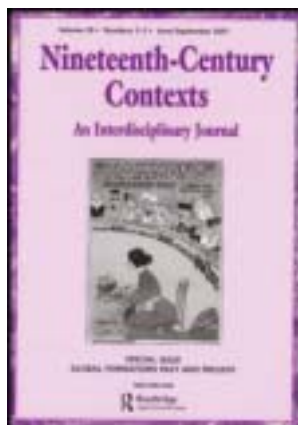


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Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction

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Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction

TALIA SCHAFFER

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 228 pages, 27 illustrations, bibliography, index, US\$65/GBP£40, (cloth), ISBN: 9780195398045

Talia Schaffer has taken four nineteenth-century British novels and considered them in conjunction with the domestic handicrafts used both in the selected works and in the wider world, to explore how the authors used crafts to reflect upon larger matters such as the economy, consumption, authenticity, and value. In addition, Schaffer explores how and why these writers used handicraft as a vehicle for understanding their characters and their contexts, but more broadly, she attempts to “change our understanding of the history of craft ideas” (5). She suggests that her selected authors used discussions around handicrafts to express wide-ranging anxieties about modernity, and offers an alternative set of ideas as a contrast to the conventional concerns of the period. This cross-disciplinary research encompassing material culture and literary studies is welcomed, as it highlights both the hidden messages of craft within the novels, and exposes an often derided and neglected craft history.

Schaffer makes explicit the connections between the novels and handicrafts by featuring an analysis of the particular paradigmatic crafts associated with each novel discussed, including paper crafts, pressed flowers, taxidermy, knitting, and hair jewellery. This is a useful way of giving the reader an insight into the background of the crafts, their use and promotion. Schaffer suggests that these craft practices were representative of what she calls the “craft paradigm” that she defines as “a set of beliefs about representation, production, consumption, value, and beauty” (4). She argues that handicrafts therefore offered an alternative to the contemporary understanding of these concerns. The Victorian novels that Schaffer uses to demonstrate these approaches are Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1851-3), Charlotte Yonge’s *The Daisy Chain* (1856), Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), and Margaret Oliphant’s *Phoebe Junior* (1876).

Schaffer reads *Cranford* “as a meditation on ephemerality” (23), which she suggests is particularly explained through both the centrality and fragility of paper in the novel. In *Cranford*, the role of paper crafts, originating in the eighteenth century, links to other paper products including public material, such as bank notes and advertising as well as domestic objects such as correspondence, spills, and sewn newspaper “pathways” designed to preserve carpets. Indeed Schaffer points out how the novel’s original title was *The Cranford Papers*, which indicated the centrality of paper in the novel but also its wider immersion in crafts and society. Schaffer usefully draws out the paradox of the omnipresent paper as being both valued and disposable.

On the other hand, Charlotte Yonge’s *The Daisy Chain* uses the notion of preservation of horticultural objects as the essence of the novel; in fact, the “chain” that binds the novel together is “the art of re-arranging and preserving nature” (93). In addition, crafts are used as a spiritual metaphor where “the characters are supposed to be like dried flowers” that are later manipulated into better versions of themselves, thus reflecting the spiritual development of the characters (94-5). In this novel the

significant craft is the fashioning of leather leaves based on natural examples, but here it is used to represent “the destruction of one’s original self, to be replaced by the permanent new version” of self (117). Both these earlier nineteenth-century novels maintain and support the notion of handicrafts as being both valuable and pervasive in life.

The later two novels, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Phoebe Junior*, use the craft paradigm “defensively, anxiously [and] antagonistically” (24) to present an irrelevant other that was to be superseded, Schaffer suggests, by issues around consumption rather than production. Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* occupies a moment when handicraft lost its position as a valued proposition and, as Schaffer says, had become an “ideal that it was no longer possible to inhabit” (120). In this case, the salvage process, as a transformation and reprocessing craft, was both creative and virtuous, a theme Schaffer returns to in her concluding chapter, in reference to contemporary recycling crafts. Although salvage and its re-use into objects had been a mainstay of much nineteenth-century handicraft, Dickens was recording its crumbling under the forces of consumption. In the world of Dickens, salvage crafts once valuable and humane have become the province of the poor, who, despite being thrifty and even transformative, do not fit into the modern world. The middle classes now purchase the “real thing.” The aviary has replaced taxidermy. Nevertheless, Dickens makes it clear that he is associated with the idea of a community and economy that appeared to be disappearing whilst he wrote.

Margaret Oliphant’s *Phoebe Junior* also sees a change in community and a rise in the consumer economy, which she emphasises as the change from making (crafting) to looking (buying). This change is, according to Schaffer, a gender issue in as much as the Arts and Crafts reformers, she suggests, usurped the amateurish handicrafters in favour of its apparent opposite, connoisseurship. Indeed the key crafted object in this novel is not the hair-decorated, solid gold brooch that has “financial rather than emotional value” (150), but a forged (crafted) bill that turns imitation into counterfeit. The bill represents a shunning of imitative crafts in favour of the connoisseur’s search for art and truth. In the end, Schaffer has shown how handicrafts as a language allowed the novelists to produce a lasting object that would go far beyond the paper medium itself (175).

Schaffer’s attempts to alter our understanding of the history of craft ideas are first brought into focus by the introductory chapter that explores ways of reading the crafted material culture of the time, but more usefully, in her postscript she explores contemporary craft and her role in “crafting” her own work. By reworking and refashioning the disparate “bits and bobs” of her research and readings, she has produced a valuable and very readable study that will be of great interest to historians as much as to literary scholars. This work is a fine example of cross-disciplinary scholarship that highlights the permanence of values associated with handicrafts in a rapidly changing world.

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