READING VICTORIAN ILLUSTRATION, 1855-1875: SPOILS OF THE LUMBER ROOM


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With the rise of material culture studies, numerous scholars interested in the idea of the "material book" (freshly studied by Leah Price) have turned their attention to Victorian illustration. Highlighting what has been called the "golden age" of aesthetic illustration, contributors to this collection examine graphic traditions, developments in illustration, and contributions of particular illustrators during the mid-Victorian age of production and consumption. The editors acknowledge previous books in the field: pioneering studies of 1860's illustration by collectors like Gleeson White (English Illustration: The Sixties, 1855-70, 1897) and Forrest Reid (Illustrators of the Eighteen-Sixties, 1928), who scrutinized engravings rather than the "material book"; studies of Dickens and his illustrators by Jane Cohen (Charles Dickens and His Original Illustrators, 1980) and Michael Steig (Dickens and Phiz, 1978); monographs on illustrated verse such as Lorraine Kooistra's Christina Rossetti and Illustration (2002) and Poetry, Pictures, and Popular Publishing (2011); and collections of essays on the illustrated book such as Book Illustrated (ed. Catherine Golden, 2002) and The Victorian Illustrated Book (ed. Richard Maxwell, 2002). Since Maxwell's book, as the editors of this collection say, "mentions (xxi) but does not contain a chapter on the 'golden age' of Sixties design" (7), this gap is what the present volume seeks to fill. As established scholars in the field of Victorian illustration who each contribute a chapter, Goldman and Cooke aim to "focus criticism of the period by uniting a series of representative interpretations within one set of boards" (7).

Arguably the most exciting among these wide-ranging essays is the first, where Goldman argues that Illustration Studies deserves a new status. Recognizing that book illustration has been generally slighted by art history, book history, bibliography, and literary studies, Goldman presents Illustration Studies as a "discipline to be recognized within the scholarly community and beyond" (15), and his definition of illustration as "clarification, explanation, elucidation and illumination" is, in his view, "but a short step from interpretation . . . the central purpose of illustration" (15). He underlines the importance of understanding illustrative techniques, bringing engravers out of the shadows, and appreciating the scope of nineteenth-century illustrations in non-literary texts such as travel narratives, natural history, religious texts, and anatomy books. Noting that White and Reid removed illustrations from the periodicals they collected, Goldman urges us to preserve and disseminate illustrated periodicals by means of online databases such as The Database of Mid-Victorian Illustration at Cardiff University. Also, he writes, reprints of Victorian texts in the forms they appeared to their first audiences will help to promote scholarship and establish, in his words, "a proper master's course, devoted exclusively to the subject of Illustration Studies" (32).

Goldman's essay nicely leads the way to Chapter 8, Philip Allingham's account of the shift from caricature to realism in the work of Dickens' illustrators (especially Phiz and Fred Barnard), and Chapter 9, Robert Meyrick's essay on early collectors of woodcuts from 1860s periodicals. These three chapters should be read consecutively since they treat broad issues in Illustration Studies more effectively than do the six intervening chapters, which take narrower topics.

Demonstrating his expertise in Dickensian illustration throughout the long nineteenth century, Allingham shows how Hablot Knight Browne’s caricature art in Pickwick—which helped to launch the illustrated book—gave way to realism: Browne (Phiz), George Cruikshank, and John Leech—all self-taught illustrators—were replaced by trained illustrators like Sir John Everett Millais, Luke Fildes, Frederick Walker, and Fred Barnard. Allingham explains the traits of caricature style and realistic illustration by analyzing the illustrations of Phiz and Barnard, an overlooked figure who is, in Allingham's opinion, the "second most significant Dickens illustrator" (174). Exemplifying the kind of work that Goldman proposes for Illustration Studies, Allingham contrasts the ways in which Phiz and Barnard illustrated David Copperfield. As a caricaturist working under Dickens's close supervision, Phiz filled his settings with symbolic, telling details including paintings on a drawing room wall, objects on a mantel, and carefully chosen props. (See for instance Phiz's Mr. Micawber delivers some valedictory remarks.) By contrast, since Barnard did his work after Dickens's death for the Household Edition of Dickens's works, he could read each novel in its entirety before illustrating it without Dickens' supervision; in doing so, he offered a new generation of Dickens readers bold aesthetic plates that foreground characters within crisp settings. (See Barnard's Mr. Micawber)

Besides contrasting two different styles of illustration, Allingham insightfully notes that "the original part purchaser" did some comparing too, reading "the illustrations against each other as well as against the text of the monthly instalment" (173). He also shows how Dickens's decision to bring out the whole book before the serialized publication of the final double number "created two classes of readers" (159).
Like Allingham’s chapter, Meyrick’s complements Goldman’s—the time by noting that in cutting engravings out of the periodical publications they collected, Reid and White “changed their value along with their meaning” (179). Their value grows and their significance changes, he argues, because today’s public thinks “fine art . . . is less likely to be found within the pages of a book, let alone a magazine” (199) than in autonomous images. Meyrick thus identifies the kind of obstacles to be overcome by Illustration Studies if it is to achieve the status of a discipline that Goldman envisions in Chapter 1. Meyrick also charts the rise of artists whose illustrations, printed on fine paper or card stock and published in publications like the Dalziels’s Bible Gallery, were marketed as works of art. Though they were not profitable, and though illustration was “already under threat of extinction” (185), as Meyrick ironically notes, these Dalziel ventures remain excellent examples of the “golden age” of book illustration produced at a time when the craft began to be recognized as art.

