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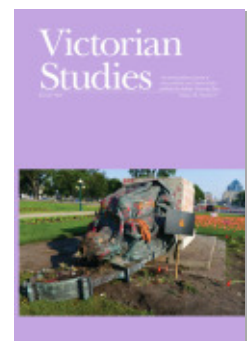
Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction

by Talia Schaffer (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction, by Talia Schaffer; pp. xvii + 274. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021, \$45.00.

It is consoling to imagine a historian of the future, looking back at the early 2020s for signs of the ways in which the crises and upheavals of our decade brought not only pain but also hope to all reaches of human thought. I am imagining such a historian reading Talia Schaffer's *Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction* and marveling at the ways a scholar of Victorian literature infused her scholarship with such a profound response to her moment. In *Communities of Care*, Schaffer brings Victorian and early-twenty-first-century discussions of caring for others into conversation with each other in ways that deepen our appreciation of both. Though clearly begun before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the book is mindful of other recent challenges to change the way we care for others in our communities, including the changing conditions of academic labor. *Communities of Care* is a stunning appeal to make our scholarship and our relations to our own communities mindful investigations of the same ethical values. These values—generosity, inclusiveness, acknowledgement of partialness, and careful, intimate address—are ones that, moreover, Schaffer practices on every page of her book.

Schaffer draws her definition of “communities of care” both from the Victorian texts she studies and from the contemporary theories (above all, feminist ethics of care) that inspire her. From the Victorians, she draws the challenges and urgencies of focusing on, and building, middle-ground smallish-scale communities that are neither institutions nor individual relations. In chapter 1, she asks us to think about the particular historical conditions, and transhistorical resources, of the kind of care communities that flourished before disease was the target of professionalized, medical advice. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, bodily suffering was endured as a matter of course and met with a fluid mixture of professional and amateur caregiving, though this was challenged by medical models that began to be professionalized in the middle of the century. In Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1817)—to cite just one of the novels Schaffer discusses in chapter 2—bodies wax and wane, and clusters of family and friends attend to injured bodies with adaptation, vigilance, and sympathy. From the Victorian culture of care, Schaffer also draws her emphasis on care as a practice rather than caring as a feeling. Care is something that needs to be done: a form of labor that often does not feel good, and indeed needs to be done even in instances where it is doomed to fail. These features—the smaller-scale, relatively informal networks of care communities, the emphasis on labor, and the acknowledgement of failure—are the cornerstones of Schaffer's ethical vision, her readings of the Victorian novels she treats, and her approach to reading.

Schaffer's attunement to a historically-informed understanding of Victorian caring allows her to recalibrate our understanding of novels we thought we knew well. No one who reads her treatment of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) in chapter 3 will be able to

forget Schaffer's reframing of Lucy Snow as a "global migrant caregiver," a harbinger of an often overlooked laborer who is essential to global capitalism (88). Her focus on the ethics of care in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) in chapter 4 provides an alternative to debates about sympathy—is George Eliot for or against it?—that have dominated discussions of this novel.

Schaffer recognizes throughout *Communities of Care* that the action of care always contains within it the prospect of failure, that no act of caring is ever complete, and that the difference between caring and failed care is a thin line. She defines sentiment as "the irritating feeling of wanting to act when you cannot," exemplified in the Victorian reader of Felicia Hemans's "Casabianca" (1826), who wishes to jump in and save the boy on the burning deck (123). Indeed, it is by tarrying with the incomplete nature of almost all acts of Victorian caring that Schaffer arrives at an account of the ways in which acts of caring in Victorian literature are distributed among readers as well as characters. In chapter 5's brilliant reading of the complexities of style and silence, care and harm, in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), Schaffer notes that the proportions of care transfer in between the narrative world and the story world. As she puts it succinctly, "the characters' failures produce our shared reading experience" (147).

In chapter 6, Schaffer brings her analyses of intratextual and extratextual caring to the work of Charlotte Mary Yonge, focusing on the extraordinarily "communal world" that characterizes Yonge's novels, life, and above all her relation to writing and to publishing. Schaffer illuminates these relations in and around the novel *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853), focusing for example on Yonge's fluid use of texts by Austen and Sir Walter Scott. What would happen, she asks, "if we take the communal world of Charlotte Yonge seriously as the basis for fiction" (186)? Using the lens of care, she demonstrates, could mean upending the hierarchies that structure our understandings of authorship and literary production—between source text and target, writers and publishers, characters and authors—in favor of a more diffuse, networked, relational model.

In the epilogue to *Communities of Care*, Schaffer elaborates the concept of critical care that she has practiced throughout the book. She begins by stressing the implications of her work for our theorizing of reading, affirming the ways in which reading-as-caring might contribute to our understanding of reparative and postcritical reading practices. She concludes by asking us to extend the model outwards to other dimensions of academic life: our work as teachers and as colleagues, as well as researchers. *Communities of Care* is truly a book that brings Victorian studies into alignment with some of the pressing issues of our time. In an era when care and protest, politics and psychic survival have gone hand-in-hand, it is more urgent than ever to engage in broad conversation—including the longstanding, ongoing conversation about the politics of care within Black and Indigenous feminisms—with others who, from many different starting points, are all finding ways to follow through on Saidiya Hartman's oft-cited statement that "care is the antidote to violence" (*In the Wake: A Salon in Honor of Christina Sharpe*, 2017).

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