

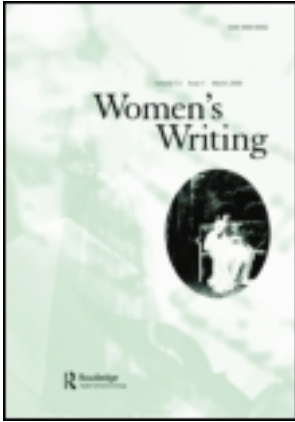
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### Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction

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in the arts expands our understanding of nineteenth-century culture. Wettlaufer's critical attention to the first half of the nineteenth century demonstrates the integral role of women in cultural construction and will reframe ongoing conversations about gender, representation and the woman artist.

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## Note

- 1 Antonia Losano, *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2008).

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

TALIA SCHAFFER

New York, Oxford University Press, 2011

240 pp., ISBN 978 0 19539 804 5, US\$65

*Novel Craft* does two equally valuable things. First, it documents and assesses a wealth of material that constitutes the mid-Victorian domestic handicraft movement. This movement flourished for a relatively short time, such that by the 1870s it was already starting to plateau and give way to the aesthetically alternative doctrines of the Arts and Crafts movement. However, in its peak years, domestic handicraft was a “thriving urban experience” (28) that made use of modern industrial technologies and enabled mid-Victorian women to assert their taste, skill and thrift. Schaffer clearly and carefully articulates the multiple aspects of the handicraft's meaning, as well as convincingly explains how it was the central aesthetic establishment against which the Arts and Crafts movement developed and defined itself. Here, Schaffer builds on previous work in the field of Victorian thing theory, and *Novel Craft* is a welcome addition to this body of literature.

Second, Schaffer argues that fictional representations of domestic handicraft in four Victorian novels function primarily in relation to the new credit economy, which was still a vaguely threatening and unknown set of abstractions between the 1850s and 1870s. Here, Schaffer builds on previous work to explore the hypothesis that handicraft fiction could “reinforce” readers' inclinations to hold on to a fully tangible and visible worth “instead of training them to believe

in immaterial value" (20). In this respect, *Novel Craft* marks a significant departure from much of the extant work on literary representations of the credit economy in nineteenth-century studies.

*Novel Craft* is remarkable for the material abundance of its first two chapters (the introduction and a historical framework), which are rich with lists and descriptions of a variety of simultaneously bizarre and delightful Victorian objects. The domestic handicraft movement encompassed crafts as diverse as knitting, papier mâché and taxidermy, as well as activities that do not fall into a recognizable craft tradition, such as shaping wire to resemble a branch of coral, wrapping it in wool and dipping it into paraffin wax (thus producing the mystifying "wax coral" which works so well to anchor Schaffer's introduction). What holds these diverse activities together is their adherence to the "craft paradigm" as Schaffer identifies it: a set of beliefs about "representation, production, consumption, value, and beauty" (4) that undergirds much mid-Victorian creative work, and which would otherwise be invisible to contemporary readers attempting to decipher the crises of valuation that often occur in these novels. The alterity of the craft paradigm is what charges the body chapters with their explanatory power. Here are four novels that have been read in one way, but which actually function in very different ways once we understand the meanings of domestic handicraft. In this manner, *Novel Craft* usefully delineates the otherwise invisible architecture of the domestic handicraft movement.

The experience of reading *Novel Craft* is somewhat bifurcated. The first two chapters contrast with the discussions of the novels, which may feature only one craft each, and which sometimes depart from materiality to discuss economics and paper currency. The four novels being read (*Cranford* [1851–1853], *The Daisy Chain* [1856], *Our Mutual Friend* [1864–1865] and *Phoebe Junior* [1876]) are not only about craft, but they are also about finance and the abstraction of the credit economy, as Schaffer reads these things in opposition to the tangible solidity of the handicraft world. In the chapters on Dickens and Oliphant, the treatment of paper as object, as circulating waste in the air and as forged banknote, exists alongside the treatment of crafts like salvage and hair jewelry. From here, the analysis moves to the economic register, exploring the mid-Victorian uncertainty with a symbolic currency replacing a literal, material register of money. *Novel Craft*'s argument traces the height of the domestic handicraft movement through characters who must negotiate between the solid and the abstract, the worthwhile and the worthless: at first, there is relief to be found in the tangible world of craft, but this solidity soon gives way to the pervasive credit economy, such that Dickens's plot fails and Oliphant satirizes the possibility of a redemptive materiality.

Schaffer's book is an important first undertaking in a field that will hopefully generate much more scholarship. Moreover, *Novel Craft* makes the

experience of encountering mid-Victorian domestic handicraft a great pleasure. Clear descriptions and plentiful illustrations enable the reader to appreciate the contours and plenitude of this material sphere. At the end of the book, one wants to find and experience more domestic handicraft in Victorian novels, to read Gaskell and Oliphant and others to discover and decode these fascinating objects oneself. *Novel Craft* provides a sophisticated and absorbing account of domestic handicraft and its relationship to the better-known Arts and Crafts movement, offering readers interested in women's history, materiality, aesthetics and the credit economy not only a rich source of archival material and detailed analysis, but also inspiration for further research.

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### **The Brontës in the World of the Arts**

SANDRA HAGAN AND JULIETTE WELLS, eds.

Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008

270 pp., ISBN 974 0 75465 752 1, £60

Branwell Brontë's famous portrait of his sisters was, up until the publication of Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars' *The Art of the Brontës* in 1995, for many people the only visual or mental link between the Brontë sisters and the world of art. *The Art of the Brontës* changed this by demonstrating with admirable thoroughness the extent to which not only Branwell, but Emily, Anne and, especially, Charlotte studied and practiced drawing. *The Brontës in the World of the Arts* builds on Alexander and Sellars' work by assembling a collection of essays in which knowledge of the Brontës' art is applied to new readings of their novels. Alexander, in fact, leads off the collection with her essay "Educating 'The Artist's Eye': Charlotte Brontë and the Pictorial Image", which details the ways in which Charlotte's ideas about visual art influenced not only her portrayal of Jane Eyre's drawings, but also her definition of realism. Antonia Losano's excellent essay "Anne Brontë's Aesthetics: Painting in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" extends her earlier work on the same subject to demonstrate that Anne's depiction of Helen Graham as a professional painter constituted a challenge to Charlotte's more conservative views regarding the relationship of art and professionalism to gender, as well as a way for Anne to argue for a more representational form of realism. Losano's essay, in fact, opens up new directions for the appreciation of the least-appreciated Brontë sister, and is thus perhaps the highlight of the collection. Most of the