



**'Disruptive Energies and the Domestication of Time'**

[Time, Domesticity and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain](#). Maria Damkjaer. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 192 pp.

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<1>Picturing *Bleak House*'s Esther Summerson jingling her keys or Mrs. Beeton laying out the steps to make a perfect stock, it is easy to believe the 'quintessential adage for nineteenth-century domesticity:' 'a time for everything and everything at its right time' (2). However, Maria Damkjaer's excellent deep dive into the representation of domestic time in nineteenth-century Britain cautions us. The orderly regularity of this phrase conceals a complicated system of the representation of domestic time, which she defines as 'points in a work where the representation of domesticity becomes temporal' (6). Whereas we might imagine that print culture, particularly with the explosion of serial publication, emphasizes regularity and mechanization, Damkjaer argues that mid-century 'print culture enabled a more fluid negotiation of experience' (166) which featured 'porousness' and 'interruptibility' as much as it did completion and wholeness.

<2>The way Damkjaer organizes this book is part of her proof. She begins with readings of canonical novels, *Bleak House* (1852-3) and *North and South* (1854-5), whose representation of time challenges some of our understandings of literary realism, and concludes with non-fiction, the 'increasingly fragmented and non-linear textual practices' (166) of *Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1859-61) and scrapbooks. While the linear, literary texts differ from the texts considered in the second half of Damkjaer's book, all illustrate 'major uncertainties

about how time in the home actually worked' (14). There is an emphasis on *work* in this book, and one of the strengths of *Time, Domesticity and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain* is how vividly Damkjaer locates the perhaps more familiar literary readings into the rhythms of the actual Victorian household. A reading of *Bleak House* imagines the under-represented labor of servants and a consideration of periodicals is contextualized by the pressures and politics of needlework. *North and South* is written as Gaskell imagines the work of Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War and the bits and pieces of cookery books such as Beeton's are consumed in the context of the 'intricate fabric of use-by dates and natural processes of consumption and decay' that challenge the home cook. Damkjaer is persuasive in showing the 'middle-class home as process, not stasis - as an entity dynamically bound to time as well as an entity in space' (3).

<3>While *Bleak House* is about the home as process, of all the works Damkjaer considers, it is the one whose representation of domestic time is the most committed to uniformity, though it gets there via repetition rather than stasis. Damkjaer sees in the novel's repeated reference to Esther's jingling of her household keys a metaphor for the kind of time the novel desires, a stability produced by constant uniform labor. This idea is enabled by its serial format, the 'recognizable blue-green wrappers and the distinctive cover design by 'Phiz'' (25) that accompanied its nineteen instalments, as well as the deeply inter-textual advertising by Dakin and Company which is designed to look like a serial installment of a Dickens novel. As both the novel and the ads emphasize domestic routines of tea-making as well as alluding to aspects of national life such as the General Election, there is a 'semblance of collusion' (51) between the discourses that produce the novel as a kind of national allegory with an idea of simultaneity at its heart.

<4>There are alternate energies at work in the novel, however. The 'counter-rhythm' of the 'ominous dripping on the Ghost's Walk at the aristocratic Chesney Wold' (35) haunts the circularity of Esther's jingling and 'the home is made temporal at the cost of narratively marginalizing the domestic servants of *Bleak House*' (166). The invisibility of labor addressed in Chapter One becomes the interruptibility of labor in Chapter Two, which shows how the constant interruptions which are a 'condition of domesticity' both 'stretch and challenge representation' (58), illustrated in periodicals such as the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and the short-lived *Timethrift*. If men's domestic time was 'often equated with leisure,' women's time in the home was 'a much more nebulous mix of work and leisure' (61) and required a way of thinking about and organizing the spare moment, the kind of time left over from constant interruption. Damkjaer shows how the genre fiction favored by periodicals, here literary fiction, didactic fiction, and advice literature, allows for 'many different conceptualizations of the everyday' (59).

