

Black, White, and Read All Over: Novels and News in the Victorian Age

The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction after the Invention of the News. Matthew Rubery. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. viii + 233.

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<1> Reading *The Novelty of Newspapers*, I was struck by how much I had thought I knew about the Victorian newspaper and how eye-opening this book actually was. One of its most important lessons is highlighted in the title: it was the nineteenth century that gave rise to the news as we think of it today. Another is that this development crucially affected plots and perspectives in the Victorian novel, as well as readers' experience of it — Matthew Rubery is particularly attuned to how people absorbed the newspapers and how those practices were represented within fiction and helped to determine the way the novel itself was read. In the end, one comes away well persuaded by his claim that novels and newspapers were essentially interlinked forms, both designed to cater to the emotions and narrative imagination of the public.

<2> There may be much we take for granted about nineteenth-century news if we simply presume that it resembled modern news. Rubery shows that this presumption is only partially right. On the one hand, the news and people's orientation toward it did come to look more like ours. It was at this time, for example, that the newspaper was divorced from partisan patronage and became financed instead by advertisers, a development that transformed it from a largely political organ to a commercial and entertainment medium. The railway and telegraph changed the speed of the news, while the lifting of "taxes on knowledge" dramatically increased its circulation; the newspaper became, as it is for us, up-to-the-minute and available for daily, individual consumption. This was the era, too, when the journalist emerged as a professional identity, and the late Victorian period saw the rise of now-familiar practices such as the personal interview. But on the other hand, there were significant differences between then and now, most obviously in the newspaper's layout, which in turn produced different emphases and modes of reception. The front page of the newspaper was occupied not by top stories but by columns of advertisements and by the shipping news. Rubery underlines the Victorians' distinct experience in noting that the "typical reader was expected to open a newspaper at the center page," where he (or she) would find the important news of the day (88).

<3> So key, in fact, is the newspaper's structure to understanding its character that Rubery deliberately mimics it in his book's organization. Each chapter covers a particular type of item in

the paper, and the five chapters proceed as readers would have encountered them, divided between Part I, “The Front Page,” and Part II, “The Inner Pages.” This is a nice conceit for reinforcing the book’s interest in the experience of newspaper *reading*: Rubery helps us to picture the news in the mind of the average consumer. Yet in the early chapters, the organization creates one of the study’s few shortcomings, which is an exclusivity of focus on the particular item type at hand, at the expense of a broader, variegated treatment of what the newspaper signifies in a given novel. One sometimes gets the sense of lost opportunities to explore the dynamics between journalistic elements within single works. The subtitle of Chapter 1, on “shipping intelligence” (tidbits on the progress and wrecks of sea vessels), is “Shipwrecks and Secret Tears from Dickens to Stoker,” but this makes all the more notable that the chapter actually barely considers *Dracula* (1897)— in a mere paragraph on Mina Harker’s reading about the wreck of the *Demeter*. This is especially unfortunate given the media richness of this novel and its self-conscious assimilation of late-Victorian journalism. One imagines a potentially much fuller discussion, linking the report on the *Demeter* with other newspaper dispatches in the novel, and both with *Dracula*’s other information technologies and with Mina’s use of her diary to record her conversations in the manner of “lady journalists.” (I wished again that Rubery had taken up Mina’s quasi-journalism, along with gender and the profession generally, reading his very short discussion of female interviewers in Chapter 4).

<4> All that said, Chapter 1 is important for illuminating a species of news, the shipwreck report, that (barring disastrous oil spills) has become largely irrelevant to us today, but that had become a staple by the nineteenth century, and whose powerful if concise narrative form lent itself to Victorian fiction. Moreover, it is here that Rubery introduces a fascinating concern of the book as a whole: the curious cross between public and private experience that the newspaper offered Victorians. The paper’s content might expose an individual or family’s private affairs; various fictional plots demonstrate, too, how public report might shade off into private emotion “when information available to everyone has special relevance to an isolated reader” (13). Chapter 1 considers representations of the reader’s affective experience in response to shipwreck news, paying special attention to the paper as offering access to the public sphere for a group of individuals largely removed from it — women. Rubery argues for a trope that unites authors like Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Charlotte Brontë, in which news of a male character’s death at sea makes simultaneously communal and legible a heroine’s private affection.

