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“Ceci n’est pas une Pipe”: Fakes, Forgeries, Replicas, and Copies

The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the Nineteenth Century. Aviva Briefel. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006. 243 pp.

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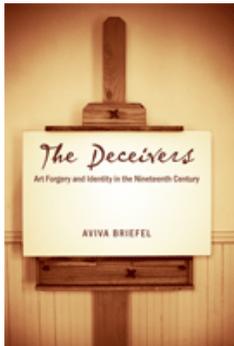
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<1>The title of Magritte’s painting of a pipe asserts that a reproduction is not the same as an original and would have provided an appropriate jacket illustration for Aviva Briefel’s book, which is also concerned with things that fool the eye. However, her deceptive subtitle leads to the expectation that the identities of nineteenth-century painters of questionable Rembrandts, Leonardos, or Van Goghs will be disclosed. Instead there is only passing reference to famous fakes in this book, which focuses primarily on the novels and short stories of Wilkie Collins, Henry James, and Guy du Maupassant, among other authors. Briefel has selected a fascinating fictional cast of nefarious characters, but she aspires to provide more than a lively romp through the devious minds of literary rogues. “Forger” in her lexicon does not exclusively refer to someone who adds a false signature to a genuine work of art or counterfeits documents, but is synonymous with the maker of fakes. Briefel argues that forgers deserve our admiration for conforming to a capitalist bourgeois ideal based on “industriousness, education, and thrift” (20). “Identity” in this context is linked to a broad but vague middle-class model that encompasses the United States, England, and France—one that does not take into account each nation’s economic, political, or cultural differences. Consequently, Briefel ignores the fact that art collectors in Victorian England did not object to the practice of painters replicating their own works of art. It was only with the arrival of modernism’s emphasis on individualism and the rise of the cult of the artist-genius that the unique work of art became prized, first of all in France. Briefel’s selective and spotty reading of art criticism and literary texts leads her to the unconvincing conclusion that her sources “elevated the forger into a model of middle-class identity” (14). Nonetheless, readers of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* will be interested in her more carefully reasoned treatment of gender in her analysis of female copyists and male homosocial and homoerotic networks of connoisseurs and forgers.

<2>In her first chapter, Briefel contends that female copyists were forgers’ imperfect doubles and were excluded from the masculine world of counterfeiting for several plausible reasons: society protected them from the aggressive arena of capitalist exchange at the same time it feared their entry into the public sphere and subsequent empowerment. Still, it was difficult to ignore the ubiquitous female copyists who perched before their easels in plain view of the museum-going public. That their visibility was a contentious issue is demonstrated by the plight of Noémie Nioche in James’s novel, *The American* (1877), who is depicted as fast and loose. Briefel provides ample additional evidence for the social construction of the female artist as dangerously available.

<3>Returning to her central thesis, Briefel takes issue with the recent arguments of Sandor Radnoti and Nick Groom proposing that forgers subverted the capitalist system. Rather, she argues that forgers reinforced free enterprise by confirming bourgeois values. Having said that, she nonetheless claims that they were “removed from the acquisitive aspects of capitalism” because they worked for love not money (26). As evidence, she cites a remark made by the connoisseur Bernard Berenson in which he characterized forgers as “happy-go-lucky” (26). Yet Berenson was not a disinterested observer: he benefitted financially from producing now-contested attributions of Old-Master paintings for the wily dealer Sir Joseph Duveen.

