



PROJECT MUSE®

Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children's Literature

by Jessica L. Straley (review)

Kate Holterhoff

Victorian Review, Volume 43, Number 2, Fall 2017, pp. 311-314 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vcr.2017.0039>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/711537>

Detracting from the strength of the study is a matter that is a question of both editorial intervention and argument structure: the author's tendency toward overreliance on secondary criticism. Frequent, often lengthy quotations from other critics have a tendency to disrupt Koehler's sustained analysis. A similar need to reassure the reader emerges in the book's overall structure. The final full chapter, "Epistolary Ghosts," considers the "patterns, continuities, and shifts in [the] representation of written communication" (185) in the short story "On the Western Circuit" and a selection of poetry, including "Thoughts of Phená" and "The Torn Letter." While "An Imaginative Woman" would surely have made a perfect pairing to the book's discussion of "epistolary personae" (195), Koehler rightly points out that Hardy's shorter works are often compelling in their engagement with spectral presences in the very way that they "evoke letters by negation only" (196). Koehler does not claim to do justice here to all of Hardy's poetry, nor can she, and while I am grateful to see both poetry and short fiction given consideration, this chapter's position in the book makes it feel like an obligatory afterthought, a necessity rather than an integral part of the overall argument.

This final chapter nonetheless points us back to those crucial issues that form the focus of this study and, indeed, so much of Hardy's work: the emphasis on miscommunication and the very elusive quality of his characters, whether embodied physically or conveyed textually. In this regard, Koehler's *Thomas Hardy and Victorian Communication* reminds us why we continue to read Hardy and why his work remains so vital. As Koehler writes, "he never ceased to be preoccupied by the question of what prevents people from recognition of one another's subjectivity, and from forming relationships based on genuine perception of one another's nature, needs, and desires" (187).

Works Cited

Hardy, Thomas. *Jude the Obscure*. Edited by Cedric Watts, Broadview, 1999.

SARA MALTON
Saint Mary's University



Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children's Literature

by Jessica L. Straley; pp. 272. Cambridge UP, 2016. \$104.06 cloth.

ALTHOUGH SCHOLARSHIP on the relationship between science and literature has tended to focus on realist fictions by George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, recent research has made room for popular and imaginative literature. Interest in Darwinism and romance fiction, in particular, has increased markedly since 2000, appearing in both multi-author monographs, such

as Anne Stiles's *Popular Fiction and Brain Science in the Late Nineteenth Century* (2011), and single-author studies, including Julia Reid's *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science, and the Fin de Siècle* (2006). Jessica Straley's *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children's Literature* uniquely examines the relationship between fiction written for juveniles and the discourse of recapitulation, the scientific theory suggesting that organisms pass through all stages of evolutionary development in their growth from single-celled organisms to adults. Therefore, unlike previous studies that focus almost exclusively on natural and sexual selection, *Evolution and Imagination* places much needed weight upon the yet understudied ideas of the evolutionists and advocates of recapitulation theory, including Ernst Haeckel and Herbert Spencer. Looking particularly at books written for children and containing lessons from evolutionary science, Straley identifies and interprets several links connecting ideas about childhood development with theories about the study of literature and education.

Straley's interdisciplinary book is sure to interest scholars of children's literature, the history of science, and nineteenth-century culture more broadly. *Evolution and Imagination* is lucidly written and often surprising, arguing that many of the best-known children's books published between 1860 and 1920 incorporated incompletely evolved or bestial children into their plots for pedagogical reasons. If ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, as recapitulationists argued, then adolescents must be properly guided from a partial to a fully evolved state. While strategies for ensuring progress varied, the liminal place of youth renders the role of education for ensuring the proper development of the race of the utmost importance.

Evolution and Imagination's chapters are divided into two historical timeframes: before and after the 1870 Elementary Education Act. This division usefully underscores the importance of instruction to Straley's claims. While scholarship concerning the Golden Age of children's literature has tended to uphold the Rousseauian notion that scientific themes were included for the enjoyment of adult readers rather than the erudition of juveniles, Straley suggests that child audiences were often active and savvy readers. Authors differed on the question of how best to convey the lessons of evolution, but the place of recapitulation theory in these texts was always intentional and improving.

Chapter 1 examines pedagogical texts that internalized natural theology and situated adults as curators of a child's educational interactions with nature. Straley historicizes literature that encouraged children to observe the natural world for moral improvement. Focusing particularly on Margaret Gatty's *Parables from Nature* (1855), Straley shows that such fiction opposed evolutionary theory on the grounds that by rejecting design, natural selection removed nature from the sphere of moral improvement. Moreover, evolutionism seemed to frame the natural world as chaotic and disorderly rather than specially created. Gatty's rejection of transmutation depended upon her conviction that in order to infer God, one must appreciate nature empirically—a requirement that the theory of evolution could never fulfill.

