



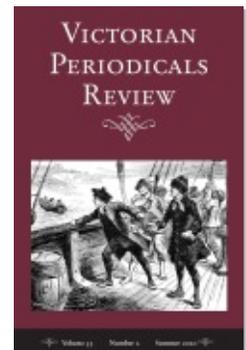
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*Collaborative Dickens: Authorship and Victorian Christmas
Periodicals* by Melisa Klimaszewski (review)

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(Review)

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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)

The writer (so-called “best of journalists,” James Payn) was not only the editor of *Chambers’s Journal* but is credited as inventor and author of the framework as well as four of the eight component tales that make up the number. In outlining his dilemma, he tackles head on a number of the challenges involved in the collaborative authorship of Victorian Christmas periodicals. These challenges are at the heart of Melisa Klimaszewski’s pioneering study of the Christmas issues and extra numbers of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* published between 1850 and 1867, all of which likewise place Charles Dickens in the roles of A, B, Y, and Z.

Klimaszewski’s main lines of argument are convincingly carried. She contends that we need to adopt a more “plural” and “polyphonic” notion of authorship than is commonly applied to Dickens (often represented as a “professional and personal bully”) in order to fully understand and evaluate the Victorian Christmas periodicals that he and thirty-nine other writers produced during this time period (2, 19, 1). Her study is the first to tackle this particular body of work from all sides, and her subtle approach allows the reader to comfortably construe Victorian Christmas periodicals as a canon despite the multiplicity of authors and a lack of traditional markers of textual coherence. Structurally, the book initially looks unadventurous; eight chapters deal chronologically with two Christmas numbers each, with the exception of the sixth (“Disconnected Bodies and Troubled Textuality”), which handles three. However, this proves to be a more than defensible approach, not least because a reliable map of the terrain needs to be drawn. Through this structure, scholars and students alike will find it easy to locate excellent synopses and close readings of any individual story. Moreover, this structure offers a fully contextualised picture of the virtues and strains of collaborative authorship during a period of Victorian print culture in which specific questions of imperial, sexual, and racial identity are raised.

Klimaszewski knows these Christmas stories inside out, having ably edited or co-edited no fewer than eight of the annual numbers for Hesperus Press. As such, she is in an excellent, perhaps uniquely qualified, position to judge how and when the voices and themes of individual writers blend harmoniously or sound notes of discord under Dickens’s coordinating hand, as he conducts the ensemble from first violin. Unusually, the model brought forward most clearly and frequently for analysing these complicated inter-relationships is that of conversation, as outlined in Holly A. Laird’s work on female co-authorship. Klimaszewski is unafraid to explore a female side to the conception of Dickens as a collaborator on heterotexts featuring work by a multigendered group. Rightly, this is adopted as a flexible rather than rigid theoretical model. But in its application to the uncertainties, self-reflexivity, and ephemerality of generating a printed rather than spoken performance, conversation may be merely the best available

of a number of metaphors and analogies for conveying what the critic apprehends.

Collaborative Dickens achieves a great deal by deftly bringing other valuable but neglected works of the period into its circle of illumination. I was particularly impressed by the curtain-call analysis of *No Thoroughfare* (1867), which sheds light on *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* (1857), *The Moonstone* (1868), and the Wilkie Collins-Charles Fechter play *Black and White* (1869). Inevitably, there are areas it does not cover and techniques it does not attempt. For example, collaborative authorship is susceptible to approaches from corpus linguistics and digital analysis of big data, as Hugh Craig and Arthur Kinney have shown in their application of the late John Burrows's lexical attribution techniques to Shakespeare's works (*Shakespeare, Computers, and the Mystery of Authorship*, 2009). Indeed, the Burrows method has been used (inconclusively, as later discoveries suggest) to attempt to disambiguate authorship of anonymous work from *All the Year Round*. Computer-assisted methods are worth exploring in order to see around or through metaphors for textual conversation in Dickens's Christmas numbers. Then there is the whole area of comparative study between different Victorian periodicals that Klimaszewski's work beckons toward. How do the Christmas conversations of Dickens and his small army of coadjutors compare with those conducted by other journals, such as *Cornhill*, *Once a Week*, *Temple Bar*, *Reynolds's Miscellany*, and, of course, *Chambers's* (which initially influenced Dickens and his sub-editor William Henry Wills but was clearly following their lead by 1865)? Did any Victorian Christmas periodical ever venture a special number composed according to *Punch's* 1869 recipe of Scrooge-like misanthropy, gushing not "with the milk of human kindness" but with "the bile of critical acrimony" ("A Notion of a Christmas Number," *Punch*, January 1869, 11)? Finally, in its understandable wish to define a new terrain and approach, this study references standard works on the Christmas stories by Ruth F. Glancy (*Dickens's Christmas Books, Christmas Stories, and Other Short Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography*, 1985) and Deborah A. Thomas (*Dickens and the Short Story*, 2016) rather less than it might. More recent doctoral and master's theses on collaboration in Dickens's periodicals have also been omitted, presumably because they have emerged while this study was moving through production. That said, with respect to *Collaborative Dickens* on its own terms, what it omits, and the future work that it will inspire, we may conclude with Dickens's words from "What Christmas Is, as We Grow Older": "Welcome, alike what has been, and what never was, and what we hope may be, to your shelter underneath the holly, to your places round the Christmas fire, where what is sits open-hearted!" (*Household Words*, Extra Number for Christmas, 1851).

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