

Imitations of Life, *or* Art (and Industry) at Home

Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction. Talia Schaffer. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 228 pp.

Reviewed by **Thad Logan**, Rice University

<1>Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in *Aurora Leigh* (1856), identifies wax flowers, doilies, and embroidered slippers as “the works of women.” Talia Schaffer takes these as her subject, along with shell nosegays, needlework portraits, skeletonized leaves, hair brooches, fish-scale embroidery, and “ivy” crafted from bits of leather. I am grateful for this book for many reasons. All of us who work with Victorian things should appreciate the quality of the attention it pays to handicrafts. Avoiding the tone of bemused contempt that for so long attended scholarly discourse on mid-century crafts, Schaffer takes them seriously and offers a thorough, theoretically and historically informed analysis of what they are and do. Her work is exemplary, moreover, for the attention it pays to the discourse of crafts—such as instructions printed in the popular press—as well as the craft object as material artifact.

<2>In my experience, it is not easy to write effectively about Victorian handicrafts: the temptation is, on the one hand, to offer up curious or bizarre examples without adequate contextualization, or, on the other, to construct a kind of detailed taxonomy that resembles the potentially endless totalizing efforts of a Mr. Casaubon. Schaffer does give us concrete examples of Victorian craft objects, and also gives us a sense of the range and variety of this particular kind of Victorian thing, but her distinctive achievement is to think carefully about handicrafting as a practice. Shell boxes and rolled paper tea caddies come into being as a result of actions performed by subjects, using certain materials in certain ways, at a certain historical moment; Schaffer’s work investigates these subjects, these materials, and this moment. She shows us that such things not only offer a unique glimpse into a vanished world of feminine endeavor, but also were a “particularly powerful mode of circulating and publicizing major cultural ideas” (7).

<3>Among the book’s many virtues is its ambitious goal of analyzing handicrafts in fiction and considering fiction as a kind of handicraft. After a look at theoretical and historical aspects of Victorian domestic handicrafts in her preface and introduction, Schaffer reads four Victorian novels, before concluding with a short but thought-provoking discussion of the varieties of twenty-first-century handicrafts in which she traces connections to and disconnections from crafts in the Victorian era. Early in her text, Schaffer identifies what she calls “the craft

paradigm,” defined as “a set of beliefs about representation, consumption, value, and beauty that underlies a great deal of mid-century Victorian creative work” (4). It is no small part of her achievement to demonstrate the relevance of this paradigm to Victorian fiction. In reading the four novels, she focuses on crafts that appear prominently in them and argues persuasively that in each case the craft at issue provides a key to understanding the moral norms and narrative techniques of the text.

<4>Beginning with *Cranford* (1851-1853), Schaffer demonstrates the value of her distinctive approach to Victorian domestic fiction. The chapter begins by noting that “*Cranford’s* significant paper craft scenes — the newspaper pathways, the candle-lighters, the letters, and the note . . . express Matty’s unspoken needs, Mary’s unconscious assumptions, and Gaskell’s own half-articulated anxieties about composition, editorship, history, preservation, and literary value” (62). Through the development of a richly textured, nuanced reading informed by her knowledge of handicrafts, Schaffer convinces us that a sustained interrogation of papers and papercrafts yields original and important insights into the workings of the novel and allows us to appreciate anew its powerful analysis of time and change. In Schaffer’s chapter on *The Daisy Chain* (1856), the focus is on crafts that preserve and imitate natural materials. Charlotte Yonge’s novel devotes a good deal of attention to handicrafts as practiced by members of the May family; here, Schaffer observes, “the issue is youthful wildness.” The crafts that appear in the story serve as metaphors for its necessary (according to Yonge) taming and domestication where “characters are represented as weeds that must be pruned, dried, arranged, glued” (93). Ultimately, the novel shows the importance of such “crafting” for wilder subjects than the May children: “the notion of replacing wild leaves with snipped leather leaves suitable for the drawing room is an apt corollary for the work of taming the wild Irish and Melanesian pupils into grateful Christian pupils” (114).

