

Danger and Disability: The Female Body of Miniature in Neo-Victorian Fiction

Neo-Victorian freak-show novels repeat the very same discourses they aim to alter and often draw on the same staging techniques and promoting strategies as the nineteenth-century freak show did. A major challenge for neo-Victorian reimaginings of the freak is that authors simultaneously repeat and reject the binaries of normalcy and deviance to criticise the exploitative and objectifying conventions of nineteenth-century enfreakment practices. This fluctuation between sameness and difference calls for new critical approaches to freak-show characters that relocate the disabled body outside rigid frames of binary thinking. This paper explores the potential of Gilles Deleuze's notion of "difference and repetition" as an apt critical tool to analyse neo-Victorian repetitions of Victorian cultures of displaying disabled people. In the volume *Difference and Repetition* (1968), the philosopher moves the concept of identity beyond the positive and the negative, to explore the relationship between identity and difference, identity and repetition, arguing that difference "must be understood in the pronominal; we must find the Self of repetition, the singularity within that which repeats" (2014: 28). Taking this as starting point, I set out to explore how the disabled body emerges positively and productively within the shifts and flows of enfreakment practises in neo-Victorian literature.

The novel under analysis is Melanie Benjamin's *The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb* (2011) – a fictional account of the life of Lavinia Warren (1842-1919) who was promoted as Charles Stratton's (1838-1883), alias General Tom Thumb, wife during her professional career as a human display. I will explore the subjective experience and desire of Lavinia Warren (or Minnie) with a special interest in the singularities of both the presentation of her as a miniature woman and her subjective experience of life as a little person. I will focus on the desire, sexuality and power (or lack thereof) of the female freak with a twofold-purpose in mind. On the one hand, I hope to demonstrate how the novel mirrors contemporary concerns regarding sexuality and disability in conjunction, exploring how the sexualised disabled woman is embedded within discourses of danger. On the other hand, by approaching the freak subject through the lens of Deleuze's difference and repetition, I aim to further the debate on the disabled subject beyond the limits of a social constructivist approach by situating the neo-Victorian body in a constant process of becoming.

References

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Keywords

Gilles Deleuze; Difference and Repetition; Neo-Victorianism; Process of becoming; Female Freaks