



**Doppelgängers and Impostors:
Flashman's Neo-Victorian Adventures in Zenda**

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Abstract

Neo-Victorian fiction has come to be understood as postmodern metafiction which re-evaluates the legacies of the nineteenth century, but scholarship tends to discuss the popular in neo-Victorianism mostly where steampunk is concerned. While this anachronistic subgenre may illustrate our relationship with the Victorian age on a wide scale, other, earlier popular fictions have paved the way in crucial ways and have much to offer. This article considers how George MacDonald Fraser's satirical novel *Royal Flash* (1970) actively engages with and re-works Anthony Hope's classic Victorian popular novel *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894) through an engaging parody of Victorian ideals of chivalrous masculinity and the adventure genre. As a neo-Victorian doppelgänger, cad and coward Harry Flashman insightfully caricatures historical events and texts alike, actualising history as textual and therefore open to re-interpretation. Through its humorous metatextual play with ideals and identities, the novel re-contextualises the Victorian era for new readerships and illustrates how a popular neo-Victorian mode may enhance and enrich our understanding of our relationship with the Victorian past.

Keywords

neo-Victorian; steampunk; *Prisoner of Zenda*; Flashman Papers; *Royal Flash*; popular fiction; masculinity; chivalry; parody

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Helena Esser

“I have seen many of the Elphbergs,” said he, “and I have seen you. And, happen what may, you have borne yourself as a wise king and a brave man; ay, and you have proved as courteous a gentleman and as gallant a lover as any that have been of the House.”

(Hope [1894] 1994: 87)

So I would end here, in a god-forsaken miserable German ruin, trying to rescue a man I'd never met—I, who wouldn't stir a finger to rescue my own grandmother.

(McDonald Fraser [1975] 1999: 216)

Where do we find the popular in neo-Victorian fiction and what can we learn from how it engages with imaginaries of the nineteenth century, and with Victorian popular fictions in particular? Scholars of the latter know how mass-marketed fiction read by a wide audience may supplement, enrich, contextualise, challenge, and even complicate our understanding of the familiar canon(s) and shine a new light on the complex history behind them. How then are neo-Victorian popular fictions placed in the context of neo-Victorian fiction in general? How do they react to, perpetuate, re-present, or re-evaluate widely consumed and widely known Victorian texts and their tropes in order to engage a new, present-day, and just as wide audience?

Neo-Victorian popular fiction is uniquely positioned to give us insight into how Victorian legacies are transmitted through and kept alive within a collective memory. After all, its ability to be legible, understood, and engaging depends on its activation of a widely shared knowledge about the Victorian age, a historical setting that must be continuously invoked, re-contextualised, and re-evaluated for its modern audience. This article contextualises neo-Victorian popular fiction within the wider field of neo-Victorian and steampunk fiction and examines how it re-configures a Victorian imaginary by comparing Anthony Hope's 1894 adventure tale *The Prisoner of Zenda* and its 1970 re-telling by George MacDonald Fraser, *Royal Flash*. I want to pay particular attention to how both texts conceptualise and re-imagine masculine ideals within the Victorian adventure narrative.

The Neo-Victorian

Neo-Victorian fiction, according to Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's seminal definition, must “in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis). From the earliest, neo-Victorianism has been theorised as a postmodern mode sensitive to Hayden White's conceptualisation of *Metahistory* (1973), and as putting into

play “the fluidity of a historical record that is perpetually open to reinterpretation and therefore constantly assuming different permutations” (Shiller, 1997: 540, see also Gutleben, 2001, Joyce, 2007). A prime example of what Linda Hutcheon has termed “historiographic metafiction,” “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon 1988: 5), neo-Victorian literature self-consciously interrogates our historical knowledge and re-evaluates the legacies of the past by re-centring historical narratives within our present-day perspective. This means that, while the Victorian era has been re-examined continuously from the moment it ended, for example in Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918) (cf. Joyce 2007; Kohlke 2008), the neo-Victorian has come to be collectively understood as a product of a postmodernism characterised by Frederic Jameson through parody, pastiche, and “the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past” (Jameson, 1991: 18).

Neo-Victorian studies, as an academic field formed by the founding of the *Neo-Victorian Studies* journal in 2008 and one which has grown steadily in the wake of key publications at the beginning of the last decade (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010; Mitchell, 2010, Hadley, 2010), has since centred on the idea that neo-Victorianism is inherently “progressive (politically, culturally, aesthetically, literarily)” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 6). Concerned with revisionist impulses towards social justice and the emancipation of historically marginalised groups, neo-Victorian fiction tends to interrogate social, economic, ecological and political genealogies, and employs postmodern strategies in order to “unsettle, deconstruct, decentre, queer or trouble such seemingly adamant categories as subjectivity, history, race, gender, sexuality or class, in an effort to reveal their purported ‘origins’ as narratively constructed” (Carroll 2010: 182). However, in its desire to establish itself as a critically viable academic field and fend off sceptical allegations of nostalgia, neo-Victorian scholarship certainly prioritised what Samantha Carroll called “stylistic pyrotechnics” (Carroll 2010: 184) over other potential influences such as popular culture (cf. Cox 2017). The canon initially established by the field identified Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) as early outliers of neo-Victorian fiction, and reflects a blossoming of neo-Victorian literature in the wake of the neoliberal 1980s, with its focus on literary heavy-weights such as A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990), Graham Swift’s *Ever After* (1992), Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996), Sarah Water’s *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002), and Michael Faber’s *Crimson Petal and the White* (2002).