In privileging these three chapters, I do not mean to suggest that the other six are without merits or interconnecting threads. In Chapter 7, Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa Surridge supplement the observations of Goldman and Allingham by insightfully reconstructing the act of reading illustrations in serial publication, specifically in Harriet Martineau’s historiettes. While narrowly examining her historiettes, they also make points that are broadly useful for Illustration Studies as a whole. “The majority of mid-Victorian illustrations (including those for the historiettes),” they write, “were placed on the first page of the serial part; readers thus saw illustrations before reading the text . . . and [illustrations] played a key role in creating meaning—arguably even one of co-narration” (142). Images of death occupy both Julia Thomas (Chapter 4) and Lorraine Kooistra (Chapter 5). In light of Allingham’s essay, Thomas’s discussion of the illustration of Little Nell’s death scene in The Old Curiosity Shop (regrettably not included in the chapter) might have been linked to Dickens’s larger career so as to provide more continuity to the volume. Nevertheless, Thomas’s analysis of death and domesticity in Victorian illustration reveals as much about Victorian cultural views of death as about a certain type of illustration. Moreover, Kooistra’s chapter on “Vestiges of Corpses in Pre-Raphaelite Illustrations” ends by applying Walter Benjamin’s concept of mechanical reproduction to the art of engraving during an age of mechanical steam printing.

Other chapters distinguish themselves in focusing on a particular type of illustrated book. Simon Cooke’s interesting examination of the political undertones of the illustrated gift book in Chapter 3 should interest readers of Kooistra’s Poetry, Pictures, and Popular Publishing (2011) in its attention to a still overlooked genre which, as Cooke persuasively argues, “sometimes had a more serious purpose than its overall profile would suggest” (78). In highlighting the pictorial contributions of Ford Madox Brown to the “material book,” Laura MacCulloch shows in Chapter 6 how his work “contributed to the overall raising of standards in illustration that was so much a characteristic of the graphic art of the Sixties” (135). Her point is well taken, but she might have linked it more explicitly to points made elsewhere in this volume about the overarching shift of illustrative styles and the emergence of aesthetic illustration in the 1860s. Still less tied to the central aims of this collection is William Vaughan’s essay, regrettably positioned as Chapter 2. While Vaughan reads wood engraving interestingly and traces the influence of the Germanic school on the Pre-Raphaelites, his focus on foreign influences does not speak to Goldman’s contention that Illustration Studies deserves a room of its own in the house of art history. Given its focus on the Pre-Raphaelites, this chapter would have gone better after Kooistra’s analysis of Pre-Raphaelite illustrations.

There are always limits to what we can learn about a genre by focusing on a series of touchstones or diverse achievements of individual Victorian authors and illustrators across the nineteenth century or, in this case, during the “golden age” of illustration. This collection would have gained more continuity if its chapters had been differently arranged and its contributors had more often referred to each other’s essays. Also, several contributors tend to underestimate the contributions made by the first generation of caricature-style illustrators, who undeniably launched the genre of the illustrated book and paved the way for artistic illustration of the 1860s. For example, while Goldman insightfully notes how artistic illustrators of the 1860s moved from theatricality to realism, he regrettably claims that all caricature-style illustrators have “charm in abundance” but lack “true ‘high seriousness’ or intellectual rigor” (28). Even Allingham undervalues the caricaturists when he calls Phiz’s caricatures “quaint” (176) and ends his otherwise excellent essay with a questionable conclusion. By shaping “the popular taste for sober, three-dimensional realism and character study,” Allingham writes, the “New Men of the Sixties’ . . . eclipsed the public’s appetite for small-scale, humorous and melodramatic etchings of Phiz, Cruikshank, Doyle and Leech” (178). Are all caricature illustrations “humorous and melodramatic”? Goldman highlights only the negative in paraphrasing Allingham’s comments on caricature-style illustration: “It was a vignetted style, playful in line, comic even when the text was not comic and, above all, theatrical, whimsical and decorative” (28). Should we accept Goldman’s own generalization that “gestures were grandiose, facial expressions generalized, printing was usually light and there was little psychological depth or true interaction with text” (28)? To find such depth in the caricature school of illustration, students of the illustrated book need look only as far as Cruikshank’s The Last Chance and—just below—Fagin in the Condemned Cell for Dickens’s Oliver Twist (1838).
reproduces a number of them, and it salutes the work of artist-illustrators ranging from the lesser-known Fred Barnard to the well-known Ford Madox Brown--two of the many book artists who helped to bring critical acclaim to "The Sixties."

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