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Review of Changing Hands: Industry, Evolution, and the Reconfiguration of the Victorian Body by Peter J. Capuano

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Changing Hands: Industry, Evolution, and the Reconfiguration of the Victorian Body

by Peter J. Capuano (review)

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spirit" of the "raucous neighborhood" around Fleet Street (p. 218). At the same time, however, his often passive—and repetitive—prose (especially constructions such as "So it was that . . ." and "The period saw . . .") undermines the agency of the non-European characters he is working so hard to highlight.

Despite these flaws, *The Love of Strangers* is a compelling reminder of the importance of the value of xenophilia, in our own day as well as in Jane Austen's. While some reviewers have criticized his references to Austen as a rhetorical ploy, such scene-setting in fact enlivens and strengthens his main argument, about the incredibly rich—if since forgotten—mix of cultures and customs in post-Napoleonic Europe. This cosmopolitan moment was soon foreclosed by the rise of nationalism and imperialism within a few decades. But Jane Austen's England was far more like today's than we may realize, in more ways than one.

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Peter J. Capuano, *Changing Hands: Industry, Evolution, and the Reconfiguration of the Victorian Body*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015, 340 pp. \$80.00 cloth, \$39.95 paper or ebook.

Peter Capuano begins *Changing Hands* with a simple question: "Why are hands the most described body part in the nineteenth-century novel?" (p. 12). The question stems from an empirical investigation conducted using databases of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction. By employing newly available digital humanities techniques, Capuano traces a perceptible shift in textual preoccupation: while eighteenth-century novels are filled with descriptions of facial features (especially eyes, but also hair, noses, mouths, etc.), their Victorian successors display a decided preference for hands. This macro-textual observation in turn allows him to see that Mary Shelley devoted more attention to the clutches than to the glares of Frankenstein's creature and that William Thackeray focused more on Becky Sharp's flirtatious fingers than on her coquettish glances. But why?

Capuano argues that the chief factors contributing to this authorial move "from gaze to grasp" were industrial mechanization and the development of evolutionary theory (p. 19). These twin forces, he maintains, created a host of anxieties about the relevance of the human body—and in particular of the human hand. Manual labor was increasingly displaced by machine technology, and the exceptional nature of a divinely modeled human form was challenged by a shared history with the anatomy of other apes. Whereas faces, and especially eyes, were important gateways to the soul for earlier writers, Victorians tended to view the proof of divine inspiration in wrists, palms, and fingers. The hand thus became "the most generative but also the most heavily contested site in the British cultural imaginary" (p. 42). Capuano examines this widespread concern through the popular fiction of the time and contends that novelists were better able to convey such cultural anxieties than were other writers.

One of the strengths of *Changing Hands* is its careful articulation of its position relative to a host of extant criticism on Victorian literature. Capuano enters the fray via a broad scholarly conversation regarding the new materialism and the corporeal turn. For too long, he insists, modern literary critics have been reading allusions to hands as metaphors or metonyms—as mere indicators for labor or socioeconomic status—and

have thus overlooked the significance of actual hands.² He corrects this tendency by embracing new practices of “surface reading” in order to appreciate Victorian hands as material appendages.³ By doing so, he both reveals the “manual crisis” of the nineteenth century and returns to a model of what he calls “our embodied handedness” (p. 3). The Victorian period is a crucial literary era in which so many common related terms (*maneuver*, *manners*, *manuscripts*) and phrases (*gaining the upper hand*) were transitioning from literal references to metaphorical expressions; from our own twenty-first-century perspective, it can be difficult to perceive the explicit gestures to physical hands. In fact, one could characterize Capuano’s primary move as an exploration of the process by which *handmade* and *manufactured* transform from etymological equivalences to obvious opposites.

