

The Value of Things after the V21 Manifesto

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Helen Kingstone and Kate Lister, eds. *Paraphernalia! Victorian Objects* (London: Routledge, 2018), 267 pp., \$155.00 cloth.

In March 2015, the collective known as V21, or Victorian Studies for the 21st century, published a manifesto comprised of ten theses. The leading thesis stated that “Victorian Studies has fallen prey to *positivist historicism*: a mode of inquiry that aims to do little more than exhaustively describe, preserve, and display the past” (“Manifesto”). The manifesto called for a move toward presentism and a renewed attention to aesthetic form and formalism. Since then, Victorian scholars working in the areas of material culture and thing theory have found themselves in the crosshairs of such debates, seemingly accused of doing exactly what the V21 manifesto claims is stagnating Victorian studies. Is there a pathway forward for material culture scholars, historicists, and thing theorists in Victorian studies?

At first glance, a collection titled *Paraphernalia! Victorian Objects* would not appear to offer such a pathway. Its title does the very thing that the manifesto claims is the dead end of Victorian studies. It shouts “Paraphernalia!” like a Victorian costermonger, but perhaps that is the point. In their introduction Helen Kingstone and Kate Lister identify paraphernalia as “miscellaneous or being auxiliary to the greater part [...] neither valuable enough for museums nor symbolic enough for purely literary study” (1). *Paraphernalia!* is an exclamation that claims space for material culture scholars and thing theorists at a critical moment when such work is being treated like so much paraphernalia, “neither valuable enough [...] nor symbolic enough” for

inclusion (1). Although Kingstone and Lister do not address directly the V21 manifesto or the resultant arguments that have followed, the volume's centering of "disjecta" is a response to a manifesto that would appear to devalue such work.

The timing of this work is important, as it is drawn together from papers presented at a one-day colloquium held at Leeds Trinity University in April 2015, one month after the publication of the V21 manifesto. The goal for this collection, write Kingstone and Lister, is to demonstrate "How things change their meanings when they come into new configurations—and become configurations" (2). This work builds on work of earlier material culture and thing theory scholars including Asa Briggs, Andrew H. Miller, Bill Brown, John Plotz, and Elaine Freedgood. In their introduction, Kingstone and Lister outline the evolution of thing theory and material culture studies with emphasis on the development of two schools: the theory-oriented approach offered by scholars like Brown and Plotz, and the historicist approach offered by scholars like Freedgood. The strength of this collection, and why I believe it stands as a response to the manifesto, is the abundance of ways that the contributors examine objects, taking theoretical and historicist approaches together and separately. Francois Robert's theoretically oriented reading of the figurative coil and use of devotional objects in Swinburne and Wilde is matched by Sophie Ratcliffe's historicist reading of curling papers in Dickens—figurative coils and literal curls can co-exist here. The editors have chosen well papers that demonstrate the breadth and inclusivity of work in material culture studies.

The volume consists of thirteen chapters grouped into five sections; each section can be read independently, but there are some surprising cross-references and threads of connection across the collection. One strong through line is the matter of space and how objects occupy, colonize, change, and fill up space, and the spaces left behind when objects are moved, sold, or taken. In his opening chapter on the bazaars of London's West End, Rohan McWilliam describes the sweeping, vigilant gazes of bazaar shop assistants, women who noticed immediately the vacant spaces that signaled a shoplifted object (25). As an opening chapter, McWilliam's establishes bazaar-sold objects not only as domestic commodities sold by and to women, but also the bazaar-shopping

experience as a type of fantasy. The following chapters trace that fantasy into the home, and readers are carried, like objects, from the market bazaar into the home. Anne Anderson's chapter on the *étagère's* role in exhibiting aesthetic beauty within the home fits well within this section, but it also provides a compelling counterpoint for Ralph Mills' chapter on plaster images and working-class material culture in Part II. Anderson explores the *étagère* as a sort of "household shrine" that enacts a "narrative of personal relationships and self discovery" through its display of "mementoes, souvenirs, and memorabilia" (37). These displays were found primarily in middle- and upper-class homes and were shaped by the aesthetic movement.

In the final chapter in Part I, Thad Logan examines the sensual aesthetics of objects in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's art. Logan claims that Rossetti originated the concept of the "artistic home" by cultivating an "intensely personal and visually elaborate space, an effect created by the multiplicity of old and unusual things" (58). Logan offers a comparative reading of objects listed in the auction catalog prepared after Rossetti's death and the paraphernalia visible in Rossetti's two versions of *Dante Drawing an Angel* from 1849 and 1853, respectively. He asserts that Rossetti gives "attention to material things as things in themselves" creating a sensual experience through the visual and emotional appeal of objects (69). The choice to close the first section with Logan's discussion of Rossetti is a good one, as it draws together the fantasy of objects, such as might be found in a London bazaar, with the aesthetic experience of objects.

Part II explores the role of ornaments—aquariums, plaster images, and taxidermy—in Victorian homes. Through her reading of aquarium books, Silva Granata offers a surprising object lesson on the complexities of creating a Victorian aquarium. Some of these practices, such as species selection and tank décor, are familiar to modern readers. Tank construction, however, was popular among Victorians as the stylish homemade tank and thriving aquarium could "function as a display of selfhood, showcasing the wealth, the taste, and interests of the owners," and evidence of a "well-cared collection also attested to habits of industry and order" (84). Of all the objects examined in this collection, only the Victorian aquarium possesses an element of danger, as Granata reveals that

the additional weight of a large tank placed in an upper story of a home not structurally designed to support it could lead to injury or even death.

