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Extraordinary Pasts: Steampunk as a Mode of Historical Representation

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Introduction

The publication of two dedicated anthologies of steampunk short stories (*Extraordinary Engines*, edited by Nick Gevers, and *Steampunk*, edited by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer) in 2008 shows that steampunk fiction is alive and well, and far from being an exhausted mode. Why have so many of our fantastic writers suddenly found in the last decade or two such a rich imaginative ground in the Victorian era? Certainly there is no simple answer to this question, but I believe that part of the answer lies in examining in detail the ways that steampunk fiction uses and represents history. We are all familiar with arguments that claim that when popular culture represents the past, it often gets it wrong, imposing present-day historicity on a past that serves mostly as a costume party. We might look at steampunk as speculative fiction's revenge against such arguments, because steampunk is a fiction that places a premium on minutely accurate historical detail, within flamboyantly wrong imagined pasts, in order to explore the ways in which the conventional historical sensibility sometimes gets it wrong. As Jacob Burckhardt once said, history is "on every occasion the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another" (171). Steampunk takes this impulse to heart in order to create an imaginative engagement between the present and the past that makes possible a challenge to the totalizing narrative of historical progress.

Up to now, academic discussion of steampunk fiction (see Clayton, Hantke, Spencer, Sussman, Tatsumi, and others) has been almost completely confined to discussion of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine*, which is certainly a work of immense importance. However, general conclusions about the sub-genre have been drawn based on this one text, and its idiosyncrasies have been imputed to the entire movement. For example, Jay Clayton's *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace*, which explores many themes and theories close to the heart of steampunk, uses Gibson and Sterling's novel as

the sole example from the science fiction sub-genre. Clayton condemns the novel on the basis of its gender politics and then gives no further mention of steampunk fiction. It seems to me that, while sf writers need to be held accountable for the outdated gender constructs that still seem to plague our plots, this critique is not necessarily relevant to the question of steampunk's historical representation. It also seems rather hasty to dismiss all steampunk fiction because of the gender politics of one novel. If we look at the range offered by the thirteen stories in *Extraordinary Engines*, for example, we do not find too many of the damsels in distress or heroic shoot-'em-ups that Clayton justly laments—instead we have outraged and capable women destroying their tormentors ("Lady Witherspoon's Solution"; "Static"; "Machine Maid") and soft-spoken automatons quietly teaching their engineer-mechanics the meaning of heart and heroism ("American Cheetah"; "Steampunch"). Clearly, it is a mistake to pass judgment on the role of gender in steampunk based on *The Difference Engine* alone,[1] and there might be other ways in which our critical perspective on steampunk has been skewed by this narrow focus on the one novel as well.

So as we turn to the question of assessing steampunk as postmodern historical representation, I want to set aside Gibson and Sterling, and take Gevers's *Extraordinary Engines* at the word of its jacket copy, and look at it as "The Definitive Steampunk Anthology," or at least consider it as a reasonably good sample of steampunk fiction, from a variety of different authors and approaches. I will explore the stories of this anthology comparatively, rather than discussing individual stories in depth, to discover the strategies of historical representation that bring them together. That said, four stories stand out for more lengthy treatment: "American Cheetah" by Robert Reed, "Lady Witherspoon's Solution" by James Morrow, "Steampunch" by James Lovegrove, and "Petrolpunk" by Adam Roberts.

What Is Steampunk?

"Steampunk" is a term that has come to refer to a set of recent speculative fictions (that is, sf, fantasy, horror, and weird stories) that are set in or engage with the nineteenth century in a variety of ways. They are frequently (but not always) alternate history stories where the break from our own history, or "nexus event" in Karen Hellekson's terms, is a matter of technology. The term "steampunk" was coined in 1987 as a joke analogy with "cyberpunk" by K. W. Jeter as he attempted to link his own fiction to that of Tim Powers and James Blaylock. These were works of gaslight romance fantasy, but with a special focus on technology, and a boisterous playfulness and flamboyance, particularly with regard to icons or pieties of history, that distinguished them from the more nostalgic traditions of gaslight romance. Though the term has been

a part of informal sf discourse for more than twenty years, it was often used pejoratively, or as an indication of excess, or even lamented directly (e.g., Van Gelder 23; "Bill" 35; Odell and Le Blanc 10). Nevertheless, "steampunk" has stuck and gained currency, and now appears as a positive categorizing term in places like jacket copy and encyclopedias. I would argue that this term has stuck with us instead of competitors like "anachrotechnofetishism" or "gonzo-historical" because it brings together a number of central elements of the texts: "steam" evokes specifically the nineteenth century and a focus on technology, past and present; "punk" evokes an irreverant attitude toward history and, through association with cyberpunk, an iconoclastic concern with the origins and conventions of sf.

