

Reviews

Aeron Hunt. *Personal Business: Character and Commerce in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014. x + 225 pp. ISBN 978-0-8139-3631-4, \$39.50 (cloth); ISBN 978-0-8139-3632-1, \$39.50 (e-book).

Recent scholarship on the cultures of business and finance in the nineteenth century has explicitly or implicitly challenged the assumption that money generally and finance particularly were forces of abstraction, turning interpersonal relationships into impersonal exchanges. For example, Peter Knight's *Reading the Market*¹ discusses the everyday world of U.S. finance, as well as the rhetoric of personalization and personification in market culture, including fiction. Hannah Barker's *Family and Business during the Industrial Revolution*² delves into archival evidence of everyday lives to illuminate the complexities of personal relationships within family businesses. Appearing before these important studies, Aeron Hunt's *Personal Business* focuses on business writing in relation to Victorian British novels, making a convincing case for the persistence of personal relationships in the actual practice of business as represented in various genres throughout the Victorian period.

Hunt directly takes on the Marxist-influenced assumptions about abstraction to argue that literary and cultural criticisms have often missed something crucial about how real businesses operated. Moving away from “broad conceptual categories or theoretical issues—the economy, capitalism, or market culture; political economy and the semiotics of money” and concentrating instead on “material, embodied, and socially embedded interactions that constitute much of business life” (5) allows her to shed new light on business as conducted and represented.

Within an overall context of personal business and the importance that business writers placed on reading character, each chapter provides a specialized context and then pays off with a reading of a single novel. Specifically, the topics are: trust and the role of

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1. Peter Knight, *Reading the Market: Genres of Financial Capitalism in Gilded Age America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

2. Hannah Barker, *Family and Business during the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

business managers in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848); charisma and romance in business biographies in Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875); the reform of bankruptcy law in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860); and scientific theories about the transmission of character traits in relation to gender in Margaret Oliphant's *Hester* (1883).

Hunt's historicist methodology will be familiar to readers of literary criticism. She mines various modes of writing about business, which taken together, constitute a discourse: "company annual reports and investment prospectuses; character certificates for bankrupts; business advice publications; parliamentary debates; legal cases; scientific treatises; and, finally, novels" (7). The contextual sections that begin each chapter are thoroughly researched, and one of the most rewarding parts of the book is how she brings historical research to bear on readings that illuminate her chosen fictional texts. She shows that novelists were engaged with the contemporary discourse of business writing, so that the connection between text and context is not merely theoretical or speculative but also rather grounded in close attention to language, plot structure, character analysis, and other formal properties.

This productive juxtaposition results in fresh readings of all the novels she discusses. Knowing how business managers were viewed helps explain the strange doubling of Mr. Dombey and his manager, Carker. Appreciating the cult of charisma in business biographies illuminates Trollope's portrait of the financier Melmotte. The attempts of bankruptcy reformers to define character inform Eliot's sense that "ruin" fundamentally transforms those who experience it. Biological concepts on the transmission of business talents through a maternal line make sense of Oliphant's multigenerational business saga in which a woman serves as head of the family bank.

Also valuable and revelatory is how Hunt establishes that nonfictional genres of business writing, like works of literature, have their own formal properties. For example, business biographies have conventions that blur the boundary between fact and fiction. Especially fascinating is her reading of stock prospectuses. These historical documents always begin with a list of names: "Names crowd the materials of Victorian investment with an insistence that testifies to the continued value of offering gestures toward the personal" (97). This new awareness of what names signified in investment cultures results in a new perspective on *The Way We Live Now's* obsession with the status of names.

Furthermore, Hunt shows that the discourses of fictional and business writing "shared assumptions about the desirability of representational concreteness" and "the realist, mimetic impulse therefore was in dialogue with business practice as it was elaborated and formalized

during the Victorian period” (25). The mimetic impulse is as evident in business manuals as it is in realist novels. In this way, *Personal Business* makes an important contribution to the vast body of work on literary realism because it explains that the urgency to get at the truth—especially of a man’s character—had economic consequences.

Hunt emphasizes that business writing strove to teach businessmen how to read character. In this respect, the book provides an implicit argument for why literature majors might excel in business: they know how to read. Her conclusion addresses the relationship between literary and business cultures today, pondering whether reading fiction might help to produce better business people. She notes in passing that after the Bernie Madoff scandal of 2008, “sales of Dickens, Trollope, and Thackeray jumped more than 15 percent” (179). These authors were all critical of capitalism generally, and no female writer appears on the list. It would be interesting to know whether readers today can find relevance in Victorian novels only as critiques of capitalism and also whether there was a difference in how male and female authors approached such critiques. Certainly, *Personal Business* suggests that business as portrayed in Victorian fiction was complexly intertwined with other forms of business writing. Novels do more than exploit sensational frauds and crashes; they provide a window into the Victorians’ preoccupation with individual, familial, and broad social issues raised by commerce and finance in nineteenth-century Britain. Overall, her focus on the everyday personal dimensions of Victorian business is a welcome corrective to literary criticism that assumes capitalism was always and only a force of abstraction.

If anything, I would have liked to have more of this book and see its basic claims applied to works of noncanonical literature, such as the novels of Charlotte Riddell, which Silvana Colella has so effectively explored in *Charlotte Riddell’s City Novels and Victorian Business*.³ As it stands, readers are fortunate to have *Personal Business*, which in its balanced and thoughtful combination of historicist methodology and formalist analysis represents the best kind of scholarship being done in Victorian studies today.

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3. Silvana Colella, *Charlotte Riddell’s City Novels and Victorian Business: Narrating Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2016).