In a shift away from middle- and upper-class material culture, Ralph Mills examines the oft-undocumented material culture of the working class, the largest population of nineteenth-century Britain. The locus of Mills' chapter is the working-class mantelpiece, as represented by George Godwin in a drawing identified as "A chimney-piece in Plumtree-court, Holborn" (1854). In his argument, Mills describes the mantelpiece as a "node" in a network of mantelpieces that connect similar working-class homes: "The culture of knick-knacks and *bric-a-brac* may be a conscious or unconscious grouping in opposition to the establishment, with the objects on the mantelpiece acting as badges, signals both to their owners and to any visitors from the same or different classes" (113). In this way, the working-class mantelpiece and its accumulated objects served a function similar to that of the Victorian *étagère* and aquarium: it created a narrative of working-class life and aesthetics through displayed ornamental objects.

To bookend the section on ornaments, Julia Courtney frames taxidermy as another kind of object arrangement: "The taxidermic process arrests decomposition; and even the simplest specimen represents composition" (123). The chapter effectively surveys the various uses of taxidermy not only in natural history and hunting or sport collections but also in dioramas and anthropomorphic groupings, such as those created by taxidermist James Willis, who served possibly as the real-life inspiration for Dickens' Mr. Venus in *Our Mutual Friend*. Connecting taxidermy with literature, Courtney argues that "Making the artificial seem real is a process at the heart of nineteenth-century realism" (136). Such a compelling statement underscores the processes by which taxidermy and literary realism co-existed in the Victorian era.

One strength of this collection is that the contributors remind readers in a myriad of ways how Victorians preempted modernity's fascination with stuff. In Part III, the attention turns to objects of anxiety and objects of devotion. Although presented as separate groupings, there seems at times a thin line between anxiety and devotion when it comes to things. In her chapter on children's literature, Valerie Sanders draws attention to children's view of

'things' as "narratives, mysteries, and most of all, as a means of defining human individuality" (143). For children, objects can take on enhanced meanings as signifiers of their experiences; but children can also be overwhelmed by objects when those objects seem to take on lives of their own. Sanders demonstrates the ways in which children place anxieties into things, a move that juxtaposes how adults place desires and morals into things, an idea posited in previous chapters. Partnering with Sanders is Francois Robert's work on Wilde and Swinburne. Robert draws comparison between Wilde's "habit of morphing all forms of beauty, especially of Nature, into devotional objects," an act that takes the microscopic detail of an object and expands it beyond its conceptual form, and Swinburne's act of "dematerializing" things "whereby the focus pans out from the devotional object proper to the larger picture" (164, 168). Robert captures the aesthetic differences between Wilde and Swinburne but also demonstrates how their dichotomy ends in a kind of productive coiling, an image taken from Swinburne's *Triumph of Time*.

The volume emphasizes not only acquisition and use of paraphernalia but also the disposal and afterlives of such objects. Some things, such as the curl papers that Sophie Ratcliffe examines in her compelling chapter in Part IV, began life as other objects. In the case of curl papers, many began life as pages in books or periodicals. Ratcliffe outlines how Dickens uses an otherwise overlooked object as a marker of social class, femininity, order, and disorder. Ratcliffe's chapter pairs in surprising ways with Robert's chapter on the figurative coil in Swinburne's poem, the complementing spiral images suggestive of a familiarity in form. This image carries through to Heather Hinds' analysis of hair and ringlets in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Tennyson's "The Ringlet." Hinds reads hair as unstable sign, capable of representing promises but also lies; the lock given as a vow may be false. In her reading of Tennyson's "The Ringlet," Hinds draws connections with other mid-Victorian locks, including Laura from Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* and Porphyria from D.G. Rossetti's "Porphyria's Lover," demonstrating the ubiquitous treatment of Victorian hair as object.

Part V, the final section, turns to objects in circulation within Victorian print culture. The final three chapters devoted to women's dress, valentines,

and medicine, respectively, seem a bit unusual as part of a collection that until this point has emphasized the thing-ness of things, but reveals how the idea of things circulated in Victorian society. Odile Boucher-Rivalain explores women's dress through the writings of Harriet Martineau, "who had come to see it as an object diverted from its original function to take on an irrational second role, that of an unconventional sign of women's boldness in taste and habits" (213). Alice Crossey writes persuasively of the popularity of the Victorian valentine as "cultural object, social hieroglyphic, and fragile, tactile thing that remains fascinating today" (241). The final chapter authored by Peter Yeandle looks at the relationship between medicinal advertising and empire, examining the "extent to which imperialism left an imprint on British popular and visual culture" (245). The through line between these final three chapters is the resonance they each have with modernity's relationship with things.

In her response to the V21 manifesto, Caroline Levine asked scholars to think about history as a curl or bend: "*Think with kink*" she writes, citing Ellis Hanson. "Kink offers us history as a strange looping, where sudden hitches [...] twist presents into pasts and vice versa" (Levine). Together Kingstone and Lister have compiled a collection that coils and curls and demonstrates the ways in which material culture studies and historiographical studies engage aestheticism and form. By centering the paraphernalia of our Victorian past, Kingstone and Lister and their contributors demonstrate its continued value to Victorian studies.

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Works Cited

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