<5> Chapter 2 turns to advertisements, in particular personal ads. While the book’s segmentation can feel especially creaky here — the analysis of Wilkie Collins’ *Lydia Gwilt*, for example, is awkwardly split between this and the previous chapter — “The Personal Advertisements” is admirably researched and probably the book’s most field-altering chapter for the way it forces us to re-conceive a familiar genre, the sensation novel. Whereas scholars have traditionally found the principal link between this genre and the newspaper to be crime reports, the advertising section of the paper, Rubery proposes, may be the more important one. He supplies an impressive catalogue of different ads upon which sensation plots turn — from obituaries, employment notices, and marriage and divorce announcements, to the more fragmentary but heartfelt items in the paper’s “agony column,” which typically included assignation attempts, quests for lost loves, and complaints of abandonment. For all the seeming authority of the newspaper, its anonymous advertisements of death and disappearance facilitated duplicity — the reinvention of identity — in real life as well as within the plots of Collins or

Mary Elizabeth Braddon. As for the agony-column ad, spare yet suggestive, it was itself a kind of sensation novel in miniature. Both forms, importantly, arose in the 1860s, and both intimated that the face of the average man or woman hid a wealth of personal, sometimes sordid incident, offering the reader the pleasure of imagining these deeply private concerns.

<6> Part I accentuates the tensions in newspapers between privacy and publicity, secrecy and revelation, authoritativeness and dubiousness, fact and fiction. These issues continue to inform the three chapters in Part II on, respectively, the leading article (the editorial), the personal interview, and foreign correspondence. But here Rubery's perspective is more narrow and focused than was generally the case in Part I, with each chapter presenting an argument about how the newspaper was treated in the work of a specific author or, in the case of the last chapter, a specific text. Chapter 3 looks at Anthony Trollope's Palliser novels as they examine and castigate the writer of the leading article, an influential form of public opinion, but a controversial one due to its anonymity, and one that Trollope takes to task for its stinging partiality. The famously publicity-shy Henry James is the subject of Chapter 4, yet Rubery usefully widens our perceptions of his attitude in showing how complicit his characters are in their own exposure; these are men and women who crave to be interviewed. At the same time, the staginess of the late-Victorian interview could seem to undermine the authenticity of its disclosures. Here is another instance in which journalism's truthfulness came into question. Chapter 5 also takes up that concern in bringing out a little observed detail about Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the fact that, like the explorer Henry Stanley, on whom he is often said to be modeled, he is both an imperial manager and a journalist. This is the light in which Rubery reads Kurtz's evocative, mesmerizing voice: even as Marlow is, on one level, taken in by it, it is as inaccurate and invested in "myth" as Stanley's reportage on Africa (151).

<7> Perhaps this study will disappoint scholars interested in detailed publishing history or the specificities of journalistic practice, but it clearly succeeds as a work of literary criticism, delivering fresh perspectives on the textual and cultural milieu of important forms and novels. It makes a good companion to Richard Menke's recent *Telegraphic Realism* in that it similarly analyzes the impact of new information media on nineteenth-century fiction. Organized not just topically but also chronologically, it concludes by considering the newspaper's place vis-à-vis modernism, reminding us, finally, that if the Victorians "invented" the news, they also invented modern ways of responding to it. As Rubery has put it earlier, nineteenth-century depictions of the psychological encroachments of the news are not "proto-modernist so much as an assertion that modernism is in many ways post-Victorian when it comes to representing the media's influence in public and private life" (104). The conclusion also takes on Andreas Huyssen's notion of the modernist "Great Divide," and in so doing brings home what may be the book's core insight: that our distinctions between low and high culture, mass journalism and literature, were never as clean as we have thought. As *The Novelty of Newspapers* makes clear, the daily paper, with its own vivid stories, characters, and views of life events, played a vital part in the story-making of Victorian authors and their descendants.