

**Pigmies in Piccadilly**

*Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain*. Edited by Marlene Tromp. Foreword by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008. 328 pp.

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<1> Oscar Wilde would not have been able to deride the sentimentality of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, published in 1841 (“One must have a heart of stone to read of the death of Little Nell without laughing”), were the novel not saturated with the language and machinery of Victorian freak culture. Haunted and pursued through the narrative by the evil and lecherous Quilp, the innocent heroine Nell encounters one sideshow eccentric after another on her long journey away from the curiosity shop, her home; midway through the narrative, she even becomes something of a sideshow eccentric herself. The “inventive genius” of Mrs. Jarley—she of the traveling waxworks caravan—discovers just how much Nell excites the attention of crowds and swiftly moves to capitalize on the impression, ensconcing the child in the waxworks exhibition room to serve both as tour guide and as an attraction herself. As Dickens explains it,

The beauty of the child, coupled with her gentle and timid bearing, produced quite a sensation in the little country place. The Brigand, heretofore a source of exclusive interest in the streets, became a mere secondary consideration, and to be important only as a part of the show of which she was the chief attraction. Grown-up folks began to be interested in the bright-eyed girl, and some score of little boys fell desperately in love, and constantly left inclosures of nuts and apples, directed in small text, at the wax-work door.<sup>(1)</sup>

In this novel, as in the wider world Dickens represents, beauty and innocence are rare, exotic, and produce sensation. Nell’s innocence — as Wilde perceived — is wholly out of proportion to the world that surrounds her and thus is rendered monstrous. Nell is as much, maybe more, of a freak than even the dwarf Quilp; it is Nell who uncannily attracts the interest and attention of all who meet her, and it is Nell who must learn to handle those who would stage-manage her.

<2> *The Old Curiosity Shop* is not among the handful of Dickens novels mentioned in passing in the fascinating collection of essays contained within *Victorian Freaks*, yet in its capacity to capture not only the ways difference becomes exoticized but also the vexed dynamics involved in the display, circulation, and management of the freak, it might well have occupied centre stage

— for these are the issues that underscore Marlene Tromp’s volume. Coming as it does twelve years after Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s edited collection, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996), and some twenty years after Robert Bogdan’s *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (1988), Tromp’s volume seems almost freakily familiar scholarly territory, many of its reference points — P. T. Barnum, Tom Thumb, the “Elephant Man,” and Julia Pastrana (the “Bear Woman”) — so well-known as to require little or no contextual explanation. Resisting the temptation to rehearse established and truthfully tired arguments that register the freak as embodiment of social discrimination, a “disempowered disabled subject,” in Christopher Smit’s formulation (286), contributors like Smit seek instead to conjure up more nuanced accounts of the freak’s agency and of the complex relationship between freaks and their managers or between freaks and the audiences that directed their awe-struck gazes their way.

<3> Particularly compelling in this regard is Joyce L. Huff’s well-written account of the sometimes passive aggressive posture of “That Wonderful and Extraordinary Heavy Man,” Daniel Lambert, who purportedly challenged one visitor to his Piccadilly apartments by refusing to answer his query about the cost of his enormous coat. Lambert’s tart response was, pardon the pun, priceless: “If you think it proper to make me a present of a new coat, you will then know exactly what it costs” (49). Not many of the stories embedded in this volume provide readers with such vicarious satisfaction, though. Meegan Kennedy’s analysis of the medical “curiosity” denominated by the press as “Poor Hoo Loo” uncovers disturbing variation in the accounts of this Chinese man’s relation to the medical authorities who oversaw his care during the fatally flawed surgery to excise an extraordinarily large tumor in his scrotum. It is evident that he suffered greatly, but were his anguished calls properly translated as evidence of “extraordinary stoicism” or were they unmet demands to exert control over his body? In another compelling and delightfully readable essay titled “Our Bear Women, Ourselves: Affiliating with Julia Pastrana,” Rebecca Stern focuses less on Pastrana’s apparently successful career as “the Bear Woman, the Baboon Lady, and the Ugliest Woman in the World” than on the circulation of her body, and identity, after she died, was embalmed, and became the portable property of her manager-husband. According to Stern, “this career continued into the 1970s, when she toured in the United States with the traveling Million Dollar Midways”! Issues of compliance, connected as they are to the freak’s agency and will, are yet more vexed when applied to the exhibition of animals. In his provocative conclusion to “White Wings and Six-Legged Muttons,” a study of the interface between human narrative and animal performance in the period, Timothy Neil writes, “The spectacle of a performing dog pushing a pram containing a dressed cat is perhaps an unpalatable icon. In spite of this, our modern sensibility of the nonhuman, our assumption of the entire natural world as our totemic right, is imperial and self-aggrandizing” (71).

<4> Darwinian science, with its emphasis on common ancestry and species proximity, provides a fascinating backdrop to the spectacle of animal performance in Victorian England. Yet Neil’s chapter is just one of several that grapple with the animal/human divide. One of Tromp’s subjects in an intriguing study of Indian performers is Lucia Zarate, a petite Mexican woman described on a “pitch card” as “rather like a monkey”; other freak-performers who were both racially other and described in animalistic terms in her study include “The African Lion-Faced Lady, Madame Howard” and “The Spotted Indian from Kingston, Jamaica” (159-60), and she notes that dwarves in particular were speculated to be “a potentially ‘prehistoric race’” (160).

