Review: Review: Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction

Reviewed Work(s): Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction by Talia Schaffer

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Source: *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (Jun., 2013), pp. 116-119

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ncl.2013.68.1.116

broaden literary history by means of the social and material histories of books and other printed texts. Today, as we are doing more and more of our reading outside of traditional book-objects, it is a particularly timely project. Price's analyses of how the Victorians did things with books might also help us notice what we're doing with their books as well as with our own.

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TALIA SCHAFFER. *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xii + 228. $65.

Talia Schaffer's new book, *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, generously offers two for one. The book signaled by the metaphorically condensed title explains how Victorian crafts and novel-writing were congruent enough to be conflated. The metonymically expansive subtitle encapsulates a parallel argument about handicrafts and fiction as more distinct endeavors. The book's first chapter, conclusion, and the opening sections of core chapters belong to the subtitle: they give us a history of handmade things distinct from readings of novels. The title's logic governs the remaining sections of the book, which address how novels by Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Yonge, Charles Dickens, and Margaret Oliphant represented crafts and used crafts to represent the work of fiction.

The first chapter and the conclusion provide a bold and intelligent account of Victorian domestic handicrafts, by which Schaffer means "anything made by hand, at home . . . whether for decorative or sentimental or pragmatic use" (p. 15). Schaffer draws our attention to both the theoretical implications and the too too solid—and sullied—materiality of wax corals, hair jewelry and painted papier-mâché tables. Schaffer refuses to dismiss Victorian handicrafts as "merely bad taste," taking them instead as "evidence of a way of thought" (p. 4) that grappled with industrialization, changes in the gendered division of labor, the rise of consumerism, and the unleashing of finance capitalism. Crafts and novels also shared the widespread nineteenth-century fascination with mimetic realism, which made an accurate imitation of a flower using wax or paper an impressive, endearing object rather than a repulsively kitschy one.

Schaffer tells the story of crafts as one of historical change. The anti-Romantic, anti-sublime handicrafts of the early nineteenth century sought to order and manage nature. In the 1840s, handicrafts developed a complex relationship to modern industrialism. By making crafts, middle-class women simultaneously expressed their distinction from the industrial workplace and their ability to rival it as speedy, precise manufacturers. The rhetoric framing mid-Victorian handicrafts was nostalgic, but their makers prided themselves on using up-to-date processes and materials (pp. 9, 58). The 1870s established a credit economy that devalued materiality and a consumer economy that emphasized purchase over production. As a result, handicrafts began to seem obsolete, attracting the contempt and hostility of the young and offering the Arts and Crafts movement an easy target.

Schaffer's account of Victorian handicraft evinces the virtues of the crafts she studies: an ability to order, preserve, and animate what to others might seem like detritus, and to restore the interest of devalued objects, beliefs, and people. This account also has some limitations. The first is methodological: *Novel Craft* gives us art without artists. When discussing what crafts meant to the Victorian women who produced them, Schaffer's argument often depends on surmises, leading to conjectural formulations such as "others must have mourned at finding their life's skills suddenly treated as barbarous amateurism" (p. 154). But the book almost never grounds such speculations in the words of Victorian women themselves. In the future histories of handicrafts that *Novel Craft* should inspire, it would be useful and illuminating to use the abundant corpus of Victorian life-writing to learn more about crafters themselves. The second limitation is that the historical narrative Schaffer provides is a bit too orderly. While the book's account of the 1840s is fully alive to the contradictions of domestic handicrafts that simultaneously imitated and protested industrial processes, the discussion of the 1860s and 1870s insists on too sharp a break with the previous era. For example, Schaffer herself points out that "prices for crafts [sold in bazaars] could veer wildly from one extreme to the next" (p. 12), yet the latter chapters overlook this similarity between crafts and stock-market shares by opposing crafts and speculative finance.

