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Disneyfying Dickens: *Oliver & Company* and *The Muppet Christmas Carol* as Dickensian Musicals

Robert Zemeckis's new animated "performance capture" film adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* faces the challenge of creating something new (an innovative adaptation making use of a revolutionary form of animation) from something old (the *Carol* has already been adapted for film countless times). It is a fitting experiment for the filmmaker, given that Dickens himself sought to transform something old into something new through his creation of a "Christmas book" from such long-standing traditions as the fairytale, the ghost story, the conversion narrative, and the Christian allegory. Though such experimentation can prove risky at the box office, Zemeckis is fortunate enough to have the promotional juggernaut that is the Walt Disney Company behind him. With a cross-country train tour, a global promotional campaign, and various spin-off products, Disney's marketing will help promote the film's November 6th release.

In contrast to Disney's other major holiday release, *The Princess and the Frog*, *A Christmas Carol* is part of the new trend in Disney animated movies which have broken with the musical fairytale format that worked so well for Disney once upon a time.[1] Though Zemeckis's *Carol* will feature a score written by his frequent collaborator Alan Silvestri, it is not a musical.[2] This is not to say that Zemeckis's source is lacking in musical potential. Indeed, the musicality of this story, and of Dickens in general, has been explored numerous times. Musical adaptations of Dickens have helped to

shape our popular perception of Dickensian London, in spite of the fact that they often present a heavily stylized and sentimentalized vision of the author's world. Lionel Bart's successful musical *Oliver!* exerted a significant influence on the popular understanding of *Oliver Twist* by re-imagining the dark (though sometimes comic) world of Dickens as a happy, melodious world which both children and adults could appreciate. Though Carol Reed's film version of *Oliver!* remains a beloved Dickensian motion picture adaptation, several critics have condemned the film for its sanitized portrayal of the brutal society depicted in Dickens's novel. Michael Pointer complains that the cheery musical adaptation is untrue to the gloomy tenor of the original text, ultimately labeling this divergence as part of an unhealthy trend in cinematic adaptations of Dickens: "The jollification of Dickens, long the cinema's way of moderating the difficult parts of the stories, swamped the subject" (85). The term "jollification" might easily be replaced with the word "Disneyfication," for most of the author's criticisms read like traditional outcries against "Disneyfication": the transformation of something dark and sophisticated into something light and sentimental for marketing to a family audience. Disney remains an easy target for the ire of scholars and cultural critics due to its unparalleled success in repackaging classic stories for child audiences. In many cases, this outrage stems from the fact that by "Disneyfying" literary classics, the film company rarely encourages young people to take up the sources—Disney thus gains a monopoly on fairytales, children's books, and the imagination in general.[3]

Though Zemeckis's *Carol* is the subject of a high-profile publicity campaign, Disney has made little use of Boz's novels over the years.[4] Nevertheless, it is still possible to analyze what it means to "Disneyfy" Dickens, particularly in regard to the subject of marketing Dickens to a youthful audience. Two useful adaptations to assess in this regard are the 1987 Disney animated feature *Oliver & Company* and the 1992 Jim Henson Studios/Disney project *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. These films represent both literal and theoretical Disneyfications of Dickens, as these G-rated family musicals are simplified and sanitized adaptations of Dickens that were marketed to families by the Walt Disney Company. In spite of these similarities, the use of music in the two films presents an interesting contrast between the adaptations: *Oliver & Company* features a score made up of pop songs that were written to showcase the vocal talents of

the celebrity cast portraying the Disney characters, while *The Muppet Christmas Carol* features a book score that unites the Dickensian and Hensonian characters. This integrated approach allows for the creative team behind the latter film to preserve key elements of the original text, thus reinforcing the appeal of Dickens's story and ultimately encouraging young viewers to seek out the source itself.

Before proceeding with analysis of the films, it is important to note that judging film adaptations solely based on their fidelity to the sources from which they were lifted is unproductive. Prominent film theorists have spent several decades trying to promote less constrictive analyses of film adaptations, noting that the best way to view these movies is as "readings" of literary sources as opposed to "live-action versions" of those sources. (Editor's note: see Kathleen Forni in the preceding issue of this journal on Zemeckis's performance capture adaptation of *Beowulf*.) Linda Hutcheon notes that "for a long time, 'fidelity criticism,' as it came to be known, was the critical orthodoxy in adaptation studies....Today that dominance has been challenged" (6-7). Robert Stam likewise challenges readers to move "beyond fidelity" (3), contrasting the stringent terms put forth by fidelity criticism: "'infidelity,' 'betrayal,' 'deformation,' 'violation,' 'vulgarization,' 'bastardization,' and 'desecration,'" (3) with the more flexible and thought-provoking terms promoted by the aforementioned "adaptations as interpretations" viewpoint: "translation, actualization, reading, critique, dialogization . . . " (4). This second approach can be particularly useful in discussing film adaptations of canonical novelists such as Dickens in the classroom: it is more productive to have students think of the larger ideas behind the topic of adaptation rather than simply having them determine if the films were "faithful."

Nevertheless, in the case of children's film adaptations, the fidelity issue is important due to the criticality of reading to childhood development. While adaptations should certainly not be critiqued on how faithful or unfaithful they are to their sources, it behooves filmmakers to somehow convey to young viewers that these films come from literary sources, and likewise, that these sources are worthy of their attention. As mentioned, this is one of the reasons why "Disneyfication" is frowned upon in academic circles, for the importance of the literary source is rarely emphasized. Furthermore, the Disney interpretation is often overly simplified.[5] Nevertheless, it

is possible to bridge the gap between the sentimentalized Disney readings and the original literary sources in a way which allows for the young viewer to enjoy the Disney film, but simultaneously encourages that viewer to read the text. The musical scores of the two Disneyfied Dickensian adaptations to be discussed here reveal the possibilities for such a reconciliation.

