

# Dickens Undone

Aesthetics and the Periphery of the Victorian Novel

Dissertation

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Hiermit erkläre ich, dass die vorliegende Dissertation selbstständig von mir verfasst und angefertigt wurde. Es wurden keine anderen als die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel verwendet. Geistiges Eigentum anderer Autoren wurde entsprechend gekennzeichnet. Ebenso versichere ich, dass ich an keiner anderen Stelle ein Prüfungsverfahren beantragt bzw. die Dissertation in dieser oder anderer Form an keiner anderen Fakultät als Dissertation vorgelegt habe.

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## Abstract

*Dickens Undone* seeks to reframe what is commonly construed as the periphery of Victorian novels as an expansive, fertile area of ‘undone science.’ The introduction argues that the characters populating this ‘periphery’—often referred to as ‘minor characters’—are the tip of an iceberg of ‘negative knowledge’ in Victorian Studies: knowledge that, in line with ‘relationships of power and influence within and around academia,’ is systematically presented as ‘not worth pursuing’ (Richardson 232, Frickel et al. 448). This disciplinary closure, I suggest, is embedded in a centripetal aesthetics that is racialising and heteronormative, and shapes the knowledge that we do produce on a fundamental level.

The readings of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit* that follow seek to generate and trial analytical tools that can help readers appreciate eccentric elements, in other words, tools that can help ‘get the science done.’ To break with the racialising heteronormative categories of ‘main’ and ‘minor,’ ‘central’ and ‘peripheral’ characters that continue to order our thinking, I propose a critical practice that aims to read lovingly, in Agamben’s interpretation of the term: a critical practice that seeks to ‘want’ a text ‘with all of its predicates,’ including aspects and characters that have been previously dismissed as ‘minor’ or ‘mere details.’ The first two readings look for ways of appreciating two particular qualities in characters that tend to put critics off: lack of structural relevance and what E. M. Forster called ‘flatness,’ respectively. Chapters three and four use these interpretative tools to zoom in on individual characters that have been considered peripheral to *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit*. Both readings uncover previously overlooked facets of key thematic concerns of these texts—autobiography and imprisonment, respectively—demonstrating how a more loving, less lopsided reading practice can considerably deepen and subtilise critical understanding of a text as a whole.

To illustrate the extent to which our centripetal aesthetics have distorted our knowledge of Dickens’s writing, the readings in *Dickens Undone* pay special attention to one particular group of characters whose systematic marginalisation by the Academy is unusually well-documented: working- and lower-class women and women of (some) economic independence. These characters’ exclusion from the conversation, I argue, has been refigured as a critical fiction: that femininity in Dickens is strictly middle-class. The working-class and working women characters I discuss are (like many others) presented by their texts as explicitly feminine. They point toward a femininity that is much more accommodating when it comes to class and age—a femininity, I suggest, which in this inclusivity and in the face of the absence of women of colour in Dickens’s fiction must be examined as a technology of whiteness.

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## Introduction: Aesthetics and the Periphery of the Victorian Novel

Love is never directed toward this or that property of the loved one (being blond, being small, being tender, being lame), but neither does it neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality (universal love): The lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is.

Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 2

In 1858, when Charles Dickens had completed *Little Dorrit* and was about to commence *A Tale of Two Cities*, Walter Bagehot made a very salient point about his art. Dickens's writing, Bagehot argued, stands out for the author's extraordinary 'power of observation in detail' (85). The observation that Dickens had an exceptional eye for details is usually attributed to George Orwell. 'The outstanding, unmistakable mark of Dickens's writing,' Orwell wrote in 1939, 'is the unnecessary detail' (100). But whereas Orwell emerges as a stalwart champion of Dickens's details, Bagehot sees in them the root of all Dickens's faults, and there are plenty. He finds Dickens's writing 'squalid from noisome trivialities,' 'painful *minutiæ*' (99), and 'needless complexities' (83). He sees in Dickens one of a class of 'men of irregular or unsymmetrical genius' (79). Especially gifted in 'some few peculiarities of mind'—those that respond to details—Dickens lacks the defining qualities of a 'symmetrical mind': a 'deductive abstract intellect' and a 'practical seeing sagacity' (81). Bagehot explains:

if a symmetrical mind busy itself with the active side of human life, with the world of concrete men and real things, its principal quality will be a practical sagacity, which forms with ease a distinct view and just appreciation of all the mingled objects that the world presents,—which allots to each its own place and its intrinsic and appropriate rank. (80)

As Bagehot's conjunction of 'place' and 'rank' betrays, a symmetrical mind forms a 'distinct view' of human life by hierarchising individual elements. Upon subordinate objects,

'minutiæ,' 'details,' the true artist bestows no more attention than is 'appropriate.' Dickens, on the other hand, 'catches at small points like a dog biting at flies' (84).<sup>1</sup>

Bagehot isn't just talking about objects, however, but also about people. The 'small points' that Dickens's irregular mind 'catches at' are both 'real things' and 'concrete men.' Bagehot is criticising Dickens's writing for giving undue attention to trivial objects and to trivial characters. Intriguingly, Orwell's panegyric on Dickens's 'unnecessary detail' soon becomes entangled in characters, too:

Squeers stands up to address his boys, and immediately we are hearing about Bolder's father who was two pounds ten short, and Mobbs's stepmother who took to her bed on hearing that Mobbs wouldn't eat fat and hoped Mr Squeers would flog him into a happier state of mind. Mrs Leo Hunter writes a poem, 'Expiring frog'; two full stanzas are given. Boffin takes a fancy to pose as a miser, and instantly we are down among the squalid biographies of eighteenth-century misers, with names like Vulture Hopkins and the Rev. Blewberry Jones, and chapter headings like 'The Story of the Mutton Pies' and 'The Treasures of a Dunghill'. Mrs Harris, who does not even exist, has more detail piled on to her than any three characters in an ordinary novel.... (102-3)

Strikingly, these '*unnecessary details*'—so important in their unnecessary—are inextricably linked to equally unnecessary characters. Even Boffin's study of miserdom is based on 'biographies.' But these trivialities don't simply characterise. They create characters. Mrs Harris, as Orwell emphasises, does not even exist, and Bolder's father exists only insofar as he was two pounds ten short. For Orwell, what's more, these details' value to Dickens's writing—their unnecessary—depends on their pertaining to these specific characters. If Paul Dombey's father had been two pounds ten short, the small sum would have been rather significant. If the details 'piled on' Mrs Harris had instead been piled on Lady Dedlock, they too would hardly be considered 'unnecessary.' Nothing more than the *unnecessary details* that make characters of them, these characters, too, are unnecessary details, though in human shape. Both Bagehot and Orwell, then, link the defining aspect—whether defect or merit—of Dickens's writing to what are commonly termed minor characters.

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<sup>1</sup> Bagehot was by no means alone in his views. The general tenets of 'Victorian literary criticism,' Freedgood writes in *Worlds Enough*, 'were heavily Aristotelian and dramatic' (x). 'During this antidiageitic century, the demands on the novel were strikingly mimetic, and Aristotelian standards reigned as if the novel were supposed to be a play' (2).

It seems unlikely that critics will agree any time soon on what exactly makes a minor character minor—a point I'll return to. There is however a basic agreement insofar as all camps use the term for characters that they deem of little importance. The term 'minor character' is thus already depreciatory. A minor character has been judged and 'allot[ted] ... its own place and its intrinsic and appropriate rank': among the flies. 'Minor character' is then a term that Orwell would caution against when it comes to Dickens. For his observation that 'the outstanding, unmistakable mark of Dickens's writing, is the unnecessary detail,' invites his fellow critics to question the absoluteness of the term 'unnecessary.' If Dickens's unnecessary details are, as Orwell claims, essential to his 'literary qualities,' this poses the question, *to what precisely* are they unnecessary (98)? Or rather, to whom? For the bathetic arc of Orwell's sentence ropes into this issue the critical habits of his readers. Orwell raises up expectations for a claim that requires great critical boldness: he's going to reveal the one aspect that sets Dickens's writing apart, that makes Dickens Dickens, and makes Dickens a great author. Only to reveal this vital, essential element of his writing to be the smallest, most non-essential thing imaginable. This ludicrous anti-climax elicits a spontaneous and involuntary response—'this is absurd!'—alerting Orwell's reader to just how deeply engrained their bias against small points and minor characters is.

*Dickens Undone* seeks to reframe what is commonly construed as the periphery of Victorian texts—the domain of minor characters and other details—as an expansive, fertile area of 'undone science,' a term I borrow from the political sociology of science. In this introduction I argue that, more specifically, the characters populating this 'periphery' are the tip of an iceberg of 'negative knowledge' in Victorian Studies: knowledge that, in line with 'relationships of power and influence within and around academia,' is systematically presented as 'not worth pursuing,' involving 'an active consideration that to think further into a certain direction will be unimportant' or uncomfortable (Richardson 232; Frickel et al.



448; Gross 749). This disciplinary closure, I suggest, is embedded in an aesthetics that is both racialising and heteronormative.

These introductory remarks are sketchy and full of omissions and can by no means replace a full-fledged critique. Their sole purpose is to introduce the reparative work of the following chapters, which seek to generate and trial analytical tools that can help get the ‘science done’ as we go forward, both in our theories and in the way we read, teach, and write about texts.<sup>2</sup> The idea is to begin to transform the large patches of negative knowledge that can be accessed by paying attention to ‘minor characters’ into an arena of ‘extended knowledge’—where, as Matthias Gross puts it, ‘planning, tinkering or researching with non-knowledge ... reveal[s] that earlier ideas on reliable and accepted knowledge must be reinterpreted’ (749-50). Only if we engage with what what our discipline doesn’t want to know, we can begin to gain a sense of the impact this area of ‘negative knowledge’ has on our work.

The first section of this introduction draws on feminist, black feminist, and decolonial feminist theory to show that the category of ‘minor characters’ is inextricably linked to idealist aesthetics devoted to the hierarchisation of human difference, both sexual and racial. The second section looks at how, in an interplay of theory and readings of individual Victorian texts, ‘minorness’ has been constructed as a cover for the devalorisation of certain characters by the critical literature as insignificant. Whilst character as a critical concept is being rigorously re-examined and reconceptualised, it continues to serve as a vehicle for the heteronormative, racialising aesthetics that divide a work of art into a centre and a much less

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<sup>2</sup> In this introduction in particular, I rely heavily on the first-person plural ‘we’ to ‘represent’ as Carolyn Betensky puts it, ‘a subject position that may and/or may not include “you”’ (726). I use this ‘we’ deliberately to refer to a group of Victorianist scholars that are mostly, like me, white and who work, more importantly, in line with a discipline that has sophisticated and powerful mechanisms for protecting its Eurocentrism (in Aníbal Quijano’s sense of the term). I use this ‘we,’ not least, to clarify that I include myself within this group. The ‘we’ that I use when looking into the future with some hope (as I do) is a different, radically inclusive, ‘we.’ That is, I firmly believe that the field of Victorian Studies can only go forward (and stagnation is the only alternative) if the underrepresentation of scholars of colour is swiftly amended. This ‘we’ must be less white, that is, many white scholars (including, very likely, myself), will have to be excluded from it.

significant periphery.<sup>3</sup> ‘Minorness’ serves not only as an excuse for not doing the ‘science,’ but, more problematically, ensures that the ‘science’ will remain ‘undone.’ With the result that even in an author as thoroughly studied as Dickens, the majority of people, as well as long stretches of text, remain unexamined, distorting—in ways that we cannot even fathom—critical understanding of Dickens’s texts, art, ideas, and the cultures that he influenced and that influenced him. The third section transitions to the reparative work of this project. Feminist literary criticism has a long tradition of shifting or expanding the unwritten lists of characters of interest, and my project pleads for renewed, and much more radical work in this area. To break with the categories of ‘main’ and ‘minor,’ ‘central’ and ‘peripheral’ characters that continue to order our thinking, I propose a critical practice that aims to read lovingly, in Giorgio Agamben’s interpretation of the term, which provides my epigraph: a critical practice that seeks to ‘want’ a text ‘*with all of its predicates,*’ including aspects and characters that have been previously dismissed as ‘minor,’ as ‘mere details.’