Margaret Thatcher infamously championed a reactionary rhetoric of “Victorian Values,” “a talisman for lost stabilities” which ignored Victorian characteristics such as the widespread disenfranchisement of the socially marginalised or systemic colonial violence in favour of a quaint ideal of heteronormative, patriarchal nuclear families and imagined diligence, while her policies strategically dismantled the legacies of the Victorian welfare state and turned a blind eye towards 1980s events such as LGBTQA+ activism, the AIDS crisis, or the plight of the miners (cf. Samuel 1992: 9). Ironically, the ruin of the mining industry also meant the collapse of those infrastructures which had so lastingly shaped the nineteenth century itself. Meanwhile, Reagan’s America was shaped by, if not a return to “Victorian Values,” then equally momentous neoliberal politics while the “Victorian” industrial paradigm in the form of the Rust Belt declined and gave way to the nascent computer age. It is here that early forms of steampunk first rear their heads, although as yet unconnected to the neo-Victorian.

British neo-Victorianism, exemplified by neo-Victorian Gothic in the works of Alan Moore or Kim Newman, seems to react to and is indeed contextualised and read within and against Thatcher's revisionism. Luisa Hadley's study, *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative* (2010), notably features an image of Queen Victoria wearing Thatcher's face. Against this backdrop, the Victorian age assumes the place of a both familiar and uncanny double of the present, a formative era whose repercussions or echoes may still be felt today as historical traumas that demand working through (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010, 2012). Neo-Victorian texts are configured as attempts to address the legacy of social disenfranchisement, exploitation, and rebellion, or of racial violence and colonial wars, and may, for example, be read within a framework of cycles of Gothic repetition, psychogeographical excavations, or as symptoms of a spectral modernity intrinsically haunted by a resurfacing past.

That such a "Victorian" past is indeed continually re-surfacing in familiar as well as unexpected ways is illustrated by the popularity of steampunk or the Victorian (re-)adaptations in popular media, from Guy Ritchie's Sherlock Holmes films (2009 and 2011), BBC's *Ripper Street* (2012-2016), Showtime's *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016), or TNT's *The Alienist* (2018), to video games like *Assassins Creed: Syndicate* (2015). Other, bleaker echoes include recent geopolitical crises in Iraq, Afghanistan, or the Crimea, frequent reminders that many patriarchal power structures are still very much in place, as well as the resurfacing xenophobia which, next to certain new, dubious revisionist histories of the age, have accompanied the Brexit movement.

To examine and challenge our relationship with the Victorians is as imperative as ever. But in its endeavour to examine neo-Victorianism's role in that relationship, scholarship has certainly played favourites. While its scope is wide, some authors, themes, and texts - Sarah Waters or Peter Ackroyd come to mind - have received much scholarly attention, whereas others have not. Some widely-read publications, such as the adventures of Elizabeth Peters' intrepid Egyptologist Amelia Peabody (1975-2010, and 2017), Peter Lovesey's trilogy about Bertie, Prince of Wales, as a detective (1987-1993, with a new edition published in 2019), or Boris Akunin's best-selling series about Erast Fandorin in Tsarist Russia (1998- present, in English since 2003) have not received much attention despite their popularity and commercial success. George MacDonald Fraser's *Flashman Papers* (1969-2005), a series of eleven novels and one collection of short stories chronicling the adventures of British soldier, rake, and cowardly cad Harry Flashman between 1839 and 1894, certainly also deserve more attention than they have received so far (cf. Higdon 1984; Crofts 2015).

The Flashman novels are presented as long-lost manuscripts edited by MacDonald Fraser in the present, and as such masquerade as alternative, but 'authentic' historical documents through a clever synthesis of historiography and re-telling of popular fiction that has fooled numerous reviewers (Higdon 1984: 86). They purport to be the 'real' story behind Victorian fiction such as Hope's *Prisoner of Zenda* and set up a dialogue writing back to or against the original text (cf. Higdon): Flashman hints that he has told story of *Royal Flash* only once before, to his lawyer, "young Hawkins" - a nod towards Anthony Hope and his profession - who then "used it for the stuff of one of his romances, which sells very well, I'm told" (288). Flashman himself originates in Thomas Hughes' 1857 popular novel for boys, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* where the infamous coward and rake acts as the hero's antagonist. As hero of his own story, Flashman is a curious take on the unreliable narrator, because we readers may always rely on him to be upfront about his cowardly thoughts, bouts of fear, and petty grudges. It is the outer

story world, which is constantly fooled by his play-acting, while we alone are privy to ‘the truth,’ which is that his perceived heroic manliness is merely a fragile and changeable pose which Flashman exploits for his own ends. His observant commentary of others veers between caricature and nuanced psychological insight, because as a coward and bully, he suspects the worst in others and sees their motives behind their own performance. As such, he is perfectly placed to undermine the glamorous portrayals of gentleman heroes in Victorian fiction and historiography by hinting that the real forces behind great events are not selfless and responsible dedication to a greater good, but instead mundane things such as ambition, greed, self-delusion, naivety, or pure coincidence. The chivalrous gentleman, a concept central to Hope’s portrait of masculinity, is re-presented as hardly more than an affectation in an age of hubris and chance.

