Tammy Lai-Ming Ho, *Neo-Victorian Cannibalism: A Theory of Contemporary Adaptations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 150 pp. eBook £39.99. ISBN 978-3-030-02559-5

Reviewed by **Matthew Crofts**

As a Palgrave Pivot publication, *Neo-Victorian Cannibalism: A Theory of Contemporary Adaptations* takes advantage of some of the advertised benefits of the format. At 150 pages, a short introduction and conclusion and three core chapters, it is by no means an exhaustive treatment of the subject. Instead, it is a densely packed, succinct exploration of the mutually "cannibalistic," often ambivalent relationship between the neo-Victorian and the literary "originals." Ho's uses of texts are an excellent example of this approach. Ho illustrates their core argument skilfully, with carefully chosen examples – making a deliberate attempt to not only include both classic and contemporary texts, oft-studied and neglected, but also to speak of writers from different nationalities.

Chapter 1, "Introduction: Neo-Victorian Cannibalism," despite its equal billing as a full chapter, acts as a short primer for the themes that follow as well as setting out the key argument. "Cannibalism" here is, of course, not literal – it is literary. The chapters are structured so that each shows the "cannibalism of a specific element of the Victorian," (1) which Ho terms as "aggressive appropriation of pre-existing texts." (2) Ho argues, convincingly, that this is a distinctive feature

of neo-Victorian fiction – its violent and conflicted relationship with its Victorian predecessors, and states that there has been no substantial study that specifically examines this cannibalism. The use of cannibalism as a term is explained, becoming clearer with the examples in the second chapter, but in essence it is the habit of the neo-Victorian of not just taking in the 'original' but also destroying it, feeding on it as it does so.

Likely a quirk of the pivot form, each chapter seems designed to stand alone – to the extent that each chapter repeats the keywords and has its own abstract at the start. This inevitably leads to some repetition of language and ideas, but given the popularity of each chapter's main text, consultation of just one chapter by students seems likely. It would make more sense if the pricing structure made purchasing just one chapter a more reasonable option – currently the full book is listed at £40 for the eBook with an individual chapter costing a full £20.

The second chapter, "Contesting (Post-)colonialism: *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Three Neo-Victorian Rejoinders," immediately showcases many of the strengths that make this book so easy to recommend: it exhibits a commanding, well-referenced grasp of the field complete with substantial footnotes. It also features generous sub-headings throughout that signpost its key ideas. This chapter's addressing of post-colonialism is a vital early talking point that clearly articulates Ho's core argument, making it clear how important writing back can be when done intelligently. *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is used as an example of how this was done well, with the analysis of it being the highlight of this chapter, before being used as a jumping-off point for "Three Neo-Victorian Rejoinders": Lin Haire-Sargeant's *H: The Story of Heathcliff's Journey Back to Wuthering Heights* (1992), D. M. Thomas' *Charlotte: The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* (2000) and Emma Tennant's *Adèle: Jane Eyre's Hidden Story* (2002). These texts are used as an example of how neo-Victorian texts remain dominated by the 'original': here that means prioritising fidelity to *Jane Eyre* over engaging with the timelier ideas of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Chapter 3, "Dickens the Cannibal Cannibalised," focuses on Gaynor Arnold's *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008). Where the previous chapter discussed post-colonialism as a reason to scrutinise neo-Victorian ethical duty to the past, here biofiction performs that same function. Ho notes that "beyond simply focusing on the salacious elements of a Victorian person's biography, neo-Victorian writers exaggerate them for sensational effect" (58), as well as commenting on the commercial motivations behind this approach. Through the analysis of Arnold's fictionalised Dickens, as well as Dickens' own value to readers, Ho shows how "cannibalising" different factors can lead to the creation of a new, more vigorous, identity.

"Stoker and Neo-*Draculas*" seems a little out of place at first compared to the two highly-canonical authors that form the basis of the prior two chapters, but this is put to effective use. Ho writes that "*Dracula* has been viewed as a popular novel for much of its history" which has a key bearing on "its afterlife and Stoker's authority" (102). It is the surprising treatment of Stoker that makes this chapter such a great third example to the prior two, as a compelling case is built to show

how "neo-Victorian writers are akin to vampires who drain Stoker of his authorial vitality and suck their literary ancestor's life-blood to maintain their own existence" (96). There is some fascinating analysis of Leslie S. Klinger's *The New Annotated Dracula* (2009) and Tom Holland's *Supping with Panthers* (1996), but it is Dacre Stoker and Ian Holt's 'official sequel' *Dracula the Undead* (2009) that provides the best example of how these texts undermine Stoker's status. As Ho argues, Stoker's characterisation as not the author of *Dracula* (as well as the text's contradictions to the Victorian original) "seems to be at odds with Dacre Stoker's expressed desire to 'give both Bram and Dracula back their dignity'" (118).

Chapter 5, "Coda: Victorian Memes", acts as a short summary and conclusion. It clearly restates the main argument from throughout the work, as well as bringing together the examples from the chapters to create an overall impression. It is another skilful touch that would make this volume such an accessible resource for students.

This is a highly recommended work for anyone interested in the legacy of Victorian fiction or the neo-Victorian mode itself. For its brevity and its depth alone, this would be an easy recommendation, but with its three distinct and clear studies it becomes a highly accessible and clear resource that belongs on the reading list for any module that confronts the neo-Victorian. Not only are its own arguments well supported and compelling, but it surveys the field well and raises key issues common across the genre. Ho's compelling readings of varied, some neglected, texts make this an important source for anyone working on neo-Victorian responses to *Jane Eyre*, Dickens and Stoker, as well as any writer or work that has had a similar 'cannibalistic' treatment by later writers.