Historical Representation?

While many steampunk stories offer an explicit nineteenth-century date for their events (e.g., "Lady Witherspoon's Solution"; "American Cheetah"), not all adopt an alternate history structure. Several of the stories in *Extraordinary Engines* are not actually set in the past at all. "Steampunch," for instance, is set on Mars. "Petrolpunk" is set in an alternative early twenty-first century. Jay Lake's "The Lollygang Save the World on Accident" is set in a giant pipe miles high in the sky, as disconnected from any recognizable historical setting as it is from the ground. So, what makes these stories historical representation at all? To take the example of "Petrolpunk," its alternate twenty-first-century reality is ruled over by an immortal Queen Victoria, and technological development has been arrested in the steam age by a royal decree against the mining of underground natural resources (i.e., petroleum, hence "Petrolpunk"). We are to understand that historical change has been arrested with technological change and the culture of nineteenth-century England persists along with its queen. The gentlemen who gather to watch the royal Titanium Jubilee (modeled after the Golden Jubilee of 1887) seem familiarly Victorian in speech, dress, and politics. So, even though we do not have an explicitly historical time setting, we clearly have an imaginative engagement with tropes for the Victorian era, albeit with an extension of that historical setting into our own contemporary moment in time.

Fredric Jameson argues that such postmodern fictional games with historiography evacuate real historical sensibility in favor of "connotation[s] of 'pastness' and pseudohistorical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces 'real' history" (20). Jameson suggests that such representations betray a blockage in genuine historicity, which is ultimately not just a matter of access to the past, but the process of reification through estrangement whereby we perceive "the present as history" (284). On the surface, we might think of the stories in *Extraordinary Engines* as examples of such a representa-

tional strategy and its drawbacks, since they certainly eschew what Jameson calls "real" history. But as we examine the stories in greater detail, to ask why they manipulate history in the ways that they do, we find that their games do not undermine the idea of the reality of the past but instead explore the intersections and limitations of the various textual ways in which we access it.

One of the first cues of "pastness" to the reader of a steampunk story usually comes from the language of the story. The first page typically features elaborate or archaic diction like "whilst" (Morrow 217), "poncey mandrake" (Lovegrove 15), or "propounded" (MacLeod 133). Similarly archaic spelling variants and schemes for capitalizing words for emphasis often help the texts to masquerade as Victorian. Indeed, "Petrolpunk" provides a clue to this game when its main "Victorian" character, a writer named Roberts after his own author, is faced with a character speaking contemporary English. The two can barely communicate, and when the traveler offers Roberts a pamphlet in contemporary colloquial slang, Roberts is so upset by how "atrociously" it is written that he cannot grasp its contents (312). He likewise becomes completely flabbergasted by the traveler's use of profanity. This parody reveals one facet of the attraction that mock-Victorianism offers the contemporary writer: the sense that Victorian English was a much more articulate language than that which we currently use and that the necessity of seeming "approachable" (312) that forces writers to simplify diction—Stephen King's injunction against the use of a thesaurus, say—can sometimes limit the possibilities of expression even more than an elaborately fantastic premise. Thus, in this case at least, we can understand the adoption of an ostensibly archaic language as both a "connotation of pastness" and an engagement with the historicity of the present.

Probably the most salient way that steampunk fiction signals its pastness, though, is through its defining "steam." Steam-age technologies figure prominently in these stories, often within the first page or two. Sometimes, as in the case of Kage Baker's "Speed, Speed the Cable," communications technologies like the gramophone and telegraph are of interest, but the pastness of the nineteenth century is more frequently signaled by technologies of transportation, like the steam ship and locomotive, or by horses and horse-drawn vehicles. But steampunk never leaves this pastness unmolested, as these technologies are reimagined in deliberately fantastic or anachronistic ways. When the narrator of "Steampunch" speaks of "all those weeks confined at close quarters, skimming across the trackless expanse, surviving on meagre rations, suffocating on the stink and breath of your fellow transportees," he is referring to an interplanetary rather than an intercontinental voyage (Lovegrove 25). The gramophone becomes a cybernetic implant for surveillance ("Speed, Speed the Cable"). And just when you got comfortable in a traditional American town, the James-Younger gang ride up on steam-driven mechanical horses ("American Cheetah").

