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Talia Schaffer. *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century*

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Talia Schaffer starts this wonderful book by telling us that it has taken “an unusually long time” to write. Thank goodness. There are many things to celebrate about *Novel Craft*, but not least is its own carefully crafted structure, which accommodates serious and deep reflection on all angles of its complex subject. While the subject of handicraft may seem at first trivial and ephemeral, there is nothing trivial about Schaffer’s consideration of its place in Victorian British culture. She warns us early that “[w]hen we read Victorian domestic handicraft only as the silly products of bored housewives, we impose on it a criterion from a later generation that was explicitly designed to contest and eradicate that handicraft, instead of viewing it in its own terms” (25). Yet she makes no hasty overblown claims for the importance of handicraft but rather identifies “a complex of ideas” (4) which she calls “the craft paradigm”(4). Tracking this paradigm through the period, she shows how it gains and then loses cultural value between the 1840s and the 1860s. In so doing, she finds, almost to her own surprise, that she has rethought the Arts and Crafts Movement, restoring its context of struggle against a vast onslaught of dubiously embroidered spectacle cases and homemade

wax table decorations. As she says, “[f]or the Victorians, domestic handicraft was utterly ubiquitous” (7).

In exploring what exactly these Victorian women and some men were doing when they “did” handicrafts, Schaffer uncovers some surprising facts. Much more than we perhaps now imagine, Victorian crafters were buying pre-produced and manufactured materials for their craft projects. Schaffer’s welcome explanation of the mysterious “Berlin wool work” which crops up everywhere in Victorian fiction and journals shows that much of it was bought in kit form with the colors printed onto canvas as a guide, or onto paper which could be sewn over and onto the canvas (42). The result was a product that was half home-made and half bought, much like modern tapestry cushion-cover kits. Indeed, sometimes the aim seems to have been to imitate a mass-produced product in making it by hand. As Schaffer says, “[h]andicraft stages a tension between historicity and modernity” (7). She argues that the Great Exhibition, which itself staged just such a tension, “can be read as the climax of the handicraft movement” (36), boasting such exhibits as “W. Bridges’s ‘tapestry wool-work, ‘The Last Supper,’ after Leonardo da Vinci, containing five hundred thousand stitches” (37).

The imitative was much prized by the crafters of the 1840s and 1850s. Schaffer starts with an account of how to make imitation coral from wax. The craze for fish-scale embroidery involved women in scaling smelly fish and then drying and varnishing individual scales before sewing them onto fabric for a sequin effect that surely might have been more easily achieved with actual sequins. But it is precisely in the diversion of the natural object into the appearance of something else that the charm of craft seems to inhere in this period.

Schaffer describes Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s eponymous heroine in *Aurora Leigh* as a typically excessive craft practitioner who “spun glass, stuffed birds, and modelled flowers in wax” (31) in addition to dabbling in dangerous taxidermy and glasswork. Schaffer

reads Aurora's crafting mistake—sewing pink eyes into her shepherdess embroidery—as a resistance to normative imitative practice in craft, and by extension in Barrett Browning's poem as a whole. Reading Aurora's craft practice thus gives us early warning that “[t]his will be a text that undercuts and complicates its own ‘reality’” (59).

Novel Craft offers close readings of four novels: Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851-1853); Charlotte Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* (1856); Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5) and Margaret Oliphant's *Phoebe Junior* (1876). But the book is not exactly organized around these novels. Thankfully, Schaffer does not mine each novel for mentions or instances of craft activity, but she rather reads each text as itself a form of practice in motion, an artifact which bespeaks and comments on the process of making which produced it. Her interest in paper throughout *Novel Craft*, and particularly in paper as the craft material of which books are made, comes most clearly to the fore in her excellent and suggestive chapter on *Cranford*. Schaffer finds evidence in this novel of an older economy of paper, characterized by “newspaper pathways, spills, letters” (68) and most of all by Miss Matty's carefully crafted candle lighters or decorative spills of “coloured paper, cut so as to resemble feathers” (70). In Miss Matty's story, she sees the “eighteenth-century sense of paper as a manipulable material” ceding to “the mid-Victorian sense of paper as a carrier of information for public display” (89). But alongside this transition she feels Gaskell's anxiety as the author of a light ephemeral sketch (*Cranford* itself) which was growing episode by episode into the objecthood of a book: “[w]ill it come together, will it make a book, or will it dissolve into its component sketches, without enough plot or characters to make it go on?” (68).

In her reading of Yonge's 1856 novel *The Daisy Chain*, Schaffer interprets the making of leather leaves as a sign of the characters' self-conscious disciplinary practices. The profits of this novel were donated by the evangelical Yonge to build a missionary college in New Zealand, and the strong missionary subplot in the novel suggests that the making and

fixing of leather leaves is a mode of editing and improving on nature, just as Pacific missionary work edits the “wild nature” of indigenous peoples. Schaffer suggests that this craft practice helps us read Yonge’s novels not as flat, but as deliberately mannered. “As modern readers, we want to see these characters grow,” she explains; “Instead, we watch them get flattened, dried, and immobilized. Living leaves harden into calcified wood. To take pleasure in this is to succeed in entering a now-foreign Victorian notion of what it means to mature—not to flourish, but to prune; not to bloom into wildflowers, but to twist oneself into a chain” (117). Conformity and discipline are virtues as much out of fashion now as pressed ferns.

