

***Dickens and Modernity.***

Juliet John, ed. Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2012. 232pp.  
ISBN 978-1-84384-326-9

In a letter written at the time of Dickens's death, John Ruskin wrote, not altogether approvingly, of the novelist's relation to the modern:

Dickens was a pure modernist—a leader of the steam whistle party *par excellence*; his hero is essentially the ironmaster; in spite of *Hard Times*, he has advanced by his influence every principle that makes them harder—the love of excitement in all classes, and the fury of business competition, and the distrust of nobility and clergy.

Ruskin's rather austere dismissal of Dickens and his legacy neatly maps out a number of the reasons for his phenomenal appeal, both in his lifetime and today. It also signals how the man who is identified as a quintessential Victorian represented, for his contemporaries, the relentless march towards the new.

*Dickens and Modernity* picks up on several of the issues raised by Juliet John in her superb *Dickens and Mass Culture* (2010), exploring the idea of the “Dickens brand”, asking how modern an author Dickens really was, and also addressing just why Dickens remains such a popular author. John's intelligent and wide-ranging introduction pays tribute to the work of Dickensians past, while at the same time assimilating the very latest work on issues as diffuse as machinery, soundscapes, and sexuality. While some of the essays have a rather tangential relationship to modernity, they are all excellent, and this useful volume presents a splendid overview of the state of Dickens studies at the time of the bicentenary.

As John notes in her introduction, this work has been inflected by a “cultural studies” approach to Dickens, which enables a rich range of approaches and materials. John Drew details the challenges and opportunities associated with the development of the magnificent Dickens Journals Online Project. While Michael Hollington considers the circus as an enclave away from the industrial, making a sequence of bold leaps across disciplines and time to consider the imaginative possibilities contained by the big top and all that it represents.

Thing theory and sexuality are well represented in the essays, with Holly Furneaux bringing the two together in an analysis of that most curious of Victorian periodicals, *Master Humphrey's Clock*. Furneaux addresses the ways in which Dickens uses commodities to mediate expressions of sexuality and the erotic that otherwise have no place in the Victorian novel. Particularly striking (with apologies for the pun) is her extended examination of the titular clock as “a gendered hybrid, infused with human feeling and creativity” (58), alongside a close reading of Henry Clay Work's enduringly popular song of 1876, “My Grandfather's Clock”. Juliet John's chapter neatly complements Furneaux's work through its sustained discussion of Dickens's engagement with both real and imaginary commodities. According to John, Dickens's representation of objects is atypical, following Elaine Freedgood in her assertion of a complicated relationship between subjects and objects. In addition to an analysis of the deaf and blind Laura Bridgman's acquisition of language (Dickens wrote of his encounter with Bridgman in *American Notes*), John offers a lively account of the posthumous sale of Dickens's worldly goods and their vexed relationship to the author's sense of his own celebrity.

One of the most engaging essays in the collection is, though, the examination of the “Oliver! phenomenon” by Joss Marsh and Carrie Sickmann. The daughter of one of the designers of

the original film sets, Marsh's love for *Oliver!* has almost literally spanned her lifetime and is reflected in the infectious passion that infuses every paragraph of this essay. Partly an analysis of the theatrical revolution heralded by Lionel Bart's musical and partly an examination of how *Oliver!* blunts Dickens's angry demand for social reform, Marsh and Sickmann situate the musical in the context of 1960s London. While Dickens's novel is about scarcity, the spectacular musical version is overwhelming in its excess, using musical hall traditions to stage the sexual freedom and excitement of swinging London. The authors draw a sequence of compelling parallels between Dickens and Bart, before going on to argue that *Oliver!* exemplifies, "the new consumer culture of the post-rationing, materialist generation of Britons who... had never had it so good" (156, my ellipses). They then offer a helpful analysis of the work's deep intertextuality, including cinematic influences such as David Lean's 1948 film adaptation and the ongoing influence of Gustave Doré's haunting engravings from *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872). The piece closes with a brief discussion of the controversial "Dickens World" experience, before offering a thought-provoking examination of the reality television show, "I'd Do Anything" which, argue Marsh and Sickmann, redefined and repositioned the role of Nancy in *Oliver!*'s recent West End revival.

Jay Clayton's chapter, "The Dickens Tape: Affect and Sound Reproduction in *The Chimes*" is another exceptionally good contribution. Focusing particularly on bells, Clayton revisits a Christmas story that is primarily considered in the context of Dickens's commitment to social reform. Underpinned by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, acoustic theory, and studies in affect, Clayton's work considers the resonance of bells in a work whose title signals their central significance. Clayton offers a guided tour of both the auditory and technological context in which the story appeared, before demonstrating the significance of bells to the story's allegory. In particular, Clayton's work urges the modern reader, whose life is likely to be overwhelmed by noise, to consider the (possibly lost) art of remembering sound and to bring this skill to bear on a reading of *The Chimes*.

Much of this collection is concerned with Dickensian afterlives and while Jay Clayton, Holly Furneaux, and Dominic Rainsford attend to the novels, many of the other essays are focused around adaptations and re-workings of one form or another. If I have one complaint about this outstanding collection of essays, it is that Dickens's proto-modernist work *Our Mutual Friend* is almost completely absent. Nevertheless, the entertaining and incisive essays in this wonderful collection offer a series of important insights into Dickens's writing and its afterlives.

*Grace Moore*