Such deliberate breaks with the realism of historical representation draw attention to the fictional (and fantastic) status of the story, and by extension, to the narrative-making processes at work in any representation of history. As Hayden White argues, any work of history is necessarily "emplotted" into the conventions of narrative as part of the sense-making hermeneutical process before it can even be written (5–8). Historians have long been concerned that such emplotment can distort our understanding of historical truth, and yet emplotment is a fundamental part of historical understanding. One cannot grasp history outside of a representation of it, even if that representation only takes shape in one's own mind. However, while it may not be possible to escape the drive to make narratives out of the past, we can write a different history, imagine a new story from the old facts, or recover new facts about the past to reshape our existing history. As Linda Hutcheon argues, historiographic metafictions, like steampunk, "juxtapose what we think we know of the past [...] with an alternate representation that foregrounds the postmodern epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge" (*Politics* 71). Following Hutcheon, William Hardesty suggests that alternate history sf similarly "uses its art—by forcing the reader to seize a non-existent past—to problematize the received truth about the past" (81). Regardless of whether or not it adopts the alternate history format, steampunk is capable of articulating just such a critique, as we will see. Moreover, the flamboyance with which these stories depart from factuality is in fact a celebration of the imaginative engagement with the past that is at the heart of all history.

Epistemological Boundaries and Historical Detail

The above examples begin to show some of the complex ways that fiction and fact can interact in steampunk. Factual people and events are frequently invoked to anchor steampunk fiction in the real, only to have that realism exploded by the eruption of the fantastic, troubling the epistemological boundaries between history and fiction, between realism and speculative fiction, and between reality and representation. Ultimately, the existence of the past itself is not in question, and what is of interest are the various texts and discourses through which we access and make sense of the past. "American Cheetah," for instance, plays with the historical facts of the capture of the James-Younger gang in Northfield, Minnesota in 1876, a favorite historical moment for Western shoot-'em-ups. But the story's insertion of (a robot) Abraham Lincoln as the sheriff pitted against the gang of bank robbers, highlights the less well-known historical roots of the gang as a rogue troop of Confederate soldiers. This adds complexity to the meditation on slavery and the human which is traditional to sf stories about robots. On one layer, we have a fantastic fiction about steam-driven robots and an immortal and heroic

Abraham Lincoln. On another layer, we have a mythic western exploring the opposition between civilization and individualism. On a third layer, we have a traditional historical fiction based on actual events, and on yet another layer, we have a revisionist microhistory of facts about the historical gang. In this way, several different ways of apprehending or representing the past are brought together to reveal a thematic truth. As the robot Abraham Lincoln attempts to convince the robot Cole Younger that life is preferable to fighting, a metafictional critique emerges tying their respective kinds of heroism to the two sides of the Civil War. The interaction of these various ways that this specific past can be represented allows the story to articulate a metafictional reflection on the historical origins of the conventions of genre fiction.

It is the minuteness of detail with which historical events are presented that lends the sense of genuine historicity to these fictions, regardless of how fantastical the rest of the story might be. Careful mention of specific battles in the Crimean War, for example, in "Speed, Speed the Cable," continually insist upon the factuality of the fiction. This is a defining characteristic of all historical fiction. But, as Georg Lukács argues, traditional historical fiction uses historical detail to develop a sense of "historic faithfulness," in which "it matters little whether individual details, individual facts are historically correct or not" (65). By contrast, in steampunk fiction, verifiability is the key to the entire game. Indeed, the accuracy of these details seems to get correspondingly sharpened, the more fantastic the departure of the story from our narrative of history. Moreover, steampunk's historical references are sometimes so obscure that they are less a matter of reference to a shared sense of solid history that the text can slot itself into, as they are in traditional historical fiction, and more a reward for careful or knowledgeable readers, or readers who follow the text outside itself into the historical record. For instance, not all readers are expected to know that when Roberts looks at William Holman Hunt's painting, "Victorissima—Light of the World," Queen Victoria has been substituted for Jesus (Roberts 290). Even fewer would be expected to remember the Box Railway Tunnel, engineered by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, when they read a reference to a Brunel Box, while they might recognize a misspelling of Stirling Engine as a nod to Bruce Sterling (Reed 338). These are historically accurate details, to be sure, but they do not refer to a commonly shared received narrative of history in the way that historical fiction is supposed to. Rather, they point to the absence of that sense of solid historical knowledge, at the same time as they assert the reality and verifiability of the historical record.

