

Review

Fictional representations of British imperialism in Southern Africa

Chrisman, Laura. 2000. *Rereading the Imperial Romance: British Imperialism and South African Resistance in Haggard, Schreiner and Plaatje.* Oxford : Oxford University Press. 241 p. R598.00. ISBN 0-19-812299-3.

Reading imperialist texts as reactive and assimilative

This impressive book by the widely published postcolonial scholar offers materialist readings of literary romances by Rider Haggard, Olive Schreiner and Sol Plaatje in its examination of fictional representations of British imperialism in Southern Africa. Chrisman's superb introduction delineates her approach to the romances: she is guided in her analysis by their internal logic, what she terms their ideological raw material and mediatory mechanisms; their contextualisation as products of and interventions against precise contemporary politico-economic processes; and the discursive relationship of the romances to other literary and socio-scientific discourses (p. 19). Her discussion of the cross-cutting late Victorian influences on *King Solomon's Mines*, for example, is deeply engaging, not least for its underlining of Haggard's fascination for the idea of interruption inscribed in the Zimbabwe ruins, which invited (British) completion of the mining operations. Just as engrossing is her revelation of the intertextual processes at work in *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, such as Schreiner's experimental reinvention of biblical discourse and contemporary polemic, converting anything from photographs to parliamentary Blue Books to her aesthetic. It is thus evident that this book is essential for anyone doing work in postcoloniality.

Begun as a doctoral thesis at Oxford, this book has years later become a *tour de force* for its innovative perspective on three influential writers, whose literary intertextual relationships are pronounced (most obviously, perhaps, in Plaatje's discursive response in *Mhudi* to *Nada the Lily*). Chrisman highlights throughout the importance of reading imperialist texts as reactive, derivative and assimilative rather than as texts that determine reaction by opponents.

Settler-colonial and metropolitan positions

This book functions as a rejoinder to Gayatri Spivak's privileging of India as the definitive site of British imperial culture, reminding postcolonial scholars that there was indeed an empire beyond the jewel in the crown of the mid-nineteenth century. It is not always amenable to readers without a vested interest in, say, Rider Haggard's politics and ideology, yet Chrisman's extended focus on British Zululand serves to reposition its fetishised and reviled autochthonous people as central to British constructions of the colonised, and therefore reassert South Africa's literary impact on the British metropolis. Haggard – and his generally homosocial and masculine perspective – occupies four of the eight chapters. The extended discussion demands of the reader a committed interest in Haggard's construction of Zuluness (which Chrisman argues is a compound of settler-colonial and metropolitan positions), by which stage the reader is begging for Schreiner's counter-narrative. Schreiner and Plaatje are given only two chapters apiece, and the book could profitably have been cut down in the first half (perhaps only at the expense of the argument, though) to weight Haggard commensurately with his successors (the jacket blurb, interestingly plays him down to highlight the more anti-imperialist fiction). Nonetheless, though somewhat turgid in the middle chapters, the book is a singular achievement for its breathtaking range of sources and references which invest it with a value for postcolonial scholars even beyond its own scrupulous argument. Everyone who should be is in this book, and its scholarship is right up to date, no mean feat given the proliferating industry of post-colonial studies.

The prominence of Victorian imperial romance

Hannah Arendt's central location of Southern Africa as the culture-bed of late Victorian imperialism is applied to Chrisman's examination of literary subjectivities produced through the socio-political transformations of economic expansionism. The imperial romance form assumed a prominence during this period, as a mode that articulated and attempted to resolve the socio-economic contradictions brought about by rapid

capitalist expansion. Chrisman believes that it was the particular currency of fiction which made it a distinctive practice for the consolidation and contestation of imperialism. She shows how, two years before Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Schreiner offered a fictional critique of empire in *Trooper Peter Halket* which is more extensive in its exploration of metropolitan and colonial populations, including women's agency and working-class experience. Chrisman takes issue with Edward Said's reading of the metropolitan women's and working-class movements as uniformly pro-empire. The novel appeals to an imaginary British metropolitan audience, composed of competing interest groups, as potential opponents of Rhodes, even as Schreiner's materialist awareness foregrounds the impossibility of such a narrative realisation. Chrisman further questions Fredric Jameson's presumption that colonised peoples could not have any metropolitan sensory impact (take the famed 1879 resistance of the AmaZulu, for example). The cognitive and physical boundaries between metropolis and colony were more mobile than his scheme of commodification can allow for (all three writers discussed trafficked across metropole and colony and mediated both perspectives in their writings). She seeks to restore the category of the political, formal structures of government, which mediates and is mediated by race and gender – an aspect, often overlooked by post-colonial critics – and situates the book within the materialist work done on Victorian imperial literature by Patrick Brantlinger, Benita Parry, and others.

Chrisman's readings of Haggard, Schreiner and Plaatje

Chrisman reads Haggard as manipulating sexuality as political alibi, emphasising the destructiveness of heterosexuality to diminish the importance of white colonialism as a factor in the decline of the AmaZulu, treated increasingly by Haggard as victims, not agents, of history. She understands Schreiner as advocating the necessity for collective colonial and metropolitan oppositional action to imperialism, situating African women as primary bearers of resistance. Plaatje, in turn, is seen as taking this further to position African women as political agents in building a national, even pan-African, narrative, even as he makes creative use of the dissonances – the division between ideology and practice – within British imperialism.

Chrisman's discussion of *Mhudi* is the best thing in the book, highlighting as it does the complexity of the text, not reducible to rhetorical post-colonial interpretations, nor to evidence of transculturation. Plaatje's representations, for example, of the triangulated elements of the historical situation obtaining in the 1820s, and the semantic contra-

dictions of British imperialism in the 1910s, are multiply mediated. Unfortunately, however, Chrisman repeats these points verbatim both in her introduction (p. 17) and in the conclusion to chapter eight (p. 207-208) which does the argument – and the scholar herself – little favour. The book could, moreover, have done with a conclusion (although perhaps the introduction was definitive), as it ends abruptly with the coda outlined above.

The book's main contribution

Occasionally Chrisman's argument is disingenuous, as when she forces Plaatje's novel – supposedly following Schreiner – to advocate women's access to political representation including suffrage (p. 183), but there are not many of these infelicities. The book's main contribution to the field of fictional representations of empire lies in its determination to do justice to the complexities of these romances, which consistently resist reduction. If, as Plaatje suggests, good judgement requires reflexivity, strategic flexibility and receptiveness to the specific context (p. 173), then Chrisman has adopted his approach in her sensitive exploration of the mediating mechanisms, strategic contextualisation, and discursive relationships of the imperial romances in order to show how they were vehicles for the ideological contradictions of British imperialism in Southern Africa.

C.A. Woeber

School of Languages (English)
Potchefstroom University for CHE