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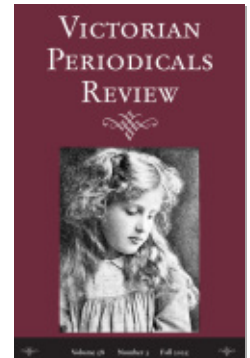
Billy Waters Is Dancing by Mary L. Shannon (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Mary L. Shannon, *Billy Waters Is Dancing* (Yale University Press, 2024), pp. 373, \$38.00/£25.00 hardcover.

Mary Shannon will be known to many members of RSVP, having won the 2016 Colby Prize for *Dickens, Reynolds and Mayhew on Wellington Street: The Print Culture of a Victorian Street*. Indeed, her work on Billy Waters was supported by RSVP's Linda H. Peterson Fellowship for 2021 in addition to a Leverhulme Fellowship. In her latest book, Shannon identifies her hero as an under-researched and significant figure whose story has wider resonance, and she offers "the first proper reclamation of his place in literary and visual culture" (4). Following in the tradition of Brian Maidment in *Dusty Bob: A Cultural History of Dustmen, 1780–1870* (2007), Shannon traces the complex representational narratives of the figure of Billy Waters, who frequently appeared with Dusty Bob and his partner African Sal but also solo and in other contexts. The significant difference, however, is that Billy Waters was a real person whose dramatic life and striking presence on the London streets became transformed into the fictionalised character "Billy Waters." Shannon explores and plays with this range of incarnations, at one point showing us the real Billy watching "Billy Waters" on stage and indignantly disavowing the representation. Such a study has much to say about representation, performance of identity, and narrative making, as well as increasing our visual literacy in approaching early nineteenth-century prints and periodicals.

The book also focuses on the Atlantic world in the early nineteenth century. Shannon's diligent research establishes that Waters was Black or possibly mixed race, born in the 1770s, and originally from New York State

or the City of New York. He may not even have originally used the name under which he became famous, but he joined the Royal Navy in October 1811 as William Waters, his rank as able seaman suggesting previous sea experience. He may have been press-ganged or sought transfer to the Royal Navy ship *Ceres* as an opportunity, for as Shannon remarks, "Seafaring offered young Black men a chance of greater freedom of movement and professional validation than might otherwise be allowed them on land" (51). But in March 1812, Waters fell from the main yard sail and broke both his legs. One was saved, but he had to negotiate the rest of his life with a wooden leg. Shannon explores how this added an aspect of comic disability to the existing construction of sailors as rowdy Jack Tars and the circulation of racial stereotypes, reflecting on the silences in scholarship regarding Black and disability history.

Like many other disabled sailors and soldiers in the Napoleonic War period, Waters turned to the streets to make his living, in his case by playing the violin and dancing. "Whatever his skills, Waters was doomed to be found comic because he was Black: he was also doomed to be found comic because he was a disabled sailor," as Shannon comments (103-4). The case study of how Waters ingeniously gained fame as a street performer is fascinating, but the book's strongest point is the comprehensive and nuanced view of how his persona, or symbol, was absorbed into contemporary culture. This dual focus is preserved throughout; we see how Waters responded to the climate of caricature in which he lived by creating his own mythology and also how this was exploited: "What he hadn't counted on was that writers and playwrights could now more easily treat him as public property and a portable idea" (190).

Identified by his distinctive hat as well as his colour and his wooden leg, the figure of Waters became a staple of visual representation of London low life, from engravings by the Cruikshanks to widely produced ceramic figurines. His fictional persona appeared in Pierce Egan's *Life in London* (1820-21) and was then played in blackface by a famous clown in *Tom and Jerry*, its 1822 stage adaptation. In the interests of comedy, this representation depicted him as a fraud and exposed the real Billy Waters to ridicule, hence losing him his living on the street. When he died in the next year, twenty newspapers published his obituary, but the constructed Waters lived on in popular culture and his mythology grew. Accounts reveal his adoption as a popular costume for masquerade balls in the 1840s, and in the following decade a puppet show play, *Billy Waters: The London Fiddler*, depicted him singing about being a jolly beggar with a wooden leg who had survived countless adventures and was 106 years old.

While grounded in admirable scholarship, this is not a typical academic read. Shannon uses modern concepts such as memes and going viral, and

she adopts an interesting method of looking with, as well as at, her central figure, taking him as both subject and object. Each major section is prefaced with an imagined description of Waters's feelings at a particular point in his story. While this may seem intrusive to some readers, it serves to remind us that Waters had an existence outside the leaves of periodicals and prints and a story that had been subsumed in his role as a character.

The book has already met with critical acclaim, and the collaborative multimedia project "Billy Waters: Songs from the Shadows" has developed from Shannon's work. She has produced a study that greatly informs our reading of early nineteenth-century popular periodicals and prints and also advances our understanding of the diverse cultural history of Britain, the complexities of fame and representation, and even modes of biography.

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Paul Fyfe, *Digital Victorians: From Nineteenth-Century Media to Digital Humanities* (Stanford University Press, 2024), pp. vii + 282, \$30.00/£22.99 paperback.

Paul Fyfe is eminently placed to give us *Digital Victorians*, an accessibly written, scholarly informed book. His background in literary studies and the digital humanities (DH) has seen him take part in a number of major international projects relating to Victorian literature and culture with a focus on digital methodologies, and this expertise is brought together here in a useful and illuminating work.

In his introduction to *Digital Victorians*, Fyfe immediately dispatches the potential charge of anachronistic analysis, arguing that such "presentism" makes the past "legible" and that bringing current academic thinking about DH to bear on the Victorian period only heightens our understanding of evolving knowledge generation practices and their associated media technologies (3). Fyfe situates his own intervention in such debates against the work of an impressive cavalcade of scholars, including Sharon Marcus, Matthew Rowlinson, Andrew Piper, Roger Whitson, Lynda Nead, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Megan War, Caroline Levine, Devin Griffiths, Mary Mullen, Wai Chi Dimock, Lisa Lowe, and others.

In chapter 1, Fyfe looks at Thomas De Quincey's essay on the mail coach (1862) alongside examples from the *Illustrated London News* and *The Times* to consider the disembodied metaphors of nineteenth-century media communication. This chapter engages with scholarship by Ruth Livesey, Thomas Smits, and others before closing with a discussion of