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Lavery, Grace. *Quaint, Exquisite: Victorian Aesthetics and the Idea of Japan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 219 pages.

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<1>“I’m big in Japan” croaks Tom Waits on his 1999 single of the same name, despite having only “the style but not the grace” and “the clothes but not the face.” This phrase, which has come to denote popular success of an eccentric and limited kind, partakes of a discourse rooted in nineteenth-century English culture and described by Grace Lavery in her captivating study *Quaint, Exquisite: Victorian Aesthetics and the Idea of Japan*. She complicates the critical concept of “Orientalism,” which posits that the West represents Asia as its primitive, static, and undeveloped opposite, by showing how Japan instead functioned as Victorian England’s uncanny double, the “Other Empire” challenging the narcissism of Britain’s exclusive claims to modernity (x). Yet this does not mean that Westerners saw Japan as simply coequal to the Euro-American powers. Ever since its “opening” by U.S. forces in the 1850s, Japan has occupied the position of being indisputably “modern, but not in the way everybody else is” (28).

<2>To understand how Westerners imagined Japan’s role as the single exception to the strict Oriental/Occidental binary, Lavery surprisingly turns to Kant’s description of the art object as similarly exceptional. For Kant, the experience of beauty creates confusion between the viewing subject and the object under contemplation, creating an experience where, in his words, “the pleasure that we feel is expected of everyone else, just as if it were regarded as a property of the object [...] but beauty is nothing by itself, without relation to the feeling of the subject” (10). Lavery innovatively and insightfully reinterprets Kant’s claim through a psychoanalytic framework, ascribing the psychological state of melancholy to the belief that one “can experience a ‘common feeling’ with another human being through an aesthetic medium, and find[ing] that belief cruelly rebuffed” (11).

<3>Japan’s status as the Other Empire, understood by the West as a culture defined by its production of artworks embodying an unassailable universal ideal of beauty, meant that it could stand as the historical and material solution to this conceptual paradox at the heart of aesthetic judgment. Lavery explains the implications of this situation by turning to two terms Victorian writers invariably associated with Japanese culture: “exquisite” and “quaint.” “Exquisite” names the paradoxical combination of pleasure and pain associated with Japanese aesthetics so as to resolve “the melancholy contradiction of the subjective universal judgment of taste” (“the style but not the grace;” “the clothes but not the face”); while “quaint,” which connotes aesthetic appreciation tinged with the sense of being minor and old-fashioned, names “the manner in which exquisite objects become (or fail to become) historical evidence” in distinction from the “muscular historical explanations that have, in recent debates about Victorian studies for example, sometimes been seen as exhaustive of historicism *per se*” (31, 22). “Quaint” thus also

describes the method of the book itself, which aims to “develop a richer engagement with obsolete aesthetic categories than traditional historicism generally offers” (31). In other words, she looks to seemingly insignificant and marginal instances of Japanophilia in Victorian culture and Anglophilia in Japanese culture to offer new perspectives on two of the era’s major historical developments: the rise of sexuality as a defining aspect of subjectivity and the completion of the project of globalization.

<4>Lavery’s discussion unfolds over five chapters focusing on, respectively, Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta *The Mikado* (1885), British aestheticism (with an emphasis on the works of J.A.M. Whistler, A.C. Swinburne, and Oscar Wilde), Victorian and modernist Anglophone haiku (especially the writings of Yone Noguchi), the collection of John Ruskin’s writings built by Mikimoto Ryuzo in Tokyo during the early twentieth century, and the figure of the katana sword in versions of the *Madame Chrysanthème/Madame Butterfly* narrative. These descriptions offer only a hint of the diversity of materials Lavery has assembled in her study, which go far beyond nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature to include objects such as American sitcoms, internet memes, the films of Quentin Tarantino, and luxury paper products. This charmingly eclectic archive exemplifies the “eccentricity” Lavery claims is “the character-type of the quaint temporal mode,” and creates an atmosphere that is refreshingly open and exciting (31). Reading *Quaint, Exquisite*, I often found myself eagerly anticipating what Lavery was going to discuss next. Startling juxtapositions frequently elicit unexpected and brilliant insights, such as her description of Ruskin’s Japanese reception by comparison to Georg Lukács’s description of his relationship to Marxist dialectics. A potential drawback to this approach, though, is that her loose and associative style may frustrate those who prioritize linear organization above all else. Readers undoubtedly have to work to keep up and the experience is largely exhilarating, even if the relations among various parts of her arguments can sometime be opaque.

<5>Individual chapters resist neat summarization and condensation. The rest of this review will focus on particular moments that should be of particular interest to readers of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*. One of Lavery’s major claims is that Japan became associated with “an eccentric modernity populated by eccentric men,” which accounts for its special appeal to queer Victorians. Lavery reads Gilbert and Sullivan’s fanciful treatment of lethal yet arbitrary legal authority in the *The Mikado* in light of the infamous 1885 Labouchere Amendment outlawing “acts of gross indecency” between men. She argues that the operetta exemplifies a genre she calls “queer realism,” which simultaneously affirms and disavows a relationship to real-world issues with the excuse that it is “just kidding” about its frivolous treatment of a serious topic (37, 48). The double-move of *The Mikado*’s queer realism is enabled by and inextricable from the quaintness of the operetta’s Japanese setting. As the strange yet indisputably modern Empire on the other side of the globe, Japan also becomes a figure for the kind of “unspeakable, remote intimacy” between men found in Oscar Wilde’s writings. For Lavery, this explains why after his conviction and imprisonment, there was an explosion in the popularity of luxury collector’s editions of his work, which were defined by the tactile sensuousness of fine Japanese vellum they were printed on (74). At the other end of the Japan-England relationship, she finds in Mikimoto’s impassioned writings and touchingly threadbare collection a version of Ruskin that, far from stereotypes of uptight Victorian moralism, stands for “the radical possibilities for a life in which emotional and political commitments could be considered part of a single, breathtakingly complex whole” (115). This loving vision was conditioned by Mikimoto’s sense of having been historically abandoned by Ruskin through his death—a relationship that can be

explained by Ann Cvetkovich's notion of a queer "archive of feeling" (137). In her final chapter, Lavery reads various iterations of the Madam Butterfly story through the lens of women's heterosexual abandonment and revenge, which is figured by the image of "exquisitely" beautiful, death-dealing katana sword. She convincingly demonstrates that this theme continues to resonate in more recent media, such as the Japanese horror film *Audition* (1999) and Tarantino's *Kill Bill* movies (2003, 2004).

<6>This study contains numerous brilliant interpretations that usefully complicate longstanding assumptions about the geopolitics of Victorian literature and contribute to our understanding of the period's sexual subcultures. While the text proffers some idiosyncratic and peculiar claims that, while fascinating, may prove difficult to extricate from the book's discursive and conversational structure, it also contains a preponderance of eminently portable insights that will surely be adopted by others in the field. *Quaint, Exquisite* is an illuminating and necessary work that will be of value to scholars of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, queer studies, and transnational literary relations.