But the craft paradigm starts to falter in the novel that is the subject of the next chapter: Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*. We are told that “Dickens passionately espoused” (119) handicraft, which is tantalizing, but disappointingly no examples are given of Boz’s own enthusiastic forays into netting or Berlin work. Maybe it is the idea of handicrafts that Dickens particularly likes. Schaffer’s powerful reading of *Our Mutual Friend* as a novel that pivots on the “salvage ethos” (120) gives a new twist to previous criticism on the theme of waste in this novel. Schaffer’s reading focuses on the wandering washerwoman and pedlar, Betty Higden, who generates “wearable items out of skeins of rough wool” (119) so that the type of work she does is “recycling, purifying, transforming” (119). Yet, as Schaffer shows, the practices of craft and salvage are no longer viable as livelihoods for the working poor in the industrial world of the 1860s. Discussing the impossible situation of the doll’s dressmaker Jenny Wren, who pays far too much for baskets of fabrics and materials, just as a middle-class hand crafter might do, Schaffer writes: “Jenny adheres to middle-class notions of femininity that her real situation ought to preclude. In other words, when Dickens works to make the dolls’ dressmaker into the craft paradigm’s iconic leisured middle-class subject, he produces a worrying contradiction with his dismaying realist descriptions of the conditions of

the working poor” (128). Betty Higden’s profession is already as extinct as “the itinerant peddler who shows wares at clean country markets” (129), and it is, Schaffer argues, surely highly significant that she “dies behind a paper mill” (129). The only character who can live and prosper between the world of craft and the world of finance is Riah the Jew. Schaffer writes that “Dickens needed what we today might see as the subject of a global world, someone with multiple affiliations and histories, fluidly combining communities” (140). This is a brilliant insight about the practices created by migration which begs to be developed further outside of this book.

The final exemplary text is Margaret Oliphant’s *Phoebe Junior* of 1876 in which Schaffer shows the craft paradigm abandoned in favor of the aesthetic of connoisseurship. When Phoebe rejects her grandmother’s hair brooch with what the Victorians came to call “discrimination” (145), she displays a faculty regularly gendered as masculine by such decorative reformers such as C.R. Ashbee, Charles Eastlake, Lewis Day, and J. Beavington Atkinson. “Arts and crafts was often constructed against a domestic female enemy,” (153) explains Schaffer. Phoebe succeeds in the novel by learning to inhabit a masculine position in her rejection of clutter and knick-knacks, showing her good taste by choosing an antique Indian shawl of a “dim gorgeous hue” (155) instead of brightly colored clothes. But as Schaffer says, by 1876 handicraft is so out of fashion it has become risible.

It seems carping to suggest that this rich and full reticule of a book should contain anything more, but there is one unexplored aspect of the “craft paradigm” which could perhaps have benefited from more teasing out. Schaffer contrasts the “craft paradigm against an emergent financial system” (10), suggesting that craft flourished “because of the threatening incursion of modern economic behaviour” (13). But though she gives some fascinating descriptions early in the book of the curious mix of marketing and gifting that went on in ladies’ bazaars in the earlier period, this aspect of the circulation and exchange of

craft is left somewhat unexplored. Even though we are told that hand-crafted objects were often displayed and bought at these bazaars, rather than made at home, most of the picture frames and wax coral table ornaments in this book tend to remain static on the domestic mantelpiece: their movements outside the home are not closely tracked. This is connected to a more serious methodological problem perhaps, which creates a correspondent gap when it comes to the economic or circulatory history of texts. Schaffer says, surely rightly, that “handicraft gave writers a language to express a poignant desire; that they could make a real artefact whose value would transcend the terrible vulnerability of paper” (175). Yet the play on paper as a craft material can occasionally seem a little too easy, and perhaps *Novel Craft* does not finally think through in theoretically robust ways the place of craft in the furious debates going on in this period about the practice of writing, originality, authorship and ownership, and gifting.

The academic world is speeding up. In Britain the Research Excellence Framework is distorting research and writing trajectories for many of us. Talia Schaffer’s book is not only exemplary in its content, but also stands as an example of the importance of time to our scholarship. Writing a good book means unpicking and restitching whole sections, devoting attention to even the smallest and most invisible of details, and, crucially, taking the time to change one’s mind. Talia Schaffer has devoted time and close attention to her craft, and a splendid, well-made book is the result.

Biographical Notice:

Clare Pettitt teaches English Literature at King's College London. She is the author of *Patent Inventions: Intellectual Property and the Victorian Novel* (2004) and *'Dr. Livingstone I Presume?': Missionaries, Journalists, Explorers and Empire* (2007).