These historical details are scattered through steampunk fiction like the "easter eggs" of video games, which invite and reward a deeper engagement from a dedicated player. They are prizes for readers with great reserves of historical knowledge but also for readers who look them up afterward, since fol-

lowing such a trail often adds layers of richness to the text. Yet even if one does not actually look them up, a reader of steampunk is trained to recognize such historical trivia and think, "that's probably something real." They create a sense of expertise in the reader, or access to secret knowledge that remains lost to the culture at large, and celebrate the privilege of access to such records that we enjoy in the digital age. Gradually, the presence of these "facts" in the fiction works to train steampunk readers to practice what historians call "microhistory."[2] That is, to look for historical truth in the interconnections between minute events and minor players acting as individuals within, and being shaped by, larger historical forces, especially when such a practice can challenge or revise our existing sense of the grander historical narrative. At the same time, though, this reliance on the extratextual historical record shows that, rather than being irreverant towards the past itself, steampunk fiction puts tremendous value on the practice of engaging with the factual past, especially when that engagement reveals a historical world that differs from the one we expected.

It is as part of this constellation of practices that specific historical people and events are frequently invoked to anchor steampunk fiction in "real" history. Notable favorites who appear again and again in steampunk stories are Jack the Ripper, Charles Babbage, Ada Lovelace, Queen Victoria and other royals, and the Romantic poets. Each of these figures is iconic for some very specific reasons. Babbage is so ubiquitous as the inventor of the steam computer that never came to be as to be now practically banished from this closely intertextual fiction—his name appears now as a synonym for computer in "American Cheetah" or merely as a telephone exchange in "The Lollygang." Ada Lovelace (daughter of Byron, and a mathematician) is, like Babbage, a figure for unrecognized and thwarted genius, but with the added complication of repression based on gender, and she is also a figure for the connections between the "two cultures" of the sciences and the arts (see Snow's and Clayton's discussion). The Romantics, particularly the Shelleys, similarly symbolize the interconnections between discourses of the soul and discourses of science, as well as the impact a small group of like-minded individuals can have on history (e.g., Morrow 228). The larger figures of public history, such as Queen Victoria or Abraham Lincoln, are treated rather differently though, and tend to wind up secretly being single-celled organisms ("Petrolpunk") or automatons ("American Cheetah"), and it is through this kind of iconoclasm that steampunk expresses its inherent distrust of the master narratives of great leaders in traditional history. Steampunk is much more interested in the minor players in history, especially in recovering histories of anachronistic people and things.

Along with this play with facts in the fiction, steampunk also juggles "connotations of pastness" that come specifically from fiction, especially from

Victorian social realism. These fictions are inhabited by pickpockets and orphans trapped in hostile domestic situations from Dickens and the Brontes,[3] rags to riches tales, and above all, solitary scientists in elaborate laboratories who could be either Dr. Frankenstein (Shelley) or Frank Reade from the Edisonade dime novel (Enton), or more likely a bit of both. Distinctions between "high" and "low" culture, and between fiction genres, are decisively rejected in steampunk fiction, which seeks instead the interconnections between such categories in a historical moment when they were first becoming clearly distinguished. For example, Ian R. MacLeod takes an archetypal sf mad-scientist plot in "Elementals" and introduces fairy-type creatures who only take on corporeality to the extent that those around them believe in them, in a direct reference to J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*,[4] blurring our own contemporary distinction between sf and fantasy as well as the "ghetto" boundary between high and low culture. These are combined with references to Freud's essay on "The Uncanny," when the narrator twice experiences Freud's misrecognition of his own reflection in a mirror and on a train to boot (MacLeod 160, 175). Including this parody of Freud's own experience jumps genres between fiction and theoretical writing, even as it mirrors Freud's own process of developing his theory out of literature. Figures from real history cohabitate with figures from past fiction; theory and literature intermingle; high literature and popular culture collide; sf, fantasy, the western, the detective story, and realism—all are brazenly juggled together. "Elementals" historicizes this indiscriminate genre mixing by dramatizing a Victorian science and magic show, suggesting "In those days, the distinctions were not so great" (MacLeod 148), providing yet another clue as to why this particular period of history is of interest. Yet while these epistemologically distinct historical sources and genres are leveled in the texts themselves, the reader is supposed to recognize the differences and is supposed to register this mixture as radical. Indeed, the uncanny effect that these epistemological boundary-crossings creates would be entirely lost if we didn't believe in the differences between these discourses to begin with.