<5>If Esther's keys are a metaphor for circular time, sewing becomes a metaphor for interrupted time. Damkjaer looks at sewing as an actual activity as well as its representation in periodical literature, which worked to articulate understandings of sewing as 'good and bad

employments of time,' the virtues of plain-work versus the 'intellectually stultifying' fancy-work (73). The proliferation of domestic periodicals representing how women spent their time became itself a kind of 'interruption into the rhythms of the home' (84) as it sought to direct and influence the way women used their time.

<6>In her third chapter, Damkjaer turns to Gaskell's *North and South*, which she serialized in Dickens's weekly journal, *Household Words*. Here domestic time, borrowing Mary Favret's concept of an eventless 'meantime,' becomes a space 'between upsetting events, a time when experiences may be discussed, contemplated, and assessed' (86). Gaskell, writing of a labor strike in the context both of the immediate violence of the Industrial Revolution and the more distant Crimean War, has plenty of upsetting events. But her novel, much to Dickens's dismay, favors meditation over suspense. Damkjaer argues that the novel's meantime doesn't give Dickens the frequent cliffhangers he wants from weekly publication, but that for Gaskell, eventless meantime 'has the potential to be recuperative for the novel's characters, who must sort their fraught memories into comprehensible narratives' (86). Damkjaer also suggests that the serial reader participates in this temporal economy; like Margaret, serial reading allows readers to 'revisit and reinterpret events continually' (102).

<7>If narrative and its particular representational needs organize the first half of Damkjaer's book, in its final sections she turns to the very different conceptualization of domestic time 'through the organization of information' (117) by looking at cook books and scrapbooks. Damkjaer reminds us that serialization was not limited to fiction with a humorous account of the original 1859-61 serialization of *Beeton's Book of Household Management*: a recipe for 'stew soup' was split in the middle (at the world 'split' for split peas). We imagine this bestselling cook book as a book, the cornerstone of a certain kind of solid English efficiency. However, Damkjaer reveals its more contingent print history which included volume publication, a re-issuing in smaller volumes for smaller households, as well as a re-serialization in 1862-63 after its original run complicating its relationship to time: 'Instead of culminating in a volume edition, the *Book of Household Management* effectively re-ephemeralizes as soon as it has de-ephemeralized' (126- 127).

<8>The print history is only one of the factors that make up the cookbook's 'dense web of different periodicities' (141). The book expresses 'the inherent difficulty in plotting time,' (137) as it addresses a reader who is both organizing her time and the time of her servants 'in the face of the very real anxiety that such a schedule would always – could only ever – be unattainable' (137). The challenge is that if domestic time is a small-scale version of the very progress of civilization (130), it is extra important that an orderly household devise repeatable systems that can be scaled up or down (134). If this sounds like Mrs. Beeton as Mrs. Bagnet, Dickens's energetic uber mother whose husband believes that 'discipline must be maintained,' Damkjaer's reading of the complex *Book of Household Management* emphasizes the reader's experience. She points out that 'the use of a cookery book is rarely linear, but is structured by a self-informed pathway: a constant activity of choosing, adapting and discarding' (142).

Emphasizing how the reader creates an experience of time in a work that itself is already marked by so many different temporal energies perfectly underscores the complexity of representing domestic time.

<9>This interest in how readers create meaning leads to a final section on how readers create the texts themselves in scrapbooks and albums. Here Damkjaer builds on the works of critics like Talia Schaffer and Ellen Gruber Garvey to talk about 'the multifarious ways in which readers can re-edit print culture' (165) in their crafts and so create a domestic time that was 'dis-synchronous, imaginative, residual and irreverent' (148-49). Damkjaer reminds us that it would be a misconception of domestic time to imagine it a 'passive receptacle of print culture' (165). By reminding us of the active engagement with a range of different kinds of print in her conclusion, she shows us a dimension of domestic time which stands 'outside regular narrativization' (162). Rather than seeing the development of print culture in the mid-century, such as the explosion of periodicals, as a sign of the increasing mechanization and regularization of time, Damkjaer's book argues instead for its complexity. 'Print culture,' she writes, 'is, and always has been, a meeting place where a multiplicity of temporalities linger – either acknowledged or unacknowledged – as they find new forms of expression' (144).