Whilst this study shares some of the basic methodology of current feminist criticism, most prominently close reading and ‘reading literally,’ I want to distance myself from the ‘postcritical’ turn some of that work has recently taken, often under the banner of ‘reparative reading.’ *Dickens Undone* is based on the premise that the aesthetics we as literary critics disseminate are deeply political, and that this political nature of the work we do bears both responsibility and opportunity. It responds to the call recently voiced by Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong for an alliance between feminist and critical race studies to ‘undiscipline—to radically renovate, rethink, and even un-make’ the field of Victorian studies, and specifically to identify and dismantle those theoretical commitments and scholarly practices that continue to replicate and disseminate white heteronormative male structural privilege (371).

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<sup>3</sup> Galvan offers a useful overview of recent work on character in her mini-essay for the 2018 ‘Keyword’ double issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture*.

Following Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Chatterjee, Christoff and Wong emphasise that such a paradigm shift cannot be achieved by ‘simply diversifying the field,’ as ‘inclusion strategies’ ultimately ‘fail[] to address structural problems and deep-seated habits’ of mainstream scholarship in the field (Maldonado-Torres et al. 370). Thinking that actively challenges the Eurocentric and white male heteronormative structures of Victorian literary studies continues to be disarmed by ‘being enclosed in specialized spaces—*theory, empire studies, comparative literature*—kept apart from the truly ‘Victorian’ of the field’ (Chatterjee et al. 374). That’s why *Dickens Undone*, an attack on our discipline’s racist heteronormative aesthetics, focuses on Dickens, a male white middle-class author. For the same reason, this book is first and foremost a book of critical practice rather than of theory. Its primary objective is to impart a sense of the immense complexity, weirdness, and fun that our commitment to idealist aesthetics keeps from view;<sup>4</sup> in other words, to prod other scholars into committing acts of ‘epistemic disobedience,’ as Walter Dignolo translates Aníbal Quijano’s phrase ‘desprenderse de las vinculaciones de la racionalidad-modernidad con la colonialidad’ (Dignolo 45).<sup>5</sup> A second objective is to begin to undo the image of Dickens’s writing that has been created in the Western tradition: the image of a very pulled-together author who keeps small points and minor characters in their place; an image that probably makes Bagehot turn in his grave and that—for very different reasons—prevents us later critics from exercising true intellectual rigour. Whilst Dickens’s unapologetic abundance has hugely facilitated this exploration (not least because it has drawn so much criticism), the

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<sup>4</sup> Maldonado-Torres writes in his introduction to the special issue of *Transmodernity* on the decolonial turn: ‘we do not produce rigorous knowledge by adhering to the questions, concepts, and standards on the basis of the views or needs of only one region of the world, and even less of a region that has been characterized by either colonizing or ignoring other regions’ (10).

<sup>5</sup> Literally, ‘It is necessary to extricate oneself from the linkages between rationality/modernity and coloniality’ (ibid.).

approach to character I present, starting with a given character's being in the text, can be productively used with any character that is in any text by any author.<sup>6</sup>

### Part one: Detailism

Bagehot appears to have fully naturalised the hierarchic order he values in a work of art. The symmetrical mind's practical seeing sagacity doesn't impose this order onto the world in his opinion, but simply sets each of 'all the mingled objects' in 'its *own* place': the place that is proper, 'intrinsic' to the object—whether that is a thing or a person (emphasis added). The practical seeing sagacity only performs the '*just* appreciation' of an order that must accordingly be already inherent in the world (emphasis added). Importantly, for Bagehot this ability to discern the hierarchy of things and people is strongly gendered. Despite its popularity, Dickens's art will soon lose its lustre, he summarises:

Even in his earlier works it was impossible not to fancy that there was a weakness of fibre unfavourable to the longevity of excellence. This was the effect of his deficiency in *those masculine faculties* of which we have said so much,—the reasoning understanding and firm far-seeing sagacity. It is these two component elements which stiffen the mind, and give a consistency to the creed and a coherence to its effects,—which enable it to protect itself from the rush of circumstances. (106, emphasis added)

For Bagehot, the faculty of the 'practical seeing sagacity,' the faculty that Dickens with his 'extreme sensibility to circumstances' so clearly lacks, is a masculine faculty (106). In other words, Dickens writes like a girl—in the derogatory sense of that phrase.

Considerable irony pertains to this notion that Dickens—who, Rosemarie Bodenheimer suggests, saw himself as 'fiercely masculine,' and whose writing continues to serve as a key reference point for normative Victorian gender identities—should write like a girl (114). But the gendered aesthetics Bagehot offers in his essay on Dickens have a long tradition in Western philosophy and literary criticism. Hannah More wrote in *Strictures on the Modern*

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<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, my definition of 'character' is very inclusive: I certainly count all implied human beings that are portrayed or referred to by a given text as characters, as well as non-human representations that thinking about character can be productively brought to bear on.

*System of Female Education* that '[b]oth in composition and action [women] excel in details; but they do not so much generalize their ideas as men, nor do their minds seize a great subject with so large a grasp' (25). And George Henry Lewes noted in 'The Lady Novelists': 'we may be prepared to find women succeeding better in *finesse* of detail, in pathos and sentiment, while men generally succeed better in the construction of plots and the delineation of character' (133). Lewes also coined the pejorative 'detailism,' complaining of 'an obtrusiveness of Detail and a preference for the Familiar, under the misleading notion of adherence to Nature' in realist literature (*The Principles of Success in Literature* 80).<sup>7</sup> Critical understanding not just of Dickens, but of realism and in fact the novel genre more generally, emerged on this contested, explicitly gendered edge. Far into the twentieth century, Ian Watt, in his seminal book *The Rise of the Novel*, attributed the hugely influential 'air of everyday reality' of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* to the novel's 'wealth of minutely described domestic detail,' widely 'mocked' by contemporary men. Watt also cites this penchant for detail—together with Richardson's professed aversion to mice—as evidence of the author's 'closeness to the feminine point' (153).

In her 1987 book *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, Naomi Schor explores with great critical acuity this devalorising connotation of details with femininity. Tracing the history of the detail from the mid-eighteenth century to Barthes and Duane Hanson, Schor finds the detail relegated by an 'axiology carrying into the field of representation the sexual hierarchies of the phallogocentric cultural order' (xlii). The detail is doubly gendered, Schor argues, 'bounded on the one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the *everyday*, whose "prosiness" is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women' (ibid.).

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<sup>7</sup> Lewes continues his rant: 'If a man means to paint upholstery, by all means let him paint it so as to delight and deceive an upholsterer; but if he means to paint a human tragedy, the upholsterer must be subordinate, and velvet must not draw our eyes away from faces' (82).

Schor credits the neo-classicists with resurrecting these heteronormative aesthetics. Giving fresh emphasis to ‘the classical equation of the Ideal with the absence of all particularity,’ she argues, the neo-classicists also ‘reinscribe[d] the sexual stereotypes of Western philosophy which has, since its origins, mapped gender onto the form-matter paradigm, forging a durable link between maleness and form (*eidōs*), femaleness and formless matter’ (9-10). Plato, in the *Timaeus*, considered form to be the rational principle according to which the amorphous, fluid mess of matter has been shaped into the world by a supremely good Craftsman. In Aristotle’s reworking of Plato, the form of a thing is its definition or essence, that which makes it what it is: for example, those qualities that make a cucumber a cucumber rather than a melon or mostly flavoured water. Matter is merely the stuff a thing is made of—in and of itself formless, non-rational, and essentially unknowable. Whilst a human being is made of blood, bones, skin, internal organs, hair, etc., these materials must be assembled and working together in a very specific way, or you might as well be looking at the shelves of Mr Venus’s shop in *Our Mutual Friend*. And although Aristotle considers Nature rather than a Craftsman the originator of things, he considers Nature to act on a similar knowledge of universal purpose. Form is what unifies matter into a specific, single, knowable, and, in effect, *useful*, thing. Matter, in this model, is meaningful only in relation to the thing it makes up, as the matter *of* a human being, say, or the matter *of* a cucumber. Matter plays a clearly subordinate role. It is non-essential.

As Schor points out, both Plato and Aristotle linked the form-matter dichotomy to a male-female dichotomy. Genevieve Lloyd explains in *The Man of Reason*:

Plato, in the *Timaeus*, compared the role of limiting form to that of the father, and the role of indefinite matter to the mother; and Aristotle also compared the form-matter relation to that of male and female. This comparison is not of any great significance for either of them in their explicit articulations of the nature of knowledge. But it meant that the very nature of knowledge was implicitly associated with the extrusion of what was symbolically associated with the feminine. (4)

The comparison of form/matter (essential/non-essential) to male/female may originally have served a purely illustrative purpose, though this of course was only possible because of a

strongly heteronormative world view. But when, in part as a response to the highly ornamental Rococo style, the neo-classicists modelled an aesthetics on this thinking (which had originally been part of philosophical enquiries into the nature of the physical world) they revived these gendered overtones as well. In fact, Schor finds that the association of the formless with the feminine gained so much momentum that she can confidently speak of ‘a persistent association of idealist aesthetics with the discourse of misogyny’ (xliv). The ideal forms of beauty the neo-classicists strove for were incompatible with natural matter—which was considered scrappy, irrational, in short: female.

Whilst ostensibly the idealist aesthetics discriminating against details are concerned with gender alone, they must be considered as part of what María Lugones calls the ‘colonial/modern gender system’ (190). That is, these aesthetics must not be thought apart from race, specifically from the racialising Renaissance humanist conception of humanity ‘based upon degrees of rational perfection/imperfection,’ as Sylvia Wynter puts it in ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom’ (287). This ratiocentric conception of what it is to be human, Wynter explains, provided the terms on which ‘the world of the laity, including that of the then ascendant modern European state, ... escape[d] their subordination to the world of the Church’ (263). It was ‘grounded ... on a newly projected human/subhuman distinction’: race (264). By ‘overrepresent[ing] their [ratiocentric] conception of the human ... as *the* human,’ Wynter argues,

the peoples of the West ... invent[ed], label[ed], and institutionalize[d] the indigenous peoples of the Americas as well as the transported enslaved Black Africans as the physical referent of the projected irrational/subrational Human Other to its civic-humanist, rational self-conception. (281-2)

Race here ‘replaces the relations of superiority and inferiority established through domination,’ as Lugones explains following Quijano. ‘It reconceives humanity and human relations fictionally, in biological terms’ (190). That is, non-white human beings are understood ‘not as dominated through conquest, nor as inferior in terms of wealth or political power, but as an anterior stage in the history of the species’ (192). Western

Europeans' violent domination of the rest of the world's population was in turn legitimated by this conception of their subrational, subhuman nature.

The aesthetics that see women 'excel[ling] in details; but ... not so much generaliz[ing] their ideas as men,' as More put it, reflect and reproduce this violent fiction of a continuum of a rational, white human species. As Wynter argues in 'Beyond Miranda's Meanings,' the difference verbalised here between fully rational bourgeois white men and less ('not so much') rational white women 'reinforce[s]' the fundamental, racialising 'code of difference ... between "men" and "natives"' (358). As Lugones clarifies, it serves to control and subdue white bourgeois women whilst, simultaneously, 'turn[ing]' them 'into reproducers of "the (white) race"' (206, 201).