Indeed, *Royal Flash* purports to illustrate how “great events are decided by trifles,” such as “someone’s having a belly-ache, or not sleeping well, or a sailor getting drunk, or some aristocratic harlot wagging her backside.” (9). This conceit plays with, if not satirises, a concept of history as the actions of great men, and instead explores, with a winking eye, New Historicist notions of history as textual and open for re-interpretation. In this particular instance, Flashman claims that his “being rude to a certain foreigner altered the course of European history” (9). This exploration of chance and speculation in the historical pattern affiliates Flashman’s concept of history with a particular development of neo-Victorian fiction that I shall turn to next, steampunk, a development where history and fiction similarly intertwine and are imagined as following hidden or alternative pathways.

Steampunk: Counterfactual Genealogies

The term “steampunk” was a term half-jokingly coined by K.W. Jeter in 1987 in an attempt to describe a new kind of “gonzo-historical” fiction written by him, James Blaylock, and Tim Powers (Gross, 2007: 57). This Californian trio had exchanged their usual science fiction for a number of fun, time-travel-infused adventures set in a Victorian London where fish people hide in the East End, automata come to life, and beggars and thieves wage a secret war in the underworld. With the exception of Michael Moorcock’s *Warlord of the Air* (1971), no other novels had as yet mixed science fiction and Victorian aesthetics in such manner, and so Jeter’s choice of term was coined in reference to cyberpunk, a radical subgenre of sci-fi which Jameson considered the “supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself” (1991: 419, original emphasis) and which had emerged recently with Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) and William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984). Whereas Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s own, seminal steampunk novel *The Difference Engine* (1991) is indeed characterised by postmodern strategies and cyberpunk sensibilities, early steampunk as well as that of the second wave which emerged around 2007 is largely characterised, in Mike Perschon’s words, as “primarily good entertainment” (2016: 174). As such, it does not share many characteristics of neo-Victorian literature as it emerges in 1990s Britain, even though they have since converged.

Steampunk, which Perschon defines as a tripartite, cross-media aesthetic comprised to varying degrees of the three components neo- or hyper-Victorianism, retrofuturism, and technofantasy (2018: 5), is a whimsical, speculative, and experimental play with the Victorian past motivated by a fascination with its outdated industrial paradigm and quaint aesthetics. As a vibrant subculture expressed through DIY, upcycling and cosplay, it articulates a radical,

quasi-anarchic Arts-and-Crafts spirit that resists the streamlined, impersonal designs of the digital age and the mass market through a re-discovery of tactility, adventure, and individuation. The steampunk aesthetic itself is inherently countercultural and doing ideological work whether it is aware of it or not, and this applies to steampunk fiction as well. Whereas steampunk fiction creatively collapses timelines and re-imagines a Victorian age infused with fantastical speculation, it is also designed for a wide readership and is usually a cross-genre mix of the crime or spy novel, the adventure, and/or the romance, and often also pays homage to well-known Victorian popular fiction, for example by Dickens, Wilde, Stoker, or Stevenson. Its anarchic re-configuration of a hyper-Victorian collage assembled from history and fiction alike is by necessity driven by the ideological undercurrents that underlie our historical vantage point, and so may illustrate them in unique and striking ways for a wide audience (cf. De-Bruin-Molé 2019).

Steampunk, while then starting on a different note to what academia considers now the standards of neo-Victorian fiction, has ended up as the established iteration of the “popular” in neo-Victorian fiction across the world. What I want to argue here is that its formulation and subsequent discussion allows us to read anew the earlier ‘The Flashman Papers’. Reading the earlier through the lens of the later enables us to appreciate how steampunk’s key elements were already implicit in the earliest neo-Victorian fiction. Not least steampunk’s extravagantly visible and (unlike, say, *Wide Sargasso Sea* or *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*) playful rewritings of Victorian fiction and counterfactual history were already in use well over a decade before its formulation in a different continent and context. *Royal Flash* is a fast-paced adventure in its own right, but its ironic commentary and its re-arranging of historical events engage with its most obvious palimpsest, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, in ways that emphasise its knowing theatrical artificiality, just as steampunk will do almost two decades later.

Doppelgängers: Zenda

Let us first consider Anthony Hope Hawkins’ 1894 adventure novel *The Prisoner of Zenda* and how it configures its setting in order to imagine its Victorian hero. In *Zenda*, the idle bachelor Rudolf Rassendyll decides to exchange London’s Park Lane for the fictional kingdom of Ruritania, which is found a train ride away from Dresden in Germany. His ‘Elphberg countenance,’ inherited from an ancestor’s dalliance with a Ruritanian prince, soon gets him embroiled in a swashbuckling adventure when the future king’s brother, ‘Black Michael,’ drugs the king in an attempt to sabotage the coronation. In order to foil Black Michael’s scheme, the king’s loyal friends Fritz von Tarlenheim and Colonel Sapt persuade Rudolf to impersonate the real king for the event. Their antagonist, however, then abducts the real king and imprisons him in his Castle at Zenda, forcing Rudolf to keep up the charade and wage a secret war with Michael’s dastardly henchmen, Detchard, de Gautet, Bersonin, and the debonair ruffian Rupert Hentzau. Michael’s mistress Antoinette de Mauban, who had travelled with Rudolf from Paris, acts as a secret ally from within the castle. Torn between his honour as an English gentleman and his love for the Princess Flavia, future Queen of Ruritania, Rudolf must ride many horses, fight many duels and engage in many feats of derring-do until all is well again in Ruritania.

