

BOOK REVIEWS

Joanna Hofer-Robinson, *Dickens and Demolition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 264, £75 hardcover.

Hugo Bowles, *Dickens and the Stenographic Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 224, \$74/£55 hardcover.

One of the first questions to ask of any new Dickens studies monograph is: How does it situate the Inimitable himself? How is Dickens's life and celebrity placed in relation to his works and their contexts, and what impact does that have upon the conclusions the work reaches as a result? In two rigorously researched new studies, *Dickens and Demolition* and *Dickens and the Stenographic Mind*, Joanna Hofer-Robinson and Hugo Bowles take very different approaches to Dickens as author. Bowles's study focusses primarily on production and inspiration, tracing Dickens's journey to stenographic literacy and considering how that literacy imprinted itself upon his fiction throughout his career. In this way, Bowles places Dickens's mindset and intentions centre stage, suggesting that a proficiency in shorthand enabled him to manipulate language in ways unavailable to other authors and to control how readers engaged with his novels. In contrast, Hofer-Robinson's study focusses on contexts of reception and remediation. Building upon recent work on literary afterlives, such as Casie LeGette's *Remaking Romanticism: The Radical Politics of the Excerpt* (2017) and Mary Hammond's *Charles Dickens's Great Expectations: A Cultural Life* (2015), Hofer-Robinson shows how Dickens's fictions were variously used to facilitate discussions about urban improvements and demolition projects in London. She persuasively concludes that the strategic deployment of the fictional world can have a material impact.

In *Dickens and Demolition*, Hofer-Robinson acknowledges that the strength of her argument lies in the sheer frequency of Dickensian afterlives, whilst also stressing that the afterlives are not marshalled to a single, specific cause. "Indeed," she argues, "it is in the dissimilarity between appropriations of Dickens that we can perceive the ways in which later users manipulated fiction to promote various agendas and representations of space" (8). The variety of Dickensian afterlives deployed in the service of urban improvement debates is evinced in the tremendous scope of Hofer-Robinson's study. Following an opening chapter that lays out the history of the development of London's built environment, chapter two discusses scenic representations of urban space in stage adaptations of *Oliver Twist* and the ways they "realised interactions between actual, imagined and symbolic spaces" (55). Hofer-Robinson's analysis of these adaptations is particularly refreshing because she offers original close readings of the texts themselves rather than defaulting to an account of Dickens's reaction to his works being repurposed for the stage, a well-versed narrative. In chapter three, Hofer-Robinson examines the ways *Oliver Twist* was redeployed in discussions about the demolition of Field Lane. Analysing the novel's reappearance in a variety of fora, including the press and parliamentary debates, Hofer-Robinson concludes with a useful paradox, stating that "even though later users often re-presented Dickens's works as a tool to aid the legibility of the city . . . the multiplicity and flexibility of Dickensian afterlives reveal that practices of appropriation in fact added to London's overwhelming illegibility" (122).

In chapter four, Hofer-Robinson turns to Dickens's own involvement in metropolitan improvement debates and the ways he "brought his writing into dialogue with practical charitable projects in London" (133). This in turn "reveals considerable intersection between official and unofficial channels for reform and collaborations between women and men" (133). Dickens's involvement in the circulation of his own writings is then productively brought to bear in the final chapter, in which Hofer-Robinson examines how Dickensian afterlives were utilised in sanitary reform debates and discourses surrounding the redevelopment of Jacob's Island. This chapter explores the place of Dickensian afterlives in cultural memory, offering insight into the ways places like Jacob's Island were represented in Dickens's fiction and then re-presented in various new fora so that, over time, "Dickensian simulacra have come to stand for . . . cultural history" (179). For Hofer-Robinson, this makes it difficult for scholars "to find traces of the actual people who lived in these slum areas" even though "Dickensian afterlives survive in abundance" (179). Ultimately, she argues, Dickens struggled to control these afterlives despite his retroactive interventions. Indeed, so far as Jacob's Island was concerned, Dickens "did not have the final say about how the scene should be interpreted" (178).

In contrast, Bowles argues in *Dickens and the Stenographic Mind* that Dickens did exercise control over the ways his works were being read. Conscious of the fact that he is dealing with a highly complex topic, Bowles dedicates his first three chapters to laying out the features and context of the Gurney system of shorthand. These chapters are surprisingly clear, and this clarity is assisted materially by Bowles's decision to compare the Gurney system to the contemporaneous Pitman system to illustrate the benefits and limitations of both. In chapters four and five, Bowles explains how the Gurney mindset manifested in Dickens's writing habits by laying out the nature of what he terms the "stenographic mind." Tracing Dickens's experiences of reading and writing from childhood learning through his years as a law and parliamentary reporter in the 1830s, Bowles emphasises the uniquely balanced relationship Gurney shorthand struck between the mechanical and the creative. "It is something of a paradox," he argues, "that it was the very restrictiveness of the Gurney system, with its compression of sounds into consonants, that encouraged the creative manipulation and expansion of letters into whole words" (69). This creative manipulation, Bowles suggests, is responsible for many of Dickens's idiosyncratic narrative decisions in his works of fiction.

