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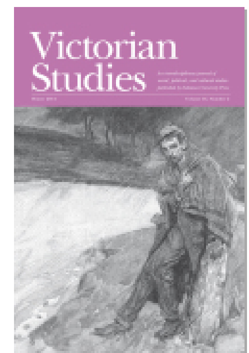
The Textual Condition of Nineteenth-Century Literature by Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small (review)



Rachel Sagner Buurma

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The Textual Condition of Nineteenth-Century Literature, by Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small; pp. 201. New York and London: Routledge, 2012, $128.00, £90.00.

In this co-authored book, a continuation of their explorations of what they identify as the problem of literary value after the theory era in *Politics and Value in English Studies: A Discipline in Crisis* (1993), Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small argue that recent practices of textual editing and (secondarily) material text scholarship manifest a troubling tendency to mute or defer questions of literary value. The approach to scholarly editing dominant in the last thirty years, they claim, values openness, multiplicity, and the preservation of versions and variants; the role of the editor, therefore, "is limited to providing readers with the materials which will enable them to make such judgments [about the preferable version of the work] for themselves" (viii). In this it stands opposed, as Small and Guy frame it, to the closure, stability, and author-centrism that characterized earlier scholarly editing. This recent school (exemplified for the authors by the work of Jerome J. McGann, David Greetham, and Peter Shillingsburg) finds its most extreme form in digital editions allowing the reader to choose what version of a given work she wishes to read. Such editions, Guy and Small claim, necessarily defer questions of meaning and, indeed, of value to the reader.

But, the argument continues, such textual editors do not merely renounce their evaluative responsibilities by attempting to discard what might be called "the work" in favor of "texts," thereby deferring evaluative decisions to readers while remaining value-free themselves. For in seeking to extricate themselves from the traditional editorial function of deciding what defines the literary work—a canon-building process involving evaluative judgments about what the best version of the work might be—textual editors and other textual materialists have substituted the idea of merely presenting the reader with all possible versions. And yet, Guy and Small argue, these versions themselves must be fixed and identified, which returns the hapless textual editor inevitably to the question of what constitutes a literary work, with all of its attendant questions of literary value. The editor may as well, they suggest, accept the burden of making judgments about literary value from the beginning, given that she almost inevitably does so despite (what Guy and Small assume are) her own intentions.

In successive chapters on "The Novel," "Poetry," "Non-Fictional Prose," and "Drama," Guy and Small take up a series of especially thorny textual editing problems, in each case elucidating the challenges of settling on a definition of the work necessary to direct the practice of textual editing. (They base several key examples on the work of Oscar Wilde, drawing—no doubt—on their own extensive previous work on Wilde.) They end each chapter by noting that almost all current responses to such challenges defer the question of value by multiplying possibilities instead of limiting them. So their chapter on the novel examines publishing formats like Broadview Press's Encore Editions and digital facsimiles of part-publications and magazine serializations in order to argue that such formats both seek to reproduce an historically specific Victorian reading experience and yet at the same time "deny that very historicity by presuming distinctions between past and present can be elided" (25). This chapter's ensuing long examination of the various editorial approaches to Wilde's famously multi-versioned *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and of Thomas Hardy's much-revised *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) ends by suggesting that

it is not useful to the reader to have editors insist on the preservation of so many different textual embodiments of the same work.

This perceived split between the historicist practices of contemporary editing and the needs of the modern reader (who is imagined as having little interest in such historical questions) is strengthened in later chapters. The second chapter draws on work by Kathryn Ledbetter, Linda K. Hughes, Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, and Linda H. Peterson on the importance of understanding Victorian poetry's periodical publication. Here again, Guy and Small rely upon a stark division between the knowledge-making and value-making functions of literary study when they suggest that while such work on Victorian periodicals "can yield useful information about the numbers and kinds of textual embodiments that were available to nineteenth-century readers," it nonetheless has "surprisingly little to tell us about the nature of those poetic works which survive today, and this is because . . . such an approach has relatively little to say about value" (85). This apparent avoidance of value seems to Guy and Small undemocratic; offering as an example Nicholas Frankel's work on the importance of the material form of Wilde's 1892 poems, they suggest that the tactic of revaluing poetry by identifying it with the material text may be "unwise" because it excludes readers who don't have access to the "original" versions housed in research university special collections departments (70). They draw similar conclusions from their careful examination of the challenges of editing non-fictional prose texts like Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) (in chapter 4) and the dramatic works of Wilde among others (in chapter 5).