The book's central chapters discuss Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, Charlotte Yonge's *The Daisy Chain*, Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, and Margaret Oliphant's *Phoebe Junior*. These chapters tease out how "handicraft helps writers imagine scenes of craft production in which they work out the values governing their own text" (p. 19). In this part of the book, Schaffer shows how authors aligned novels

with the materiality, labor, and emotional resonance of handmade crafts (p. 19). In the first chapter, on Gaskell, crafts (especially paper crafts) become a meditation on ephemerality and a way to stage the redemption of the useless and outmoded. Paper, whether in the form of decorative spills, quaint notes, or the pages of Gaskell's printed text, "perfectly parallels the Cranfordians, who are both doomed and thriving, both extinct and continuing" (p. 68).

Schaffer contrasts Gaskell to Charlotte Yonge, for whom the pressing of flowers into albums resembles the preservation of souls: "In *The Daisy Chain*, characters are represented as weeds that must be pruned, dried, arranged, glued" (p. 93). This chapter, like the one on Oliphant, is essential reading, especially for scholars who still need persuading that Yonge and Oliphant merit serious consideration, although it also explains why readers today are likely to find Yonge antipathetic. Schaffer skillfully anatomizes Yonge's beliefs in the domestication of youthful wildness; the missionary conversion of colonized subjects; the replacement of flux with permanence, even at the cost of desiccation; and typological interpretations that reduce complex narratives and characters to uniform essential truths.

Chapter 4, on *Our Mutual Friend*, argues that Dickens uses handicraft's investment in "restoring, recycling, purifying, transforming" (p. 119) to dramatize challenges to finance capitalism, and the failure of those challenges. The focus here is on characters such as Betty Higden, Jenny Wren, Mr. Venus, and Riah, who represent the good side of salvage. Schaffer's reading contrasts those figures with the more villainous Gaffer Hexam, Rogue Riderhood, and Silas Wegg, who do not transform what they scavenge into something new that can be transferred to others (p. 125).

The themes of waste, paper, and sentiment are familiar ones in Dickens criticism, but *Novel Craft* ends on a far more innovative note in a brilliant chapter on Margaret Oliphant's *Phoebe Junior* that should help bring this underrated novel the attention it deserves. Schaffer shows how the generational conflicts in *Phoebe Junior*, which are also contests of status, get played out over objects. Phoebe represents the fast 1870s; she is no longer a producer who makes goods but a connoisseur who appraises them. But although Phoebe represents the death of craft's handmade aesthetic, she also embodies its sublation. Her eyes, Schaffer shows, "both see keenly and yet fill with blinding tears" (p. 168). Young Phoebe thus combines the evaluative powers of aesthetic discrimination with the emotive expressiveness associated with the sentimental home.

Novel Craft is an excellent book that marshals the history of women, industrialism, finance, material culture, the book form, and imperialism to provide a cogent historical narrative about handicraft that then informs Schaffer's expert readings of four significant novels. Schaffer deliberately refrains from making grand claims for handicraft as the key to understanding Victorian literature or culture (p. 6); she sees handicraft and novels sharing a commitment to realism but sees no grounds for arguing that either caused the other's interest in literalist mimesis. As a result, the arguments that *Novel Craft* makes about individual novels do not necessarily attain the status of paradigms, but they will help us better understand the watchguard that Lucy Snowe makes for M. Paul in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and the bazaar scene in Anthony Trollope's *Miss Mackenzie*. The book offers something fresher and more unexpected than yet another paradigm: it demonstrates that Victorian handicrafts merit our interest, whether they appear inside novels or without them.

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Gillian Silverman, *Bodies and Books: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in Nineteenth-Century America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. Pp. xiv + 226. $55.

Publishing a book like this one invites empiricist griping. Gillian Silverman contends that readers experienced bodily "communion" with others through the books they shared. Not surprisingly, such a thesis poses problems in confirming if readers did experience "consubstantiality" with others through books, or if this is an appearance produced by figurative language originating in prescriptive literature from the time and in the wider culture of performative sensibility. Indeed, *Bodies and Books: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in Nineteenth-Century America* may provide its own object lesson as a locus of communion between Silverman and anyone who has ever struggled to identify and assess transactions in reading that are no less historical for being elusive. This is not to ignore failings that might have been avoided through more time in the archive or fewer theory-driven arguments. Some of these I take up later. Yet *Bodies and Books* is a worthwhile addition to the already substantial body of work on nineteenth-century reading, if for no other reason than, by treating its paranormality as