

Vile Bodies:
Review of Kathryn Hughes, *Victorians Undone:*
Tales of the Flesh in the Age of Decorum

Robert Finnigan
(Nottingham Trent University, England, UK)

Kathryn Hughes, *Victorians Undone:*
Tales of the Flesh in the Age of Decorum
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Kathryn Hughes opens her new study, *Victorians Undone: Tales of the Flesh in the Age of Decorum* (2018) by declaring that her book is:

[A]n attempt to reverse the situation whereby biography, which passes as ‘the writing of a life’ has become indifferent to the vital signs of life – to breath, movement, touch and taste. Dressed in its Sunday best, the book might be described as presenting the ‘material turn’ in humanities, part of the new wave of interest among historians and literary scholars in objects that they can feel and hold, rather than simply chase through text after text towards an ever-receding horizon. In its workday incarnation [it] is an experiment to see what new stories emerge when you use biography – which, after all, is embodied history – to put mouths, bellies and beards back into the nineteenth century. (p. xiv)

By placing her study in the context of material culture, Hughes capitalises on current trends in Victorian and neo-Victorian studies. These trends include explorations of “nostalgia, fetishism, the trace and spectrality, adaptation and historiographic metafiction”, which, according to Nadine

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Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss, are based on “either visual [...] or material aspects” (2011: 1). Similarly, by fleshing out discussions on the unconformable or rather-impolite aspects and functions of the body, Hughes’s focus on materiality and life-writing provides a series of rich and metaphorical portraits of her subjects, which add to works such as *Victorian Literature and Culture: Writing Materiality* (2016) by Sabine Schülting and *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture* (2016), edited by Juliet John.

Undertaking what can loosely be described as a ‘thick description’, Hughes draws on an extensive range of literary examples, biographies and archival materials, which highlight the considerable amount of research she has conducted. However, Hughes also falls victim to this methodology. Her concerted attention to detail, the dense and unrelenting amount of information in every paragraph, coupled with the many digressions and meanderings, mean that the subject of her study becomes unfocused, tiresome and often a challenge for all but dedicated readers and scholars.

Throughout her study, Hughes inadvertently, or rather subtly, critiques and criticises ITV’s *Victoria* (2016-present) for its denial and refusal to acknowledge many of the Queen’s and her Court’s eccentricities like their strange behaviours, their slavish adherence to particular beliefs, rituals, and respectabilities. Moreover, Hughes suggests they were not bloodless insects, to be pinned for posterity to an inky piece of velvet, but farting, belching, squashy creatures with varicose veins and acid reflux. Yet, *Victoria* shies away from matters of flesh and blood, issues of hormones, genes, hygiene, peoples’ aches and pains and the altogether human aspect of their bodies. In this way, Hughes’s discussion compliments recent critical debates concerning biofiction, such as Marie-Luise Kohlke’s, ‘Neo-Victorian Biofiction and the Special/Spectral Case of Barbara Chase-Ribinyd’s *Hottentot Venus* (2013), Jose M. Yebra’s ‘Neo-Victorian Biofiction and Trauma Poetics in Colm Toibin’s *The Master* (2013) and Ann Heilmann’s *Neo/Victorian Biographilia and James Miranda Barry* (2018), and does so by viewing the body as a transhistorical trope that connects Victorian and contemporary anxieties concerning ‘the body beautiful’.

Hughes’s study is divided into five chapters; chapter one, ‘Lady Flora’s Belly’, explores Queen Victoria’s “obsess[ion] with other women’s figures” (p. xiv), and the suspiciously swollen belly of her mother’s lady-in-

waiting, Lady Flora Hastings. In this chapter, Hughes makes a strong case that the Queen and her confidante, Baroness Lehzen, started the rumour that Lady Flora was pregnant; a rumour that led to a brutal examination, in terms of medical science and public opinion, of Lady Flora, months before she died of cancer. In chapter five, 'Sweet Fanny Adams', Hughes turns her attention to the murder of eight-year-old Fanny Adams, whose body parts were found scattered across a Hampshire hopfield in 1867 and the subsequent trial of Frederick Baker. Both chapters are filled with a rich amount of detail, yet the quasi-sensationalist nature of the subject and the manner in which Hughes treats them, may be uncomfortable for many contemporary readers. This discomfort is stressed in the final pages of this study, as Hughes notes that the expression 'Fanny Adams or Sweet Fanny Adams', is not a swear word but does, in fact, relate to something infinitely more sinister. Mindful of the story of the little victim's body parts, sailors at Deptford frequently called the revolting tinned mutton they were served, 'Fanny Adams'. However, if these sailors were served nothing at all, they would describe their meal as being 'Sweet Fanny Adams – or Sweet FA.