An immediate best-seller which inspired numerous stage adaptations, imitators, and films, the novel initiated the genre of the Ruritanian romance and “Cardboard Kingdoms” (Wallace 1987) whose cultural impact into the present Nicholas Daly chronicles in his recent work (Daly 2020). The success and lasting imaginative power of the Ruritanian setting is directly connected to the fact that it was geared towards a specific type of adventure narrative, which in turn could accommodate a specific type of hero. While the small, German-speaking kingdom must be in the vicinity of Bohemia, Vesna Goldsworthy (1998) also locates it within a contemporary imaginary of the Balkans, which fascinated contemporary readers with their mixture of palace intrigues among rulers who belonged to “mostly German dynasties” and remnants of Ottoman culture, thereby giving an impression of “European ‘Otherness’” (Goldsworthy 1998: 48). Ruritania, as Daly notes, is indeed “only very mildly exotic” and offers “fairy-tale and daydream qualities” with its crumbling castles, royal pageantry, picturesque forests and Catholic ceremony (Daly 2020: 4). Whereas the real Germany in the 1890s was no longer an obligingly non-threatening loose assortment of small, feudal principalities and kingdoms which could be imagined through enchanted forests and spa towns, but instead a unified state which, under Prussian military and economic leadership, had won three consecutive wars with old European powers (cf. Melican 2014), Ruritania chooses to return to an anachronistic, picturesque, pre-1871 imaginary. Indeed, the Oxford World’s Classic’s edition of the novel chooses as its cover and, by inference, stand-in for Zenda Castle, a painting of Neuschwanstein Castle, the most famous of Ludwig II of Bavaria’s “fairy-tale” creations and itself heavily imbued with imaginaries of romance.

A “country apart in time as well as in space” and “sequestered from the tide of progress”, Ruritania offers a heterotopic setting in which industrialisation has had no purchase, and the rural dominates: “pastoral Ruritania cherishes not just court pageantry but the old-fashioned virtues of duty and honour” (Daly, 2020: 4). Here, swashbuckling adventure which, in prominent works such as Alexandre Dumas’ *The Three Musketeers* (1848) or Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1882), had previously been relegated to a historical past, can be safely transported into a quasi-present as what Daly terms a “cosy adventure”, because “however bloody the fighting, however serpentine the skulduggery, it will never spill over into international politics” (Daly 2020: 5). Providing escapism from the modern, industrialised world, Ruritania synthesises familiar imagery of royal pomp, dashing cavalry, or deference to social hierarchies which would have been legible across Europe, without importing the more troublesome aspects of modern life. These aspects were not least an integral part of Britain’s own “second self” as a “semi-feudal kingdom of tradition and spectacle” (Daly 2020: 6), but they likewise connected it to courts across Europe: Queen Victoria was not only grandmother to the German Kaiser Wilhelm II, but also to the future George V and Tsar Nicholas II, a pair of cousins who - coincidentally - closely resembled one another. As such, Ruritania provided British readers with “their own distorted and minituarized reflection” as a “heterotopia in which everything is different and yet the same” (Daly 2020: 6). That this can easily slide into the kind of counterfactual history familiar to us today from steampunk will be all too evident, where a parallel geography allows for a parallel “different yet the same” timeline after the fashion of Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* (1872).

This rendered Ruritania legible and exciting, and made it an imagined place designed to accommodate narratives of swashbuckling adventure “in which real heroes and heroines can still flourish” (Daly 2020: 4). Hope’s English hero may move, as Mark Girouard notes, “straight from

modern clubland into a world of castles, kings, beautiful women, and feudal loyalties” (1981: 265) and here explore a particular ideal of Englishness and heroic masculinity, namely that of the chivalrous gentleman. In keeping with the broader cultural revival and re-imagining of medieval ideals as illustrated through Tennyson or the Pre-Raphaelites, the chivalrous ideal was a fantasy of knightly gallantry:

A chivalrous gentleman was brave, straightforward and honourable, loyal to his monarch, country and friends, unfailingly true to his word, ready to take issue with anyone he saw ill-treating a woman, a child, or an animal. He was a natural leader of men, and others unhesitatingly followed his lead. He was fearless in war and on the hunting field and excelled at all manly sports; but, however tough with the tough, he was invariably gentle to the weak; above all he was always tender, respectful and courteous to women, regardless of their rank. [...] He was an honourable opponent and a good loser, he played games for the pleasure of playing, not to win. He never boasted. He was not interested in money. He was an ardent and faithful lover, but hated coarse talk, especially about women.

(Girouard 1981: 260)

This code was instilled in young men in public schools, on playing fields, and in boys’ literature, with sportsmanship serving to bring out “such knightly qualities as self-control, courtesy, and honour” and others such as “loyalty and fellowship, [which] were important for the educated gentleman” (Watkins 1994: xii). The virtues of fair play and “Christian manliness” originated in and were epitomised by Thomas Hughes’ 1857 popular novel for boys, *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (Bristow 1991: 53). The novel engendered “a new variety of morally responsible and physically strong manliness” which cultivated, on the one hand, “the virtues of the proper gentleman (fair play, team spirit, decorum)” and embraced, “on the other, the values of competition, independence, and a wilful strength of mind” (Bristow 1991: 54, 58). Its ideals would, as Bristow and Girouard have chronicled, inform the imperial adventures penned by George Alfred Henty, Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, or Arthur Conan Doyle, and so remain at the core of British masculinity throughout the *fin de siècle* and well into the First World War. They were, however, equally instrumental at home: the chivalrous gentleman according to so Girouard, “had been deliberately created [...] [as] a new model for the ruling classes” (1981: 260). A conscious reaction to “the increase of democracy,” “the worship of money, and the placing of expediency before principle,” the chivalrous ideal carried within itself the aim “to produce a ruling class which deserved to rule because it possessed the moral qualities necessary to rulers. Gentlemen were to run the country because they were morally superior” (1981: 260-1). As such, chivalrous masculinity and the adventure genre played crucial roles in maintaining or indeed re-constructing a national identity.