Changing Hands begins with a data-driven observation culled from digital humanities methodologies, but its eight chapters are structured by close readings of canonical novels, spanning from Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) to Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). The examinations of these novels are often accompanied by excerpts from contemporary guidebooks and pamphlets on topics such as hand-shake etiquette and handwriting analysis. Capuano’s recovered trove of manuals on all things manual includes texts such as Richard Beamish’s *Psychonomy of the Hand* (1843), which explained how the qualities of a subject’s hands could reveal personality traits. While his individual chapters each focus on hand-related themes, Capuano also addresses a wide variety of critical topics regarding race, class, and gender. He is generally interested in both “embodied handedness” and “manual discourse” (p. 107); he primarily attends to the materiality of hands, but he does not ignore the metaphorical and metonymical implications of their employment. His critical account is therefore not a repudiation of earlier works by Victorian scholars but rather a helpful companion to them.

Capuano’s first four chapters look at industrialization and gender discrepancy in the early nineteenth century. New Victorian anxieties surrounding the status of the physical hand in a mechanizing world provide a solid backdrop for original readings of popular novels. In this context, *Frankenstein*, a text filled with both “malevolent tension and barbaric tensility,” could be considered “the first industrial novel” (pp. 35, 41). Factory work altered the very meaning of manual labor. Machines were not only replacing human hands but also mangling and eviscerating them. Hands were thus being rendered obsolete by machines that could significantly outperform them, but their remaining value also received renewed attention because of the dangers of the mechanized workplace.⁴ A laborer whose hands were amputated after an industrial accident could no longer work; hands became more vulnerable and thus more valuable. In his reading of Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), Capuano further notes that the separation of gendered spheres produced a new kind of labor for middle-class

2. Capuano references works such as Bruce Robbins’s *The Servant’s Hand: English Fiction from Below* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986); and Patricia E. Johnson’s *Hidden Hands: Working-Class Women and Victorian Social-Problem Fiction* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001).

3. For the practice of surface reading, see Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108:1 (Fall 2009): 1–21.

4. Similarly, “broken or missing fingers” and “scarred or broken hands, wrists, arms, and elbows” were common among sailors in the early nineteenth century. See Simon P. Newman, “Reading the Bodies of Early American Seafarers,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 55:1 (January 1998): 59–82, quotes on p. 67.

women, needlework, that oddly aligned their situation with the plight of lower-class manual laborers. As domestic work increasingly resembled mill work, the work of one's hands was transferred from the shop to the home.

The highpoint and centerpiece of *Changing Hands* is its fourth chapter, which features a reading of Becky Sharp's "manual tactics" in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848) (p. 94). Becky is often described by critics as manipulative, and Capuano allows us to see how her manipulations are explicitly manual. Her touches, squeezes, gestures, and waves are all part of her engagement in "hand-to-hand combat" in the social setting of the Victorian drawing room, a combat he explains by reference to popular etiquette guidebooks of the time (a genre itself flourishing at the mid-century period) (p. 107). Capuano considers not only Thackeray's words but also his original, hand-drawn illustrations for the novel, which underscore *Vanity Fair's* emphasis on gaining the upper hand.

The analysis falters somewhat in chapters 5 and 6, which involve evolutionary theory. While Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) seems to be an obvious cultural touchstone for Victorian hands, the novels Capuano has chosen to examine in this light, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860–1861) and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), fail to evoke a profound resonance with scientific paradigm shifts. The argument that Darwinian evolutionary theory eroded the barrier between human and animal anatomy and thus, in a parallel way, also led to anxieties about the dismantling of taken-for-granted class barriers is reasonable but tenuous. While Capuano interestingly posits that evolutionary theory developed in the way that it did because of already-existing attitudes toward the hand (especially regarding the "discovery" of the gorilla in the 1840s), his claim that similar hands among Jewish characters in Eliot's novel are somehow related to "the Darwinian notion of 'adaptive resemblances' in animal species" is unhelpful (p. 177). While the gradually strengthening connection between anatomy and genetic inheritance in the nineteenth century certainly had wide-ranging implications, the links drawn here between evolutionary theory and the novel remain unconvincing.