I want to argue that these racialising, heteronormative aesthetics subtend the critical fiction of 'minorness' that continues to inform and restrict our critical practice. Schor shows that details, particulars, 'small points' stand ambivalently to form. Details are tolerated, sometimes even condoned, 'as long as the clauses of a certain *aesthetic contract* are respected—avoidance of the contingent, maintenance of the guarantors of classical order (simplicity, regularity, symmetry)'—that is, as long as they can be teleologically subordinated to an organising structure, as long as they are useful to that structure (27). This 'aesthetic contract' is easily discernible in Bagehot's desire to have minutiae and trivialities in their 'own place,' according to their 'intrinsic and appropriate rank.' The same 'aesthetic contract' clearly informs twenty-first-century scholars' concepts of how significance is distributed among the characters of a given text, which usually employ the spatial figures of 'central' and 'peripheral' or 'marginal' characters. Alex Woloch, paraphrasing A. Bartlett Giamatti's observations on the literary hero of epic poetry, writes in his influential book *The One vs. the Many* that in order to elaborate its protagonists' complex humanity

a narrative can organize its discursive universe into a referential core—the central condition of the protagonist—and a symbolic field that elaborates and nuances this core: the peripheral representations of minor characters. Secondary characters—representing delimited extremes—become allegorical, and this allegory is directed toward a singular being, the protagonist, who stands



at the center of the text's symbolic structure, or what Giamatti calls 'the single and abiding visionary core.' (18)

The *raison d'être* of 'secondary characters' is to 'elaborat[e] and nuanc[e]' the protagonist. They exist in the text to help characterise the protagonist rather than as characters in their own right. Woloch, writing from a New Formalist standpoint, clearly relies on notions of a more or less unified 'symbolic structure' here that have been thoroughly criticised.<sup>8</sup> But with regard to minor characters especially, this kind of thinking continues to be taken for granted across many different schools of thought in Victorian literary studies. This basic assumption that some characters constitute 'peripheral' or marginal 'representations' that are allegorically subordinated, 'directed toward' a narrative's 'center' or 'core,' unmistakably projects onto the characters populating a given novel the idealist aesthetics described by Schor, 'which clearly subordinates the periphery to the center.'

Dickens's writing, Bagehot asserts, breaches this aesthetic contract. In fact, Bagehot criticises Dickens's details on both counts, contingency *and* violation of classical order. What's more, he considers them inextricably linked: in his eyes, Dickens's details are contingent to an extent that precludes any possibility of symmetry. This particular train of thought points toward 'what is perhaps most threatening about the detail' according to Schor: 'its tendency to subvert an internal hierarchic ordering of the work of art which clearly subordinates the periphery to the center, the accessory to the principal, the background to the foreground' (15). Out of '[their] own place and [their] intrinsic and appropriate rank' details become 'noisome' and 'painful' to Bagehot to an extent that they can make the whole work 'squalid.' 'Vivid facts stand out in [Dickens's] imagination,' he observes,

and a fresh illustrative style brings them home to the imagination of his readers; but his continuous philosophy utterly fails in the attempt to harmonise them.... [H]is abstract understanding is so far inferior to his picturesque imagination as to give even to his best works the sense of jar and incompleteness.... (84)

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<sup>8</sup> Caroline Levine provides an overview of the critique of Formalist aesthetics in *Forms*, 24-6.

Dickens is amazingly perceptive when it comes to the world's particulars, Bagehot is saying, but because he cannot put them in order, in their subordinate place. He cannot make a sound novel out of them. Instead of a harmonious whole, there's only 'jar and incompleteness.'

Especially with regard to those details of the 'concrete men' variety, with regard, in other words, to 'minor characters,' Bagehot is not alone. Think only of Orwell's famous observation: 'rotten architecture, but wonderful gargoyles' (105). And so I want to take Schor's argument a step further, and challenge to what extent the order that is 'threatened' by the detail and the minor character, the 'hierarchic ordering of the work of art which clearly subordinates the periphery to the center,' is in fact 'internal.' I'll suggest that, as far as Dickens is concerned at least, his texts do not in fact offer a single, absolute hierarchy of characters that subordinates peripheral or minor characters to a central character or central set of characters. Any such hierarchy is suggested by those who talk and write about Dickens's texts in a racialising, heteronormative tradition of literary criticism strongly influenced by critics like Bagehot, Lewes, and Watt. What I am saying is indeed that Bagehot has a point, at least insofar as Dickens's work does not at all replicate the hierarchy at the heart of idealist aesthetics that subordinates a periphery to a centre. I'll side with Orwell, however, insofar as I don't believe this is at all a bad thing. In my opinion, the blatant lack of centripetence, of allegorical movement toward a unifying centre, in Dickens provides an opportunity for readers to break with tradition and to cultivate instead a critical practice that seeks to explain and appreciate such ex-centric tendencies.

## **Part two: Minorness**

Much has been done to recover unnecessary details in recent decades. The nineteenth-century, and Dickens in particular, has been one of the key sites of this recovery. In 'The Reality Effect,' Roland Barthes pointed out that the 'superfluous details' that characterise the nineteenth-century literary aesthetic are 'superfluous' only insofar as structural analysis

isn't equipped to appreciate them. 'Its inventory,' he writes 'omits all details that are "superfluous" (in relation to structure)' (141). He goes on to identify 'superfluous' details as a generic marker of realism (145, 148). More recently, Elaine Freedgood has called attention to the rich resonances of cultural meaning in Victorian object-details—things—in what she calls 'strong metonymic readings' (*The Ideas in Things* 4). She argues that things in the novel constitute repositories of history, 'bear[ing] on the grisly specifics of conflicts and conquests that a culture can neither regularly acknowledge nor permanently destroy' (2). Mahogany furniture in *Jane Eyre*, for example, contains the memory of imperial deforestation, which made space for slave plantations in the Caribbean and Madeira. 'Minor characters,' however, continue to meet with more critical ambivalence. This is perhaps most pronounced in a growing body of work that considers Victorian novels as generically 'overloaded,' in terms of 'overpopulation' or 'excessive population' (Halevi-Wise 208; Steinlight, 'Why Novels Are Redundant' 501; Chappell 784; emphasis added). In this section, I seek to extend Barthes's suspicion of 'unnecessary' or 'superfluous' details to 'minorness.' Emily Steinlight comments in *Populating the Novel* that her observation 'that the social worlds assembled in nineteenth-century literature are phenomenally crowded, crammed *far beyond their capacity* with living human beings,' is 'a fairly obvious premise' (3, emphasis added). How exactly do we gauge a text's capacity for living human beings, especially considering that all these characters are in fact contained in the text? Why is it obvious that nineteenth-century novels strike us as overpopulated and not, say, modernist novels as underpopulated or 'impoverished'? On what terms are 'minor characters' minor or too much? What are they of little significance to?

For the most part, minorness has not in fact been theorised, but used to denote characters that don't have what a given model of literary character values. In the 'referential' or 'humanist' concept of character, which values psychological complexity, a character that lacks psychological complexity is minor. Structural concepts, which theorise characters in

terms of their narrative function, will consider characters minor that lack structural relevance. Thus Mieke Bal explains in a footnote to her *Narratology*:

In some fabulas there are actors who have no functional part in the structures of that fabula because they do not cause or undergo functional events. Actors of this type may be left out of consideration.... [T]he initial disregard of an actor does not mean that this actor is without significance. It only means that this particular actor does not form part of the functional category, and therefore need not be taken into consideration. (201)

Bal differentiates clearly between characters that 'need not be taken into consideration' and characters that would in fact be 'without significance.' A minor character is here one that isn't important in terms of what a given critic is interested in, one whose significance this given critic or model is not equipped and is not interested in equipping itself to appreciate.

Woloch's *The One vs. the Many* marks a turning point in thinking on minor characters. Woloch proposes a model of literary character that reconciles 'referential' and structural concepts of character. He argues that these two ways of looking at literary characters are not mutually exclusive, but together describe an important literary dialectic. The referential and structural models highlight different aspects of characters that affect one another: 'literary character' Woloch writes, 'is itself divided, always emerging at the juncture between structure and reference' (17). The realist novel, 'infused with the sense that any character is a potential hero,' considers every character a fully complex human being, he argues (31). In other words, it imagines Mobb's stepmother as a person like you and me, with a history and baggage, hopes, dreams and discontents, strengths and weaknesses. But because 'space within the same fictive universe' of a single text is limited, it can afford to render only very few characters in this degree of complexity (13). With the result that the complex humanity of all others, including Mobb's stepmother, is constricted. Woloch's argument is, then, that a text's 'interest in a character as a fictive individual' cannot be thought apart from 'this character's reduction to, or compression within, a functional narrative role' (26). The analytical value of this appreciative model with regard to the 'periphery' of the Victorian novel is rather obvious: it presents a way in which the immensely versatile toolbox of

structural analysis can be productively applied to characters that are not structurally relevant.

*The One vs. the Many* is interested in patterns of distribution, and in particular in the relationship between protagonists with the ‘character-system’ as a whole. (As Woloch’s reading of *Great Expectations* especially shows, it’s not only ‘minor characters’ that encounter the problem of compression, on the contrary.) He suggests that the realist novel followed a paradigm of spatial distribution that is essentially asymmetric: the protagonist takes the lion’s share, while a multitude of minor characters—those ‘narrative workers’ that serve to ‘elaborate and nuance’ the protagonist ‘at the center of the text’s symbolic structure’—fight for the scraps (22). This model, in which the ‘aesthetic contract’ described by Schor comes to constitute ‘the paradigmatic character-structure of the realist novel,’ unmistakably replicates the centripetal aesthetics Bagehot advocates (31). More importantly, Woloch’s paradigm locates these centripetal aesthetics in the text. A character’s standing in the character-system is determined by their structural relevance in Woloch’s model. All characters are potentially full human beings, only each is compressed in ‘a functional narrative role.’ What makes minor characters minor is thus their ‘essential formal position (the subordinate beings who are delimited in themselves while performing a function for someone else)’ (27).<sup>9</sup> In other words, Mobb’s stepmother gets the extremely limited amount of space in the text that she gets—and thus lacks all psychological complexity—*because* she is extremely contingent to the structure of *Nicholas Nickleby*. Minor characters are no longer conceded (if only in a footnote) to be simply not that relevant to what the critic is doing. In a version of a common ‘mechanism by means of which,’ according to Wynter, ‘human groups

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<sup>9</sup> Intriguingly, whilst Woloch takes structural relevance as measure of ‘minorness,’ he bases his assertion that Victorian novels are overpopulated—that a struggle for space is inevitable—on ‘humanist’ criteria. There are too many people in Victorian novels because they cannot all be presented in their full psychological complexity, with ‘full’ presumably referring to the level of complexity that, say, Henry James aimed for with Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*.

have been enabled to make the fact that it is they/we who are the authors and agents of our own orders opaque to themselves/ourselves,' a centripetal hierarchy is construed as inherent in the individual text ('Unsettling' 305).<sup>10</sup>

I will discuss several instances of this leap from a lack of critical interest to an hierarchy that is located in the work of art. It is a common move in current thinking about minoriness, which is often concerned with a single author or text. Thus Rosetta Young has argued recently that in *A Christmas Carol* '[m]ajoriness'—and by implication minoriness—'is dictated not by readerly interest or space taken within the narrative' (233, emphasis added). Rather, she suggests, Dickens relies on something along the lines of Pierre Bourdieu's multiform capital, which encompasses economic, cultural and social assets, 'to index their "majoriness"—that is, their significance in the narrative—in a distinct departure from [other] realist novels that utilize psychological intricacy' (221). Young's language—majoriness is 'dictated,' 'indexed,' 'utilized' by the text—clearly locates the majoriness-minoriness hierarchy within Dickens's novella, when in fact certain characters appeal to Young's reading because they are complex when viewed from her Bourdieuan perspective.

