

Queer Pleasures of the Post

Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal and Victorian Letters. Kate Thomas. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 251 pp.

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<1>As all Victorianists know, the Post Office was one of the great nineteenth-century institutions, though it's one that literary scholars have tended mostly to underplay. Schools, law courts, asylums, the press and other institutions have long held our attention and helped us to understand the various apparatus that shaped the discourses of Victorian society and culture; however, the Post Office and its vast, impressive communications network has tended to remain more humbly out of the Foucauldian view. Kate Thomas's *Postal Pleasures* will change all that, in unexpected and often exciting ways.

<2>For Thomas, the postal network of correspondents, letters, postmen and routes that swiftly spread once the Penny Black stamp was issued in 1840 led not only to new forms of communication, but also to new kinds of promiscuous social relations. An imaginative fantasy of the letter emerged with "transformative effect" (2), as letters crossed boundaries and co-mingled with other letters in the crowded postal bag. As a universalizing institution with access for virtually all, by the end of the century, the Post Office "brought everyone into connection with anyone: accessible, cheap, and anonymous, the post was almost immediately understood to engender queer relations" (5). That use of "queer" may come as something of a surprise, but Thomas's argument, both playful and largely persuasive, is that there's nowt so queer as the Post Office. Universalizing, nationalizing and incorporating though this communications system is, Thomas suggests that "postal circuits can produce 'permanent queering'" (8). That is, detached from the gendered body of its author, a letter enters into the communications network in ways that allow it to be confused and mis-identified, despite itself; rather than following the straight and narrow path of direct communications, then, letters are more circuitous and uncertain, all of which is "absorbed" (10) by literature at the end of the century. *Postal Pleasures* explores this absorption with case studies of works by Trollope, Hardy, Henry James, Eliza Lynn Linton, Kipling and others.

<3>Before the literary readings in later chapters, the queer pleasures of Chapter One focus our attention, perhaps not surprisingly, on the 1889 Cleveland Street Affair, one of the most significant and well-known sex scandals of the late-nineteenth century, and one which looked forward to the Wilde trials six years later. Cleveland Street was the site of a brothel whose rent

boys were also Telegraph Boys. As Thomas's overview of the scandal indicates, the Cleveland Street Affair is well trodden ground by critics, beginning with Montgomery Hyde in 1976, and more recently with cultural historians of queer London (see recent monographs by Matt Cook, H.G. Cocks, Matt Houlbrook, and Morris Kaplan). Other scholars have thought about the representation of gender and sexuality in press reports of Cleveland Street, comparing the case to other sensational sex scandals of the period (see Laurel Brake). But Thomas's clever move is to recast the scandal as a story about modern media/communications networks: "A telegraph boy disseminated mail. Not only did he appear on your doorstep himself (male) along with the message (mail), but he was also a uniformed reminder that in a postal age, all correspondence is mediated by a vast network of functionaries. The Cleveland Street Affair dramatized what many had already realized: Post Office employees were entangled in the correspondence they distributed. Disseminators diffuse themselves along with the thing they carry" (40). The telegraph boy and the rent boy became conflated, both providing a "service" for the general public, for a fee. Though the Cleveland Street Affair remains the most infamous case of its kind from the period, the link between Post Office boy-workers and urban sex workers was longstanding by 1889, and the whiff of the rent boy hung over the telegraph boy — fluidly mobile, smartly dressed, promiscuously about town, knocking on your door — for a long time thereafter. Thomas doesn't reveal new details about Cleveland Street, but she does brilliantly to emphasize that queerness was at the very centre of the communications network. The rent/telegraph boys unveiled in the scandal merely highlighted that awkward fact.