In the adventure novel, the hero is initiated into a sphere of action and clear moral choices. As Phillip Mallett explains:

Past and future yield in importance to the present; what counts is the necessary and immediate action, isolated from the wider context of life. [...] [One] of the pleasures offered by the adventure story is the chance to explore, unseen and unembarrassed, fantasies of a more powerful self, regardless of whether they are achievable in reality.

(Mallett 2015: 153-4)

In seemingly disengaging this fantasy of capability and action from the wider context of real life, adventure fiction responded to the increasingly pluralistic and introspective society and culture

of the 1890s. Counter-cultural currents such as aestheticism, decadence, and the New Woman challenged gender ideals and complicated identifications of and with a shared masculine ideal:

In the real world outside the novel, masculine identity was inseparable from the totality of gender and social relations, and where these were contradictory and changeable, so too was the idea of what constituted the manly; manliness could never be fully attained, grasped once and for all.

(Mallett 2015: 153-4)

The endeavour of New Imperialism demanded a clear, actionable masculine identity that seemed increasingly difficult to locate. The male heroes of popular adventure narratives represented, as Bristow argues, “a tremendous lack” in the real world, but in the myth created by these novels, “all the problematic elements of male identity could, momentarily, cohere” (Bristow 1991: 225-6). A counterfactual setting like Ruritania could “transform the moral and ideological ambiguities of the real world into clear choices and social and political certainties” (Watkins, 1994: xvi). Here, a timeless, universally attainable heroic masculinity lies within grasp and can be fully realised in a safe space.

Rudolf, in his “cozy adventure” in Ruritania, halfway between home and a land of derring-do, certainly displays all the qualities of this chivalrous gentleman. His conduct as king is marked by a sense of duty, respect, and responsibility towards a state of which, after all, he is not a citizen, but as narrator he also constantly emphasises how “wild” and “desperate” every part of the affair actually is, thereby always reminding us of the *sang froid* and bravado required. Through their courageous dedication to a cause that is greater than the individual and so stands in opposition to Black Michael and his minions’ selfish desires for power, Rudolf, Fritz, and Sapt grow into a band of brothers. Indeed, at the end of the adventure, Fritz and Sapt bare their heads and bow as one would to a real king and declare that, ““Heaven doesn’t always make the right men kings!”” (Hope [1894] 1994: 165).

The real king, a jovial and hard-drinking man – and, one suspects, somewhat inspired by the notorious Prince of Wales and his set – is set up as Rudolf’s double because he lacks the moral responsibility and self-control that Rudolf quite naturally assumes, even though he has hitherto delighted in his role as idle bachelor: “Indeed, Rassendyll at the beginning of the text is a rebel against this idea of masculine action and self-assertion” (Kestner 2010: 154-5). Now, however, he is prepared to give his life to restore the king and to give his last in trying to defeat the arguably most intriguing villain of the story, Rupert Hentzau - “reckless and vary, graceful and graceless, handsome, debonair, vile, and unconquered” (Hope [1894] 1994: 149). In him Rudolf, “the most gallant gentleman that lives” (150), finds another kind of *doppelgänger*, namely one who, like Black Michael to the king, constitutes a negative of himself. Rupert is a dashing ruffian who cheats, betrays, and flirts without shame or honour, but does so “*à la mode* and stylishly” (95). Where Rudolf is upright and courageous, Rupert is insolent and audacious, but always charming. Whether he breaks the rules of duelling or turns on his allies because he desires de Mauban, Rupert is characterised by an easy grace and almost innocent obliviousness of his own dastardly qualities. His allegiance is only to himself and the excitement of playing the game, and as such he both parodies and emphasises Rudolf’s chivalry.

Rassendyll’s conduct towards angelic, proud, and pure Princess Flavia, his feminine counterpart, also illustrates his chivalry. Although Rudolf falls in love with her and finds himself sorely tempted by his position, theirs is by necessity a chivalrous, pure love characterised by

self-denial and honour. We see this when she declares that, although she loves him, “Honour binds a woman, too, Rudolf. My honour lies in being true to my country and my House.” In an epitome of a courtly love scene, Rudolf calls her “My queen and my beauty!” and she replies: “My lover and true knight!” (163-4). In fact, the marriage date and the threat of dishonouring the Princess act as a ticking clock for Rudolf’s increasingly bold attempt to save the real king from the impenetrable fortress of Zenda. The heroes’ Hail Mary mission attests to Rudolf’s dedication to the chivalrous ideal and indeed provides numerous opportunities for swashbuckling duels which, as a “theatre of manliness in which masculinity is performed through feats of arms” (Daly, 2020: 26), call back to the codes of chivalry and the knightly class. *Zenda* is embedded within and implements the core ideas surrounding a Victorian ideal of chivalrous masculinity concisely and evocatively, and therefore constitutes a potent sounding board for neo-Victorian re-imaginings.