Young backs up her claim regarding majoriness not with textual evidence,<sup>11</sup> but with the assertion that '[if] you were to name the major characters in *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge and Tiny Tim would top this list' (229). Majoriness (and, by implication, minoriness) thus ultimately comes down to a question of readerly intuition here, which seems to be closely

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<sup>10</sup> In *Worlds Enough*, Freedgood links this mechanism to the term 'form': 'Eventually, though, these forms make trouble, as we forget that we made them and their autonomy comes to guarantee our own autonomy as critics. That is, if we invoke form, we are understood as truly knowing, in some guild-like fashion, the works we discuss' (xi).

<sup>11</sup> Textual evidence is hard to come by. Woloch cites Henry James, who observed of *The Wings of the Dove* that 'though my regenerate young New Yorker, and what might depend on her, should form my centre, my circumference was every while as treatable,' betraying a degree of ambivalence toward the way he had chosen to distribute attention among his characters (21). There are also frequently other influences at work. The List of Roles for *Othello* for example, is topped by Othello, which might indicate he is the play's first character or protagonist. But then Desdemona is only listed at the bottom of the list, which is separated by genders. This puts her even behind Lodovico and Gratiano, Sailor, and Clown, of all of whom it would be difficult to argue that they are more significant than Desdemona.

linked to what one expects other (critical) readers to intuit. This is not a coincidence, for Young's and Woloch's assumption that a hierarchy of characters is a formal aspect of prose fiction reflects a deep critical commitment to a centripetal conceptualisation of nineteenth-century character-systems.

I will try to demonstrate how these hierarchies operate by means of a brief and admittedly cursory survey of the way the critical literature treats *Little Dorrit's* Affery Flintwinch, the subject of my fourth chapter. A JSTOR search for Affery Flintwinch returns 27 results, 25 of which are actually concerned with Dickens's novels.<sup>12</sup> And whilst a JSTOR search is by no means exhaustive, I believe it will present a compelling sample. Seven of the 25 results mention Affery within a quote or to contextualise an observation about something else. Another four authors give Affery as one of several examples of a pattern they're interested in. Jenny Hartley, for example, backs up her observation that women in *Little Dorrit* 'are shut up, silenced,' with a list that begins: '[w]e are told that Affery "held her peace" and that Tattycoram is taken back into the Meagles fold where she will relearn her lessons of self-control ..., Arthur's birth-mother has died in her incarceration...' (73). Three papers actively downplay Affery's contribution to *Little Dorrit* as they pass her by. Avrom Fleishman, for instance, writes, '[i]t is true that she manifests a spate of rebellion when Rigaud/Blandois confronts her masters with his discovery of their wrongdoings, but she adds nothing material to the information the blackmailer extorts' (578).<sup>13</sup> The remaining eleven results are all examples of what I term centripetal interpretations. They interest themselves in Affery exclusively in terms of the allegorical work she can be construed to do for *Little*

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<sup>12</sup> For comparison, JSTOR has 32 results for Pet Meagles, 115 results for Mrs Clennam, 69 for Flora Finching, 224 for Miss Wade, and 1,640 for *Little Dorrit*. The last number, of course, also includes mentions of the novel itself.

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Surridge concludes that 'Middle-class beatings thus carry symbolic weight and are marked by rhetorical stress in a way that lower-class battery'—for which she cites Flintwinch's abuse of Affery as an example—'is not' (19). And Julian Markels notes, '[a]nd then there are stories—of Affery Flintwinch and Flora Finching and John Chivery—that are *superfluous* to the pattern but are *wonderfully gratuitous* celebrations of socially constructed humanity' (This is the first and only time he mentions these characters, 209, emphases added).

*Dorrit's* 'narrative core,' averting the threat posed by the detail by means of what Schor calls 'semantico-structural recuperation' (102): 'viewed in the proper perspective, any prodigal detail can be brought back into the fold of meaning' (101). Take Paul D. Herring's observation that 'Affery's dreams had been the *device* through which much of the action in the old house in the City had been presented' (34), or Michael Squires's reading of Affery as a 'compensating support figure' to Arthur's 'center,' who 'throw[s] into relief the greater emotional complexity and attractiveness of the figure to whom [she is] joined' (50-1).<sup>14</sup> These readings are interested in Affery only in terms of how she can be construed to reflect what is considered the centre of the narrative. Not one of them mentions the large-scale exploration of marital cruelty and women's rights that *Little Dorrit* undertakes with this character.

None of these individual papers are 'wrong' or 'bad,' and only very few I would term negligent with regard to Affery. One can hardly expect anyone to interest oneself in each and every character in *Little Dorrit*, especially in a single publication. But considered en masse they show Victorian studies micro-managing the limits of a research agenda based on character. The character of Affery and her interests are consistently, explicitly affirmed as an area of negative knowledge: knowledge about *Little Dorrit* that is not worth having. Presenting her as precisely a 'secondary,' 'peripheral representation' whose sole purpose is to 'elaborate' and 'nuance' the (pursuits of) other, important characters, these readings tacitly suggest that it is not worthwhile to look at Affery as a character in her own right. Veiling the Academy's resistance to interest themselves in Affery as an attribute of Dickens's

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<sup>14</sup> For Rachel Bennett, Affery combines with Mrs Clennam's 'dark room, her widow's weeds, her place by the fire, her wrathful reading from the Bible which is indeed a curse,... to make Mrs Clennam indubitably a witch' (179), whereas according to Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, Affery's troubling dreams '*anticipat[e]* Little Dorrit's own sense of disconnection from reality in Book II of the novel' (375). Lawrence Frank suggests that 'the episode [of Jeremiah first violently 'waking up' Affery], comic as it is, *reveals* the way in which [Arthur] Clennam, too, had been violated throughout his childhood by his incarceration in "the old dark closet..." (872). 'The *device* of locating many of Flintwinch's actions within the supposed 'dreams' of Affery intensifies their air of mystery and irrationality,' writes Brian Rosenberg (160). Alan Wilde figures Affery as an 'analogue' to the darkness of Mr. F's Aunt (40). Even Garrett Stewart's fictional version of Arthur's mother, hearing 'the servant Affery shivering to the bone with a sense of *my* frightful claim on them all,' reads Affery's experience as a symptom of her own suppressed story (525).



text, this pattern is particularly effective in ensuring that Affery remains unexamined, utilising scholars' 'fear[s] of marginalisation' that, William Jamal Richardson has observed, are 'nearly universal' around areas of negative knowledge (238). The prohibitive sense imparted by the literature manifests itself most strikingly in scholars' concessions that the character or set of characters they have discussed is merely minor, both devalorising their own research and reinforcing the tacit rules about what and who cannot be legitimately written about. That critics breaking new ground should feel the need to attenuate the relevance of their work by conceding up front that the key passage they will discuss 'is relatively minor' bears witness to an academic culture that is not only toxic but moribund (Hu 460).

There is no discernible logic informing which characters are considered to merit critical attention and which aren't. There are, of course in Dickens, plenty of characters who are considered central to their texts who are not rendered in any great emotional complexity, first and foremost among them Mr Pickwick. At the same time there are characters Victorian reviewers praised for their 'psychology' who are rarely, if ever, considered: Charley Bates 'turning against the murderer' in *Oliver Twist*,<sup>15</sup> '[p]oor miserable Mr Jellyby' and 'the Lincolnshire baronet,' Sir Leicester Dedlock, in *Bleak House*,<sup>16</sup> or *Our Mutual Friend*'s Betty Higden, 'because without such a character as hers Mr Dickens's tales would be unlike themselves.'<sup>17</sup> There are characters, like *Little Dorrit*'s Miss Wade, who are of very little structural relevance and take up very little space, and are yet considered highly significant. And there are characters like Mr Guppy of *Bleak House*, who play a critical role with regard to function and take up a rather considerable amount of space, who are however not attributed significance to. Affery is touted as not worth looking at despite the fact that she is

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<sup>15</sup> John Moore Capes and J. E. E. D. Action, in a review in the *Rambler*, January 1862, cited in Philip Collins 449.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Fotherhill Chorley, in a review in the *Atheneum*, 17 September 1853, cited in Philip Collins 289.

<sup>17</sup> E. S. Dallas, in an unsigned review in *The Times*, 29 November 1865, cited in Philip Collins 477.

of considerable structural importance to *Little Dorrit*, despite the fact that the text renders her in great psychological complexity, and despite the fact that she snatches up a chunk of textual attention that can almost rival those of the novel's other two A-characters, Amy and Arthur. There are notable exceptions to this pattern, such as John Gordon's recent reading of Mrs Joe, or Matthew Bevis's analysis of Sir Leicester Dedlock.<sup>18</sup> But for the great majority of Dickens's characters, there are no guarantees for scholarly interest, not even being a titular character, as the elder Martin Chuzzlewit evinces.

This arbitrary limitation of the research agenda to certain characters of interest is possible because of the centripetal aesthetics that are ascribed to Dickens's texts: Affery being of subordinate significance to *Little Dorrit* (if of any at all) justifies critics' inattentiveness. Since the purpose of the concept of 'minorness' is precisely to be able to avoid engaging with the character at hand, how precisely any given 'minor character' is subordinated by the text is equally not deemed worthwhile exploring. Our commitment to the centric paradigm, then, has not only created an image of Dickens's writing that is falsely orderly and rational. It has created an image of Dickens's writing that actively discourages academic rigour. Theoretical abstractions of what determines 'majorness' and 'minorness' in Dickens reflect and obscure how this image comes to be, and it is fuelled by the casual remarks on certain characters' minor, subordinate, or secondary status. While there is no perceivable logic with regard to the formal properties of marginalised characters—it is not the case that we consistently interest ourselves in characters that are structurally relevant or that are rendered in psychological complexity—there is a perceivable logic with regard to certain properties of the implied human beings that are marginalised. People with disabilities in Dickens are invariably considered to be subordinate characters; so are people

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<sup>18</sup> Other examples include Daniel Deneau's discussion of Chuffey, Helena Michie's reading of Mr Twemlow in 'Extra Man. Dining Out Beyond the Marriage Plot in *Our Mutual Friend*,' and Judith E. Pike's reading of Isabella Linton in *Wuthering Heights*.

of colour; so are working-class women, as well as financially independent, i. e. working women, including those of the middle-classes.

### **Part three: Undoing Dickens**

The readings of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit* that follow seek to generate and trial analytical tools that can help readers appreciate ex-centric elements so that we can begin to resist the racialising heteronormative categories of main and minor characters, both in our theories and in the way we read, teach, and write about Victorian texts. I by no means propose to withdraw attention from those characters that have traditionally been considered central, or even to refrain from allegorical readings. Rather, I suggest extending the quality of scholarly attention that has been reserved for those characters deemed 'central' to *all* characters, and to stop treating allegory as a one-way-street. If Affery's pursuits reflect on those of Arthur and Amy, do not Arthur and Amy's pursuits also reflect on Affery's? What I'm proposing is a critical practice that aims to read lovingly, in Giorgio Agamben's interpretation of the term in *The Coming Community*, A critical practice that aims to 'want' a text '*with all of its predicates, its being such as it is,*' that interests itself in details and minor characters *as well*—not as details and minor characters, but as properties of the text that are not inherently ranked. A critical practice that considers all characters offered by a text significant and attends to *how* these characters signify in their diversity rather than hierarchising them.