Chapter 2 studies the Anglican clergyman and evolutionist Charles Kingsley's celebrated fairy tale *Water-Babies* (1863). Identifying parallels with Spencer's advocacy of scientific pedagogy, Straley argues that Kingsley's complex tale was intended to teach lessons about scientific thinking to children. Unlike Gatty, Kingsley rejected the notion that the natural world could best be experienced through observation. To avoid an exclusively materialist perspective, Kingsley incorporates fantasy and nonsense into his plot. Breaking with the Enlightenment dependence on reason, Kingsley proposes that in order to learn how to become fully evolved humans, children must exercise their faculties of imagination through play. He suggests that the best scientific pedagogy benefits from a literary framework that permits speculation about non-observable phenomena in nature. Straley argues that "*The Water-Babies* does not so much claim that children naturally *do* recapitulate the evolution of the species as it suggests that they systematically *should* in order to ensure a healthier, fitter, and nobler human future" (58).

In Chapter 3, Straley studies the role of nonsense and linguistic games in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Carroll rejects natural historical study and advocates a pedagogy that permits imaginative literary and linguistic play. By parodying the rote memorization advocated by Matthew Arnold and other educational reformers, Carroll suggests the benefits of spontaneity for altering and advancing literary forms. Straley contends that forms of accidental but creative wordplay in Carroll's novel actually demonstrate a willed adaptation, despite interpretations that emphasize the uncontrolled chaos of nonsense literature. Much as evolution relies upon descent with modification, so does Carroll's humour rely on parodies balancing continuity with change.

Chapter 4 argues that Mowgli from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) and *The Second Jungle Book* (1895) offered British and American children a model for retaining healthy animality, thereby re-masculinizing Western culture. Rather than the typical *Bildungsroman*, which insists on a progressive development into adulthood, Kipling's story of the "man-cub" revels in this animality. Mowgli is remarkably heterogeneous—a sign of advanced evolution according to Spencer—because he can adapt to and survive all the difficulties he encounters in the jungle by approximating and internalizing aspects of the entire animal kingdom. In this "recapitulative fantasy for an imperial age" (120), Kipling offers a blueprint for educating the Empire's masters, which Anglo-Americans delighted in imagining and organizations like the Boy Scouts enacted.

Although fiction that engaged with recapitulation theory privileged development narratives about boys, Chapter 5 studies Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) to demonstrate the role of evolutionism in girlhood. In order to advance the human race, girls were groomed to be strong and healthy mothers; their education tended to focus on the appropriate selection of mates and the importance of mutual aid. Straley shows that Burnett's

text followed the arguments of many first-wave feminists who supported the eugenic mandate contending that mothers played the significant role in human evolution of controlling the creation of future generations. For this reason, the girl protagonist of *Secret Garden* is less a passive flower (the conventional non-human analogy for women) than a gardener entrusted with metaphorically weeding out unsuitable male playmates. Here, evolutionary fitness depends on cultivating friendships and supporting the family unit, rather than Kipling's fantasy of the self-sufficient individual.

Pushing back on claims that children's literature offers a respite from reality and is thus unscientific, Straley demonstrates that fantasy enabled such fiction to engage purposively with evolutionary theory. I was convinced by Straley's focused engagement with recapitulation theory and children's literature, and suspect that this text would augment undergraduate and graduate courses concerning these topics. *Evolution and Imagination* provides detailed and wide-ranging literary and historical evidence that children's fiction engaged with evolutionary science in "an attempt to reunite the modern, urbanized child with a lost nature more attuned to his evolving body and consciousness" (189).

KATE HOLTERHOFF

Georgia Institute of Technology



Nineteenth-Century Illustration and the Digital: Studies in Word and Image

by Julia Thomas; pp. 121. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. \$54.99 cloth.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY *Illustration and the Digital: Studies in Word and Image* is an excellent primer for anyone interested in the subject matter indicated by its title: illustration studies, particularly of the nineteenth-century, and the digital archives that are expanding the research horizons of this field. Drawing on a comprehensive range of critical scholarship and digital projects, Julia Thomas uses the concise Palgrave Pivot format to nimbly encapsulate the central topics that preoccupy Victorian illustration studies at the present moment while anticipating future directions of the field.

Victorian periodical scholars have long argued that illustrations are neither ephemeral nor subordinate to letterpress. Over the past two decades, case studies presented by, among others, Brian Maidment, Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, Peter Sinnema, Lisa Surridge and Elizabeth Leighton, and Thomas herself have demonstrated that illustrations offered distinctive interpretive affordances to readers of Victorian print. As evidenced by recent work such as Kooistra's "Charting Rocks in the Golden Stream" and Paul Fyfe's "Ways of Seeing Victorian Periodicals," the analysis of nineteenth-century illustration