Christine Ferguson casts new light on the old story of Joseph Merrick by exploring issues of language and enfranchisement; thanks to the evolutionary hypothesis of Darwin, the possession of speech came to trump the possession of a soul as the primary marker of humanity. She finds in Dr. Frederick Treves' famous account of "The Elephant Man" a narrative of animality that relies on dubious assumptions of verbal impoverishment. Of Treves she writes, "His own project might be read as an attempt to restore evolutionary development to an anthropocentric course, presenting Merrick not as man-turning-into-animal but as animal-turning-into-man through the ministrations of love, cleanliness, and conversation" (121). Darwinian science plays an even more pronounced part in the "explanation" and marketing of "Krao," a young girl from Indochina — as studied by Nadja Durbach in "The Missing Link and the Hairy Belle: Krao and the Victorian Discourses of Evolution, Imperialism, and Primitive Sexuality." Durbach focuses on the machinations of G. A. Farini, the Canadian man who "unveiled" Krao as his "latest discovery" and trumpeted her as "a perfect specimen of the step between man and monkey" (138). Post-Darwinian science provides ballast to the Victorian fascination with the mummy-fetish, the subject of an essay by Kelly Hurley. A recognizable motif of late-century imperial Gothic fiction, the mummy — according to Hurley — exposes and challenges the boundaries of what constitutes the human. She situates the mummy within an array of "phantasmatic liminals" that include "the vampires, shape- and sex-shifting entities, post-Darwinian species hybrids, devolutionary or otherwise transformative bodies that cannot hold their human shape" (183).

<5> Many of the essays in *Victorian Freaks* either explore outright or at least rely upon notions of the animal/human divide and, in doing so, make a real, lasting contribution to scholarship, taking the field in a new, exciting direction. (As a side note, it's a bit worrisome not to find the theme included in the index, and it makes me wonder why it flew below the radar screen of the editor or indexer.) Some of the ways the collection seeks more forthrightly to Make It New are, paradoxically, less successful. Garland-Thomson makes much of the British context in her preface, "Freakery Unfurled," and in an introductory chapter titled "Toward Situating the Victorian Freak," Tromp and Karyn Valerius maintain that the volume's essays "speak to the tensions in British self-definition between consumer desire and material self-control" (13). However, Heather McHold's essay, "Even as You and I: Freak Shows and Lay Discourse on Spectacular Deformity," was the only contribution really to make a sustained attempt to follow through on that dimension of study. McHold observes that the handbills, posters, and other texts central to freak-show culture "reveal the expansion of middle-class ideologies and the British Evangelical tradition into one of the most unstable sectors of working-class society" (22); she concludes that "for the deformed on exhibit in Victorian England, the intellectual connection between respectability, behavior, and personal possessions was essential" (30). Tromp's essay, "Empire and the Indian Freak," deserves credit as well for bringing into view the distinctly British context in which "the enfreaked Indian becomes a metonymy of English-Indian relations" (167).

<6> On a first read-through, I thought this volume disappointed (if ever so slightly!) in not really making good on Garland-Thomson's claim that it accords "full humanity to the people who performed as freaks by shifting from a social constructivist understanding of freakery to a rigorous materialist analysis" (x). While not quarreling with the rationale behind such a methodological or interpretive shift, I questioned whether we necessarily come away sensing that

“full humanity” of the featured freaks has in fact been restored, or uncovered, or in Garland-Thomson’s terms, “enfleshed” as “particular people in particular lives at particular moments in particular places” (xi). What kind of information — biographical or other — I wondered, would actually suffice to pull off that feat? It seems to me that *Victorian Freaks* humanizes and vivifies in an entirely different, but perhaps equally progressive way — that is, by bringing to the forefront the engagement of the contributors with their subject matter. How appropriate, then, that the cover image for the volume — an illustration titled “The Pigmies in Piccadilly: Lucia Zarate and General Mite, with the Exhibitor” — is credited as having come “from the editor’s private collection.” In a similar vein, Stern’s essay is both exemplary and yet representative in its opening account of first “meeting” Julia Pastrana “in a box” during summer research a decade or more ago. The closing section of this wonderful essay explores the dynamics of her response to Pastrana and offers a sophisticated interpretation of the idea of affiliation. Smit, too, frames his study of the photographs of Charles Eisenmann and the late Victorian freak-performer around views of himself looking at the original prints. His personal experiences render his claims for a collaborative aesthetic all the more intriguing (if not completely convincing).

<7> Many of the contributors to this volume evidently journeyed to the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera in Oxford to access materials. If the archive conjures up images of musty enclosed space and fragile material with a precarious hold on history, this volume does much to counter that impression, as a spirit of progressive critique — of wanting to find in this past the tools to live a better present — infuses essay after essay. Even those less concerned with the archives and more focused on rereading the freak figure in Victorian fiction (as in Martha Stoddard Holmes’ “Queering the Marriage Plot: Wilkie Collins’s *The Law and the Lady*” and Melissa Free’s “Freaks that Matter: The Dolls’ Dressmaker, the Doctor’s Assistant, and the Limits of Difference”) develop new ways to read the period’s fiction so that, in Stoddard Holmes’ words, “bodies and desires ... are viable subject positions rather than curiosities” (256). In this way especially, *Victorian Freaks* takes an old curiosity shop and makes it new.

#### Endnotes

(1) Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. Angus Easson (New York: Penguin Books, 1985) 286.(^)