Oliver & Company is a modernized (and highly Disneyfied) retelling of *Oliver Twist*. The film resets Dickens's second novel in 1988 New York City and recasts some of the most prominent characters as animals: Oliver is an orphaned kitten taken under paw by Dodger, a streetwise mutt. Fagin is presented as the dog's master, a scrap dealer who is in debt to Sikes (renamed Sykes), re-imagined here as a brutal loan-shark. The tenor of the adaptation illustrates the basic tenets of taking a Disneyfied approach to a literary source: Disney lightens the material significantly and uses cute, cuddly animal characters, all of whom would be reproduced as stuffed toys, McDonald's Happy Meal prizes—including Oliver and Dodger Christmas ornaments released just in time for the holiday season—and countless other types of child-friendly merchandise to market the film to kids. Though the storyline is clearly based on *Oliver Twist*, the four aforementioned characters are the only ones lifted directly from Dickens's text.

Despite the fact that the film has little to do with Dickens's novel, a 1987 featurette on *Oliver & Company* places strong emphasis on the connections between the adaptation and its source, describing the film as a "new twist on an old Twist…*Oliver Twist*." The featurette's narrator quickly clarifies this statement, however, explaining that the story has been "updated the amazingly musical Disney way," clearly placing the film in a specific context. The narrator also points out that "although *Oliver & Company* is inspired by a classic English novel, some modern-day Disney touches have made it all new and all American."[6] While the social criticism of *Oliver Twist* is a product of the period in which it was written, the more timeless aspects of the novel relate to the fairy-tale depiction of the lead character's journey from rags to riches. These are the elements which are most successfully preserved in the modernized adaptation, and the basic sequence of "the parish boy's progress" is maintained in *Oliver & Company.* The film begins with Oliver trying to survive on the streets. He meets up with Dodger and is subsequently introduced to Fagin's gang. After a botched

robbery, Oliver is taken in by a rich little girl. The story ends with his permanent adoption by the rich family.

In spite of the divergences from the original text, it is still possible to place *Oliver & Company* in the tradition of film adaptations of *Oliver Twist*, for many of the changes made to the story are reflective of larger trends regarding film versions of Dickens's novel (most notably, trends started by Reed's *Oliver!*). As in the Reed film, Fagin is reinvented as a sympathetic co-protagonist.[7] Furthermore, the depiction of his gang is almost uniformly positive. Just as in *Oliver!*, these changes to Fagin's band necessitate the presence of a more menacing villain: Sykes. Though Disney's version of Sykes is very different from any traditional representations of the character, his brutality and his role as central antagonist, as established in *Oliver!*, are preserved. Finally, *Oliver & Company* emphasizes the friendship between Oliver and Dodger, a relationship that is virtually nonexistent in the original novel but which has been heavily emphasized in several adaptations of the book, most particularly in the film *Oliver!* To a certain extent, the entire premise of the Disney film is centered on Bart's memorable song, "Consider Yourself," which focuses on the bond between Oliver and the Dodger; Jerry Beck notes that the working title for the film was *Oliver and the Dodger*, further underscoring that the friendship between the two characters was central to the Disney reading (182-183). Consequently, the modifications made to *Oliver & Company* seem somewhat less drastic when placed alongside the changes that have been made to the story over the course of its adaptive history. Moving past the oftentimes frustrating attempts to evaluate a film version of a literary classic based on the tenets of "fidelity criticism," a new appreciation can emerge for some of the creativity behind *Oliver & Company* as an adaptation.[8]

The central problem with taking this analytic approach is that the process of adapting Dickens's novel often seems of peripheral importance to the creative team behind this Disney cartoon. Rather, the central motivation seems to have been showcasing the musical talents of the celebrity voice-cast. Thus, the two factors that most weaken the idea of the film as a Dickens adaptation are the two elements around which it was marketed: the musical score and its performers. Featuring prominent pop stars such as Billy Joel, Bette Midler, Huey Lewis, and Ruth Pointer, the score for *Oliver & Company* is a pop score, and the songs are used mainly as ve-

hicles for the performers, not the characters or the plot. Whereas musical theatre songs are meant to serve a dramatic purpose, pop songs are meant to be listened to or danced to. As a result, the distance between the film and its Dickensian source material is increased significantly, for the music has no basis in the story, nor any genuine application to the characters. Instead of building on an imaginative concept, namely, the use of a modernized setting and animal characters to help tell a familiar story to children, the filmmakers play up the elements that fracture the movie into incoherent pieces and thus prevent true interest in the source from emerging.

In discussing the musical score, it is important to contextualize *Oliver & Company* as a Disney animated feature, particularly in light of the curious place it holds in the Disney canon. The 1980s marked a difficult time for the studio, and Disney's once unshakeable hold on the medium of animation seemed to be faltering. All of this would change in 1989 with the release of *The Little Mermaid*, widely acclaimed as the film that marked the beginning of the "Disney Renaissance." *Oliver & Company* thus holds the dubious honor of being the last film of Disney's "bronze age." Nevertheless, *Oliver & Company*, as a musical, was an important predecessor to *Mermaid*; the last musical produced by Disney had been *The Fox and the Hound*. Furthermore, *Oliver & Company* was the first Disney animated film to feature music by Howard Ashman, who wrote the opening number played over the film's credits. Ashman eventually became a leading figure in Disney's renaissance, as he collaborated with his songwriting partner, composer Alan Menken, on the scores to *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*.

