

Helen Kingstone and Kate Lister (eds), *Paraphernalia! Victorian Objects* (Routledge, 2018) pp. xiii + 267 (£115.00)

In the wake of Bill Brown's formulation of 'thing theory' in his book *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago University Press, 2003), there have appeared numerous books and essays examining cultural engagements with the object-world, whether in the forms of things, commodities, or portable property. While Brown's book discusses twentieth-century literature, the material turn in literary and cultural studies has particularly captured the imagination of Victorianists, possibly because Victorian society and its literature were part of a new industrial economy involving the mass production and consumption of things on an unprecedented scale. *Paraphernalia! Victorian Objects* is a worthy contribution to the growing work on Victorian things, although surprisingly few of the essays draw directly upon the methodologies of thing theory.

The book's thirteen essays form an interesting miscellany and all are written by contributors working either in departments of History or English literature. Cultural histories of specific objects or groups of objects form the bulk of the book, for only a minority of the chapters discuss the representation of objects in literary texts in any detail. Nevertheless, interdisciplinarity is a welcome feature of this approach to Victorian material culture and *Paraphernalia!* ranges beyond disciplinary boundaries in discussions of topics such as collecting, decorating the home, the symbolic uses of objects, the misuse of objects, body parts as things, the body's use of things, and the circulation of objects, serving to highlight the apparent inexhaustibility of Victorian objects.

Helen Kingstone and Kate Lister, the editors of this collection, claim that *Paraphernalia!* 'takes a broad and interdisciplinary look at how paraphernalia manifested

itself in Victorian culture and society' (p. 6); however, this statement and the book's title are somewhat misleading. The term 'paraphernalia' traditionally signified the portable property women were allowed to possess under common law, a legal term which was current at a time when demands for the reform of the Married Women's Property Acts led to changes in the law between the 1870s and 1890s. To avoid disappointing scholars who presume from the book's title that there will be some mention of the legal debates on women's property, the editors in their introduction needed to emphasise the complexities of the term 'paraphernalia' in its Victorian context and explain the volume's focus on its more colloquial meanings, signifying the odds and ends associated with cultural and domestic life. The editors suggest that 'paraphernalia carries implications of the miscellaneous; of being an auxiliary to a greater part ... the "disjecta" of everyday life, neither valuable enough for museums nor symbolic enough for purely literary study' (p. 1). However, not many of the objects discussed in the subsequent chapters – dress, stuffed animals, devotional objects, for example – are missing from museum collections or from available literary studies. The book's rather short Introduction does not fully do justice to the many rich and insightful essays on offer, some of which I will single out here as particularly original, in that they suggest new lines of enquiry in this field.

Thad Logan's 'Rossetti's Things', an essay focusing on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's extensive collection of objects, is interesting for its consideration of the differences between the visual representation of things and their representation in language. Lacking interest in ordinary Victorian household objects, Rossetti limited his collecting habits to those things which he perceived as having sufficient 'visual and emotional' resonance to be depicted in his art (p. 70). Logan highlights the inadequacy of language to represent such things accurately, unlike Rossetti's paintings and drawings which reveal a 'real attention to material things' (p. 69), providing 'an intense sensory experience for the viewer' (p. 70). The

importance of accounting for sensory experience is also discussed by Sophie Ratcliffe in her fascinating chapter on curl-papers in Dickens's work. Highlighting the ambiguity of this unquestionably ephemeral object, often created from printed paper, including books and periodicals cut into strips, curl-papers raise questions about 'the borders between art and artefact, between high and low culture' (p. 195). Ratcliffe asks 'how an historian and critic is to engage with the histories of loss', for to study ephemera applied to the body then discarded requires an acknowledgement of an 'embodied and affective encounter with material culture' which can only exist now in the form of literary and visual representation (p. 205).

The ambiguity of hair, a part of the body which can so easily be alienated from its original owner, is discussed by Heather Hind in her essay on the work of M.E. Braddon and Tennyson. Once removed from the head, Hind suggests that a lock of hair worked into an ornament can be simultaneously a commodity and a valued memento. Tracing links between texts and locks of hair, Hind shows in an interesting reading of *Lady Audley's Secret* how hair can function as 'an object-text', open to 'perplexing' misreading (p. 189). The ambiguity of objects and their adaptability for different uses (or misuses) is explored by Valerie Sanders in her chapter 'Objects of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century Children's Literature', a study of children's relationship with material culture and how this is represented in the work of E. Nesbit and Frances Hodgson Burnett. Sanders is one of the few contributors to engage with thing theory directly, pointing out its relative failure to grasp children's special relationship to the material world. Growing up, Sanders argues, involves a realisation that objects lack magical agency as children eventually come to acknowledge 'the real purpose of objects' (p. 157), a process which Nesbit and Burnett represent particularly well.

Ralph Mills's chapter on the fragile, cheap plaster of Paris ornaments sold on the streets and bought mainly by working-class customers is an exemplary account of how to read textual and visual evidence to understand the significance of an obsolete object. George

Godwin's 1854 sketch of a working-class mantelpiece is read by Mills for its fascinating story of working-class taste and 'cultural literacy' (p. 115). Other informative essays include Silvia Granata's discussion of the 'aquarium craze' of the 1850s and 1860s, which involved desires for novelty ornaments within the home which could potentially foster scientific knowledge (p. 81), and Alice Crossley's 'Paper Love: Valentines in Victorian Culture', which illustrates the diversity of the Victorian Valentine card, including a type called 'Bachelor's Buttons' containing sewing implements and buttons for women to send to bachelor friends (p. 235). These chapters reveal some of the forgotten ephemeral objects which were once part of everyday life, but now survive only in the forms of textual and visual traces. *Paraphernalia! Victorian Objects* indicates that the study of nineteenth-century material culture is by no means exhausted, the essays demonstrating that we need to continue reading this period through its objects in order to understand better the relationships between the fabric of the past and its representation.

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