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How To Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain by Leah Price (review)

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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

recycling the paper to meet practical earthly needs. On the other hand—and it is worth remarking how strong a narrative trope the “on the other hand” gesture is in this book, given Price’s acute antennae for cultural variance—no isolated action in relation to printed texts is transparent in its meaning. The dismembered book may testify to an act of devaluation, but it can also enable new acts of valuation, as when the cabinet-maker’s wife described by Henry Mayhew “scheme[s] to go to the shops who ‘wrapped their things from books,’” so that he may have “something to read after his day’s work” (240).

Everything depends upon cultural transaction and hence on metaphor. Deeply informed as *How To Do Things with Books* is by bibliographic, economic, and social history, it is fundamentally literary-critical in its methods, reading the cultural record of Victorian book use and the more recent history of academic study of books through their languages of description. Certain tropes prove persistent: consumption of books; “tomes as tombs”; binding as dress (143). One of Price’s most distinctive critical moves is to point out connections and disconnections between Victorian patterns of response to books and patterns of response today to media that encroach on the book’s erstwhile terrain: the Victorian mother, absorbed in a book, temporarily deaf to her children, prefigures twenty-first-century mothers “engrossed in their smartphones” (52–53). Yet where Victorian conduct literature “valued the willingness to be distracted,” we “think of absorption as a virtue—to check Facebook is to succumb to laziness, to read a novel cover to cover is to find a stable self” (68).

If I have a hanging question at the end of this (certainly) absorbing, playful, thought-provoking book, it concerns the difference in pressure to be placed upon metaphor as a symptom of past cultural attitudes and as a diagnostic descriptor of academic work today. To hold up to scrutiny the metaphors by which we account for our current transactions with books is to enter into an argument about the distribution of scholarly attention and the nature of disciplinary relations in ways that have potential political force within the institution. When Price discerns continuities between Victorian literary genres and contemporary genres of intellectual practice—the *bildungsroman* and literary criticism, the novel of manners and reception studies, the *it*-narrative and textual bibliography—she is asking us, for example, to recognise that “competing Victorian fictional subgenres . . . anticipate twentieth-century” scholarly competition between attention to objects and attention to people (130). The notion that we bring to the study of Victorian books some thoroughly Victorian discriminations in our perceptions of social and textual relations is at once an elegant piece of troping, and (arguably) one that overweights the authority of tropes. Are our disciplinary and institutional priorities really so adversely hierarchical? Do we really preserve too much of the Victorian assumption that reading and interiority are higher order practices and book handling a lower order practice? Price doesn’t go quite that far—though she comes close. In the end a liberatory agenda for attending to non-readerly treatments of the book, rather than revolutionary overthrow of the priority of textual analysis, lies behind such observations. But one can suspect that reading the trope of generic continuity has special attraction here because it holds out, tacitly, against so much evidence that the history of the Victorian book was so largely a history of reading not undertaken, of textual matter gone to waste.

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