Evaluating *Oliver & Company* in the context of the looming Disney Renaissance allows for a better understanding of just how central music was to the revitalization of the studio's animated films department. *The Little Mermaid* marked a turning point in the way that Disney films were structured, for through the efforts of Ashman and Menken, who had collaborated on the off-Broadway smash *Little Shop of Horrors*, the films of the Disney Renaissance seemed to have more in common with Broadway book musicals than with traditional animated films: the songs are placed strategically to serve both characterization and storytelling purposes.[9] As a result of its being produced and completed before Disney adopted the book musical format for its animated features, *Oliver & Company* lacks the

cohesion and structure of *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*; the pop score to *Oliver & Company* serves ornamental purposes as opposed to storytelling purposes. Similarly, while songs are often used for characterization in book musicals, the songs in *Oliver & Company* are built around the voice-cast's personalities as opposed to the personalities of the film's characters. Although many of these characters are already far-removed from their Dickensian predecessors, an integrated score which emphasized climactic turning points in the story, or which underscored the personalities of these Disney versions of Boz's characters, could potentially have stimulated interest in young viewers regarding the roots of the adaptation; even if it did not draw them back to the original novel, *Oliver & Company* could, at the very least, have drawn youthful viewers to the "culture text" of *Oliver Twist*, a text that had become infinitely more kid-friendly following the release of the film version of *Oliver!*[10] Unfortunately, the pop musical score prevents any such interest in Dickens from emerging.

Oliver & Company contains three major pop numbers, sung by a pop star who plays a character in the film: Joel, who portrays Dodger, sings "Why Should I Worry?"; Pointer, who provides the singing voice for Rita the saluki, sings "Streets of Gold"; and Midler, who portrays the pampered poodle Georgette, sings "Perfect Isn't Easy." The principal problem presented by all three numbers is that the voice-actors seem to be performing as celebrity pop vocalists, not as characters in the film. This is one of the dilemmas posed by a pop score, for since the songs are not incorporated into the story, they do not create cohesion—an issue that is especially problematic in a film like *Oliver & Company*, given the fact that it is an adaptation/ modernization/Americanization/Disneyfication of a British source.

"Why Should I Worry?", arguably the most well-known song from this film, is sung by Dodger as he navigates the streets of New York. While the tenor of the song fits Dodger's carefree personality, the number does little to advance the story, and there is a distinct sense that he is singing the song simply for the sake of singing. At the number's end, Dodger returns to Fagin's lair; the only purpose of the song is to get the character from one location to another, a purpose which could easily have been achieved without the interlude. One can contrast "Why Should I Worry?" with various songs from the integrated musicals of the Disney Renaissance. "Belle" in *Beauty and Beast* and "One Jump Ahead" in *Aladdin* are comparable

musical numbers in that they feature the films' protagonists navigating the busy streets of a heavily-trafficked center of commerce, but whereas "Why Should I Worry?" displays little direct relevance to the plot or characters, these two songs from the later films are loaded with vital information: both numbers introduce the protagonists and antagonists, establish the settings of the respective films, and set the basic elements of the plots in motion. Furthermore, both songs outline the basic personalities of the lead characters. "Why Should I Worry?" accomplishes none of these tasks and serves purely decorative purposes. There are no references to the characters or the storyline in the lyrics, and, as in most pop songs, there is a sense of interchangeability: the song could be sung by virtually any other pop-vocal character and utilized in virtually any other pop musical about life in New York.

Even more problematic is the characterization of the singer, for Dodger's personality seems inconsequential when he sings "Why Should I Worry?" Instead, there is a great deal of Billy Joel in the number. The pop-rock rhythm of the song, along with the use of lively piano music, fits in well with the performer's distinctive style, and the number's emphasis on the film's New York setting connects it to the larger body of Joel's work:

> One minute I'm in Central Park
> Then I'm down on Delancey Street
> From the Bow'ry to St. Mark's
> There's a syncopated beat
>
> Whoo, whoo, whoo, whoo, whoo
> I'm streetwise
> I can improvise
> Whoo, whoo, whoo, whoo, whoo
> I'm streetsmart
> I've got New York City heart

"Why Should I Worry?" was subsequently included on several Billy Joel compilation CDs, and this seemingly harmless fact actually reveals the most problematic elements of the score to *Oliver & Company.* If "Why Should I Worry?" were more firmly integrated into the film, then it would be more difficult to include it on a compilation CD, for the song would lose most of its meaning when taken outside the context of the film. However, the nonintegrated pop score to *Oliver & Company* repeatedly reinforces

the idea that these songs do not belong to the characters, but rather to the pop vocalists providing their voices.

In the case of Dodger and most of the other characters, any disparities between character and performer seem negligible; the role of Dodger is ideally suited for Joel, and the promotional featurette indicates that Joel had been considered for the part from early in the pre-production process. Hence, Dodger comes across as a loveable Disney character that was heavily patterned on the celebrity voice-actor cast in the role—the songs he sings are Billy Joel songs, not Dodger songs…and certainly not Dickens songs. Naturally, Joel has little to do with Dickens, the Artful Dodger, *Oliver Twist*, or anything related to the source.

