

Talia Schaffer, *Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. \$45.00. 265 pp.

S. Pearl Brilmyer, *The Science of Character: Human Objecthood and the Ends of Victorian Realism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. \$30.00. 289 pp.

REVIEWED BY ELIZA WILCOX *University of Tennessee*

<https://doi.org/10.5325/georelioghstud.74.2.0161>

Rapid developments in science and medicine dominated the Victorian era, and both Talia Schaffer's *Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction* and S. Pearl Brilmyer's *The Science of Character: Human Objecthood and the Ends of Victorian Realism* generate new methods for understanding how Victorian realists responded to these changes. Schaffer invites scholars to consider the centrality of care to the development of character in Victorian fiction. Revisiting literary scenes of caregiving, she asks us to think more critically about how caregiving is woven (or not woven) into our daily lives. Schaffer convincingly articulates care as the meeting of another's need, which requires care to be a fluid, responsive action rather than simply sympathetic feeling (35). Taking this definition further, she develops the term "care community" to move away from an ethics of care as individual acts and into the study of networks of care as collective actions (45).

Schaffer puts feminist ethics of care in conversation with Jürgen Habermas's conception of the public sphere to specifically address the "foundational concerns of Victorian culture" that revolved around communal structures of care (13). In so doing, Schaffer moves scholarly conversation away from the oppositional conflict between the "personal" elements of care and the "political" dimensions of the public sphere and into an original reconceptualization of care collectives where both orientations "overlap, engage, and ramify" (47). Schaffer's rich introduction and first chapter detail the deep history of care ethics in the context of Black feminist thought, disability studies, and queer theory as well as in feminist ethics of care. As she braids these differing but overlapping fields together to craft new ways to value "what is broken, be[ing] patient with the past, and repair[ing] it to survive for future others to enjoy" (4–5), the fundamental nature of care in both Victorian and modern societies becomes increasingly clear. Schaffer's attention to the potential value of past care histories is indicative of the reparative nature of her overall methodology, which she skillfully carries forward into her core argument.

In chapter 3, Schaffer provides necessary historical grounding for the role of these “pre-normate” care communities before the shift to state-sponsored institutional care. She elucidates how “pre-normate” care configurations at the turn of the nineteenth century were essentially communal in nature. She reads scenes of care in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* and “Sanditon,” Charles Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol,” and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* to contextualize the attendance to the sick or injured in each novel as “[communities] where ordinary bodies [were] cared for through communal participation, with repeated holistic caring, aiming for long-term social amelioration” (86). In the remaining four books she examines—*Villette*, *Daniel Deronda*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Heir to Radclyffe Hall*—Schaffer traces desire for this “pre-normate” configuration within mid-to-late Victorian fiction. Schaffer’s argument is strongest in her examinations of the attempts at caregiving and care communities in these works, arguing that even when that care is “problematic,” the care given still matters and might help us better understand and apply care today. For example, her analysis of *Villette* and Lucy Snowe’s role as a paid caregiver both reveals Victorian anxieties about care as separate from feeling and links Snowe to “modern migrant global care-giving” (116). As she builds on the idea of care *separate* from feeling, Schaffer turns to Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* to elucidate how an excess of sympathy without sufficient care is equally concerning.

Schaffer’s differentiation between sympathy, sentiment, and care in *Daniel Deronda* is compelling and advances a nuanced understanding of care relationships that moves beyond a simple “carer” and “cared for” binary. Sympathy, to one end, is about the “passive specularity” of someone else’s suffering that is “centered on the self as a way to confirm one’s own moral sensitivity” (118). By contrast, caregiving is a performative act of meeting another’s needs, regardless of one’s own internal feelings. In between, there is sentiment, which Schaffer theorizes as the “sensation of failed caregiving,” stuck on the path from simply recognizing suffering to actually doing something about it (118). To instantiate this spectrum, she reads Daniel and Mordecai’s relationship as antithetical to the “passive, helpless acquiescence” that characterizes almost all of Daniel’s other relationships. While their relationship has some elements of “bad care,” its reciprocity allows Daniel to, for the first time, see himself as “cared for” rather than a “carer,” ameliorating the asymmetry that a sympathetic response provokes.