<4>The resemblance between specialists such as Berenson and art forgers is the subject of Chapter Two, “Intimate Detections: Connoisseurs, Forgers, and the Thing between Them.” Clearly fascinated with the emerging science of connoisseurship, Briefel delves into the

anatomically comparative method popularized by Giovanni Morelli, suggesting that it aided the creators of fake works of art by making it easier for them to copy the distinctive physical traits Morelli assigned to each of the Old Masters. This secretive bond between connoisseur and forger based on body parts, “training in art history, a minute attention to details, a sense of discipline, and a knowledge of material culture” provided a fertile breeding ground for homoerotic liaisons (59, 67-68). Drawing on Eve Sedgwick’s theory of triangulated desire in *Between Men* (1985), Briefel asserts that the resulting fakes were construed as seductive females to avoid homosexual panic, elaborating on a point raised in her Introduction: “Both literary and artistic discourses represented the fake object as female in order to mitigate the transgressive implications of the union between forgers and detectors” (14). In the instance of Oscar Wilde’s “Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” however, a woman is replaced by an effeminate young man whose portrait facilitates a homoerotic fantasy. As compelling as this chapter is, the reader should approach Briefel’s interpretation of Collins’ *A Rogue’s Life* (1856) with caution. It is unlikely that Collins, whose father and brother were respected Victorian painters, would seriously have suggested that faking was a model worthy of imitation (53). Similarly, how plausible is it that Sigmund Freud, in his essay on Michelangelo’s *Moses*, concluded that Morelli forged himself?

<5>Shifting gears in her third chapter, Briefel addresses the ethics of restoring and collecting classical works of sculpture as a matter of national pride. She centers her discussion on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* (1860), which she sees as a signal expression of American cultural authority. Hawthorne’s belief that Americans had a moral imperative to rescue and restore neglected works of art laid the groundwork for the current demands of the Greek and Italian governments for the return of artworks from American museums. A subtext of his narrative revolves around the character Miriam, who heedlessly restores ancient treasures without regard to authenticity. Briefel explains that although women were considered incapable of such travesties, Miriam is part Jewish, which accounts for her complicity in the commodification of art.

<6>Racial stereotyping is further explored in Chapter Four, “Real Sons of Abraham: Jewish Art Dealers and the Traffic in Fakes,” where Jewish merchants are construed as scapegoats for the bogus objects on the art market. Race is effectively linked with issues of gender, fakery, and commodification in Briefel’s intriguing reading of George Du Maurier’s novel *Trilby* (1894). In this instance it is a Jewish conductor, Svengali, rather than a dealer who profits from transforming a hapless female artist’s model into a fake diva.

<7>In her final chapter, “Paste and Pearls: Drawing the Boundaries of Female Identity,” Briefel explores the significance of jewelry in relation to female empowerment. She coins the term “bric-a-brac woman” to describe women who combined the wearing of real and fake jewels, claiming they provoked a disturbing visual manifestation of the confusion of female selves” (159, 160). It would have been illuminating if Briefel had engaged with Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra in this section of her book. Maintaining that once doubt and a crisis of faith occurred in the modern period, belief in a verifiable reality was shaken, Baudrillard asserts: “All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation; that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could *exchange* for meaning, and that something could guarantee this exchange—God.”⁽¹⁾ He goes on to argue that when this conviction was challenged, the result was an endless stream of copies lacking reference to a certifiable original. The concept of simulacra offers the opportunity for a deeper analysis of why the “bric-a-brac woman” was perceived as a socially defiant hybrid who invited male punishment, as in George Sala’s short story, “Mrs. Mellor’s Diamonds” (1866). Women who refused to perpetuate the illusion of the real by sporting fake jewels were a threat to the free market system and the world of genteel appearances. The same could be said about the opera singer in the film *Gaslight* (1944), whom Briefel also characterizes as a “bric-a-brac woman” who is murdered for her deception. This dramatic Hollywood moment drives the author’s point home; unfortunately, she tries the reader’s credulity by insisting that the singer’s victimized niece was a forger because she fakes her madness in her final scene with her husband.

<8>Uneven but provocative, *The Deceivers* is nevertheless an important contribution to the scholarship on gender studies. Even if some of the conclusions seem forced, Briefel has collected a significant literary corpus on forgery and raises interesting questions about the relationship between originals and fakes, reality and illusion, and mimesis and deception that invite further investigation.

Endnotes

(1) Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984) 256. (△)