The first two readings, of *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Dombey and Son*, develop analytical tools that can help readers attend to and appreciate the presences of characters that are usually marginalised or ignored altogether. Specifically, these two chapters look for ways of appreciating two particular qualities that tend to put critics off: lack of structural relevance and what E. M. Forster called 'flatness,' respectively. Chapters three and four use these interpretative tools to zoom in on individual characters that have been considered

peripheral to *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit*. Both readings uncover previously overlooked facets of key thematic concerns of these texts—autobiography and imprisonment, respectively—demonstrating how a more loving, less lopsided reading practice can considerably deepen and subtilise critical understanding of a text as a whole.

Chapter one takes its cue from *Martin Chuzzlewit*'s critique of reading for the (marriage) plot and of what such a reading marginalises, namely: narrative middles, and female characters' experience of middles especially. Acutely aware of the way in which teleology and gender ideology interlock in the marriage plot, the novel offers an alternative model to the teleological that is based on dependence rather than on succession and patriarchal transmission. I suggest that this model, in which gain hangs upon existence (rather than death, the prerequisite for transmission), can be used to conceptualise the contribution of characters who are marginalised by a reading for the plot, like Mary Graham and Mrs Gamp. Both are 'non-functional actors' in structural terms, narrative mercenaries: their work for the plot of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is disconnected from their individual personalities. To appreciate such characters' existence, I argue, one must begin by considering what the text gives them space *for*, what it gives them room to do and say—whether that is a whole lot of space, as with Mrs Gamp, or very little, as in Mary's case.

Building on the basic methodology outlined in chapter one, chapter two rethinks 'flat characters'—characters that are constructed around a single quality that they repeat to the point of absurdity—as the result of a strategy of characterisation I term narrative caricature. Very simply put, flat characters are given room to repeat themselves, to stay unchanged as the world around them picks up speed. Approaching these characters as being in the process of being caricatured rather than as quasi-pathological, static representations that the author simply copies and pastes, allows me to tease apart the ambivalence that is constantly being re-negotiated between a flat character's highly peculiar or 'eccentric' aspect, and their highly generic or 'typical' aspect. Looking at *Dombey and Son*'s Miss Tox, Captain Cuttle, the Native,

and Susan Nipper (among others), this chapter demonstrates some of the many ways in which flat characters, by virtue of *not* developing, come to constitute sustainable sources of textual interest and pleasure.

Chapter three offers a reading of *David Copperfield* that is doubly de-centring. It brings into focus a number of characters that get David involved with the second-hand market, spearheaded by the old lady with the hand-basket, who, taking her leave at the end of the novel's fourth paragraph, exists on the literal periphery or margin of the text of *David Copperfield*. At the same time, it considers David as a peripheral character—exploring his construction of a human consciousness beginning with the extreme edges of his autobiographical text, where, according to David, an individualised identity must be consolidated or 'formed' if it is to have *form* at all. Systematically violating this boundary, the second-hand market encourages a number of shady exchanges that forge both physical and textual relationships between David and the characters who come into possession of his possessions, in a peculiar way that constructs an alternative, de-individualised human existence that is bound up in all genders and classes (though not races) and exceeds both memory and collection.

Chapter four revisits *Little Dorrit*'s imprisonment motif from the point of view of Affery Flintwinch, who finds herself imprisoned in—that is, unable to leave—a violent domestic relationship with her husband, Jeremiah, and her mistress, Mrs Clennam. I argue that Dickens's writing builds on the rudimentary Gothic appeal of Affery's experience—the shadow and gloom, the constant threat of bodily harm—to create an imaginatively 'psychologised,' highly political portrayal of domestic violence. I suggest that this detailed portrayal of the Flintwinchs' complex power dynamic betrays a degree of insight into intimate partner violence and a complicity with contemporary feminist efforts that demand a re-examination of Dickens's stance on this issue that cut Victorian domestic ideology to the quick.

Next to the productive potential of a 'loving' approach, my readings seek to adumbrate the extent to which our centripetal aesthetics have distorted our knowledge of Dickens's writing. To this purpose, I have chosen to focus on one particular group of characters whose systematic marginalisation by the Academy happens to be unusually well-documented: working- and lower-class women and women of (some) economic independence.

Michael Slater's 1983 book *Dickens and Women* remains the seminal work in this respect. What interests me here is his uncommented omission of the great number of working-class and working women in Dickens's oeuvre. Slater does, by synecdoche, mention *Dombey and Son's* Polly Toodle and *Bleak House's* Mrs Bagnet, but only to exclude them from his argument. 'Mrs Bagnet in *Bleak House*,' Slater concedes,

is one of Dickens's few examples of a mature woman functioning admirably as wife and mother. Polly Toodle in *Dombey* is another. But both Polly and Mrs Bagnet, we might note, are simple, uneducated working-class women, lacking in the angelical refinement and exquisite sensibility that form part of Dickens's ideal of wifedom as shadowed forth in his middle-class heroines (and Lizzie Hexam) before their marriages. (313)

Lack of scholarly interest is here refigured not just formally (as 'minorness'), but ideologically, as a question of class. What Slater is saying is that working-class women do not merit consideration as women because femininity in Dickens is, with the single exception of Lizzie Hexam, strictly middle-class. What Slater isn't saying is that his conception of femininity in Dickens (as inherently middle-class) is based on a long-established sample of 'central' characters, honed by literary criticism in the neo-classicist tradition, which marginalises working-class characters. Negative knowledge is here visibly refigured as a class barrier within the text. In fact, we witness Slater rejecting textual evidence of two 'successful' wives—evidence that is, as Slater points out, hard to come by in Dickens—because these two good wives do not conform to an ideal of wifedom that is not in fact represented in any of Dickens's texts, but considered to be 'shadowed forth' by a group of 'middle-class heroines.' This refers to a group of women characters that have been traditionally considered Dickens's heroines, not in the sense that their texts show them to

consistently and courageously combat adversity (though Esther Summerson would to an extent fit that description), but in the sense that they are innocent and wholesome—‘insipid goodies,’ ‘legless angels’—and because in the end of the book they get married, presumably happily, to the good (or reformed) guy—Harry Maylie, Martin Chuzzlewit, Walter Gay, David Copperfield, Eugene Wrayburn. That is why Slater’s Dickensian ‘ideal of wifehood’ is inherently ‘shadowed forth’: these characters have been cultivated as heroines, as the women that matter in Dickens, because they present token women in male homosocial exchanges in the romantic tradition. The critical tradition privileges middle-class female characters only insofar as they help consolidate white middle-class male power.

Slater’s book greatly extended the list of women characters that could legitimately be talked about, and much more of this work has been done since. And yet, in this one respect of working-class and working women, Slater’s argument continues to confine the scope and content of this particular critical conversation. Lillian Nayder’s 2012 collection *Dickens, Sexuality and Gender* suggests the rigour with which the women of the central plots have been reconsidered since the publication of *Dickens and Women*. But working-class female characters remain, with very few exceptions, firmly on the other side of the line demarcating relevant from irrelevant to the critical conversation.<sup>19</sup> Dickens’s working-class women largely fall through the cracks again in Patricia Ingham’s astute revision of Slater’s categories in *Dickens, Women and Language*, which codes Dickens’s female characters as linguistic signs. Natalie B. Cole reviews over 190 articles and books in her meticulously compiled *Dickens and Gender. Recent Studies 1992-2008*. Yet her section on ‘Odd Women’ can include work on only two characters, who both belong to the upper middle class: Flora Finching and Miss Havisham. Similarly, the section ‘Femininities and Work’ compiles research on a wide variety of aspects of middle-class women’s domestic labour, but Cole could not include a

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<sup>19</sup> A notable exception presents Polly Toodle, mainly because of her position as wet-nurse.

single publication on the many forms of paid labour performed by women in Dickens's fiction and journalism. (It appears that none of the publications Cole reviews on Dickens's prostitutes could reasonably be included or cross-referenced in this section, either, which is rather worrying considering these characters are considered to be defined by the *work* they perform). In the rare instances when one of Dickens's female 'minor characters' is discussed, the argument tends to sideline her as either marginal or comic, and hence 'benign.'<sup>20</sup> At the same time, a consensus has emerged that femininity in Dickens is essentially middle-class, much as it is presented in John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) or Sarah Stickney Ellis's popular conduct books from earlier in the century—texts that imagined femininity exclusively in a middle-class context and based on the concept of the separate spheres, which was unattainable for many working-class wives and women who were financially independent.

And yet working-class and working women proliferate in Dickens's fiction. As Slater cannot help but notice, these women are there. They are there not by accident but by a deliberate choice on the part of Dickens to write them. They are doing things and saying things regardless of the aesthetic contract of idealist aesthetics, and regardless of what we as critics are comfortable talking about. Woloch, too finds the clear-cut hierarchy of narrative asymmetry muddled by their presence. He soon contends that

while performing these narrative duties, Dickens's minor characters compel intense attention, in-and-of-themselves, through the configuration of their personalities and physiognomy, the texture of their speech, and their immediate and direct interaction with the protagonists. (128)

These functionally subordinate characters get (much) more attention than is due to them, and to an extent that en masse allows them to encroach upon the space of the protagonist, undermining the regular, well-proportioned asymmetry of Woloch's centripetal paradigm. Minorness in Dickens, Woloch argues, 'catalyzes new kinds of affective presence' (128). Such

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<sup>20</sup> Berry 22; Northcutt Malone 380; Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets* 96.



characters ‘become[] larger than—and stand[] out against—[their] instrumental role in the novel’s “theme, plot and purpose”’ (ibid.).

The problem with Woloch’s thinking about presence, especially when used as an analytical category, is that he construes it as causally determined by minoriness. The ‘compression’ of a potentially full human being within a limited functional role, Woloch argues, effects a distortion of the character’s personality (128). This distortion, Woloch suggests, takes place on a spectrum between absorption and explosion. Either the character ‘is smoothly absorbed as a gear within the narrative machine, at the cost of his or her free interiority’ (25). The result is what Woloch terms ‘the worker,’ whose personality ‘is reduced to a single functional use within the narrative’ (ibid.). Alternatively, the character ‘grates against his or her position’ in the structural hierarchy and cracks under the pressure. This is ‘the eccentric ... the fragmentary character who plays a disruptive, oppositional role within the plot’ (ibid.). Woloch is here not referring to a villain or adversary, but rather to characters like *Little Dorrit*’s Flora Finching, who holds up the plot with her unhinged soliloquies (too many superfluous details). A character’s ‘affective presence’—their memorability as a rather wacky implied human being—is construed as the direct result of their limited structural relevance. The danger here is that form quickly becomes a means not just of explaining represented idiosyncrasy, but of explaining it away. A character’s amiable wackiness is accounted for by their formal insignificance, implicitly affirming that it does not merit further analysis.

This model creates an issue in practice that I think is best illustrated by means of an example. Mrs ‘Aggerawayter’ Cruncher is the wife of Jerry Cruncher, odd-job-man to Tellson’s bank, an unspecified and ‘confidential’ business connexion of the Manette family in *A Tale of Two Cities* (25; bk. I, ch. 4). Jerry improves his wages as a ‘Resurrection-Man’ or body snatcher, in a weird doubling of the ‘recalled to life’ motif that dominates the beginning of the novel as Mr Lorry goes to Paris to reclaim Doctor Manette (believed dead by his

daughter Lucie) from his 18-year imprisonment in the Bastille. In the novel's second chapter, the narrator splits his attention between Lorry and Jerry, both pondering the answer Jerry is to carry back to London, 'RECALLED TO LIFE' (12; bk. 1, ch. 2). As Lorry, jolted about in a mail-coach, 'in his fancy would dig, and dig, dig' (17-8; bk. 1, ch. 3), Jerry says to himself, '[m]uch of that wouldn't do for you, Jerry! I say, Jerry! You'd be in a Blazing bad way, if recalling to life was to come into fashion, Jerry!' (14; bk. 1, ch. 2). The structural purpose of Mrs Cruncher appears to be that Jerry doesn't have to keep talking to himself for the reader to get onto his secret. Master Cruncher, all curiosity, does his part to building a sense of mystery around his father's extra-curricular activities, wondering things such as, 'Where does my father get all that iron rust from? He don't get no iron rust here!' (61; bk. 2, ch. 1). But mainly it's Jerry himself who betrays that he has a rather unsavoury side-hustle. Thus, when he wakes up to find his wife praying in a corner:

'What!' said Mr Cruncher, looking out of bed for a boot. 'You're at it agin, are you?'