<5>Schaffer’s reading of *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865) foregrounds Betty Higden, usually considered a minor character. Here, Betty’s knitting is a model for the many crafts that value and reclaim what has been discarded. “Handicraft after handicraft,” Schaffer informs us, “uses leftover scraps — shells, candle ends, bits of cotton or straw, pieces of newspaper, old glass bottles, feathers” (120). Betty’s re-use of “waste” in the form of textile scraps (like Jenny Wren’s dressmaking for dolls), enacts a (doomed) alternative to the new commodity culture based on disposability, but figures for the reader “Dickens’s vision of a viable England . . . and a humane economy” (119). Noting that crafts in *Our Mutual Friend* are practiced “only by the economically marginal,” Schaffer sees this as a novel in which “the craft paradigm is deeply fragmented, perhaps disintegrating beyond repair” (143). Turning to Margaret Oliphant’s *Phoebe Junior* (1876), Schaffer argues that this novel “explores the way that the marketplace itself altered and superseded craft values” (145). In an intriguing reading of this lesser-known novel, Schaffer considers the debasement of domestic handicraft in favor of a new skill, “connoisseurship,” which Phoebe masters, and deploys at the novel’s moment of crisis. To be a connoisseur is to know how to make aesthetic judgments about objects; the shift of focus Schaffer identifies here—from making things to observing and evaluating them—signals the triumph of a consumer culture.

<6>Always attentive to history, Schaffer links her study of crafts to the changing discourse of design reform, and also to the great fact of the Exhibition of 1851. *Novel Crafts* is also important for its attention to crafts in the context of gender roles, evolving domestic ideologies, and the larger economy. One of Schaffer's strongest arguments is that the handicraft paradigm looks backward, nostalgically, to traditional models of femininity and to older modes of economic production: domestically produced objects become a way "to name the nostalgic 'real' of money" (20) at a moment when economic realities were changing the way money was used and apprehended. Yet women could and did buy many of the materials needed for crafting. Schaffer makes a very interesting distinction between artifacts themselves and the rhetoric in which they were embedded: the object was a "modern, disposable product of consumer economy," whereas the rhetoric "offered a conservative reassertion of older social norms" (9). The handicraft then, in Schaffer's penetrating analysis, flourished because of a "threatening incursion of modern economic behaviour," "was driven by the Victorians' need to retain an alternative to mainstream capitalism," and "was understood as a last vestige of the pre-industrial object 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" (13, 15).

<7>Schaffer makes an ingenious attempt to work paper as thing and idea into the argument in every chapter; sometimes, particularly in the cases of *Cranford* and *Phoebe Junior*, this is apt and illuminating, but at other times it seems that we are seeing the ghost of an earlier or alternate project that does not always work seamlessly into this one. On the other hand, her thesis that paper is a kind of master material for the nineteenth century yields so many insights that it seems hardly worth quibbling about whether this might have been better developed in a separate study.

<8>I have a somewhat more serious reservation about her argument, mounted in the introduction and in Chapter Five, that the arts and crafts movement included "an attempt to eject women from the private sphere" so that men (with their more highly developed sense of taste) could take over the decoration of houses (152). It is certainly true that there is a strong element of misogyny in the writings of some reformers. In *Hints on Household Taste* (1867), for instance, Charles Eastlake fairly oozes contempt for "materfamilias" and her inept — even malignant — decorative choices. But I think Schaffer goes too far in imagining that the primary thrust of late-century design discourse was hostile to women. If we turn to the rhetoric of what we might call "mainstream" design reform, in the register of Eastlake's hugely popular advice manual, rather than the more rarefied discourse of aesthetes like J. Beavington Atkinson and C. R. Ashbee, we find that many women wrote important texts — among them Lucy Orrinsmith, Rhoda and Agnes Garrett, and the prolific Mrs. Haweis. Schaffer mentions these names, but does not, I think, acknowledge that they were at least as influential as the masculinist writers on whom she focuses. In contrast to Schaffer's surprisingly sweeping assertion that "home decoration now became the province of men" (56), we might point to Walter Crane's iconic image for the cover of Clarence Cook's *The House Beautiful* (1877), in which a stately female figure presides over a stylized "aesthetic" interior. Women were still closely associated with domestic interiors in the last decades of the century, despite a shift toward a different model of what constituted good design, and a very perceptible tone of disdain on the part of nearly all writers for such mid-Victorian horrors as carpets patterned with cabbage roses and beaded lamp stands.

<9>Schaffer's assertions about women and the discourse of design are, however, original and interesting in that they challenge notions that there was an unchanging "ideology of domesticity" throughout the Victorian era. Hers is, on the whole, a wonderful book — witty, well written and richly detailed, with an argument that is coherent, nuanced, persuasive, and important.