By modeling the character of Dodger so heavily on the voice actor, using songs and music for the sole purpose of promoting the actor's vocal talents, and marketing the film around the celebrity cast, the producers succeeded in completely distancing the film from its roots. In fact, this technique ultimately hurts the film's coherence more than the modernized setting or the use of animated animals. While the New York setting and canine characters are innovations that can be considered in the evaluation of the film as a Dickensian adaptation for children, the voice cast and musical score completely revise the alleged purpose of the project (as described in the first moments of the featurette), for the Dickensian adaptation is made subsidiary to the celebrity cast's pop solos.

Later in the film, the song "Streets of Gold" continues this trend—in fact, the number is virtually identical to "Why Should I Worry?" as it is another pop/rock song that highlights the film's New York City setting in a generalized way. As mentioned, this particular number is sung by Pointer's Rita, though it could easily have been sung by Joel's Dodger instead. The only reason for switching to another character is to include another pop vocalist. The last of the three aforementioned numbers, "Perfect Isn't Easy," is set up like a solo number sung by a pop diva. Georgette is clearly modeled heavily on Bette Midler herself, as she assumes comedic mannerisms and personality traits associated with the actress and pop star; the correlations are so obvious that it seems the character was written specifically for Midler.[11] Since the idea of Georgette as a character is superseded by the idea of Midler playing the character and singing the character's

songs, the very idea of analyzing *Oliver & Company* as a family-musical adaptation of *Oliver Twist* is compromised.

The primary result of the incorporation of these contrary components is disorder. *Oliver & Company* was promoted as a modernized musical adaptation of *Oliver Twist*, but it is obvious that the Dickensian elements of the film were of little importance to the creators. The pop score holds a central place in the adaptation, but the songs only serve to create confusion, as the emphasis on the voice cast dissociates the film from its source. With the vocalists' personalities taking precedence over the Disney characters, and the Disney characters taking precedence over the Dickensian element, there is little of *Twist* left in *Oliver & Company*. While the film's Disney characters and lively pop score were clearly meant to increase its appeal to a youthful audience, the disunity between these elements and the source prevent any sort of coherence from emerging, which ultimately rules out any chance of the film being used to draw young viewers to reading Dickens.

At first glance, there are few differences between *Oliver & Company* and *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, at least in terms of the basic premises: both are musical Disneyfications of Dickens which heavily simplify the original sources by merging pop-cultural figures with the Dickensian narrative. Furthermore, though Jim Henson Studios has often sought to downplay the merchandising associated with their various film and television projects, *The Muppet Christmas Carol* was marketed along the same lines as *Oliver & Company* and subsequently transformed into a variety of spin-off products featuring the Muppet characters. Nevertheless, *The Muppet Christmas Carol* ultimately succeeds in drawing the young viewer's attention toward the original source, primarily because it successfully unites the film's two separate threads: the Dickensian story and the Henson characters. The integration of these two distinct elements works surprisingly well, due in large part to the creative team's approach to the source material, an approach that is well-reflected in the film's score. In fact, the film's songs illustrate the effectiveness of the creative team's methodology as the melodies succeed in combining the personalities of the Muppet characters and the Dickensian roles that they are playing. In this instance, the Disneyfying process produces successful results from a Dickensian point

of view—here, the adaptors are genuinely interested in inspiring young viewers to take up Dickens's novel.

Though *The Muppet Christmas Carol* was the fourth theatrically released film featuring Jim Henson's highly popular Muppet characters, this movie also marked several important firsts for the Muppets and the creative minds and gifted performers behind the characters. *The Muppet Christmas Carol* was the first Muppet film produced after Jim Henson's tragic death. It was also the first Muppet movie produced and released by Disney—though before the Muppets' subsequent assimilation by Disney.[12] Finally, it was the first Muppet film adapted from a literary source. The fact that Jim Henson Studios turned to Dickens for their first foray into film adaptation is noteworthy, as there are numerous links between the two gifted men whose creations inspired the two separate components of the project. Charles Dickens was a master novelist, while Jim Henson was a master puppeteer, but fundamentally, both men were storytellers. Both Dickens and Henson crafted worlds that enthralled and inspired audiences all over the world. Furthermore, both men invested themselves in their often eccentric characters. Henson brought many different Muppets to life single-handedly: Kermit the Frog, Rowlf the Dog, the Swedish Chef, Dr. Teeth, Waldorf, Mahna-Mahna, Ernie, Cantas Fraggle and many other Muppets were Henson's personal characters.[13] In a way, Dickens was also a puppeteer, pulling the strings of his characters and bringing them to life through a distinct voice, look, and movement. It is known that while writing his novels, Dickens tried to live the roles of his characters. Pointer discusses Dickens' habit of acting out his creations: "His daughter Mamie described how he gestured and grimaced in front of a mirror, living the roles of his characters as he wrote his stories" (2). This technique seems somehow analogous to Henson's talent for bringing multiple characters to life through the use of different puppets with different types of voices.