After hailing the morn with this second salutation, he threw a boot at the woman as a third. It was a very muddy boot, and may introduce the odd circumstance connected with Mr Cruncher's domestic economy, that, whereas he often came home after banking hours with clean boots, he often got up next morning to find the same boots covered with clay. (58; bk. 2, ch. 1)

Jerry's painful conviction—and the origin of much of his comedy—is that Mrs Cruncher's prayers damage his unholy business. 'The devoutest person,' the narrator neatly sums up the irony in this, 'could have rendered no greater homage to the efficacy of an honest prayer than he did in this distrust of his wife' (166; bk. 2, ch. 14).

What interests me here is the nonchalance with which the narrator passes over Mrs Cruncher and Jerry's violence against her, to what Barthes in *S/Z* termed the 'hermeneutic code': a text's interest to create a sense of enigma (*passim*). Mrs Cruncher seems to be simply a convenient target for tell-tale muddy boots and revealing rants. In this respect, Mrs Cruncher appears to be a near-perfect specimen of what Woloch presents as the 'worker' variety of minor characters. The extremely limited amount of attention the text bestows on her correlates with her extremely limited, passive contribution to the Manette-Darnay plot

line. One could easily construe Mrs Cruncher as her narrative function anthropomorphised: she is religious because her functional purpose is to provoke muddy missiles, and she is constantly silenced—literally deprived of space on the page—by her husband’s threatening rants because her opinion, her voice, is irrelevant to the text’s symbolic structure. One may go so far as to take the fact that Dickens didn’t even bother to give her a proper name as indicative of this character’s complete lack of ‘free interiority.’ In this line of argument, Mrs ‘Aggerawayter’ Cruncher is nothing more than a plot device in human guise: an aggravator.

The problems with this line of interpretation become evident with Jerry’s next visitation on his wife. Once the reader has caught up with Jerry’s unsavoury side-hustle, the text introduces a new secret, which will constitute the only structural link of the whole resurrectionist business to the Manette-Darnay plot line. Jerry makes his move on the grave of the freshly interred Roger Cly, an Old Bailey spy—to find it empty, as the reader learns many chapters later when Sidney Carton uses this piece of information to his advantage in getting control over Cly’s long-term associate Barsad. The text points toward this significant flop by again making use of Mrs Cruncher. The morning after young Jerry has followed his father to watch him unearth the coffin of Cly, he finds his parents in bed, his father

holding Mrs Cruncher by the ears, and knocking the back of her head against the headboard of the bed.

‘I told you I would,’ said Mr Cruncher, ‘and I did.’ [‘work you for it’ (165)]

‘Jerry, Jerry, Jerry!’ his wife implored.

‘You oppose yourself to the profit of the business,’ said Jerry, ‘and me and my partners suffer. You was to honour and obey; why the devil don’t you?’

‘I try to be a good wife, Jerry,’ the poor woman protested, with tears.

‘Is it being a good wife to oppose your husband’s business? Is it honouring your husband to dishonour his business? Is it obeying your husband to disobey him on the wital subject of his business?’

‘You hadn’t taken to the dreadful business then, Jerry.’

‘It’s enough for you,’ retorted Mr Cruncher, ‘to be the wife of a honest tradesman, and not to occupy your female mind with calculations when he took to his trade or when he didn’t. A honouring and obeying wife would let his trade alone altogether. Call yourself a religious woman? If you’re a religious woman, give me a irreligious one! You have no more nat’ral sense of duty than the bed of this here Thames river has of a pile, and similarly it must be knocked into you.’

The altercation was conducted in a low tone of voice, and terminated in the honest tradesman’s kicking off his clay-soiled boots, and lying down at his length on the floor. (169; bk. 2, ch. 14)

Clearly something went very wrong in the graveyard after young Jerry ran home. But there is something else going on here that has nothing to do with the Manette-Darnay plot line. Mrs Cruncher's head knocking against the headboard, their 'low tone of voice,' her rhythmical exclamations, 'Jerry, Jerry, Jerry!', his phrasing that sense 'must be knocked into you,' his climactic discharging of the infamous 'clay-soiled boots,' him getting off (the bed) and stretching out on the floor.

Such half-heartedly veiled sex scenes are no rarity in Dickens.<sup>21</sup> But then there are also Mrs Cruncher's tears, her pleading ('Jerry, Jerry, Jerry!'), his torrent of abuse, the violence with which he knocks her head against the headboard, the narrator's pitiful 'the poor woman.' Spousal rape was considered a contradiction in terms until as late as 1991 in Britain, but it was nonetheless a topic among politically interested Victorians, as writing by Harriet Taylor Mill and J. S. Mill indicates.<sup>22</sup> Although spousal rape was not a criminal offence and would therefore not be brought before magistrates as such, A. James Hammerton has suggested that 'the fact that so many [men's] assaults [on their wives] were described as having taken place in bed, with no explanation of precipitating arguments, suggests an obvious sexual battle ground,' where wives' resistance to sex would in many cases be forcefully subdued or even punished with a beating (*Cruelty and Companionship* 108).

If, as Woloch argues, the 'new kinds of affective presence' exhibited by minor characters are 'catalyze[d],' brought about, by a character's 'compression within[] a functional narrative role,' the worker's dehumanising absorption does not simply coincide with, but is *caused by* limited structural relevance (128, 26). Jerry's rape of his wife, the ultimate suppression of her 'free interiority,' would be the novel's way of dramatising its 'absorption' of Mrs Cruncher 'as a gear within the narrative machine.' In other words, Mrs Cruncher is raped by her

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<sup>21</sup> Consider, for example, Sniff's rubbing, one-legged erection of his corkscrew in 'The Boy at Mugby,' or Pecksniff, 'strangely attired,' on the top landing at Todgers, demanding to see 'Mrs. Todgers's notion of a wooden leg, if perfectly agreeable to herself!' (*Chuzzlewit* 154; ch. 9).

<sup>22</sup> See Morales.

husband because her contribution to the Manette-Darnay plot is so small. This issue pertains not to Woloch's model specifically, but to the centripetal tradition as a whole. A symbolic centripetal reading of *A Tale of Two Cities* fares no better with Jerry's rape of his wife. Albert D. Hutter's exploration of the generational theme in the novel picks up on the sexual overtones of the passage, and suggests that 'Jerry's language, like his mysterious nocturnal affairs, parodies the sexual violence of the Evrémondes' rape [of Madame Defarge's sister]' (454). The scene in the Crunchers' bedroom, he argues '*reflects the structure of the Tale*: it is at once psychological and social, suggesting both a child's vision of his parents' sexuality and the historical nightmare of the French Revolution' (ibid., emphasis added). Mrs Cruncher's experience of spousal rape is construed as Freudian terror of parental sexuality, and then the nightmarish quality of the scene is made to stand for the 'nightmare of the French Revolution' (455). In a text-book centripetal interpretation, the ex-centric element of Jerry's rape of his wife is assimilated into an allegorical structure.

There is clearly a thematic connection between Jerry's rape of his wife and the Evrémondes' rape of Madame Defarge's sister. And I don't mean to call into question Mrs Cruncher's structural contribution to the Manette-Darnay plot line, nor that it is very, very limited.<sup>23</sup> But neither of these formal attributes of the novel can justify scholars' avoidance of what happens to Mrs Cruncher. I believe that literary critics have a responsibility to Mrs Cruncher's being in the text as both a functional actor and an implied human being. I don't want to dispute the fact that she is silenced or deprived of space on the page, but to analyse this as part of the characterisation of Mrs Cruncher. If some characters are less structurally relevant than others, presented in less psychological detail (or none at all), heavily caricatured, or only roughly sketched, these are aspects of the way in which they bear

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<sup>23</sup> Tellingly, Dickens's agent John Forster, always a firm advocate against unnecessary detail, wrote approvingly of *A Tale of Two Cities* in a review in the *Examiner*, that 'there is not a person in the book who is not an essential portion of the story'—with the exception of Stryver and 'the slightly sketched family of Jerry Cruncher' (in an unsigned review in the *Examiner*, 10 December 1859, cited in Philip Collins 437).

significance. This is, of course, a fancy way of saying that it is worthwhile to study these characters, that there is indeed knowledge worth pursuing here. With regard to Mrs Cruncher, this means to acknowledge that she is not in fact silenced and subordinated by the text, but represented to be silenced and violently subordinated by her husband and, albeit to a lesser extent, her son. Further, to acknowledge that what happens to Mrs Cruncher happens to *her* rather than to some other character; to acknowledge that while Dickens was writing about the time of the French Revolution, he was also writing *for* a time when newspapers were filled with accounts of men's assaults on their wives in bed.

Mrs Cruncher sits even more uncomfortably among the critical understanding of Dickens's ideals of femininity than Mrs Bagnet and Polly Toodle. She is portrayed as a working-class woman who is cleanly, industrious, God-fearing, self-denying in her submission to her husband and son. A working-class woman, in other words, who is a picture of Dickensian femininity as it is understood today. Feminine virtue, however, does not cause Mrs Cruncher to thrive, on the contrary. It is cruelly punished and subdued. Does Mrs Cruncher have what it takes to achieve 'angelic refinement'? Sure. Will she achieve 'exquisite sensibility' in a one-bedroom flat, with an abusive, semi-criminal husband working two jobs and still not making ends meet? Unlikely. And yet *A Tale of Two Cities* does not present Mrs Cruncher as a 'gender offender' as Madame Defarge or The Vengeance are often construed to be, but emphasises her femininity: 'the poor woman,' 'his decent wife' (165; bk. 2, ch. 14). Bringing together femininity and class in a way that jars with current critical understanding of gender identities in Dickens, Mrs Cruncher is representative of a large number of working-class wives and financially independent female characters in Dickens who paint a picture of femininity that is much more complex than the critical literature acknowledges.

The readings that follow showcase characters—Mary Graham and Mrs Gamp, Miss Tox and Susan Nipper, the old lady with the hand-basket and a bookseller's wife, and not least

Affery Flintwinch—who are, like Mrs Cruncher, presented as emphatically womanly, but whose womanliness manifests itself in ways that trouble and challenge current ideas of Dickensian femininity, most importantly that it is inherently middle-class. These characters are not faceless, de-gendered *homo sacers*—‘third rate characters ... who are so inseparable from their milieu that they often remain nameless, susceptible to being confused with, substituted for, or merged with others, virtually ceasing to be characters at all,’ a synecdochal figure of ‘surplus life’, as Steinlight argues (*Populating the Novel* 123). Their life is not, as Nancy Armstrong, also citing Foucauldian biopower, suggests, ‘life outside the gender binary ... as a state of being that nullifies kinship along with erotic object choice by immersing the individual in a biological milieu that barely distinguishes life from death’ (‘Gender Must Be Defended’ 544). Such critical voices echo—though they do not always reference—arguments feminists of colour have long been making. Lugones summarises:

It is part of their history that only white bourgeois women have consistently counted as women so described in the West. Females excluded from that description were not just their subordinates. They were also understood to be animals in a sense that went further than the identification of white women with nature, infants, and small animals. They were understood as animals in the deep sense of ‘without gender,’ sexually marked as female, but without the characteristics of femininity. (202-3)

Lugones’s qualification ‘consistently’ is important. In Dickens, and I think in many other Victorian authors, too, it is not only white bourgeois women who count as women, but white women generally. The prostitute Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, ‘even this degraded being,’ of whose ‘humanity ... her wasting life had obliterated so many, many traces when a very child,’ has in her ‘a feeble gleam of the womanly feeling’ (270; ch. 40). *Hard Times* endows Rachael, a factory worker, with a ‘neat figure’ and a ‘sober womanly step’ (102; bk. I, ch. 10). Even Liz in *Bleak House*, ‘[a]n ugly woman, very poorly clothed,’ ‘coarse and shabby and beaten,’ is called a ‘good woman’—and what higher authority could there be than Esther Summerson (134, 136; ch. 8)? No matter how low they’ve sunk, these women have it in them to be feminine. With regard to Dickensian gender identities, then, my readings seek to point toward toward

a femininity that is much more accommodating when it comes to class and age, a femininity that turns out to be not at all accommodating only with regard to race.