Impostors: Flashman

Originating in a text so instrumental in creating the “manly schoolboy hero, who is physically strong and morally incorruptible” (Bristow, 1991: 55) and playing into the ideal of ‘muscular Christianity,’ *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, Harry Flashman stands out as the ideal figure through which to re-imagine the Victorian notions of chivalrous masculinity presented in *Zenda*. Flashman is ironic commentary on “the muscular-Christian public school system” because he “stands against its general attitudes and worldview” (Crofts 2015: 32). In MacDonald Fraser’s novels, he has graduated from the vicious, mean, drunken bully of Hughes’ *Tom Brown* to a rude, selfish, misogynistic *bon vivant* who bemoans the “the end of the great days of the bucks and blades”, the “smothering [of] the old wild ways” and the advent of “the Victorian age, when respectability was the thing” because it might interfere with his “idling, gaming, drinking, and raking about town” (MacDonald Fraser [1970] 1999: 11).

From the outset, Flashman is shown at variance with the dominant ideals of his age, creating, between his outward performance of conformity and heroism and his private deconstruction of those ideals, a space in which “Victorian society’s own created illusion” about “of their military, their virtues, their sobriety, chastity, Christianity and honesty” are skilfully undermined (Crofts 2015: 35). For example, the beginning of *Royal Flash* finds the anti-hero escaping a police raid on a gambling den and brothel and happily throwing friend and foe alike to the wolves for his own advantage: “Anyone who is ass enough to sacrifice himself for Flashy deserves all he gets” (MacDonald Fraser [1970] 1999: 16). This first impression immediately subverts the alleged sportsmanlike camaraderie and honour of the Victorian ‘clubland’ set. It complicates the notion of a period unified by a single ideology by showing the continuation of Regency values: time, as in steampunk, is not linear or single but runs in parallel lines. However, it is the defining feature of MacDonald Fraser’s novels that the cowardly anti-hero frequently disguises his moral failings under a pretence of courage, duty, and honour: the alternative timeline must fictionalise itself because to do otherwise “would cost [Flashman] his reputation and social standing” (Crofts 2015: 34). Indeed, his performance is so convincing that he is constantly celebrated as a hero and gentleman, accruing more and more fame. In fact, his feats of heroism and derring-do, be they during the Afghan war, the Indian Mutiny, the Crimean War, or

in the American West, are always cowardly attempts to shirk his duty and get himself out of trouble (or into someone's bed), misread by his contemporaries through their timeline to create a fiction about him he benefits from.

Royal Flash's parody of *Zenda* exemplifies this clash of temporalities and fictions. The novel imagines the 'real' history behind Hope's story by re-situating events within the context of the Schleswig-Holstein affair, Danish-German political relations, and the 1848 revolution and, in line with neo-Victorianism's assembly of a dense meta-historical collage, adding Otto von Bismarck, Franz Liszt, Richard Wagner, and Lola Montez to the mix. Germany's pre-unification feudal kingdoms potently evoke a "Ruritanian" setting that is satirised through a series of events oscillating between the absurd and the sinister. Flashman becomes embroiled in these by hiding in the carriage of Lady Elizabeth Rosanna James, who an attentive reader will identify as the adventuress Lola Montez (1821-1861). This spontaneous act of cowardice simultaneously incurs the wrath of a strait-laced and fierce young German by the name of Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) and ignites a turbulent affair with the Lady which ends in a violent falling out: Flashman tires of the fact that Lola is not one of the "softer women who understand that it's *my* pleasure that counts" (MacDonald Fraser [1970] 1999: 24); she is enraged, he strikes her, she comes at him "like a wildcat, clawing and screaming" (25). In a petty act of revenge, Flashman sabotages her career on the London stage as a 'Spanish dancer' and, in a re-telling of real events, arranges for her to be outed and booed from the theatre. Far from the chivalrous reverence of Rudolf Rassendyll, Flashman usually objectifies women as "piece", "tarts", "minx" and so on, but calls them "ladies" to their faces (12-13). He here enacts the persona of the gentleman which is wholly incongruous with his actions or thoughts, and again shows the clash of Regency and Victorian values and times.

While Rudolf, too, is play-acting and performing in *Zenda*, his chivalry is presented as genuine, while Flashman's is purely farcical. His purposefully politically incorrect misogyny identifies him as a philandering cad who has no use for the concept of consent. This, too, is a deliberate undermining of the chivalrous ideal and certainly a result of re-imagining the Victorian age from the perspective of the era of second-wave feminism (the 1960s-1980s), from which Flashman's status quo must read as a patriarchal wilderness. Flashman's sexism, however, is defied here and there by complex female characters themselves, and Lola Montez is one of them. Portrayed as passionate, temperamental, and imperious, but also beautiful, courageous, and proud, she continuously draws Flashman to her with something, as the 'editor' notes, akin to respect (294). In this we see a clash of not just two but three times: Regency, Victorian and the 1960s: the times and values of the character, of the setting, and of writing.