Naturally, merging the worlds of Dickens and Henson presented several creative challenges to Brian Henson, Jim Henson's eldest son and the film's director. Casting the Muppets in the roles of Dickensian heroes and heroines meant walking a fine line: placing too much emphasis on the personalities of the Muppet characters would have detracted from the Dickensian element. Simultaneously, to de-emphasize the Muppets and place primary focus on the Dickensian world would have restricted the

imagination of the piece and turned off longtime fans of Henson's characters. The commentary provided by Henson on the "Kermit's Fiftieth Anniversary" edition DVD of the film reveals that the director was more willing to take the latter risk than the former; Henson recounts that the ghosts were originally going to be played by famous Muppet characters, but the creative team ultimately decided against this out of concern that such casting would hurt the legitimacy of the film as an adaptation of Dickens's novella:

> Initially, the Ghosts were going to be Muppets—well-known Muppets—and it seemed like a great idea, and then, in the end, we didn't do it because it seemed to undermine the credibility of the story. But, at that time, I'm pretty sure we were going to put Scooter in as the Ghost of Christmas Present, and we were going to put…um…I can't remember…Miss Piggy I think was the Ghost of Christmas Present, and, like, Scooter was Christmas Past, and then Gonzo in a hood was going to be Christmas Yet to Come.

Rather than place the iconic Muppet characters in central roles, Henson wisely decided to cast the most famous Muppets in less prominent parts so that they would not divert from the narrative—a sharp contrast to *Oliver &* Company, in which the personalities of the performers redirect the viewer's attention away from the story's Dickensian roots.

With a beautiful set of new puppets filling the roles of the Dickensian ghosts, the older, classic Muppets take on the novella's supporting roles. Some fans of the original characters were disappointed to see Kermit and his friends relegated to these ancillary parts, and the Henson Company subsequently attempted to rectify the situation in the next Muppet film, *Muppet Treasure Island* (Hugh H. Davis 103). Whereas *Muppet Treasure Island* is largely a spoof of Stevenson's original novel, placing the Muppets and their wacky personalities at the forefront, *The Muppet Christmas Carol* retells Dickens's story with a level of conviction and restraint seldom seen in a children's film.[14] It is worth noting that *Muppet Treasure Island* received more favorable reviews from longtime fans of the characters, thus elevating the film to a "cult" status reminiscent of the first three Muppet movies. Indeed, the zany and satirical tone of this film fits in much better with the tenor of the earlier Muppet films. *Muppet Treasure Island* is clearly a better Muppet movie than *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, but the comparison is inherently flawed because *The Muppet Christmas Carol*

not really a Muppet movie at all: it is a musical adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* that just happens to feature the Muppets. This contrast is what allows for the film to succeed in promoting the source as something that young viewers should try reading. The casting decisions by Brian Henson clearly reveal a healthy respect for the Dickensian text from which he was working—a respect that amusingly extends to the Muppets themselves.[15] In the DVD commentary, Henson himself alludes to this respect, and draws attention to the faithfulness of the film to the original novel, a faithfulness that results in the preservation of Dickens's narrative voice through the casting of the Great Gonzo in the role of Dickens himself. (See Hugh H. Davis, esp. 96-100.) Throughout the film, Gonzo acts out the part of Dickens by reciting actual lines spoken by the lively narrator of the original novella, and Henson astutely asserts that this allows for the preservation of elements of Dickens's original narrative often lost in translation of the written medium into a visual/ auditory medium: "By having Gonzo play Charles Dickens, it allowed Jerry Juhl really to write probably the most faithful adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*." Though Henson likewise describes the film's central dynamic as "the light, irreverent tone of the Muppets crashing with the heavy, dramatic tone of Dickens," the film presents a much less violent merger between the two factions than the director implies, a balance achieved thanks in large part to the film's musical score.

The Muppets have always been regarded as musical characters, for Henson loved to experiment with the interplay between puppetry and music for story-telling. Traditionally, the structure of Muppet musical performances has been analogous to that of the musical revue as opposed to the integrated musical. The Muppets first gained prominence when Jim Henson showcased the characters on variety shows such as *Jack Paar* and *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and *The Muppet Show* itself was presented as an irreverent revue-style show. The musical scenes in some of the early Muppet movies largely preserve the revue-style format, for although the songs are not presented as acts in a music hall like the songs on *The Muppet Show*, many of these numbers seem like actual performances as opposed to integrated musical numbers. For example, many songs in *The Great Muppet Caper* are not integral to the plot; rather, they are utilized to liven up the film and to showcase the abilities of the Muppet characters in various contexts, some largely satirical: early on in the film, Kermit does a Fred

Astaire routine by dancing with a coat-rack; later, Miss Piggy swims in a water ballet like Esther Williams in a conscientiously over-the-top production number. Neither song is relevant to the story. Rather, the Muppets are simply staying true to their musical roots by displaying their talents in the format of a revue (during one such revue-style song, Kermit breaks the fourth wall and remarks "What a great number!", fully aware of the fact that a song is being performed.) The last film in the original Muppet movie trilogy, *The Muppets Take Manhattan*, features a more structured musical score, an unsurprising development given that *The Muppets Take Manhattan* focuses on the Muppets' attempts to produce a musical on Broadway. Many of the songs featured in this film are used for storyline purposes: the characters sing the mournful ballad "Saying Goodbye" upon deciding to go their separate ways, and the lively ditty "Together Again" upon reuniting later in the film. If *The Muppets Take Manhattan* marked an attempt to move the Muppets away from the traditional revue format, *The Muppet Christmas Carol* picks up where this film left off.