Throughout, Guy and Small worry about the "conflation of cultural history with canonicity" invited by these scholarly practices (136). (In this they necessarily suggest comparison with Walter Benn Michaels's very different critique of material text scholarship in *The Shape of the Signifier: American Writing from 1967 to the End of History* [2004].) But—as a major trend in recent work in Victorianist literary studies has begun to point out, and as strands of our critical tradition have always argued—the opposition between cultural history and canon-making, or (to frame it as a broader problem in the disciplinary history of English studies) between knowledge-making and value judgment, may be neither useful nor inevitable. Many readers of *Victorian Studies* might argue that the histories of the process of valuing a text—whether in 1873 or at the present moment—are equally part of that text's reception history. Further, many working critics implicitly follow Walter Benjamin when they assume that a text's reception history is "a component of the effect which a work of art has upon us today" and that "this effect does not rest in an encounter with the work of art alone but in an encounter with the history which has allowed the work to come down to our own age" (Benjamin and Knut Tarnowski, "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian," *New German Critique* 5 [1975], 28). Victorianists have long been interested in the sociology of reading—perhaps exactly because the small marginal traces and large data aggregations bearing witness to the bare fact of individuals' and groups' readings of nineteenth-century literature signals a place where literary value was made, or (if you prefer) discerned by groups of readers. Guy and Small offer in this volume a careful, respectful engagement with a dominant practice of scholarly editing and an important mode of material text scholarship, and their interesting descriptions of the challenges of such work—which they know about firsthand—usefully bring out some of the assumptions

and pitfalls of this work. But their critique of the way such editing responds to the problem of literary value does not take into account the crucial fact that there are many ways in which literary scholars value texts, only one of which is the kind of explicitly evaluative judgment-making required by literary canon-building.

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How To Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain, by Leah Price; pp. 350. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, $29.95, $24.95 paper.

This deeply researched, deftly argued study delivers a sharp corrective to the "idealist" conception of reading and the broader "bookish liberalism" that have guided those histories of the book that take novel reading as the representative way of engaging with books, and assume economic and cultural circulation to be based on operations of individual choice and a will to read (150). Leah Price asks us to bring to our bibliographic and historical practices a clearer distinction between "reading" and "use," whereby the "uses" to which books have been put are understood to be as often material as ideational. Given the excess of print supply over demand (Price quotes W. H. Wills's estimation, in 1850, that the daily newspapers produced in 1848 "added up to '1,466,150,000 square feet of printed surface'"), it is no surprise that the medium of the text was often valued above its content (qtd. in Price 142). Even the least desired of books retains value in the paper it is printed on: paper that the Victorians used to line pies, pattern dresses, curl hair, wipe bottoms, and to pulp and recycle as new paper and new board.

Historians of literacy have commonly, and not wrongly, seen a great democratic good in the emergence of mass markets for print that followed the removal of taxes on paper and the development of new manufacturing methods "substitut[ing] cheap wood pulp for expensive linen" (9). Price describes an adjacent history, rather less easily aligned with the triumph of democracy. This is a cultural history of how Victorians perceived printed matter as, among other things, a burden, waste, and a "carrier of relationships" fraught with evidence of the inequality of human participants in culture and in the marketplace (Natalie Davis qtd. in Price 260). The book, in *How To Do Things with Books*, is as often an obstacle to social relations as an enabler of them: it is a means of repelling others, exploiting them, imposing upon them, and dictating to them (or attempting to). So, unhappy husbands and wives in Anthony Trollope's work erect screens of print against one another; the very book-lovers in Charlotte Brontë's and George Eliot's corpus who equate their reading with interiority leap to identify others reading in their presence as hostile; and when the books themselves find voices in it-narratives such as "The History of an Old Pocket Bible" (1812), they are eloquent about the horrors of neglect and abuse they have endured. You can put a book into cultural circulation in any number of ways, these and numerous other reports of Victorian non-reading remind us, but you cannot compel those who pick it up to take its content into their heads. The same men and women who foist anonymous tracts and Bibles on children, the poor, servants, and colonial subjects, worry continually here over whether the recipients will not mistake the value of the texts given—which might mean overvaluing them in the way of idolatry, or abusing them in the way of