As the meticulously researched and re-presented historical take on *Zenda's* Antoinette de Mauban (cf. Higdon 1984), Lola's invitation of Flashman to Munich in 1847 is what entangles him in the novel's central plot. Flashman is cleverly grafted onto the real historical setting in which Montez has become the mistress of Ludwig I of Bavaria and commands a private guard of students. The novel's mimetic reconstruction of history here serves to legitimise its claim to authenticity in the face of Flashman's more outrageous escapades, as, for example, when he is blackmailed with his own indecent conduct by the novel's version of Rupert Hentzau, Rudi von Starnberg, a "cool, jaunty gentleman", "cocksure" and nonchalant (78-9). Rudi, too, serves as a double of the (anti-)hero, but in a somewhat different way:

They are rare, but they do exist, and you can only call them adventurers. Rudi was one; it was the excitement, the mischief, that he lived for, more than the reward; the game, not the prize. Mad as hatters, mark you, and dangerous as sharks—they are not to be judged by the standards of yellow-bellies like me.

(MacDonald Fraser [1970] 1999: 233)

Rudi is dastardly, has no respect for women and will readily betray his allies. In that, he resembles both Rupert and Flashman, but his debonair daredevilry and nonchalant bravado also set him at odds with the selfish, cowardly, and quite ungallant hero, who answers Rudi's call to adventure by panicking and knocking him unconscious with a wine bottle.

Still, only Flashman can assume a special part in a scheme set out by Bismarck. "Coward and rascal that I've always been, I have two talents, for foreign tongues and horseflesh" (31) comments Flashman, exhibiting similar talents to Rudolf in *Zenda*. The scheme, too, is somewhat similar: At Bismarck's ancestral home in Schönhausen, our anti-hero is trained by Rudi, Bersonin and de Gautet ("Bismarck's beauties" (119)), doubles of the henchmen from of *Zenda*, to assume the role of the Danish prince consort of Strackenz, a strategically important (but fictional) kingdom between Germany and Denmark. Prior to his marriage to the Duchess Irma, he has contracted "Cupid's measles" (114), a sexually transmitted disease. This jibe at the realities behind Victorian sex and gender, which had been highlighted in 1966 by Steven Marcus's famous *The Other Victorians*, again undermines ideals of gallantry and is in keeping with the more laconic tone of a 1960s novel. No selfless chivalry for the greater good here, but instead Bismarck's meticulous plot to solve the Schleswig-Holstein question in a way that forwards his long-term plan to unite Germany and curb the "spread of liberal thought [...] before it breeds revolution proper" (111). The imaginary Ruritania (here Strackenz), and the re-imagined person of Bismarck are grafted onto the real historical trajectory of German politics, with allusions to the liberal *Vormärz* and its failed revolution as well as foreshadowing the Second Schleswig War between Prussia and Denmark in 1864. MacDonald Fraser uses the 'Iron Chancellor's' reputation as a ruthless but efficient politician to portray his character at the beginning of his career as equally conservative and unrelenting. Whereas this constitutes an interesting mixture of fiction and fact, Flashman's reactions serve to satirise both Hope's swashbuckling intertext and the newly imagined scheme presented to him when he calls Bismarck "a raving lunatic" and the plan the "maddest, most ridiculous" "grotesque fairy-tale" (116-117).

This is also the case with Duchess Irma, the novel's version of Princess Flavia. Presented as young, haughty, with a "hard, cold loveliness," "pale and pure and perfect," and "chilly as mist in a cemetery" (162-3), she is a chaste Victorian feminine ideal carried to the extreme. Her cold reserve is deconstructed when, after the coronation, she rages against a cameo by a bearded socialist with flashing eyes, whom she calls a "Revolutionary upstart" (174) and whom readers may easily identify as Karl Marx. Moreover, after Flashman's less than passable conduct during their wedding night, an episode which served as Rudolf's motivating catastrophe but is placed here front and centre, the "imperious little piece" (175) becomes, in his words, "as randy as a monkey" (183). Irma, again recalling characters in Marcus's *Other Victorians*, is an irreverent parody of Victorian gender ideals. MacDonald Fraser uses her to reflect the series' larger moral theme of how a hidden, private truth may serve to deconstruct the romanticised, hypocritical exterior performance.

Such obscured truths also come to light on plot level when, in an unexpected twist on *Zenda's doppelgänger* story, de Gautet attempts to kill Flashman while overlooking the Jotunschlucht, a picturesque gorge. Flashman survives by ducking away “with the instinct of pure panic”, screaming “No! No!”, and then tackling de Gautet, “smashing blindly with my fists, knees, and anything else, trying to beat him into the ground” (188). What begins with a hardly stylish tone – “In a novel”, Flashman comments, “murders are not committed so” (188) – escalates further into a parody of a fight. Our anti-hero, “in the grip of mortal fear” and “roaring at the top of my voice” (189) knocks his attacker out, runs away, then turns back and forces de Gautet to explain Bismarck’s real plan by torturing him with vicious methods remembered from his school days: “I’ll show you the advantages of an English public school education” (190). This episode links a subverted ideal of chivalry back to the school system (cf. Crofts 2015: 31), but also illustrates Flashman’s nastiest characteristics. Where Rudolf’s stand-off with Black Michael’s henchmen is conducted with a snide, double-edged politeness, de Gautet’s appeal to Flashman’s honour as a gentleman meets deaf ears. Flashman’s behaviour is that of a bully, vengeful and merciless, and is not tempered by the fact that his opponents are revealed to be cunning and ruthless, too. Their real plan, putting another spin on *Zenda* by re-presenting it as a somewhat naïve fiction, was to kill Flashman, frame him as a British spy, and so use Strackenz as a pretext to start a war with Denmark and unite Germany. Again, real history is mixed into the story as the real war of 1864 is used to create the prospect of an alternative timeline. When Flashman murders de Gautet in cold blood by throwing the bound man into the gorge, it is sadistic and without honour: “I held him fast and let him look, just to let him know he was really going to die. Then I [...] gave him a push.” (196).

