

Laura Monrós-Gaspar. 2015. *Victorian Classical Burlesques: A Critical Anthology*. London and New York: Bloomsbury. x + 298 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4725-3786-7.

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Traditional criticism has often held prejudices towards nineteenth-century popular drama. Oblivious to the popular appeal of Victorian comedy and farce and their inherent potential for revealing the intricate links in the triangular relations between dramatists, society and spectators, scholars have until very recently been reticent to seriously consider Victorian burlesque, an immensely popular form at the time but all too often ignored in academic criticism. Indeed, Alan Fischler has recently dismissed Victorian burlesque as a “parasitic form” which “degenerated into a riot of execrable puns, with little other point” (Fischler 2014, 375). However, in the wake of recent works which provide more positive insights into nineteenth-century popular theatre, such as Richard W. Schoch’s *Victorian Theatrical Burlesques* (2003) and Jeffrey. H. Richards’s *The Golden Age of Pantomime: Slapstick, Spectacle and Subversion in Victorian England* (2015), Laura Monrós-Gaspar’s *Victorian Classical Burlesques: A Critical Anthology* (2015) proves a significant contribution to performance history within Victorian studies.¹

In the context of nineteenth-century theatre, the term burlesque applies to a form of parodic drama which, by means of occasional music, witty punning, topical references and metatheatrical conventions, provided travesties of well-known stories.² The scope of the burlesque playwright’s parodic pen was wide and all-encompassing, including takes on Shakespeare, the legends of King Arthur, Victorian melodrama, Italian opera and, as Monrós-Gaspar illustrates, classical antiquity. In the first pages of the introductory section to this anthology, significantly entitled “Why Classical Burlesque?” Monrós-Gaspar illustrates the extent to which the Graeco-Roman world

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² Concerning the definition and features of Victorian burlesque, the term “travesty” applies whenever an elevated or classical theme, work or character is vulgarised or portrayed in a low manner (Schoch 2003, xiii). Obviously the term often acquired a literal sense since cross-dressing, as Monrós-Gaspar highlights (23), was a recurrent staple in mid-Victorian parodic drama (Rowell 1985, 70; Booth [1991] 1995, 130; Hall 1999, 348).

permeated all kinds of cultural manifestations in mid-Victorian times. In a vivid and picturesque style, the author invites the reader to imagine a passer-by strolling around mid-Victorian London, marvelling at the Greek and Roman scenes in the paintings in the National Gallery, the manufactured products with mythological topics at the Great Exhibition, the *tableaux vivants* enacted in the Ancient Hall of Rome on Great Windmill Street or the heathen characters engraved in the portico to Covent Garden theatre (3-6). With this imaginary promenade, the author provides a meaningful backdrop through which to explain the infiltration of classical culture into Victorian burlesque, drawing on critical works which foreground the pervasiveness of classical antiquity in Victorian England (Richards 2009; Vance 1997; Goldhill 2011). Following George Rowell (1985, 66-67), Monrós-Gaspar additionally identifies the 1737 Licensing Act, which forbade the inclusion of political matters on the stage, as a rationale explaining Victorian dramatists' change of tack to mock classical works (8).

From the point of view of classical reception in Victorian burlesque, a point of debate among scholars is the degree of *knowingness* of classical mythology in the average spectator. Considering that Victorian popular theatre was enjoyed by audiences from all walks of life, we may assume that there must have been dissimilarities between individuals in their competence to fully comprehend the mythological references in the plays: formal education in classical literature would reasonably seem to be a necessary condition for a mid-Victorian theatregoer to fully appreciate the classical allusions in Victorian burlesques. Nevertheless, Edith Hall tellingly points out that "the dozens of theatrical entertainments on Graeco-Roman themes produced in the mid-nineteenth century [...] show that knowledge of Classics was more widely disseminated across all social strata than has been recognised" (1999, 340). In tune with Hall, Monrós-Gaspar refers to late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century popular theatrical forms, such as the puppet show, ballad operas, fairground entertainment and tavern singing, which staged mythological scenes in their performances and which might have instructed uneducated spectators in recognising the classical hypotexts in Victorian classical burlesques (7-9). Conversely, the author speculates that topical references to everyday culture might have been more appealing for less erudite audiences than the classical referents (12).

