

Jill Marie Treftz, “Tennyson’s *The Princess* and the Culture of Collection.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 44 (2016): 239-263

Tennyson famously dismissed *The Princess* (1847) as “only a medley” (qtd. in Hallam Tennyson 2.71). Jill Marie Treftz argues in her cornucopia of an article that *The Princess* is not only a medley but “eminently a medley” (258), mirroring in its form – a lyrical collection – the poem’s engagement with the nineteenth-century culture of collection. Collection, through its connection to discourses surrounding education, natural history, gender and colonialism, offered a “scientific, or at least quasi-scientific, rationale for what might otherwise be construed as a purely consumerist and even decadent pursuit” (239); the “science” of collecting became “one way of ordering the world according to the modes of British thought and British morality” (242). *The Princess*, according to Treftz, both participates in, and endorses, the culture of acquisition: the collection at Vivian-place, and the various collections portrayed in the poem, reaffirm “the importance of these acquisitions to the establishment and survival of British national identity and the imperial power that relies upon it” (239). While the interior narrative, where collection is directly linked to gender norms, helps preserve “the domestic social order upon which British national and imperial identity rests” (239).

The article is split into five sections, the first of which provides an overview of the role collection plays in reinforcing social and cultural hierarchies in nineteenth-century Britain (241). Here, the author draws on Michel Foucault’s concept of the museum as heterotopia as a framework for the interplay between science, Empire, English national identity and the cultures of collecting at work in *The Princess*. Treftz claims that *The Princess* primarily engages with the amateur collectors of the period, but argues that even dilettante collectors were deeply embedded in the larger imperial-scientific culture underpinning institutions like the Royal Geographic Society, the Geological Survey of Great Britain and the Royal Gardens at Kew (242). Part II of the article focuses on the Vivian-Place collection in the frame narrative of the poem, the diverse contents of which, according to the author, represent “Britain’s growing imperial interests in an increasingly global society” (243). Treftz itemises the significance of each of the items of the collection, which are primarily anthropological or ethnographic in nature and an attempt to catalogue the native peoples of the world. In between these relics are ranged a “faint chronology” of artefacts that begins with fossils and ends with hunting trophies, which “very, very loosely” tracks the trajectory of British imperialism through collection and commerce (244-5). The section concludes with a discussion of the “monstrous horns of elk and deer” (Prologue 24) that hang on the walls alongside the family weaponry, which signal “total environmental dominance” (246). Part III, by far the longest section of the article, explores the eponymous Princess of the poem’s title, Princess Ida, as collector. Ida establishes an art collection, which is dependent upon a reading of femininity as morally and intellectually triumphant; she rejects the hypersexualised femininity of the Odalisque as well as the “stunted squaws of west and East”, thus reinforcing a common narrative of Western cultural superiority in which Western women are seen as privileged over their non-Western sisters (248). In amassing her collection, the author emphasises, Ida has usurped a masculine position and abandoned her “‘rightful’ place” (251). Part IV explores how Ida moves from the poem’s most visible collector to its most collectable

“item”: for the king, she is a potential piece in his collection; for the Prince, she is one half of an entity with social value – the married couple (253). Treftz reveals how the Prince becomes the ultimate collector by demasculinising Ida and stripping her of her power through the dismantling of her collection (255). Part V claims that the narrator’s shift to the socio-political in the final few lines of the poem forms an act of curation (258), a reinforcement of the importance that collecting and collections play in the establishment and security of British national identity (258).

Treftz provides a cogent and original reading of how *The Princess* draws on the “science” of collecting to reinforce British identity in the mid-nineteenth century, although she at times overplays her hand. For instance, her discussion in Part II of the place of “amber” in the Vivian-Place collection, which she claims is “curiously passed over in the catalogue” (245) is purely speculative and unsupported by direct evidence from the text. The significance of the amber, Treftz claims, “may” lie in the “ancient rosaries”, which until the Reformation were “often” made of imported Baltic amber (245), and thus “may” align with the collection’s promotion of “British cultural triumph” (245). But, there again, it may not. This slight lack of control does not diminish the importance or reach of Treftz’s article, however, which is essential reading for anyone interested in how science and culture intersect in mid nineteenth-century Britain.

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