Jack the Ripper is the iconic figure who bridges all of these categories, because while the Whitechapel murders certainly happened, Jack himself can be thought of as an invention of the popular press, a fictional murderer for real murders. "Steampunch" and "Lady Witherspoon's Solution" both feature a Ripper caught and punished, while Keith Brooke's "Hannah" dramatizes a different type of Whitechapel sex murder. Jack the Ripper haunts steampunk fiction as a symbol for the limits of historical access—our inability to ever know definitively what really happened—and the way in which this limit is the very thing that offers us imaginative access to the past, because the indeterminacy of events allows us to imagine our own solution to the murder, our own identity for the murderer, our own version of "what really happened."

Several of the stories in *Extraordinary Engines* directly address this theme of the limits of historical access. Jeffrey Ford's "The Dream of Reason" takes the form of a reconstructed and revised history, correcting errors of a Romantic version and weighing the accuracy of different documentary evidence and competing versions of events (e.g., 431, 435). Similarly, the narrator of "Lady Witherspoon's Solution," Captain Carmody, presents us the purported diary of Kitty Glover, which he has transcribed into his own Captain's log. Yet Carmody announces that he has omitted most of the diary, particularly Kitty's poetry, so we are limited in our access to her tale by what he found "of note." Furthermore, Carmody muses on the limits of his own access to what really happened because, for instance, the diary does not make clear what happened between Kitty's mother and Lady Witherspoon. In this way, these stories continually work through the textual nature of our access to history and engage in multiple levels of intertextuality. Sometimes this becomes a matter of autoreferentiality, as when "Petrolpunk" includes an etymology of its own title and editorial notes critiquing itself (333). But for the most part, these stories prefer to avoid such solipsism and continually gesture outside themselves to the world at large and to the intricate network of texts through which they develop their meanings.

Past and Present

In the stories in *Extraordinary Engines*, pastness is generally used to mark the difference between the nineteenth century and the twenty-first through the use of obsolete settings and social forms, such as the gentleman's club ("Elementals"; "Hannah"; "Speed, Speed the Cable") and the ladies' society ("Lady Witherspoon's Solution"), or through markers of cultural change, like attitudes about race ("American Cheetah"), gender ("Machine Maid"), and class ("Static"). But this ostensible distance between the two times is often set up in order to call the very notion of cultural change into question. Frequent mention of obsolete cultural forms, like the music hall (Lovegrove 29; MacLeod 151) and the penny dreadful (Lovegrove 30; MacLeod 150), underscore an image of the nineteenth century as the distant historical point of origin for many of our now established cultural forms and pastimes. For instance, "Steampunch" tells of the rise and fall of a popular entertainment known as "mechano-boxing," which fits into the historical narrative of increasing middle-class leisure and the growth of mass entertainment in the late nineteenth century. Yet there is also a clear reference here to *Robot Wars*,[5] a competition of the late 1990s where engineers designed robots to fight one another.

In "Steampunch," mechano-boxing is eventually outlawed due to the vociferous opposition of one John Sholto Douglas, Marquess of Queensbury. Douglas opposes mechano-boxing because he believes strongly in the benefits

of athleticism and healthy competition to the human body and spirit, and he fears that the popularity of mechano-boxing will lead to a decline in human sports. The historical Douglas, of course, was a strong proponent of sports for just these reasons, and to this day, boxing follows the Marquess of Queensbury rules, to which he lent his patronage. "Steampunch" is citing this very specific historical detail as a point of origin for a contemporary cultural practice. At the same time, however, the story asks us to look at the historical cultural conflict as an analogy for contemporary conflicts over video games and childhood obesity. This interplay between genealogy (the Victorians are our distant forebears) and analogy (we are very much like the Victorians) is a key feature of steampunk historical representation, because at the same time as historical change is asserted by the genealogical model, the fundamental idea of progress is negated by the analogic model. The balance between these two models allows steampunk to call the orthodox idea of progress into question without abandoning the possibility of change altogether.