Let me be clear. Focusing on Dickens's working-class women, the overall drift of my argument categorically excludes characters of colour. That is because femininity in Dickens's fiction is white, in the most fundamental and unequivocal sense that there are no women of colour in it. Helena Landless is 'very dark, and very rich in color,' but still recognisably lighter than 'the gipsy type' (*Drood* 44; ch. 6). If there is indeed any indication that she is in any way mixed-race, it is safe to say that she 'passes' as white, or the reader would hardly encounter her in a Cloisterham seminary for young ladies. Edith Dombey's much-quoted claim, '[t]here is no slave in a market: there is no horse in a fair: so shown and offered and examined and paraded, Mother, as I have been,' outrageously co-opts the position of enslaved black women, and Dickens knew better (*Dombey* 382; ch. 27). In *American Notes*, only a few years before, he had disgustingly quoted 'a few specimens of the advertisements in the public papers' (162):

'Ran away, a negro woman named Rachel. Has lost all her toes except the large one.' (162; ch. 17)

'Ran away, a negro girl called Mary. Has a small scar over her eye, a good many teeth missing, the letter A is branded on her cheek and forehead.' (162-3)

'Twenty-five dollars reward for the negro slave, Sally. Walks *as though* crippled in the back.' (163, emphasis Dickens's)

In the meantime, *Martin Chuzzlewit* had alluded to Cicero's black, enslaved daughter, but did not portray her.

In this respect, then, Dickens's fiction replicates a 'significant absence'—the phrase is Wynter's—that is characteristic of most canonical British literature. In 'Beyond Miranda's Meanings,' Wynter pinpoints this absence in *The Tempest*,

the most significant absence of all, that of Caliban's Woman, of Caliban's physiognomically complementary mate. For nowhere in Shakespeare's play, and in its system of image-making ... does Caliban's mate appear as an alternative sexual-erotic model of desire; as an alternative source of an alternative system of meanings. Rather there, on the New World island, as the only woman, Miranda and her mode of physiognomic being, defined by the philogenically 'idealized' features of straight hair and thin lips is canonized as the 'rational' object of desire. (360)



The absence of Caliban's woman, and of Caliban's longing for her—'[a]ll his desire instead is "soldered" on to Miranda as the only symbolically canonized potential genitrix'—is 'an ontological absence,' Wynter argues (361). As Maldonado et al. paraphrase, Caliban's woman is 'absent in a way that makes the represented symbolic order of desire, of culture, and of rationality possible' (82). Given the absence of women of colour in his fiction, femininity in Dickens, too, must be interrogated as a technology of whiteness. We can only begin to do so if we acknowledge its full spectrum.

# I

## *Martin Chuzzlewit's Marginalised Middle*

In chapter 14 of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, young Martin bids his fiancée Mary Graham goodbye. Martin's grandfather, whom Mary works for, is opposed to their marriage, and has disinherited Martin. Martin is now bound for America, to seek his fortune.

'Now, I am going to America, with great prospects of doing well, and of returning home myself very soon; it may be to take you there for a few years, but, at all events, to claim you for my wife; which, after such trials, I should do with no fear of your still thinking it a duty to cleave to him who will not suffer me to live (for this is true), if he can help it, in my own land. How long I may be absent is, of course, uncertain; but it shall not be very long. Trust me for that.'

'In the meantime, dear Martin——'

'That's the very thing I am coming to. In the meantime you shall hear, constantly, of all my goings-on....' (237)

Martin's interruption betrays that he imagines Mary's meantime only in terms of *his* absence. He doesn't consider that, in her precarious situation of economic dependency, what *she* will do during the years he is away poses an essential problem to Mary. Martin's character has to be turned completely inside out before he finally sees the meaning in Mark's half-taunting prompts on the topic:

'Ah, sir!' said Mark, with a sigh. 'Dear me! You've ventured a good deal for a young lady's love!'

'I tell you what. I'm not so sure of that, Mark,' was the reply; so hastily and energetically spoken, that Martin sat up in his bed to give it. 'I begin to be far from clear upon it. You may depend upon it, she is very unhappy. She has sacrificed her peace of mind; she has endangered her interests very much; she can't run away from those who are jealous of her, and opposed to her, as I have done. She has to endure, Mark: to endure without the possibility of action, poor girl! I begin to think she has more to bear than ever I have had.' (528; ch. 33)

By the time Martin realises the self-centred nature of his design, the damage is done. Mary's hardships, the narrative interest that lies in endurance and in the impossibility of taking action, are lost to the novel. The reader does not get any insight into what Mary feels, even when Pecksniff forces his kisses upon her in chapter 30, a scene that is, for satire's sake, given in free indirect discourse wholly focused on her slobbering assailant.

Fariha Shaikh suggests in *Nineteenth-Century Settler Emigration in British Literature and Art* that Martin and Mark's experiences in America build on some of the favourite motifs of the 'emigration literature' genre that was booming at the time (174). But Martin's plan, as represented here to Mary, differs in one important respect: whereas, as Shaikh argues, emigration literature's 'key preoccupation'—vital to the project of colonisation—'was the question of settlement and how to make a new home,' Martin is going to America in order to come back (7). Even if he should return to take Mary there, he is clear that it would be only 'for a few years.' I want to suggest that *Martin Chuzzlewit* takes advantage of the contemporary interest in emigration to problematise its own narrative replication of an acutely gendered distributive pattern that was popularised in medieval romances. Opposed in his courting of the lady (Mary) by a male opponent (Martin's jealous grandfather), the knight-errant (Martin) sets out to prove his worth (i. e., to make his fortune, this is capitalist England after all). But adventure is valued over love in the romance plot, in which women generally figure as mere 'tokens' in essentially homosocial exchanges, as Sheila Fisher explains ('Taken Men and Token Women' 72). The lady—someone to be rescued, pursued, or won—is central to defining and consolidating masculine chivalric identity: this 'design,' as Martin assures Mary, 'is undertaken for your sake' (236; ch. 14). But the lady's contribution—being rescued, pursued, or won—is mostly passive and not narrated. With the result that, as Fisher amply demonstrates, romances frequently 'relegat[e] many of the moments of [women characters'] greatest activity literally to the margins of the texts': their beginnings and ends ('Women and Men in Late Medieval English Romance' 161).

Mary's interrupted statement complicates this gendered distribution of space as it replicates it, by introducing into the medieval model an idea closely associated with the nineteenth-century novel: telos.<sup>1</sup> What is at stake here is not simply a given amount of

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<sup>1</sup> Watt explains: 'from the point of view of plot, heroic chastity is subject to exactly the same literary defects as inveterate promiscuity; both are poor in the qualities of development and surprise. In the romances, therefore,

months or years, but specifically the *meantime*: the time that is defined by lying *between* two events, the current moment and Martin's return to England 'to claim you for my wife.' In the design Martin springs on Mary, her immediate future is conceptualised as a narrative middle, more specifically, the middle of a Victorian marriage plot. A considerable chunk of her life is suddenly oriented toward what awaits her at the end of the book—marriage—and brushed aside. Martin marginalises Mary's experience because he is 'reading for the plot' here, in Peter Brooks's famous phrase. In his study of the same name, Brooks defines plotting as

the activity of shaping the dynamic aspect of narrative—that which makes a plot "move forward," and makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a portent of design that hold the promise of progress toward meaning. (xiii)

Following Barthes, Brooks argues that it is a 'passion of (for) meaning' that keeps you reading (37).<sup>2</sup> He theorises plot in terms of an '*anticipation of retrospection*': a narrative makes you read on by promising that once you come to the end, you will find that everything you've read has been significant with regard to that end (*passim*). Anticipation of retrospection is precisely how Martin tries to ameliorate Mary: 'Now I can tell you all my plans as cheerfully *as if you were my little wife already*' (236, emphasis added). He dismisses her anxiety about her immediate future by imagining their meantime as though he were looking back at it from a point in time when, he imagines, he will have achieved his goal, a point in time when, he imagines, they'll be happily married and there is no more worrying. It is from within this teleological plot of Martin's that Mary's experience is marginalised. The novel intimates here already what Martin only comes to realise much later: Mary's side of the story is by no means insignificant as such. It is insignificant only in terms of Martin's teleological way of looking at their not-yet-shared lives.

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while courtly love provided the conventional beginning and end, the main interest of the narrative lay in the adventures which the knight achieved for his lady, and not in the development of the love relationship itself (136).

<sup>2</sup> Only one of Barthes's theories about what makes people read, as becomes more than clear in *The Pleasure of the Text*.

Plot in the teleological sense is of course a rather recent theoretical concept. In the 1840s, as Hilary Schor has pointed out, 'plot' still referred to something more along the lines of 'a sympathetic character who traveled forward through space and time,' like Oliver or Little Nell ('Dickens and Plot' 96). *Martin Chuzzlewit*, however, detects an unmistakable trend toward reading in 'anticipation of retrospection.' 'Now pray,' says John Westlock to Martin, about to take him into his confidence regarding his suspicions as to Anthony Chuzzlewit's death: 'when I tire your patience very much in what I am going to say, recollect that it has an end to it, and that the end is the point of the story' (735; ch. 48). Nadgett later breaks the story of Jonas's crime to Montague in much the same manner, promising '[t]here is more interest as you go on' (589; ch. 38). With the harsh treatment Mary experiences from her lover, the text illustrates that this tendency toward reading for the plot creates a hierarchical order (important vs not so important) that is dangerously unjust. Conditioned to read in anticipation of retrospection, Martin doesn't even notice that he turns his lover into a minor character—a character that his reading of their relationship renders insignificant. At the same time, there is a sense here that the teleological, hierarchising logic that leads Martin to brush Mary's meantime off as insignificant is somehow entangled with the institutionalised production and hierarchisation of sexual difference.

Working off *Martin Chuzzlewit*'s critique of Martin's 'minoring' of Mary, the first part of this chapter looks at how scholars', and in particular Victorianists', ongoing commitment to teleological plot creates and perpetuates cultural hierarchies in their readings of texts like *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The second section of this chapter trials one alternative way of finding value. Inspired by the relationship Mary has with the novel's other Martin Chuzzlewit, this approach seeks to conceptualise characters in terms of their being in the text. My reading of Mrs Gamp in this second section approaches this character's existence, her being in the text, by asking, what is she given space in the text for? This question can be asked regardless of

how much space a character is given, and in fact the first section constitutes a more detailed examination of what Mary is given the very limited space she is given *for*.