<4>From the boys of the Post Office, we move to one of its great men, the novelist, Anthony Trollope, who for most of his writing life was a high ranking civil servant in the Post Office. As Thomas rightly notes, most of us know about Trollope's postal work — he recounts it lovingly in his *Autobiography* (1883), for example, and his deep knowledge of the postal routes of counties in England and Ireland clearly informed his sense of the local — but most critics, even devoted Trollopian, have tended not to spend too much time thinking about the links between his fiction and his professional postal life. I like the way Thomas re-reads the conventional criticism of Trollope (ably assisted by Trollope's own revelation of his writing routine in the *Autobiography*), that he was too mechanical in his methods, too prolific in his prose. But the things Trollope valued in his work for the Post Office, were the same things he valued in writing: "repetition, speed, and the all-important 'considerable circulation'" (77). There is something very modern about Trollope and his affinity for contemporary communications networks, at home and abroad, though in Thomas's reading of him and his life, it's a strikingly, even refreshingly queer form of modernity and everyday life. Suffice to say that she puts the "anal" back into the "banal" in ways that this queer and avid Trollope reader found both provocative and wry.

<5>Key to *Postal Pleasures* is Thomas's understanding of the "postal plot" in nineteenth-century fiction, which foregrounds "the distance, separation, delays, and precipitous deliveries that could skew the trajectory of a communication, or reveal how skewed any communicative trajectory always is" (2). If previous plots in, say, the eighteenth-century epistolary novel relied on the content of letters as plot, the "postal plots" identified here explore the letter as part of a system of mediation and communication liable to reveal more than it intends. "Postmarks, telegram forms, envelopes, addresses, smudges, and stamps" — all in their different ways queer the plots of nineteenth-century fiction and "tell their own tale" (83). For example, in an imaginative reading of Trollope's under-read late novel, *John Caldigate* (1879), in which a postman-as-hero must

interpret the clues of a single envelope in order to clear the name of an accused bigamist, Thomas shows how the breakdown of conventional marital and other social bonds is imagined through “the literal and metaphorical potential of the postal system to sustain queer and irregular structures of alliance” (83). Put slightly differently, by paying attention to the post, we are better able to understand the “identifications and cross-identifications that vex the seeming stability of the name in this novel that has a name for a title” (95). John Caldigate may *seem* stable, but like the envelope that causes him so much grief, he is anything but settled.

<6>Chapter Three, “A Queer Job for a Girl,” argues that in Trollope’s short story “The Telegraph Girl,” (1877), Eliza Lynn Linton’s *The Rebel of the Family* (1880), and Thomas Hardy’s *A Laodicean* (1881), working for the Post Office “goes hand in hand with these women’s ‘predilection’ for women: . . . these are fictions that ask what work and domesticity might look like for the unmarried, middle-class woman who chooses a working life. Their answer is that these workers, workplaces and household look lesbian...” (99). Chapter Four explores how the “blood brotherhood” of Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling and Bram Stoker was “best sustained not through heterosexual procreation, but through the postal kind of intercourse: bureaucratic, networked, homosocial, and homoerotic” (158). For Thomas, these writers’ imperial visions are revealed through various forms of the homosocial postal plot, which the writers are at pains to control, but she concludes the chapter with a surprising turn to queer (“gay,” she says) writers for whom the postal system provided its own, more tender and personal plot — Walt Whitman, Edward Carpenter, and the young Bram Stoker. These men were all correspondents, linked affectively and otherwise to each other by their letters and an “erotics of touch enabled through networks of communication and travel” (203); the homosocial postal plot was both an imperial device *and* a form of queer liberation by the 1880s-90s.

<7>*Postal Pleasures* is a pleasure to read, and it gains strength as it goes along, not least by introducing insightful readings of less well-known works which make us think differently about authors we thought we knew. The final chapter, a “Postscript,” turns to Henry James’s *In the Cage* (1898), the highpoint of nineteenth-century postal plots. In a novella all about telegrams that continually pass through the hands of the three main characters, message-sending becomes “a metaphor and instrument of consciousness that manifests between people and across distance, difference, misunderstanding...” (208). By the end of the century, then, the significance of the Jamesian postal plot is the way it takes us to the space “in between” letters and messages, the space between the lines of modern consciousness, which cannot be too easily decoded. With their cross-purposes and cross-wires, propensity to get mislaid or go astray, tendency to be misidentified, nineteenth-century letters suggest a much odder global communications network than we have yet imagined. Through her engaging, playful and convincing readings, Thomas has taken the universal and made it seem very queer, indeed.