As often as not in steampunk stories, dreams of progress, both scientific and social, are revealed as dangerous drives to impose one's own order on others. Jeff VanderMeer's "Fixing Hanover," for instance, includes an engineer's simple and eloquent lament for his own complicity in the violence of an empire: "He took his plans, his ideas, to the government. They listened enough to give him some money, a place to work, and an assistant. All of this despite his youth, because of his brilliance, and in his turn he ignored how they talked about their enemies, the need to thwart external threats" (393). Indeed, this theme of responsibility, of the hubris of the mad scientist, of the violence which science and technology make possible, permeates steampunk as the tie at the core of connections between contemporary sf and nineteenth-century fiction. "The Dream of Reason," "Lady Witherspoon's Solution," "Elementals," and "Hannah" all feature scientific experiments gone wrong with deadly consequences for their human subjects, and each of these stories carefully explores the nature of the scientist's relationship to his subject and the perversity that can arise out of the drive to understand the physical world without care for the human. As the opening of "Hannah" cautions: "A man of science must never succumb to the fallacy of believing that his quest for knowledge and understanding can somehow be kept pure, separate from real life. A man of science is in a specially privileged position, almost God-like in some ways. A man of science has responsibilities. Oh yes, my friend, responsibilities" (261). These stories articulate an ambivalence about the responsibilities of the scientist or technologist in worlds filled with consequences, the conflict between dreams of reason, or the drive to create, and the destruction of the innocent and of the environment.

As the most outrageous example, "Lady Witherspoon's Solution" explores the connections between social and scientific progress, by featuring a group

of feminist vigilantes (The Hampstead Ladies' Croquet Club and Benevolent Society) who use a chemical serum to "devolve" offending men (such as the aforementioned Jack the Ripper) into a Neanderthal-like form and direct their violence upon one another for the ladies' gambling sport, before being castrated and exiled to an otherwise deserted island. In this way, the story yokes the ideas of evolution and social progress together, mirroring the Victorian notion of social Darwinism, wherein the more refined and civilized person should also be thought of as more highly evolved. The "bestial" men who terrorize London's women in the workhouses, the courthouses, and on the streets should likewise be thought of as already less than human. The satire is over the top but finely balanced and makes clear the potential for tyranny underlying the most benevolent of social projects. As Kitty Glover attempts to use the companion Serum U to achieve a posthuman evolutionary stage, her openness is transformed into arrogance, her wit into derision, and her independence into cruelty, even before the consequences of her hubris send her into devolution. In this way, "Lady Witherspoon's Solution" creates a complex, if humorous, articulation of the connections between the drives for progress (both social and scientific) and the drive for power or mastery over the world. This theme is nothing new to sf, of course, being one of the foundational myths of the genre. It is only necessary to note here the ways in which steampunk fictions rearticulate that myth through returning to its historical and literary origins.

What is particular to steampunk articulations of this theme, though, is a focus on the process of meaning making and interpretation of the world and the ways in which we often get it wrong. "The Dream of Reason" and "Lady Witherspoon's Solution" both feature wildly erroneous conclusions drawn from reasonable scientific premises: Amanitas Perul first mistakenly deduces that the stars are made of diamond, and when his experiment to trap their light and slow it down fails to produce the hypothesized diamond dust, he again erroneously concludes that the stars are made of nothing, sparking a complete paradigm shift in his culture's cosmogony. The historian narrator, a believer in this "modern" paradigm of nihilism, describes Perul's later conviction that the stars were flaming balls of gas as the "delusions" of a madman (Ford 441). In this way, the theme of error permeates this story, ultimately suggesting that our own cosmogony is likewise ultimately a kind of "best guess" drawn from available data and experiments and that it is unlikely to be the final word on the matter. Similarly, "Lady Witherspoon's Solution" features repeated errors in interpretation, from Captain Carmody's initial assumption that the creatures he finds on the island are neanderthals to a key error in interpretation that Kitty makes. Renault had named his first serum, Serum U, which Kitty interprets as "Uplift," where Renault had meant "Unknown" (Morrow 239). Serum D is likewise presumed to mean "Devolu-

tion," where Renault had intended "Demimonde" because "Such unorthodox research belongs to the shadows" (240). Despite her mentor's correction of this error, Kitty persists in labeling the serums according to her mistaken interpretation and fails to heed the warnings of her teachers about the dangers and consequences of this research—to her downfall, naturally.