The Muppet Christmas Carol presents a fully integrated book musical score. To further define these terms: The "book musical" is the format most associated with the writers of the golden age of the Broadway musical such as Loesser, Wilson, Lerner and Loewe, and of course, Rodgers and Hammerstein. While different forms of musical theatre, such as ballad opera, comic opera, and vaudeville had existed long before the advent of the book musical, Orly Leah Krasner notes that "during the first two decades of the twentieth century producers, performers, librettists, and composers grappled with the notion of a single genre that could combine the best of all worlds into a unified coherent whole" (29). With the arrival of *Oklahoma!* in 1942, the concept of the integrated musical was finally crystallized. In an integrated musical, neither the libretto nor the musical score is privileged. Rather the two are organically linked: songs grow seamlessly out of the plot and the characters and serve to reinforce the qualities of both these narrative elements. Consequently, the development of the integrated musical led to new emphasis on the possible narrative functions of music and songs. In an integrated musical, the story and the players dictate when and how music will be used; thus, the action taking place in the story (or the emotion being felt by the character) must be high enough to warrant song, and a good song develops that action in a way that spoken words cannot

(Frankel 30-31). Before the advent of the integrated score and the book musical, the songs in most stage shows were utilized for decorative purposes, much like the pop songs in *Oliver & Company*, which make no real contribution to the film's narrative or characters. Conversely, nearly all of the songs featured in *The Muppet Christmas Carol* are incorporated seamlessly into the story, and this integrated score proves essential to binding the different threads of the film together: *The Muppet Christmas Carol* is clearly both a Dickensian musical and a Muppet musical.

Popular composer Paul Williams, who had previously written the songs for *Emmet Otter's Jug Band Christmas* and *The Muppet Movie*, undertook the task of writing the songs for *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, and in the DVD commentary for the film, Henson claims that "Paul Williams is the most successful writer of Muppet songs. He understands the tone completely." However, Williams wisely refrains from simply writing "Muppet songs" for this film—the songs are not mere decorations used to highlight the wacky world of Henson's characters, nor are they outlandish musical numbers utilized to showcase the Muppets' musical abilities. Rather, Williams uses songs to reinforce the emotional highpoints in the story. Unsurprisingly, many of the highpoints that Williams sets to music are analogous to the musical climaxes in other musical versions of *A Christmas Carol* such as Leslie Bricusse's *Scrooge* or Alan Menken's *A Christmas Carol: The Musical*, and Williams clearly approached the project with the mentality of a composer writing a book musical; the Muppets were simply one incidental factor in the larger story being told through music:

> The songwriter's task is to complete the picture in a fashion that advances the plot and remains true to the character singing—in this case characters so beautifully and artfully created by Dickens. For me, and I think for screenwriter Jerry Juhl, the approach was to retell the story staying true to the author's emotional and philosophical intent. Yes, the story was cast with a mix of humans and Muppets, but they were playing beloved characters in a story that will be told and retold again and again. I wrote for "Tiny Tim" rather than "Robin the Muppet" just as I wrote for "Scrooge" rather than "Michael Caine" (par. 1)

Ultimately, Williams's songs supplement the story as it was written by Dickens. Key moments such as Scrooge's introduction, Marley's warning, the breakup of Scrooge and Belle, the arrival of the Ghost of Christmas

Present, the Cratchit family Christmas, and Scrooge's redemption are all dramatic enough to warrant a shift from speaking to singing. Thus, it is the Dickensian narrative itself which determines where songs should occur. This is yet another contrast between the Muppet film and *Oliver & Company*, in which the placement of the songs is random, and the score is structured around the pop vocalists as opposed to the narrative or characters.

The Muppet Christmas Carol features seven songs, not including a few brief reprises scattered throughout the film. Williams wisely divides the musical numbers among the famous Muppet characters, the newer Muppets characters created for this film, and the human characters, and the result of this distribution is that no one faction holds dominance over the story's musical narrative. Despite the wide variety of performer-types presented in this film, there is an overarching sense of unity to the entire piece. Such a sense of unity would have proved useful in rectifying the disorder epitomized by the musical score to *Oliver & Company.* The earlier film features numerous musical characters, each of whom are subdivided into different components. An individual character, like Dodger, can be split up into many separate and disparate parts which are fractured further due to the disunity of the film's musical score: Dodger is part Dickens, part Disney, part Billy Joel, part 1980s pop-music, etcetera. Since the pop songs he sings have no real relevance to the film's story, Dodger's use of music to define his personality only serves to further rupture the coherence of the film. For *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, Williams's use of integrated songs which dictate the structure of the narrative and reflect the personalities of both the Muppet characters and the parts that they are playing prevents the same kind of confusion from resulting. The songs help to reinforce these connections, and, by focusing primarily on the Dickensian element in his musical numbers, Williams was able to guarantee that the appeal of the story would not be usurped by appeal of the pop-cultural icons presenting that story. Had Williams and the other writers decided to have the Muppets' personalities dictate the tenor of the film's songs, then the end result would have been quite similar to the result of *Oliver & Company*: the performers would have taken control of the musical narrative and distanced it from its Dickensian roots.

