing during the operation to give him relief from the pain while he continued to bleed. Sympathy is also a central theme in Rebecca Sternâs discussion of Julia Pastrana, the hirsute âBear Woman,â a freak so ambiguously attractive, and profitable, that her corpse was embalmed by her manager-husband after her death in 1860 and continued to be exhibited, clothed and upright, for over a century. Stern discusses Arthur Munbyâs fascinating poem âPastranaâ (1909), a touching meditation by

a man whose unconventional sympathies for unconventional women were carefully concealed beneath a conventional exterior.

A more fortunate recipient than Hoo Loo of medical sympathy was Joseph Merrick, the celebrated âElephant Man.â Christine Ferguson recruits him to challenge the assumption of current disability studies that the marginalized can be liberated by giving them âvoice.â She suggests that the voice Merrick, Englishman though he was, received through his âdiscovererâ Dr. Frederick Treves, was akin to the less than empowering voice British colonial educational policy deigned to confer on its Indian subjects. Another English freak, the 739-pound Daniel Lambert, was not a Victorian at all, but in her essay Joyce Huff discusses the persistence of his memory among Victorians for whom he became a focal point for âfears about the ability to manage consumer desires in a developing commodity cultureâ (p. 39). We are reminded of the iconography of John Bull and an earlier equation of corpulence with national wealth and power (and such are the temptations of presentism that I am reminded of current concern about the obesity of the âaverage Englishmanâ—and woman).

Although Stern suggests convincingly that Wilkie Collins was indebted to Julia Pastrana for *The Woman in White*âs Marian Halcombe, whose flawlessly feminine figure belied her alarming face, only three of the contributors to this collection focus on the treatment of freaks in Victorian fiction, and Wilkie Collins figures largely in two of them. In her aggressively presentist discussion of Collinsâs *The Law and the Lady* (1875), Martha Stoddard Holmes claims that a âsocially responsible readingâ of Miserrimus Dexter, on whom Nature bestowed a handsome epicene face, a fine manly torso, and no legs, âdictates the anachronismâ of calling him âqueerâ (p. 241). Melissa Free also draws upon queer theory in her discussion of Ezra Jennings in Collinsâs *The Moonstone* (1868) and Jenny Wren in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). Both of these essays make the argument that Collins and Dickens employ âqueerâ characters to facilitate the hetero-normative plot resolution of marriage. Both essays make a good case for their resolute anachronism. While Holmes and Free thus stretch the ideas of âfreakishnessâ and âenfreakmentâ to embrace the queer, Kelly Hurleyâs contribution brings the Victorian fascination with mummies under the sign of the freak. âThe Victorian Mummy-Fetish: H. Rider Haggard, Frank Aubrey, and the White Mummyâ attends to two novelists whose works owe their attractiveness for contemporary literary scholars to their vulnerability to post-

colonialism, post-Freudianism, and (if there is such an  
ism) post-Gothicism. And it must be said that after expo-  
sure to discussions like Hurley's it is hard to read such  
novels any other way, whatever Victorian readers might  
have made of them.

Note

[1]. Gareth Stedman Jones, "From Historical Sociol-  
ogy to Theoretical History," *British Journal of Sociology*  
27, no. 3 (1976): 296.

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