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Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction by Talia Schaffer (review)

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however, it also obliges us to reconsider certain contemporary assumptions about metre that have their origin in this period—notably, about the supposed naturalness of classical feet as structural units animating English verse. No future study of historical prosody can afford to ignore Martin’s thoroughly researched and highly provoking work. But modern verse theorists, too, will benefit from this education in the cultural contingency of certain key terms and concepts (metre and rhythm, verse and poetry, discipline and freedom, orthodox and avant-garde, public and private, audible and silent reading; and so on) that continue to serve as descriptive and analytical categories in our literary-critical practice today.

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Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction

by Talia Schaffer; pp. 228. Oxford:

Oxford UP, 2011. \$65.00 cloth.

TALIA SCHAFFER opens her fascinating study of nineteenth-century domestic handicraft with instructions on how to make imitation wax coral and asks, “What cultural values could have made such an artefact desirable?” (3). The wax coral, with its wine-bottle core, twined wire, Berlin wool, and paraffin-wax finish sets the stage for a literary journey through the rarely discussed area of Victorian craft that was so perplexing, indeed alien, to readers and viewers of following eras. As Schaffer writes, “We have no grammar for decoding this practice” (3). Thus, she determines to analyze what she calls “the craft paradigm” and “a set of beliefs about representation, production, consumption, value, and beauty that underlies a great deal of mid-Victorian creative work” (3). The resulting work is a welcome study of an under-researched, rarely discussed area of women’s work during a time of social, economic, and cultural change.

An interrogation of the proliferation of domestic craft in the early nineteenth century has been circumvented, even shunned, by craft historians and art historians, as well as by literary scholars. It is this avoided territory

that engrosses Schaffer as she probes a selection of novels, each associated with a descriptive that illuminates the relationship between craft and the novel: ephemerality in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851–53); preservation in Charlotte Mary Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* (1856); salvage in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65); and connoisseurship in Margaret Oliphant's *Phoebe Junior* (1876).

In exploring this under-represented area of women's work and culture, Schaffer joins the ranks of what art historians call the "anthropological turn," a probing interest in material culture that allows for the discussion of mundane objects, ephemera, memorabilia, and "things" that have been overlooked in analyses of "high art." As an art historian more interested in craft than in art, I found Schaffer's introduction particularly perceptive and illuminating. She explores Elaine Freedgood's term "thing culture" and brings this together with John Plotz's discussion of "portable property" (making it clear she prefers the term "thing culture"), a move that enables her to explore the "extravagant form" of Victorian "object relations" (14). Her study is informed largely by "thing theory"; she considers domestic craft "a last vestige of the preindustrial object world, a marvellous survival of a cherished past, even if in fact it was a wholly new procedure driven by the changes in mass production, transportation, advertising, and sales that made it possible to procure craft instructions and materials" (15).

Schaffer's discussion of the novels follow her chronology of the rise and fall of interest in domestic craft, beginning with its prominence in the 1850s, as examined in the pages of *Cranford* and *The Daisy Chain*: "The values of the town of Cranford," writes Schaffer, are defined by "a women's world based on scraps and patches" (146). The 1860s "see craft dwindling," and, as she suggests in her examination of *Our Mutual Friend*, although "still frequently invoked and sentimentally defended," craft becomes "associated with vocational failure and financial instability" (146). Finally, in her closing chapter about *Phoebe Junior*, she concedes that the earlier "craft world and its industrial economy and emphasis on production have been thoroughly superseded by a consumer economy" (173).

Schaffer does not, however, abandon domestic craft to a nineteenth-century demise but rather ends her study with today's proliferation of craft production that often disseminates via new media. She asks us to "read modern handicraft as the descendant of Victorian domestic handicraft" and suggests that if we do this, "we can see that it is a coherent movement expressing its own consistent ideas" (190). Along with this, she successfully challenges the precept that the Arts and Crafts movement is the antithesis of domestic handicraft and argues that we might, instead, consider domestic handicraft "an independent school of thought dating back two centuries" (179). With this in mind, Schaffer takes us on a brief sojourn through the proliferation of twenty-first-century handicraft, which she divides into "three major schools: Martha Stewart, women's magazine traditional craft hobbies, and the new-

est form of handicraft, which is sometimes called radical craft, indie craft, DIY craft, or alt craft,” (179). By the time one reads Schaffer’s postscript, it becomes clear that by writing “novel craft,” or what she refers to at the end of the book as the “novelty of craft,” she has constructed a sophisticated genealogy of domestic craft that challenges its historical marginalisation and establishes its place within contemporary culture. She writes: “I have picked up the debris of a vanishing culture and stitched it together” (191). In so doing, she reminds us that the “central virtues of homemade craft for the past two hundred years have remained: recycling, sentiment, economic alterity, amateurism, imitation, nostalgia, and technophilia” (190).

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St. John and the Victorians

by Michael Wheeler; pp. xiii + 269.
Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012. \$91.95 cloth.

Victorian Parables

by Susan Colón; pp. xiii + 158.
New York: Continuum, 2012. \$120.00 cloth.

Dickens, His Parables, and His Reader

by Linda M. Lewis; pp. 295.
Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2011. \$67.03 cloth.

THESE THREE recent books all examine the influence of particular New Testament texts on Victorian culture, and all three assume that sympathetic engagement with Victorian religious beliefs is crucial to understanding Victorian culture, society, and literature.

Michael Wheeler’s book *St John and the Victorians* is a model of interdisciplinary research into religious ideas. He brings wide reading and deep learning to bear on the “cultural afterlife of the fourth gospel in Victorian Britain” (xiii). Drawing on primary sources including hymns, paintings, stained glass windows, etchings, sermons, and scriptural commentaries, as well as both canonical and non-canonical literature, Wheeler gives us a clear, eminently readable analysis that provides new insights at every turn.

Wheeler’s first two chapters discuss controversial aspects of the fourth Gospel. Traditionally represented as feminized and contemplative, John became a site of conflict: Victorian Anglo- and Roman Catholics embraced the standard portrayal, while muscular Christians tried to revise it, turning John into a model of “true manliness” (24). Questions about whether John