Williams's and Henson's meticulous approach to determining the placement of songs within the Dickensian narrative is reflected in the various alterations that were made to the film's score both before and after the film's release. Three songs, "Room in Your Heart," "Chairman of the Board," and "When Love is Gone," were cut from the theatrical release of the film, though the last of these numbers was reincorporated for the home video release. "Room in Your Heart" is sung by Bunsen and Beaker in their roles as the charity collectors who visit Scrooge's office in the opening scenes, while "Chairman of the Board" is sung by Sam the Eagle in his role as Scrooge's schoolmaster. Conversely, "When Love is Gone" is sung by a human character, Belle, as she breaks off her engagement to Scrooge. The excision of the former two songs helps streamline the film (for these numbers serve mainly decorative purposes in their respective scenes—scenes which play out in largely the same way with or without the musical interlude). However, the reincorporation of "When Love is Gone" is important in the context of the film's musical narrative, as it is fitting for Belle to sing of the change in her feelings for Scrooge given the emotion of the situation. Furthermore, the abridged version of the scene does not clearly intimate that Scrooge and Belle's separation will be permanent, whereas the lyrics of this song explicitly reveal this fact. Notably, Williams uses a reprise of this song in the final moments of the film when Scrooge has discovered love and acceptance with the Cratchit family: "The Love We've Found." Thus, "When Love is Gone" provides an important link in the chain of the musical narrative. Like the other songs which make up the film's score, the emotion inherent in the scene, as written by Dickens, dictates the use of music, and there is never a sense that these songs are being sung simply for their own sake; rather, they supplement the narrative.

Williams is likewise meticulous in his use of integrated songs to define character. Unlike the pop score to *Oliver & Company*, which reinforces the dominance of the Disney characters and pop-star voice cast over the Dickensian elements of the characters, the songs to *The Muppet Christmas Carol* complement the integration of the Muppet characters into their Dickensian roles, as the songs highlight the personality traits of these Dickensian roles while allowing the Muppet characters to step comfortably into those same parts, musically merging two personalities. When Kermit sings "One More Sleep 'til Christmas," the song arises naturally within the

context of the scene, for Bob Cratchit loves the holiday season and is eager to share the joys of Christmas. The emotion is so strong that it is not enough for him to talk about it: he must sing. This song also seems like a perfectly natural anthem for the avuncular Kermit to be singing in his capacity as a loveable Muppet character who perpetually looks on the bright side of things. Kermit was clearly the ideal Muppet to use in the role of Bob Cratchit, and Williams's writing of the character's songs reinforces this fact:

> The world has got a smile today,
> The world has got a glow.
> There's no such thing as strangers when,
> A stranger says hello.
> And everyone is family, we're having so much fun,
> After all, there's only one more sleep 'til Christmas.
> 'Tis the season to be jolly and joyous!
> With a burst of pleasure, we feel it arise!
> It's the season when the saints can employ us,
> To spread the news about peace and to keep love alive!

The gentle philosophy and loving message presented in the song is evocative of both Kermit and Cratchit and reaffirms Kermit's suitability for the role he is playing; both halves of the character are integrated seamlessly, and there is no sense that the personality of the famous Muppet character is dominating the song or distracting the audience from the centrality of the Dickensian story. Later, when Kermit, Miss Piggy, and Robin sing "Bless Us All," it seems a fitting number for both the Cratchit family and the Muppet "family" portraying these characters, as it reflects the love and faith of the Dickensian protagonists, and the warmth and hope associated with the Muppets and Henson's own worldview as conveyed in his various film and television projects. A child viewer, delighted by what is being presented onscreen, would immediately understand the connections between the characters. Furthermore, he or she would most likely feel comfortable in later taking up the novella, for the fidelity to the Dickensian vision, as epitomized in the depiction of the characters through song, emphasizes the timeless appeal of *A Christmas Carol*.

The importance of the original text to the foundations of the film adaptation is fully conveyed in the final moments of the movie. At the very end of the film, just before the credits start to roll, Gonzo recommends that

the viewer try reading the book next. If *The Muppet Christmas Carol* had diverged drastically from the source, it is doubtful that this recommendation would have been included. Indeed, such a recommendation would be out of place even in the case of an adaptation like *Oliver!*, as a child who enjoyed the film would undoubtedly be troubled by the reprehensibly evil Fagin who is hanged for his wickedness in the novel's penultimate chapter.[16] But Gonzo's book recommendation reinforces the importance of Dickens's story to the creative team's vision. It also reinforces the fact that the writers behind this innovative adaptation sincerely believed that the source material could be enjoyed and appreciated in and of itself. The songs sung by the characters are not simply Muppet songs, but likewise, *Christmas Carol* songs which fit into the story being told and which help to supplement the themes of Dickens's original text.

Though *Oliver & Company* and *The Muppet Christmas Carol* were both released under the Disney banner, the former fits in more closely with the label of "Disney film," or perhaps more specifically, "Disney adaptation." Its oversimplified vision of the source material, coupled with the confusion created by the pop score, leaves little of Dickens's original vision intact and provides no incentive to investigate the literary source. *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, thanks in large part to the unity provided by the film's musical score, is grounded far more firmly in Dickens's original text, and as a result, the characters are able to function much more naturally in their dual roles as pop-culture icons and Dickensian characters. The appeal of these pop characters supplements the appeal of the text rather than distracting from it, thus overcoming the disparity between Disneyfied interpretation and literary source. *The Muppet Christmas Carol* is not only a more organic Disney musical adaptation of a work by Dickens; it is also more harmonious.

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Notes

1 The most successful Disney animated films of the past several years, those created by Pixar Animation Studios, have utilized music in a far subtler way than the

traditional songs in the hand-drawn musical films of the "classic" Disney era. Not surprisingly, *The Princess and the Frog* will mark a return to the fairytale musical format: it likewise marks Disney's return to hand-drawn animation.