Chapter three, 'George Eliot's Hand', and chapter four, 'Fanny Cornforth's Mouth', stand out as highlights. In chapter three, Hughes challenges the popular, and widely disseminated, myth concerning Eliot's particularly large right hand which she purportedly acquired as the result of her youth spent "crushing the curd" (p. 157) on her father's dairy farm. It is such myths, Hughes asserts, that were popular among early biographers and were employed as a method of inaccurately reinforcing negative portraits of Eliot, the century's most famous female intellectual, as a working-class country girl who almost, miraculously, transcended her limited origins. Moreover, this myth also hints at the apparent loose sexual morals of dairymaids. This could conveniently be linked to Eliot's own unconventional lifestyle, not only in living openly with Georges Henry Lewes, an already married man but also at the age of sixty, following Georges Lewes' death, marrying John Cross, two decades her junior. Similarly, in chapter four, Hughes focuses on the pouting lips of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's model and mistress, Fanny Cornforth. Hughes questions why, given Cornforth's importance in Rossetti's life and art, this plump and garrulous woman was largely excluded from the biographies of Rossetti and the history of the Pre-Raphaelites in favour of Elizabeth Siddell and Jane Morris? This, in turn, leads into a discussion concerning prostitution and

kept women, on largeness and slimness, corsets and rational dress, sex and the perceived dichotomy of women as Madonna or whore in the Victorian period and carrying over into our own. In this respect, Hughes foregrounds the contemporary and neo-Victorian preoccupation with issues relating to the female body, perceived restrictive gender norms and stereotypes as seen in representations in print and visual cultures. For instance, ‘fallen women’ feature prominently in neo-Victorian works, from Sarah Woodruff in John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) to Sugar in Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) and Vanessa Ives and Brona Croft/Lily in John Logan’s *Penny Dreadful* television series (2014-2016). However, there is little new material added to these debates; instead, Hughes extends current discussions relating to the “reinforce[ment of] neo-Victorian dimorphism through the body and clothing” (Danahay 2016: 143).

In chapter two, ‘Charles Darwin’s Beard’, readers are introduced to Darwin’s medical history, his eczema, flatulence and sensitive stomach. As Hughes remarks, “[t]he young naturalist threw up nonstop during his first seven weeks while sailing on the *Beagle*” and was “a martyr to wind, so severe that he was always obliged to leave dinner early in order to belch and fart his way to comfort” (p. 129). Discussing the rise of Muscular Christianity, the Crimean War and Julia Margaret Cameron’s propensity for photographing writers as sages or prophets, Hughes dissects Darwin’s changing appearance, from his clean-shaven face with mutton chop sideboards to his adoption of his soft and white beard. Fashion had begun to change in the 1840s, “when sideboards began creeping further down men’s faces, broadening out to the point where they became fully-fledged sidewhiskers” (p. 76). This trend continued to evolve in the 1850s with ‘the Newgate frill or chinstrap’, to full beards appearing in the 1860s. This change in fashion was echoed in the periodical press, medical and scientific pamphlets as many adopted a pro-beard perspective, and extolled the positive value of growing a beard. Placing this change in context, Hughes notes that because of facial eczema, the decades long perception that clean-shaven men were gentleman and civilised, and due to the overly critical opinions of Susan and Caroline Darwin, by the time Darwin grew his beard in 1862, he was already behind the times. In reference to Darwin, Hughes humorously quotes Charles Dickens’s joke that “some of his friends welcomed his beard because it meant they saw less of him” (p. 131). By focusing on this aspect of Darwin’s life, Hughes illustrates convincingly that

matters of appearance and fashion were not limited to women or femininity but were equally connected to the spirit, mind and intellectualism of the age. Although she acknowledges that the growth of a beard is taken as a sign of masculinity, and its greying or whitening was viewed as a sign of physical and intellectual maturity, Hughes does not consider how the same colour changes were viewed in respect to women. Concluding her discussion on Darwin, Hughes describes how he would pull and tug at his beard, and how it grew whiter and whiter over the course of his remaining years. Moreover, Hughes ends with the caveat that there is a good chance “his beard may yet unlock one of the great biographical puzzles of the nineteenth century”, (p. 150); namely, what ailed Darwin in his final years.

The positives of this study are many; Hughes’s choice of bodily materials will both intrigue and repulse many readers; the subjects she explores are thoroughly researched, and the breadth of materials she has considered is evident on every page. The comparisons Hughes makes between Victorian and contemporary life, while minor, are effortlessly made and will delight readers with a taste for such matters. Likewise, the coupling of textual materials with varied and interesting photographs and other images adds to the appeal of this volume. Despite these positives, there are a number of negatives that overshadow the otherwise insightful discussions. Hughes introduction is brief but mostly filled with exposition, and there is little in the way of a discussion of critical materials relating to the areas she has chosen to focus on. For example, there is no mention of *Victorian Turns, NeoVictorian Returns: Essays on Fiction and Culture* (2009) edited by Penny Gay and Judith Johnston, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (2010), edited by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn or more recent works such as *Neo-Victorian Dickens* (2012; special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*). Hughes’s study may have benefitted from a more detailed discussion of *Victoria*, as well as the inclusion of discussions of other TV shows and films like BBC’s *Ripper Street* (2012-2016) and Sky Atlantic/ Showtime’s *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) in order to provide a more balanced perspective on the extent to which embodiment is foregrounded, dramatized or disavowed in neo-Victorian texts. Likewise, it might have been revealing to explore the possible generic similarities and differences in this regard between works of biography, biofiction, and fiction. These issues aside, scholars with general and wide-reaching interests in neo-Victorian adaptations and appropriations of

Victorian gender, materialist constructs, textual and visual cultures, will find this study an informative read.

Bibliography

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