By contrast, Capuano's final chapters, which explore the role that handwriting played in the Victorian novel, reveal surprising insights regarding the changing attitudes toward scripted messages. While eighteenth-century novels were often epistolary in form, their authors never drew attention to the penmanship of their characters. But in the nineteenth century (and especially with the rise of detective fiction), handwriting became an important clue to the unique individuality of the letter-writer, as evidenced by contemporary publications such as Henry Firth's *Guide to the Study of Graphology* (1884). Capuano shows that handwriting was a complex element in the Victorian period; on the one hand, it stood out against the mechanized labor of the factory as inescapably personalized, but on the other hand it suggested a technology (with the pen as a tool) that could be systematically ordered and taught. Capuano's reading of Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853–1854) and its clerical communications therefore highlights "the repeated interplay . . . between the mechanistic and the manual" (p. 209). He persuasively explains how attention to the idiosyncrasies of individual signatures marked the hand as "the nineteenth century's most undisguisable body part" (p. 212).

Capuano's analysis is limited to nineteenth-century British fiction, but his observations could certainly be extended to other literary traditions. This limitation is not a weakness but rather a provocation to scholars working in different fields. How were attitudes toward the hand affected by industrialization in other cultures? In nineteenth-century American literature, for example, one quickly thinks of the "squeeze of the hand" in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Mark Twain's use of fingerprints in

Pudd'nhead Wilson (1894). The US Civil War occasioned thousands of amputations, and the "empty sleeve" became a prominent theme in American literature of the 1860s.⁵ Capuano's work should inspire others to investigate anxieties surrounding "embodied handedness" in a wide array of works across multiple venues.

Changing Hands concludes by gesturing to the present day with a particularly apt set of illustrations from Google Books. As is now well known, the page displays on books digitized by Google occasionally reveal an image of the human fingers holding down the paper's edge. Capuano remarks that here "the figurative and literal instantiations of having something 'at hand' in a digital research environment merge with uncanny force. They remind us that our seemingly disembodied ability to scroll through a digitized text by tapping electronic buttons still relies on the human hands that first performed the function" (p. 255). This final vignette reinforces the book's pressing point—that an increasingly digital generation would do well to recall the physical fingers on which it depends.

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Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. 376 pp. \$91.00 cloth.

In centuries past, our medieval ancestors recognized stones as much more than mere units of inert substrate. Stones were conduits of mystery, of possibility—a dragon's egg, a giant's bone, or even a medicinal agent. Stones were agential enigmas whose existences and essences interpolated with the human world in phantasmal ways, and, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues, they continue to do so today. The commingling of stone's lithic force with the human world is the central narrative of *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, an exploration of medieval texts that seeks refined understandings of stones as active entities that "possesses creative forces and intense dynamism" (p. 42). At a time when literary studies seeks applications for the burgeoning new materialisms, Cohen interjects and points backward hundreds of centuries to medieval thinkers and texts whose preoccupation with the material world parallels our supposedly "new" materialisms.

However, regardless of material fascination, the Middle Ages were hardly an episteme known for challenging prevalent anthropocentric ideologies. Thus, an interesting tension arises early in the book and is sustained throughout: How exactly can we discern ecological perspectives from the strikingly anthropocentric texts of the Middle Ages? It is a question Cohen considers: "Although inherently anthropocentric, such narratives unleash ecologies-in-motion that subtly challenge that perspective that offers alternative visions in which a gem of cold gleam touched by water explodes in sudden storm, or a rock that calls out to be held burns the hand that grasps its heft" (p. 10). Importantly, Cohen does not seek to resolve this lingering tension between the texts and his critical approach; instead, he balances the two, focusing his attention on the uncanny ability of stone to assert its agency even within the confines of an anthropocentric literary tradition.

5. Colleen Glenney Boggs, "The Civil War's 'Empty Sleeve' and the Cultural Production of Disabled Americans," *J19* 3:1 (Spring 2015): 41–65.