Schaffer then turns to the book’s controversial ending as evidence of the personal-political overlap that care engenders. Schaffer contends that Mordecai’s influence on Daniel is so profound that it not only restructures his relationship with others but also his relationship to the state: “[the end] does not try to depict the political or economic outline of the new state, but rather, reverts

to something more familiar: a local, affiliative community of care" (136). Just as *Villette* anxiously predicts a "bleak world devoid of personal caregiving" in the form of paid nursing and care, *Daniel Deronda* "imagines an idealistic future in which caring solves all problems" (139). Neither can exist without cooperative interaction, as the kinds of care advocated for in *Daniel Deronda* are impossible to scale, and the types of care provided in *Villette* are devoid of the relationality necessary to produce good care. Continuing to track how care structures literature, Schaffer examines the imbrication of the reader, in *The Wings of the Dove*, and the writer, in *The Heir of Radclyffe Hall*, in caregiving. Her conclusion turns outward, toward her academic audience, and advocates for community care practices in academia. Her attention to repairing "broken" care in praxis as well as theory is commendable, even though the attempt to address these practical concerns seems underdeveloped in comparison with her attention to the fictional representations.

S. Pearl Brilmyer's fascinating *The Science of Character: Human Objecthood and the Ends of Victorian Realism* also asks scholars to rethink character in new ways, bringing together new materialism with feminist science studies and poststructuralist theory to examine how character "became a locus of a literary-philosophical inquiry into corporeal existence" in the last decade of the nineteenth century (II). Brilmyer recovers John Stuart Mill's failed scientific theory of etiology and applies it along with other key Victorian scientific theories of character to late-Victorian realist novels, revealing the influence these theories had on shaping Victorian ontological conceptions of character as "aesthetic objects" rather than "thinking subjects."

Brilmyer applies her dynamic materialist lens to George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Sarah Grand, and Olive Schreiner, deftly attending to how they used characterization techniques to depict reality as it is rather than imagining reality as it could be. Tracing the material dimensions of humans as "aesthetic objects" rather than as "thinking subjects" reveals how these writers theorized material encounters between human bodies rather than the "sympathetic exchange[s]" between human minds, creating a temporary "impression of a living, breathing person" (II). These temporary impressions accumulate, creating a "dynamic materialist" archive at the end of the nineteenth century. Brilmyer tracks how these works shift character study from a focus on individual subjectivity to humans as material beings in the world impacted in a myriad of ways by their relations with others, nonhuman and human.

George Eliot plays a central role in Brilmyer's analysis; *Middlemarch* is used to demarcate the beginning of the dynamic materialist turn and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* is the culmination of Eliot's desire to understand language

as a generative force (77). In her compelling analysis of *Middlemarch*, Brilmyer names Eliot as a “dynamic materialist,” arguing for reading *Middlemarch* in conversation with theories of plasticity. Yoking together new materialist philosophies of plasticity, which is a substrate of dynamic materialism describing the “idea that a thing is simultaneously susceptible to *and* can cause change” (47), Brilmyer reads Eliot’s alternating repetitions between “solid” language and “fluid” language when describing characters as indicative of how character is constructed through an interaction between internal and external forces. Thus, Eliot’s descriptions reinforce Brilmyer’s larger claim to the particular suitability of fiction to act as a product of the “dynamic, material experience of personhood” (74).

Moving to *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Brilmyer examines how *Impressions* upsets the narrator/character binary and, in so doing, invites the reader to view Theophrastus, and character more generally, as *objects* under the microscopic view of the reader rather than as *subjects* revealing their innermost personal feelings (85). Eliot’s presentations of characters as “instances of types” instantiates the characterological tension between the specific and the general, ultimately using these character “sketches” to “situate the human as an object of natural historical inquiry . . . decenter[ing] and dehierarchiz[ing] the human within the *scala naturae*” (97). In later chapters, Brilmyer follows the same pattern to connect novelists with theories of character, reading Thomas Hardy through Darwin, Sarah Grand through Arthur Schopenhauer, and Olive Schreiner through various animal ethologists, such as William Morton Wheeler. Overall, Brilmyer generates new, cogent language for discussing the material dimensions of both character and science in Victorian literature.

Both Schaffer and Brilmyer’s work reconceptualizes character through material relations rather than as an expression of psychological interiority. For Schaffer, character is refracted through a lens of care networks, making visible how caring for another makes literary character “a construction [between subjects], built up by act upon act, like a bridge extended through painstakingly riveting a series of plates” (57). Similarly, Brilmyer’s attention to how late Victorian realists interpolated character through innovations in scientific theories challenges scholars to think of literary character as an interrelated set of relations rather than as an exploration of psychological depth. Each study offers Victorian studies and Eliot studies new, refreshing ways to engage with the material reality of the nineteenth century and its tangible impact on Victorian fiction.