2 Silvestri has written the musical scores to Zemeckis's *Romancing the Stone*, *Back to the Future* (and its two sequels), *Forrest Gump*, *Contact*, *Cast Away*, *The Polar Express* and *Beowulf.*

3 In an article entitled "Home by Tea-Time," Deborah Ross expresses her reservations about this trend:

> Over the last 60 years, the Disney Corporation has bought more and more children's classics, oversimplifying and packaging them for audiences much younger than those their authors had in mind. By the time our eight-year-olds have developed the vocabulary and syntactical sophistication to appreciate the humour and style of Milne or Grahame or Carroll (if in fact they ever do), they reject their works as 'baby stuff.' Since these stories will then be known to our children only in the Disney version, Disney has gained a monopoly on the next generation's fantasies….Controlling the contents of our children's imaginations is the surest way to create a big market for Disney products. (207-208)

The fear of Disney as an "evil empire" that seeks control over the minds of its audience is one of the most common criticisms of the Walt Disney Corporation. Other criticisms of Disney usually relate to the conservative vision of the films, a somewhat ironic factor given that the studio's use of animation was revolutionary; Jack Zipes labels Disney himself as a "radical filmmaker who changed our way of viewing fairy tales [but] his revolutionary technical means capitalized on American innocence and utopianism to reinforce the social and political status quo" (21-22).

4 The distinctly British traits of Dickens's characters would most likely have translated poorly to the Americanized idiom in which the Disney Company has traditionally worked. Notably, many British film critics disliked Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*, feeling the filmmakers had Americanized a British classic. Robin Allan describes "the conflict between the attempt to remain faithful to the spirit of Carroll and Tenniel, an inability to understand some of that spirit, and a desire to popularize and to introduce an anarchic zany element which critics found mixing uneasily with the decorum of the English original" (138). Though Allan herself finds this rebellious Americanism to be the film's most vitalizing feature, she recounts that many British critics took exception to this "zany" reading:

> What English critics missed most and what the film cheerfully and confidently lacks is, as C.A. Lejeune wrote in the *Observer*, "any sense of summer peace, the comfortable drowsy Victorian

quietude that used to brood over these magic stories." *The Times* critic also bewailed the loss of peace…Instead there is noise: "Cheaply pretty songs," *The Times*; "Indescribable hullabaloo," C.A. Lejeune; and "Sheer din," Alan Dent, writing in the *Illustrated London News* (138).

5 Richard Schickel states that Disneyfication can be defined in part as the reduction of a literary work "to the limited terms Disney and his people could understand" (225).

6 Here, the cultural issues involved in Disneyfying a British source are made explicit: while *Oliver!* preserves the Englishness of the source while operating in the American medium of the book musical, *Oliver & Company* is American in its form, idiom, and content.

7 The design of Fagin in the animated film seems consciously evocative of Reed's visual interpretation of the character in the film version of *Oliver!*

8 The relationship between *Oliver & Company* and *Oliver!* brings up one of the truly fascinating elements of the study of *Oliver Twist* in other media, for many versions of *Twist* can effectively be described as adaptations of adaptations as opposed to adaptations of the novel itself. In Dickens's own era, many of the writers who adapted *Twist* for the stage borrowed scenes from the melodramas that came before rather than dramatizing new sequences from the novel (thus creating a very selective reading of the story). Furthermore, rather than utilizing the book itself as his main source, Bart patterned *Oliver!* heavily on David Lean's 1948 film version of *Twist* (Roper 39).

9 This restructuring is apparent when one considers that *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Lion King* were later adapted for the Broadway stage as successful live-action book musicals.

10 Paul Davis coined the phrase "culture text" in describing the afterlife of *A Christmas Carol* in other media, though the term can likewise be applied to *Oliver Twist* given the multitude of adaptations of this novel.

11 At one point when sitting in front of the mirror, Georgette primps herself by fluffing up the fur around her bust, giving off the impression that she is flaunting her "breast" size. Midler had previously earned notoriety for adopting a similar pose at the 1982 Oscars when she presented the Academy Award for Best Song (as she made ready to list the nominees, Midler, who was wearing a low-cut gown, joked that she was ready to "rise to the occasion" and elevated her bosom with her hands.)

12 Between 1989 and 1990, Disney had been negotiating with Jim Henson to acquire Henson Associates, Inc., the company which owns the Muppets (in fact, the two parties had been in talks since the mid 80s). The deal was incomplete at the time of Henson's death (Blau A1). It would be almost fifteen years later that Disney would finally acquire the Muppets in 2004.

13 "Singlehandedly" may be a poor word choice given that Henson needed the assistance of a fellow puppeteer to operate some of the larger Muppet characters.

14 Thomas Leitch comments on *The Muppet Christmas Carol* in his text on adaptation, asserting that the producers "graft the Dickens franchise onto another commercial franchise and make a running joke of the whole project of adaptation" (91). While I would agree that there is a good deal of this kind of "wink-wink, nudge-nudge" humor in the film, Leitch makes the film sound like a spoof of the original text, which overlooks the detectable earnestness behind the creative team's approach.

15 In a humorous moment, Sam the Eagle, most remembered for his Americanism, lectures the young Scrooge on commerce: "You are going to love: business! It is the American way!" Gonzo quickly whispers in his ear, and Sam immediately corrects himself: "It is the *British* way!"

16 This contrast reveals one of the debatable elements of my comparisons between the two films in terms of their ability to draw young readers to Dickens, for one might argue that the *Carol* is infinitely more suitable for young readers than *Twist*. Nevertheless, young people read Dickens's longer and more complex works in the Victorian age. Furthermore, modern youths who enjoy following the adventures of the abused orphans created by Rowling and Handler (Lemony Snicket) would most likely find Oliver's journey equally engaging.

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