Monrós-Gaspar's edition of the plays anthologised in this volume, comprising Edward L. Blanchard's *Antigone Travestie* (1845), Robert Brough's *Medea; or, the Best of Mothers, with a Brute of a Husband* (1856) and Francis Talfourd's *Alcestis, the Original Strong-Minded Woman* (1850) and *Electra in a New Electric Light* (1859), evinces the difficulties which often arise for an anthologist, whose task involves not simply selecting texts, but also complex textual archaeology and the making of annotations and other paratextual documents to the works anthologised. This task proves an even harder challenge to the literary scholar working on Victorian popular drama: original manuscripts of Victorian burlesques are scarce, and today only survive in acting editions in the British Library, originally delivered to the Lord Chamberlain for licensing (Schoch 2003, xii), or in rare

volumes published at the time such as Thomas Hailes Lacy's acting editions from the 1860s (Hall 1999, 340). As Monrós-Gaspar discloses in her introduction, her textual work on the plays in this volume has consisted in collating the plays surviving in the Lord Chamberlain's Plays collection of manuscripts with their respective versions in Lacy's edition, excepting Blanchard's *Antigone*, of which no printed version was ever published (39). The author's excavation into the textual history of the plays and the resulting collations, commentaries and annotations testify to the complexity of her work and her philological verve.

As the four plays in the volume under review reveal, the changing patterns of society which characterised the mid-Victorian period provided a background for the Victorian world of popular spectacle. In turn, Victorian burlesques responded to mid-nineteenth-century social changes in the form of topical references, anachronistic allusions and social commentary. Monrós-Gaspar follows Jacky Bratton's foundational concept of "intertheatricality" (2003) in order to get to grips with the interrelated semiotics at play between playwrights, works and spectators in the performance history of the plays.³ A significant instance of the "intertheatricalities" at work in Victorian burlesque is the author's analysis of Edward L. Blanchard's *Antigone*, which is read against mid-Victorian financial culture, particularly the passing of the Bank Charter Act in 1844 and the swindle of the Independent and West Middlesex Insurance Company (21), a well-known financial fraud in nineteenth-century Britain indirectly alluded to by Blanchard (68). Among other topicalities which reveal Victorian classical burlesque as a mirror for mid-Victorian culture are anachronistic allusions to emigration to Australia because of bankruptcy (83), the London Metropolitan Force or Peelers (109, 159), child education (150-151) and Victorian technological advances such as the telegraph (165), the steam vessel (239) or cabs and railways (69-70).

Nevertheless, the volume's analytical focus on the plays' "intertheatricalities" is particularly placed on nineteenth-century perceptions of women, marriage and Victorian negotiations of gender, as is already anticipated on the cover of the volume, which features Ruth Herbert, a well-known Victorian stage actress at the time, as Diana in a production of William Brough's *Endymion* (1860) at the St. James's Theatre (Adams [1891] 2013, 61-62). As the author has argued elsewhere (Monrós-Gaspar 2011, 205-209), female heroines in mid-Victorian comic theatre drew attention to unorthodox models of behaviour which disclosed the social headway of women and anticipated fin-de-siècle feminism. This is the case with *Antigone*, *Alcestis*, *Medea* and *Electra*, whose female voices underpin pivotal concerns related to the

³ Jacky Bratton devises the concept of "intertheatricality" to illustrate the transactions operating in theatre reception. Bratton's intertheatrical reading into theatre history "seeks to articulate the mesh of connections between all kinds of theatre texts, and between texts and their users. It posits that all entertainments [...] are more or less interdependent. They are uttered in a language, shared by successive generations, which includes not only speech and the systems of the stage—scenery, costume, lighting and so forth—but also genres, conventions and, very importantly, memory" (Bratton 2003, 37-38).

Woman Question in the mid-nineteenth century, such as debates on divorce or the rights of married women, and other issues which shocked Victorian audiences, such as adultery or infanticide. Victorian controversies on marriage feature prominently in Brough's *Medea* and Talfourd's *Alcestis*, both of which display the inequality of Victorian women within marriage. Monrós-Gaspar persuasively reads these plays on the grounds of notorious divorce cases covered by the press at the time and the Matrimonial Causes Act in 1857, which extended the accessibility of divorce to middle classes and women in particular (28-29). The author's insight into Brough's *Medea* and Talfourd's *Alcestis* within the backdrop of the mid-Victorian debates and press coverage of divorce legislation reveals the influence of Victorian journalism on the reception of the plays. Additionally, *Alcestis* and *Electra* are referred to by Francis Talfourd as "strong-minded women," a Victorian archetype of female resoluteness and intellectuality which, in light of Monrós-Gaspar's reading, served both as a prototype for the late-Victorian New Woman (33-36) and as an antithesis to the Victorian ideal female or the "angel-in-the-house," represented by Chrysothemis in Talfourd's *Electra* (219).

In closing, the publication of this anthology entails a noteworthy input into the recent critical re-evaluation of Victorian popular drama. The volume excels at effectively outlining how a throbbing classical culture found its way through Victorian comic theatre, revealing the appropriation of classical plots and characters as an effective tool to comment on the socio-political concerns of the time. In addition, the author's insight into the eponymous protagonists of the plays reveals fresh perspectives on female subjectivities and the politics of gender relations in the mid-Victorian period. The versatility of the volume makes it a compelling work for Victorianists working on classical reception, performance history or gender studies.

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