

Daniel Hack, *The Material Interests of the Victorian Novel*.

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This fine study, in the Victorian Literature and Culture series from University of Virginia Press, explores the 'material interests' of Victorian fiction in various 'economic, physical, linguistic, and corporeal' forms, arguing that attention to the material aspects of writing responds to concerns of the period (1-2). Daniel Hack treats in detail four well-known novels, *Henry Esmond*, *Bleak House*, *No Name* and *Daniel Deronda*. He also discusses some notable intertextual links: the substantial advertising that accompanied the part-issues of the Dickens and Eliot novels; the debate over remuneration of authors stimulated by Carlyle's 'The Hero as Man of Letters' and pursued by the (short-lived) Guild of Literature and Art championed by Dickens, Forster and Bulwer Lytton; the related phenomenon of proliferating begging-letters which sometimes shared 'literary' qualities.

The first novel examined, *Henry Esmond*, is chosen because its eighteenth-century setting and material imitation (when first published in 1852) of eighteenth-century book-production, enable a focus on the transition that this period represents - between a literary culture centred on patronage, manuscript circulation, and the sort of allusions these factors fostered, and the dominance of a print medium where the material substance of the text was more separable from its verbal content, and the writer had less control of its dissemination and interpretation. Hack shows how this significant change is registered in the novel's plot, in the difference between Joseph Addison's MS poem *The Campaign* (which gains him preferment), and Richard Steele's periodical *The Spectator*, to which Esmond contributes a paper directed at his love-interest whose object fails. This movement in the novel also mirrors, Hack contends, the novel's political plot, its rejection of Jacobitism carrying with it a change from 'a sovereign-authorized identity to a self-authorized one' (34-35). Moreover, the text's format is not straightforwardly imitative of an eighteenth-century memoir, since its footnotes make its supposed date and provenance very difficult to determine.

Hack's approach to *Bleak House*, which is, as he acknowledges, the novel of Dickens's which engages most thoroughly with the significances of writing's 'physical materiality' (37), is to look at Krook's notorious 'spontaneous combustion' as a blurring of the distinction between body and sign, the physical and the metaphorical. He argues that this blurring helped to legitimate Dickens's wish to intervene in public policy debates about physical issues such as sanitation and the disposal of dead bodies. Relevant to this context, since it was running literally in tandem with the novel in the 'Bleak House Advertiser', was a dispute about the famous chemist Baron Liebig's endorsement (or otherwise) of the unadulterated state of a brand of ale: the debate about a physical substance and its possible corruption eventually gave way to 'discussion of the authenticity, location, and meaning of documents' (60).

Dickens reappears in the next chapter - for me the most fascinating in the book - this time as the recipient of begging-letters, and as one of the pioneers of the Guild of Literature

and Art. Begging-letters were endemic to the lives of prominent Victorians, and as they were not only instances of writing, but also assumed to be fraudulent and hence fictional, they bore an uncomfortable resemblance to material published as fiction, especially since both forms usually aimed at engaging the reader's sympathies. Meanwhile the Guild reflected and contributed to contemporary debates about how authors should be remunerated: it strove to differentiate itself from the Royal Literary Fund, an organisation which more or less obliged indigent authors to produce begging-letters, but had a conception of literary endeavour which meant that it could not subscribe fully to market values either. This is the context for discussing *No Name*, which features Captain Wragge's schemings, including begging-letters, as a parody of the main plot: despite the latter's eventual adherence to conventional morality, the text undermines both explicitly and implicitly the widespread belief in the affective role of fiction.

No Name ends with a kiss between Magdalen Vanstone and her fiancé, while the reader is left with words on paper; Gwendolen's experience in *Daniel Deronda* resembles Magdalen's in many ways, but she is left with Daniel's letter rather than the physical presence she craves. According to Hack, the text suggests that writing may have more power than Gwendolen credits it with, and thus that Gwendolen may be overly pessimistic. His main concern, however, is a detailed analysis of the language used to describe Mordecai, his plans, and his relationship with Daniel: this brings out how Mordecai's nationalistic idealism is not antipathetic to, but actually fostered by, money-making activity. Moses, as the study discusses at length, was after all the name of both a Jewish spiritual leader and a London clothier famous for his advertising – one venue for which was the 'Daniel Deronda Advertiser'.

The Material Interests of the Victorian Novel is a very well-researched and rewarding study. It is intricately but always lucidly argued, and has some original contributions to make to the criticism of canonical Victorian fiction in its 'material' contexts.

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