

BOOK REVIEW

Carolyn Vellenga Berman. *Dickens and Democracy in the Age of Paper: Representing the People*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. 368. \$125.00 (cloth).

Lanya Lamouria 

Missouri State University
Email: llamouria@missouristate.edu

In *Dickens and Democracy in the Age of Paper: Representing the People*, Carolyn Vellenga Berman examines a crucial period of democratic reform in Britain (1832–1867) to probe a question, framed four decades ago by Benedict Anderson, that lands with renewed urgency today: what role does print culture play in constructing the modern nation? Centering the analysis on Charles Dickens’s writing and biography, Berman makes a compelling case that literature, broadly understood, engaged in a rivalry with Parliament in this era, challenging conceptions of national belonging and the people established by the First Reform Bill and government publications. The foundation on which Berman builds this argument will be familiar to many readers. The notion that Victorian novels borrow from Parliamentary Papers or blue books is commonplace in Victorian studies, as are claims that Dickens’s fiction mimics and mocks the parliamentary speech he transcribed as a young reporter. But Berman, reading eight of Dickens’s novels alongside a wide range of historical materials, reveals that such observations fail to capture, first, the complexity of the interaction between literary and government discourses, and second, the intensity of Dickens’s efforts to supplant Parliament as the national voice. Much like Sally Ledger’s *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (2007), Berman’s *Dickens and Democracy* reconsiders Dickens’s radicalism, concluding that it is located not in his “political prescriptions” but in his audacious claim to “speak for, and speak to” the people (321).

Part one, “The Art of Representation,” which covers the novelist’s literary apprenticeship in the 1830s, explores Dickens’s engagement with three “technologies of representation” (28) that mediated the nation’s relationship to its representatives while reshaping definitions of the people: shorthand, the Reformed Parliament, and Parliamentary Papers. Berman’s analysis of political shorthand manuals, which threads through several chapters, is suggestive. Chapter 1 links the novelist’s shorthand training to his appreciation of written language as visual hieroglyphic and to his thematic preoccupations (“spinster,” a word emphasized in one manual, looms large in his imagination) (41). Berman’s innovative reading of *David Copperfield* considers the role of shorthand in reshaping conceptions of the national community. David hones his shorthand skills by staging a “private Parliament”—Thomas Traddles reenacts famous parliamentary speeches, directing his attack at Mr. Dick and Betsey Trotwood—a scenario that exemplifies “how shorthand writing might produce political mimicry throughout the social body,” even amongst the disenfranchised (45). In chapter 2, Berman yokes a history of the parliamentary press (whose reports constituted an unauthorized “breach of privilege” until 1875) with an account of the First Reform Bill, using this context to frame a brief rereading of *Barnaby Rudge* as novel concerned less with Chartism than with the anti-Catholic agitation that preceded the extension of the vote in 1832 (60). Chapter 3, in which Berman treats *The Pickwick Papers* as response to the flood

of Parliamentary Papers that the British government began offering for public sale in 1835, sets the stage for the rest of *Dickens and Democracy*. Dickens's rivalry with Parliament is, fundamentally, a rivalry with blue books, which represented the people not only by reporting facts but by "hearing, recording, compiling, and transmitting" the personal testimony of individual British subjects (105).

Part two, "A Parliamentary People," offers clear evidence of Dickens's mimicry of Parliamentary Papers through readings of *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House*. In chapter 4, Berman observes that Dickens paradoxically attacks the coercive reformed Poor Law by writing a book, *Oliver Twist*, "constructed from the tissue of parliamentary publications" that enacted this coercion (134). And yet Dickens seems aware of his complicity with state power: a web of references, beginning with the name "Twist," links the book and the paper-based book trade with cotton production and the "transatlantic 'spinning machinery'" of slavery (171). The analysis of *Bleak House* in chapter 5, which argues that the Court of Chancery is a "warped mirror image of the Houses of Parliament," likewise takes a transatlantic turn (177). Berman's central insight concerns the novel's experimental dual narrative: Dickens's toggling between third- and first-person narrators mimics the blue books' movement between data and testimony. The concluding section of the chapter is less satisfying. Reframing *Bleak House*'s infamous satire of international anti-slavery efforts, Berman proposes that Dickens's novel instead provides a model of national "responsibility" that he implicitly recommends to America (204). The third and final part of *Dickens and Democracy*, "Decomposing Forms," traces Dickens's intensifying skepticism about the capacity of either state or literary discourses to apprehend the people. In chapter 6, focused on *Hard Times*, Berman extends the argument that Dickens is aware of his implication in the discourses he attacks. Stephen Blackpool becomes an "objec[t] of governing knowledge" not only when he is interviewed by an MP but also when he is represented by Dickens (226). In chapters 7 and 8, which read *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend* in tandem, Berman explores how Dickens uses the themes of waterways and coal to expose Parliament's involvement in exploitative circuits of global capitalism and the dirty manufacturing of MPs, a system of corruption that sullies "national literature" as well (302). In the coda, Berman reflects provocatively on links between Dickens's historical moment and our own, emphasizing that social media platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter) resemble parliamentary reporting, a technology for delivering politics to the people.

Berman describes the historicist methodology of *Dickens and Democracy* as "a kind of salvage" (316). At its best, this approach reveals novel connections—for instance, between the shorthand manuals Dickens mastered and his later fiction. But the sheer number of materials and quick transitions between them mean that the argumentative through-line can be hard to follow (an issue in chapters 7 and 8) and that some aspects of the analysis are underdeveloped (the Emancipation Act of 1833, referenced repeatedly, deserves sustained attention). Taken as a whole, however, *Dickens and Democracy* contributes greatly to understandings of Dickens, the politics of the Victorian novel, and the role of print culture in modern democracy. "[R]epresenting the People," Berman observes, "remains a vital and pressing challenge" (327).