Yet the most poignant error in *Extraordinary Engines* is certainly that of Mrs. Goverman in Margo Lanagan's "Machine Maid." Mrs. Goverman, isolated in the colonies and unsure of her new role as a wife, disappointed at having to abandon her own interest in engineering, disgusted and oppressed by the sexual acts her husband expects, discovers that the automaton he has provided to help her with the housework is capable of sexual functions as well. She assumes that her husband is availing himself of such services and, in her misery, redesigns the machine so that it will amputate the offending body part. Consequently, although she has by that time come to love her husband, Mrs. Goverman is more disappointed than surprised to learn of his bloody death during her absence. Yet, ultimately, Mrs. Goverman discovers that the doll was not the instrument of Mr. Goverman's death, leaving her with proof of her husband's fidelity and love at the very moment that she perceives what she has lost. "Machine Maid" works the interplay of errors, interpretation, and responsibility from a different perspective than the other stories we have discussed, but it shares with them the focus on responsibility and the connections between the work of the scientist/engineer and the "real world" outside that work. In this way, "getting it wrong" becomes a major theme of steampunk fiction, whether it's the mistaken interpretation of a historian, the erroneous conclusion of a scientist, or the failure to trust in a partner.

Conclusion

Despite their interest in "getting it wrong," these stories celebrate the drive to document, to explore, and to interpret the world, both present and past, which they locate in the nineteenth-century enthusiasm for science and for "words like *Exploration*, *Revolution*, *Rationalism*, and *Utopian*" (Baker 111–12). This nostalgia is tempered by consistent worry over the consequences of scientific and technological progress, and of an untempered drive to mastery, as they assert that we can never know the whole of the answer, either scientifically or historically. These are stories that understand "that the smartest, surest voices were often wrong, and it was foolish to believe that even the simplest question had an easy, eternal answer" (Reed 338). Their parody of the cultural forms of the past is both playful and deferential, looking to bring the past and present into contiguity in order to revise our understandings of both. As we have seen, none of the strategies of historical representation that these stories adopt is arbitrary, and they all seek to

develop an imaginative engagement with a past that seeks genuine historicity in continually challenging or revising the totalizing narrative of historical progress.

If we look at the poets who make up Kitty's Academy of Arts and Letters, we see a neat schematization of four different approaches to history: Kitty writes a feminist historical romance about Boadicea, which presupposes that we can have imaginative access to the past and that human nature does not change with time. Tobias Crowther writes religious and metaphysical poetry that emphasizes the eternal. Ellen Ruggles writes modernist poetry, focusing on the present and quotidian objects and asserting that these are all we can truly know. The Nietzschian Edward Pertuis writes sf poetry about the future and the coming of the Ubermensch or Superman (with a "dashing scarlet cape," no less [232]). As Kitty and Edward fall in love and conduct their experiment, from this perspective, "Lady Witherspoon's Solution" is what happens when sf and historical romance fall for one another, much like steampunk itself. In the story, this pairing is both dangerous and ill-fated, but I think we can have better hopes for steampunk.

Notes

1. Indeed, an extended investigation of the role of gender in steampunk fiction is clearly needed but is outside the focus of this article.

2. Giovanni Levi defines microhistory as "a procedure which takes the particular as its starting point (a particular which is often highly specific and individual, and would be impossible to describe as a typical case) and proceeds to identify its meaning in the light of its own specific context" (110).

3. A detailed investigation of the connections between steampunk texts and their nineteenth-century sources would certainly be illuminating as well but is beyond this paper's scope.

4. *Peter Pan, or, The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* was first performed in London in 1904.

5. *Robot Wars* began as an American competition in 1994, but it was filmed as a BBC2 television series from 1998–2002, with some seasons rebroadcast in the US and Canada.

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Abstract

This paper discusses the thirteen stories in Nick Gevers's anthology, *Extraordinary Engines*, as exemplary texts for considering steampunk as a form of historical representation. Despite their cavalier attitude towards conventional history, the stories are found to adopt specific strategies of historical representation in order to work through metafictional concerns about the relationship between the present and the past, the origins of the conventions of genre fiction, and the idea of progress itself.