When Flashman next adopts the guise of an ill-used but fundamentally chivalrous gentleman in order to save his life from the Danish nationalists who have foiled his panicked escape, the act contrasts powerfully with his murder of de Gautet: “In that, I saw, lay my only hope—to make them believe I had been a helpless victim of a dastardly plot. And God help me, wasn’t it true?” (206). His outward pretence, so ironically at odds with his commentary - “I looked him full in the face, like a man struggling with tremendous emotion. (I was, and it was funk [...])” (206) - humorously dismantles his performance as gentleman as hollow, but by impersonating the character of an adventure hero like Rudolf, he is also forced back into the adventure plot. Although he frantically tries to escape from this “lunatic, no-hope scheme” (214), calls the nationalists idiots for risking their lives for a greater good, and panics throughout this “bungling, ill-judged, badly-managed” affair (225), he must try to rescue the real king, imprisoned in a fortress beyond a moat, in a swashbuckling show-down only superficially reminiscent of that of *Zenda*. Of course, his rescue of the king is purely accidental, and he only survives the affair because Bismarck has been called away to manage the revolution in Berlin. From beginning to end, Flashman is a reluctant anti-hero whose refusal to do anything heroic fuels a comedic, sometimes cynical meta-commentary on how we imagine the Victorian era.

Conclusion

The ‘Flashman Papers’ cleverly translate our inevitable position of hindsight and historical distance into a parody of the Victorian chivalrous masculine ideal which lies at the very centre of Flashman’s character. In so doing, they put into play Kohlke and Gutleben’s notion that neo-Victorian humour is “doubly double: both temporally and ideologically” (2012: 3). They

certainly reflect a late 1960s revision of the Victorians where the gaps between appearance and practice is based largely (but not entirely) on the way periods seep into one another – the Regency continues into the Victorian. Reading them in 2020 leverages our hindsight and present-day values only to reinforce an ironic reflection on “period terminology, outmoded attitudes, and questionable ideological discourses in order to comically deconstruct them” while also “inadvertently giving them new life and keeping them in cultural circulation” (Kohlke and Gutleben, 2012: 2). While the ‘Flashman Papers’ are irreverent satire that “provide a pervasive insight into an era that remains essentially unknowable, posing fundamental questions about the way we view a time that we only know through the materials left for us” (Crofts, 2015: 34), they are also a homage.

Although both are fast-paced, plot-driven narratives designed as a quick, entertaining read, *Royal Flash* is almost doubly as long as *Zenda*, providing much more elaborate descriptions of settings, characters, and pastimes. Conjuring up this neo-Victorian novel’s Victorian world for the reader to experience is then just as important for its enjoyment as the action itself. *Royal Flash* in fact re-orientates the Ruritanian world of adventure and chivalry provided by Hope not just through ironic commentary and subversion. As was always implied, place becomes time. Despite Flashman’s sceptical commentary, the Victorian age itself becomes a kind of Ruritania: from the perspective of a world where the First World War eliminated royal leaders (as in Germany or Russia) or elsewhere reduced them to a decorative status, and where genocide, the atom bomb, and the Cold War fostered a sense of fragmentation and disillusionment, the Victorian era for the 1960s could seem idyllic and quaint – especially if read naïvely through the idealistic prism of adventure fiction. Flashman’s Victorian era is one of hubris, hypocrisy, blunder, and self-delusion – “Fraser rewrites history without the patriotism and morality” (Crofts, 2015: 35) – but still there is a certain comic glamour about Flashman’s participation in the pivotal historical events that, intentional or not, have come to shape the world we live in.

Flashman’s cynical, selfish meta-commentary challenges and interrogates Victorian self-presentations as well as its historical trajectory at large, constructing its meta-textual neo-Victorian revisionism through recourse to Victorian popular fiction and the popular adventure plot. The ‘Flashman Papers’ represent a chaotic Victorian era as a historical playground in which adventures abound, even if they arise out of the ineptitude of leaders, petty grievances, misunderstandings, deceit, egotism, and a lot of sexual energy. Through the outward adherence to a shared Victorian social code, the complexities and ambiguities of the world at least seemingly cohere into clearer choices. Although his actions are often involuntary reactions to a historical current that insists on sweeping him along, they can have momentous consequences and so both realise and parody the (Victorian) adventure narrative as a fantasy of a more powerful self. While the series may not emphasise the alternative technologies that steampunk fiction is characterised by on its surface, yet, like steampunk, it highlights very forcefully its mashing of timelines, its exploration of alternatives, and its roots in well-known palimpsests: *Royal Flash* does not conceal but parades its reworking of an 1890s bestseller. Written, like steampunk, for a wide readership, it is happy to raid formulae proven to sell, to mix genres as well as temporalities in what I called earlier in this article “a hyper-Victorian collage assembled from history and fiction.” In this reading, the history of steampunk itself is offered an alternative history, 1960s neo-Victorian strategies continuing into and affecting the 1980s

but concealed under a new costume of technological props, just as Flashman the Regency rake continues to affect the Victorian period in which he, a residue, so resolutely struggles to maintain his own time and values while wearing the costumes of Victorian modernity.

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