Kate Thomas’s *Postal Pleasures* builds on well-established work on the role of the Penny Post in the nineteenth century, pointing to the way reformers like Rowland Hill envisioned it as a democratizing institution that could create national cohesion. Supposedly, by allowing all people the same rights to communicate at the same low rates, the Penny Post would organically circulate heteronormative familial affect throughout British space, binding citizens together in a natural extension of the nation and promoting moral and educational progress. So too, postal reformers saw improvements in international communication networks—both the post and the telegraph—as instrumental in maintaining imperial connections and building the discourse of international Anglo-Saxonism that would turn Britain’s potentially threatening “First Empire,” the United States, into an ally.

Diverging from these well-trodden paths, Thomas marks out her own critical space in arguing that the same networks that nineteenth-century theorists said would create productive
homogeneity across British and Anglo-Saxon spaces could also generate homoerotic effects. Through the analysis of such familiar queer writers as Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, and Henry James, and perhaps less clearly queer writers like Anthony Trollope and Rudyard Kipling, she shows not only how the social gender and sexual codes that grounded communication networks were constantly in flux, but that postal networks were always already queer. These networks, Thomas argues, served the purpose of making people “geographically connected, and giving them literal and figurative addresses or coordinates” (223), but identities could also be fluid and connections muddled, as evidenced by the Victorian fascination with postal plots in fictional rather than epistolary form. In postal plots, the appearance of envelopes—stamps, postmarks, addresses—and the incidents surrounding circulation and delivery (as well as the incidents in the transmission of telegrams) become more important than the content of the missives themselves. Delays, distance, and the intermediation of postal employees all indicate that communication is anything but direct. For Thomas, these postal plots stress texts’ detachment from rooted subjectivities as “a universal communication system […] allows for queer interactions to be undifferentiated and unmarked from straight ones” (8).

The figure of the postal employee in particular remains the central figure throughout Postal Pleasures as Thomas tracks the various ways postal employees participate intimately in the lives of others. In most cases these are literary, but Thomas’s first chapter focuses on the historical accounts of the Cleveland Street Affair, which first became news in 1889. Thomas
suggests that the recruitment of messenger boys into prostitution was facilitated by the post office itself, which promoted a homosocial domestic alternative to the heteronormative family. Moreover, messenger boys were eroticized in part as a result of their postal uniforms, which, when worn during sex, ensured that “[h]aving sex with a telegraph boy was a way of having sex with Queen and country, with officialdom” (46). The prosecution of the aristocratic men who hired these boys was intended to very publically detach the post office from associations with abuse and queerness, though Thomas’s reading of Oscar Wilde’s 1895 trial and Wilde’s postal communications with other men indicates that queer correspondence was constantly merging with—and perhaps indistinguishable from—straight correspondence.

No treatment of the Victorian post office in literature would be complete without the inclusion of Anthony Trollope, who worked for the Post Office for over thirty years. Thomas devotes one full chapter and portions of two others to Trollope’s postal fictions and his autobiographical accounts of his work in the post office. As she notes, Trollope’s approach to writing was famously mechanical and driven by rigid word quotas, but it was also distinctly impersonal in that Trollope enjoyed taking on the personas of others when writing. This, in Thomas’s view, indicates that Trollope had the capacity for “a queer kind of sympathy” (82)—sympathy for the non-heteronormative and non-familial. Trollope’s postal novel *John Caldigate* (1879), for example, is in Thomas’s view a “pro-sex novel” (92) in that it does little to criticize its promiscuous titular protagonist who, when accused not entirely unfairly of bigamy, instead
critiques his evangelical mother-in-law who does not want her daughter Hester to ever marry. Luckily for Caldigate, postal clerk Samuel Bagwax saves the day by reading the tell-tale signs on a doctored envelope used as evidence in the bigamy trial. Thomas suggests, however, that the novel does not reaffirm the morality and sanctity of marriage. Rather, it calls marriage into question by showing that marriage is a contract governed by legal frameworks and is only one of a multitude of relations.

Thomas’s third chapter—one of her strongest—features her only reading of a woman writer, Eliza Lynn Linton, alongside her reading of Anthony Trollope and Thomas Hardy, and shows how depictions of women postal employees challenged not only gender normativity, but also heterosexuality. Where Trollope suggested that such jobs could save middle-class women from prostitution, and many Victorians believed they would instill the type of duty and submission that would make such women good wives, it also provided women with alternatives to marriage and opportunities to build homosocial relations with other women. In Trollope’s short story “The Telegraph Girl” (1877) and Linton’s novel The Rebel of the Family (1880), the female protagonists temporarily take on the role of the husband in their domestic relationships with other women. These opportunities exist in large part because of their employment with the post office, for work itself figures for Thomas as a “connotative metaphor for lesbianism” (111). While these women’s gender transgressions are ultimately contained within heterosexual marriage, Thomas demonstrates that the women’s femininity in the end is infused with masculine
virtues such as “industry, duty, and patriotism” (126) derived from their experience as civil
servants. She concludes with Hardy’s novel *A Laodicean* (1881), analyzing the way a lesbian
relationship is structured through telegraphs between the two women that bypass male suitors
and heterosexuality itself. This novel, too, ends in a heterosexual marriage, though Thomas’s
major claim is that telegraphy enables a “fleeting vision of a reorganized society in which the
logic of a communication network engenders intercourse between a diversity of people and
configurations of gender” (147).

One of the strengths of Thomas’s final chapter is that it demonstrates the fact that the
queer effects of postal plots are not purely liberatory; they are also complicit with the growing
phenomenon of late-nineteenth-century transnational Anglo-Saxonism. This transnational racism
has received more critical attention of late from Victorian scholars, and Thomas makes a
fascinating contribution to the discussion in arguing that where letter-writing between Anglo-
Saxon spaces was meant to reinforce familial relations, those familial relations can be displaced
by the “homosocial and often homoerotic structures of imperial bureaucracy and postal
networks” (157). She focuses particularly on the homoeroticism of Anglo-American
brotherhood, showing how Arthur Conan Doyle resolves the plot of “A Study in Scarlet” (1887)
via the tightness of the Anglo-American communication networks. In a chapter that also
variously touches on Kipling, Jack London, Whitman, and Edward Carpenter, Thomas most
notably offers a queer reading of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) based on its depiction of the
post and telegraph. The use of communication networks in *Dracula* models two different versions of empire, showing that networks can solidify Anglo-American brotherhood in the novel but also open them to a degenerative vampiric invasion.

One question Thomas leaves only partially answered is why telegraphy and regular mail are theorized together; Thomas dismisses this issue, making the curious claim that “[t]o the nineteenth-century mind, there was less difference between a post-letter and a telegram than there is to a twentieth- or twenty-first-century mind” (34). She later calls this same clarification into question when she demonstrates the fact that telegrams were far more expensive than the Penny Post, and in essence reproduced the unequal access to communication networks that the Penny Post had supposedly solved. This is, however, perhaps a point for future research and analysis. *Postal Pleasures* inspires useful questions about the formal dynamics of Victorian communication, and Thomas’s work is expertly intersectional as she weaves together a complex understanding of the way literary depictions of postal networks were inflected by the politics of gender, class, sexuality, and race. Indeed, *Postal Pleasures* makes a crucial contribution to the study of queer theory and the growing field of transnational Victorian literary studies.

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