



# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 2.3 (WINTER 2006)

## Dickens's Costs

*Ready to Trample on All Human Law: Financial Capitalism in the Fiction of Charles Dickens.*  
Paul A. Jarvie. New York: Routledge, 2005. ix + 205 pp..

Reviewed by [Gordon Bigelow](#), Rhodes College

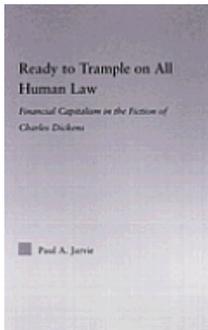
Mailing List

Submissions

Editorial Board

Back Issues

Issue 2.3



<1> “Modernity,” Anthony Appiah once observed, “has turned every element of the real into a sign, and the sign reads ‘for sale.’”<sup>(1)</sup> In this view, modern history works as the inexorable price-tagging of human experience, and both money and writing (i.e. the price, and the tag) become media of historical transformation. Paul Jarvie’s book locates Dickens in this world of universal vendability, a world where, year by year and decade by decade, the reach of the general equivalent extends farther and farther.

<2> For Jarvie, Dickens’s novels reveal “the psychological damage created in people by living in a society dominated by financial capitalism” (14). But Dickens, in Jarvie’s analysis, draws a distinction between productive investment and non-productive speculation, or, in Aristotelian terms, between “economics,” as the use of money to maintain home and hearth, and “chrematistics,” as the limitless, usurious application of money to create more money. “Economics” involves the realization of use-value, chrematistics the illusory perpetual motion of exchange value. When money is used primarily as a way to create more money (in the cycle Marx illustrates with the formula M-C-M’) then commodities begin to lose their character as useful things—things that feed and clothe us and keep the *oikos* in good form—and begin to appear only as temporary embodiments of the general equivalent, waiting to realize their ultimate potential as profit. Exchange value proclaims the essential convertibility of all things, and thus it corrodes that other kind of essence, the intrinsic usefulness of things to sustain life. In this process, Jarvie argues, “finance unhinges language and meaning” (18), as “signs out of control in the financial world” become “absurdly unrelated” to the goods and services they describe (16, 17). It is this destabilized world of exchange value, a world that talks with price tags, which, for Jarvie, creates the anxiety, neurosis, delusion, and madness at the heart of so many Dickens plots.

<3> In *Nicholas Nickleby* then, the damaged world Nicholas encounters is produced by the chrematistic speculation of Ralph Nickleby, and this damage can potentially be corrected by the “economic” capitalism of the Cheerybles. Their “brotherly” capitalism, as Jarvie calls it, finds application in individual charity, paternal benevolence, and the care and protection of children. However, Jarvie argues that everywhere in Dickens’s work the plain argument for a kinder and gentler capitalism is undercut by some counter-narrative, or counter-current of energy, which shows that the utopian realization of use-value is impossibly fragile. Jarvie relies on two forms of evidence here, one textual, and one biographical. Thus the fraternal generosity of the Cheerybles is undercut by their iron-willed paternalism, while in Dickens’s tense negotiations with his publishers, the call for fairness of contract is complicated by what Jarvie sees as Dickens’s own drive to establish himself as a literary capitalist.

<4> The emphasis of the argument shifts as it moves to the second half of Dickens’s career. Where *Nickleby* could imagine a “brotherly” alternative capitalism, the late Dickens presents a world that has largely closed down the vision of alternatives. Jarvie makes the point with a quotation from an 1860 book by T.J. Dunning, which Marx cited approvingly in *Capital*:

With adequate profit, capital is very bold. A certain 10 per cent will ensure its employment anywhere; 20 per cent certain will produce eagerness; 50 per cent positive audacity; 100 per cent will make it ready to trample on all human law (qtd. in Jarvie 92).

The passage, which gives the book its title, reveals the ultimate contest Jarvie sees in Dickens’s fiction: the battle between human moral agency and the inhuman automatism of exchange value.

Jarvie argues that in the late Dickens this automated logic of exchange has become pervasive. Whereas the language of finance is “unhinged” in the early work, the linguistic field itself becomes a “metonymic chaos” in the late novels (101). (Think of Barthes’s line from *S/Z*: “the bourgeois sign is a metonymic confusion,” a line which, oddly enough, Jarvie doesn’t mention. (2)) In *Little Dorrit* then, investment and speculation become nearly indistinguishable; Merdle’s speculative capital is omnivorous, and there is no place the novel can go to pull value out of its destabilizing cycle. In *Our Mutual Friend* the process of “metonymic” substitution embodied in speculative capital works at the level of “human biology” (115), a point Jarvie pursues in Mr. Venus’s shop, with its notorious trade in tissues and bones.

<5> As may already be clear, Jarvie’s analysis draws from two distinct and often opposing critical traditions: a Marxian humanism, emphasizing the psychic deformation caused by capitalism and the utopian significance of use-value, and a poststructuralist theory of textuality, often hostile to the humanistic view of essence and value-in-use. The book does not reconcile these two viewpoints, but the tension between them is in some ways productive. For one thing, it allows Jarvie to take an unusually long view of Dickens criticism. There was a time when theoretically informed critics spurned the standard literature review, as bourgeois enterprise or potentially contaminating encounter with the errors of the past. Jarvie, by contrast, quotes richly from Humphrey House, Walter Houghton, Dorothy van Ghent, and the pre-poststructuralist J. Hillis Miller. Jarvie seems to want to link the liberal moralism of Dickens studies in the mid-twentieth century with the anti-liberal critique that came to dominate U.S. criticism during the 1980s. But there is a related track of critical conversation the book does not consider, among poststructuralist critics seriously invested in Marx, from the Baudrillard of *The Political Economy of the Sign*, and Gayatri Spivak’s essays on the theory of value, to the ongoing debates in the pages of *Rethinking Marxism*.

<6> One of the book’s strengths is its persistent attention to the figure of “the Jew.” By placing the Victorians’ ambivalent loathing of speculation within the long history of attacks on usury, Jarvie is able to read the “subtext of anti-Jewish mistrust and violence” (69) that runs through the novels he studies. This argument coalesces in the book’s conclusion, where Jarvie triangulates his analysis of Dickens’s fiction with a brief study of Jews and finance in Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* and Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*.

<7> Although gender and sexuality are not central to Jarvie’s method, his readings attend consistently to these questions. An interesting example comes in his reconsideration of the flirtatious and rather menacing commodities on display in *Christmas Carol*’s street scene, where Scrooge makes his way home past “broad-girthed Spanish Onions . . . winking from their shelves in wantonness at the girls as they went by” (qtd. in Jarvie 53). Audrey Jaffe finds here the channeling of consumer desire through the gate of compulsory heterosexuality.(3) Jarvie calls the pleasures named here the “polymorphous perverse” (54), arguing that this omni-directional form of desire is produced by the infinite exchangeability of the wares on display.

<8> This is a readable and coherently argued book, one which, given the variety of its critical concerns, will be useful for students of Dickens at many levels. It adds to the critical conversation with its sustained focus on Victorian anti-semitism, and it offers an approachable analysis both of Marx’s *Capital* and Dickens’s capitalism.

#### Endnotes

(1) Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In my Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 145.(△)

(2) Roland Barthes. *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller, pref. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 40.(△)

(3) Audrey Jaffe, “Spectacular Sympathy: Visuality and Ideology in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*,” *PMLA* 109 (1994), 254-265.(△)