In the final chapters of the book, Bowles uses a variety of case studies to argue that Dickens's stenographic mind influenced his fiction. Exploring the rendering of cockney dialect in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37) in chapter six, Bowles argues that "one way Dickens was able to 'contain his audience' may have been the phonetic spelling of local accent and dialect to control the way that readers articulated the speech of his characters, i.e. 'force' vocalization" (99). This suggests that Dickens's understanding of stenography led to combinations of letters that would result in the vocalisation of certain sounds, which would in turn evoke or parody a given dialect. Finally, chapter seven draws upon a wealth of examples of the stenographic mind at play through puzzles and phonaesthetics, in which Bowles offsets necessarily complex linguistic explanations of the phenomenon with stenographic reappraisals of familiar humorous scenes from Dickens's works, such as Pip's letter to Joe in *Great Expectations* (1860–61).

Occasionally, when Bowles reframes well-known Dickensian anecdotes from a stenographic perspective, he overstates the influence that shorthand can reasonably be said to have had upon Dickens's mindset. For example, Bowles would have it that "Dickens's sense of competitiveness may also be partly due to the intense rigours of Gurney training," citing an instance "in 1835, while reporting at Chelmsford" when Dickens was "cooped up in a hotel on a rainy day and the only book he could find to read was *Field Exercises and Evolutions of the Army*. He writes, 'I have read it through so often that I am sure I could drill 100 recruits from memory.' He could

be describing the challenge of a Gurney transcription exercise” (70). This example is not substantiated further. Despite the occasional appearance of a more tenuous example, Bowles’s approach offers a real freshness to many well-worn Dickens anecdotes. He asks us to consider that narrative decisions as diverse as Dickens’s choice of character surnames, his depictions of characters learning to read and write, and his manipulation of dialogue to generate satire might well have Gurneyesque roots. Where for Hofer-Robinson the in-built remediation potential of Dickens’s fiction led to his loss of control over the reception of his works, Bowles argues that Dickens’s competence in shorthand enabled a linguistic experimentation that actually bolstered his control.

Whilst these texts discuss authorship from very different angles, placing them in dialogue with one another reveals some intriguing similarities in approach that may be useful to the periodical scholar. In *Literary Authors, Parliamentary Reporters* (2012), Nikki Hessell—a direct critical predecessor and source for Bowles’s study—argues that parliamentary reporting is often represented “as a rather unpleasant interlude or stepping stone in . . . [authors’] careers, one that is left behind with relief as they rise above its petty demands” (ix). Both Hofer-Robinson and Bowles join Hessell in deconstructing this problematic hierarchy by adopting a more integrated understanding of the relationship between literary fiction and journalism. Far from being “left behind in relief,” Bowles argues that shorthand continued to have a sustained and measurable impact upon Dickens’s fiction throughout his career and may be responsible for many of its idiosyncrasies. Equally, in her third chapter, Hofer-Robinson’s analysis of how Dickensian tropes and reprinted extracts in the periodical press contributed to changes in the built environment also emphasises the continuities between journalism and fiction. In her analysis of *Household Words*, for example, she argues that “fiction and journalism appear to validate each other” (157).

Hofer-Robinson’s work also evinces many hours spent in digital and hard copy archives, and she is alert to the limitations of both kinds of resources. She includes a supplement, “Archival Sources and a Note on Method,” at the end of the monograph to explain the ways she has endeavoured to achieve a balance between the two. As a result, the case studies in each of her chapters are amply evidenced and lucidly written. Viewed as a whole, however, Hofer-Robinson’s monograph sometimes presents a more challenging reading experience because it tends to dart back and forth between genres, debates, and fora, which means that the rationale behind the order of the chapters is not immediately obvious. Nevertheless, each chapter is undeniably rich and informative in its own right.

Both authors give their studies reasonable parameters, but their work also paves the way for future study, particularly by periodical scholars. For

example, Hofer-Robinson's decision to focus on urban improvements and demolition projects raises questions about how Dickens's works were marshalled by the provincial press and provincial theatres to discuss political issues not pertaining to the metropole. Equally, Bowles sets up frameworks that enable us to identify traces of the stenographic mind in Dickens's works whilst also suggesting that the subtle differences between different shorthand styles might have even more exciting considerations for authorship. Bowles posits that, if it is "possible to distinguish between a report written by a Gurney reporter and a reporter using a non-alphabetical system like Pitman or a note-taker," we might one day be able to determine "whether Dickens actually wrote a report of which he is only suspected of being the author" (95). In this respect, *Dickens and Demolition* and *Dickens and the Stenographic Mind* both succeed in debunking a criticism often levelled at Dickens studies: that there is nothing new to say. On the contrary, by asking that we engage with Dickens's works with a view to stenographic inspiration and material afterlives, these studies both offer fresh approaches and reveal just how much work remains to be done.

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Melisa Klimaszewski, *Collaborative Dickens: Authorship and Victorian Christmas Periodicals* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019), pp. xii + 282, \$80/£66 hardcover.

Introducing "Waiting for the Host," its "Extra Double Christmas Number" for 1865, *Chambers's Journal* proclaimed some uncomfortable insider truths about the Christmas periodicals phenomenon:

Be it known, however, that Christmas Numbers are not to be turned out, like an egg-spoon, by a single individual. A is the Author of the great idea—the germ of this snow-drop of literature; B is the Builder of the framework; while the rest of the alphabet (especially Y, Z) write the stories that hang upon it. I can't do it all alone; nor U (Reader) neither, nor W (that is, a person of twice your abilities, if such a one exist); nor X—the unknown, let him be who he will. In my school-days . . . I used to get into great difficulties with equations. But in equations, *a* at least was known; whereas in the turning out of Christmas Numbers, he is the very person whom it is so hard to discover. Yet, until the architect appears with his rough sketch or plan in hand, what is the poor builder to do, and all the intelligent and skilled labourers who work by the piece? (*Chambers's Journal*, December 25, 1865, 1)