### **Part one: Mary G., or marriage and the novel**

An Aristotelian, teleological conception of plotting, motivated by the unconquerable dream of a totalising, fully determined meaning, has been argued to produce, hierarchise and regulate human difference, from Edward Said's observation in *Beginnings* in 1975, that underlying the 'convention of adequacy' according to which 'frequent "returns" to a text will yield up a meaning that is wholly knowable, and wholly embodied in the text,' is the 'imagery of succession, of paternity, of hierarchy' (162),<sup>3</sup> to Carolyn Dinshaw's argument in *Chaucer's Sexual Politics* that to read searching for 'wholeness,' following a 'totalizing impulse—the desire to eliminate instability, adjudicate difficulties, secure a clear moral structure and enduring rest,' is to read 'like a man' (51). The marriage plot has a particularly bad reputation: 'The plot of love and its conjugal imperative,' Jill Galvan and Elsie Michie summarise in their introduction to *Replotting Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, has been credited with 'invent[ing] modern genteel womanhood and its masculine complement' (1). Popularising a 'psychology of desire,' Victorian marriage plots—and not least Dickens's—have long been considered a powerful heteronormative force (ibid.).<sup>4</sup>

Victorian Studies presents one of the last strongholds of reading for the plot. Our discipline's methodological commitment to teleology is upheld based simply on an assumption that Victorian novels, or at least the truly Victorian ones, were written that way. Somewhat ironically, this is only a recent development. Victorian literary critics mostly

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<sup>3</sup> Brooks himself writes that 'the translations of narrative, its sliding-across in the transformatory process of its plot, its movements forward that recover markings from the past in the play of anticipation and retrospection, lead to a final situation where the claim to understanding is incorporate with the claim to transmissibility' (27).

<sup>4</sup> Most recently by Furneaux in her paper "'Even Supposing—' Reading/Writing Outside the Marriage Plot in Dickens Fan Fiction.' See especially pp. 171-4.

bemoaned British novels' lack in 'the "economy of art,"' as Lewes put it (qtd. in Stang 81). What Freedgood, in *Worlds Enough*, terms the 'critical fiction' of a homogenous Victorian novel form that is 'integrated, coherent, and conservative,' only crystallised in the second half of the twentieth century (146, ix). It is in this spirit that Brooks termed the nineteenth century the 'golden age of narrative,' claiming that 'authors and their public apparently shared the conviction that plots were a viable and necessary way of organizing and interpreting the world' (xii). This assumption has by no means been discouraged by the fact that theorists and critics of plot alike have relied heavily on the Victorian canon, and in fact, it is integral to what Caroline Levine and Mario Ortiz-Robles loosely term the Marxist model of reading, which informs much of that criticism and 'tends to understand the middle as the site of revealing textual eruptions, conflicts, absences, and fissures, while endings then close down such contradictory energies in favor of strained ideological conclusion' (4). The paradigmatic teleological structure that has been attributed to Victorian novels has thus come to greatly exceed questions of structure. As Galvan and Michie observe,

if ... anything seems to bear out the cliché that the nineteenth century was a morally and socially conservative time, it is the notion that its fiction possessed an internal drive towards blithe marital endings—that the course of true love may not always run smooth but nonetheless arrives at the goal, often with the arrival ratified by a child (or the promise of one). (1)

As the conviction that Victorian novels are strongly invested in plotting continues to shape our understanding of Victorian society at a basic level, Victorian Studies provides a disciplinary paradigm in which reading for the plot is regarded as legitimate and in fact methodologically indispensable.

This commitment to a teleological model of Victorian novels manifests itself not least in a tendency to take characters' individual fates as indicative of the author's stance towards the choices they make, a critical move that is applied as casually as though all of Dickens's novels were 'moral fables,' as F. R. Leavis argued of *Hard Times* in *The Great Tradition* (227). Regardless of a growing amount of research that highlights a lack of determination in many

of Dickens's endings,<sup>5</sup> the ends that female characters in particular find in Dickens are frequently considered indicative of their relation to established gender identities. Characters that betray feminine virtue are understood to be rewarded in the end with marriage.<sup>6</sup> Those who do not achieve it, lacking either in virtue (the fallen women) or in femininity (the gender offenders), are punished: silenced, killed, or otherwise done away with—preferably to some faraway colony. 'A frozen life, a premature death, a life selflessly devoted to the service of others,' Slater wrote,

such are the fates of Edith Dombey, Lady Dedlock and Louisa Gradgrind. When we note that one or other of these fates is also allotted to nearly all Dickens's women characters who are endowed with passion we can register just how disturbed he was by this quality in the opposite sex; he seems compelled to show it as finally punished or at least neutralized. (265)

This thinking continues to inform scholarship almost four decades later. Katherine Dunagan Osborne argues that *Dombey and Son* 'moderate[s]' the 'threat' Edith poses to Dombey's authority 'through [her] less-than-ideal ending[]' (374). Deborah Epstein Nord observes that, '[l]ike Edith Dombey, Lady Dedlock must be *purged* from the text she haunts so that a chaste but truly (re)productive female sexuality [i. e. Florence, Esther] may prevail' (*Walking the Victorian Streets* 106, emphasis added). Hilary Schor argues in *Dickens and the Daughter of the House*, that

the daughter functions as a kind of narrative last testament: what she carries out is the distributive function associated with dying words. In this way, her work is the work of the inheritance plot as well. Wills exist in novels not only to get property into the right hands, but to get characters in the right place: the 'aha!' of conclusion is that X-thing belongs to Y-person, but also that Z-person belongs to Y-person. (129)

This teleological logic pervades not only studies of gender in Dickens, but in the Victorian era more generally, as Deanna K. Kreisel's argument about Victorian representations of women's bodies as economic metaphors betrays:

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to Dickens's often noted indifference to the ending of *Great Expectations*, Furneaux has recently pointed out that the double dash terminating both *Bleak House* and Esther's narrative problematises contemporary expectations 'of a Victorian novel by the author whose name has become synonymous with the Victorian period' ('Even Supposing—' 171). See also Dasgupta 85.

<sup>6</sup> A reward that critics don't always meet with ambivalence. Whereas Slater laments that 'the Marchioness has "dwindled into a wife"' (241), he later notes that marriage 'rescue[s]' 'Miss La Creevy ... into domesticity' (322).



if the money-chest image suggests that death is the proper fate of the degraded or transgressive woman, then the fluid, Gulf Stream images suggest that nurture, maternity (and, by extension, marriage) form an alternative type of (en)closure for the pure woman. In these two images we can thus see inscribed the two possible endings for Victorian plots: death and marriage. (10)

Female characters' experiences in and of the novelistic middle—'the most difficult of Aristotle's "parts" of a plot to talk about,' as Brooks concedes—are marginalised in favour of an highly abstracted idea of Victorian endings (125).

*Martin Chuzzlewit's* interest in Martin's marginalisation of Mary betrays, only a few years into the Victorian era, a subtle understanding and in fact scepticism of a teleological trend in the way stories are read and (re)told. The misguided rhetoric Martin uses when breaking his plan to Mary clearly pivots on the privileged position endings hold in the teleological paradigm. 'If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning,' Brooks writes, then 'the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for the end*' (52). Although the middle leads up to the end and makes it possible, it is 'the metaphoric work of eventual totalization [that] determines the meaning and status of the metonymic work of sequence' (29). Promising Mary an ending in which he can finally 'claim you for my wife,' Martin casts their marriage as the ultimate determinant of meaning in his plot, which by these means becomes *their* plot. The particular ending Martin envisages for Mary—marriage—is a condition in which she exists in absolute relativity to her husband, in which her *raison d'être* is *his* happiness.<sup>7</sup> When he tells her 'my plans as cheerfully *as if you were my little wife already*,' he means 'as though you had no life apart from mine, no interests apart from my happiness.' It is not so surprising, then, that the only worry Martin can imagine Mary having in the meantime—the meaning of which is determined in anticipation of this end—is that she will hear, constantly, of all *his* goings-on.

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<sup>7</sup> Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, '[h]umanity is male and man defined woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being' (xviii). The idea of women as by nature 'relative creatures' was popularised by, among others, Stickney Ellis in her *Women of England* series. See Waters 366.

The issue that *Martin Chuzzlewit* highlights is that the teleological promise of ‘eventual totalization’ is somewhat misleading. This is where Martin, who really does *mean* well, goes wrong. For the teleological model’s promise of eventual meaningfulness totalises by both unifying and discriminating. Once you come to the end, you will find, in fact, that not quite *everything* you’ve read has been significant with regard to that end. Brooks explains that

[n]arrative operates as metaphor in its affirmation of resemblance, in that it brings into relation different actions, combines them through perceived similarities ..., appropriates them to a common plot, *which implies the rejection of merely contingent (or unassimilable) incident or action.* (91, emphasis added)

Brooks’s parenthesis is important. The elements of a text that a reading for the plot rejects are not in fact ‘merely contingent,’ but contingent *to* the plot one is reading for. Unassimilable to that plot, they resist appropriation. In other words, their presence mars the plot-metaphor’s claim to ‘eventual *totalization.*’ ‘Merely contingent’ is then code for ‘disruptive’ here. Martin’s marriage plot cannot assimilate Mary’s rather pressing concern with the time up to their marriage. The thought that Mary, in the meantime, has to undergo trials of her own—problems that she has to tackle herself, independently of her future husband—would sour his design (as in retrospect, of course, it does). Brooks’s sentence would then read more accurately: ‘which implies the rejection *as* merely contingent of unassimilable incident or action.’ A teleological approach, whether to the reading of a novel, or, as in Martin’s case, to life, attaches value to certain aspects that are ‘significant’—that is, conducive to a favoured strand of meaning—and devalorises other aspects, which are not conducive to that strand of meaning, as ‘insignificant.’ As Martin and Mary are about to part in chapter 14 the narrator asks,

[w]as he thinking solely of her care for him, when he took so little heed of her share in the separation; of her quiet monotonous endurance, and her slow anxiety from day to day? Was there nothing jarring and discordant even in his tone of courage, with this one note self for ever audible, however high the strain? (243)

This ‘one note self’ is Martin’s ‘common plot,’ and only what harmonises with it bears significance for Martin. Mary’s ‘share in the separation’ appears insignificant, negligible to

him, not because she has in fact any less interest in that story, but because her interests in the meantime don't fit into Martin's self-centred design.

By reading in anticipation of retrospection, Martin allows his bias full play. This also takes place for readers who are not themselves an actor in the plot they are reading. When I read in anticipation of retrospection, I reject elements and characters as contingent (or 'unassimilable') based exclusively on anticipation, for I do not yet know what will happen in the end. And my ability to envisage which elements of a text will turn out to have been significant with regard to a certain ending and which won't is inevitably informed by the training I bring to the reading: my expectations are shaped by my experience of the genre, my theoretical commitments, my familiarity with the secondary literature. In other words, I anticipate to find signification where I am used to finding it and comfortable with finding it, or in the things that matter to me, at the same time rehearsing my prejudices as to what is *insignificant*. And I'll only find signification roughly where I expect to find it, because I'm actively rejecting those elements that do not meet these expectations. The same mechanism that affirms the hierarchies I bring to my reading of the text thus serves to close off more firmly that category of the marginal, peripheral, insignificant that includes in particular anything that, being 'unassimilable,' would trouble these hierarchies. That is what Martin learns from his encounter with teleology: plotting is to a certain extent always already a self-involved activity.

Before I move on to the question what an alternative to the teleological reading model could look like, I want to give credit to the role of marriage in Martin's marginalisation of Mary. For marriage as Martin envisages it is a textbook example of what Sara Ahmed calls a 'happiness object.' In 'Killing Joy,' Ahmed discusses the idea (rather than the emotion) of happiness as a shared orientation toward certain 'happiness objects' 'as being good, as being "what" would promise happiness' (577). She argues that

happiness involves both reciprocal forms of aspiration (I am happy for you, I want you to be happy, I am happy if you are happy) and forms of coercion that are exercised and concealed by the very

language of reciprocity, such that one person's happiness is not only made conditional on another person's happiness but on the willingness to be made happy by the same things. (580)

Whereas, for example, a domestic role—caring for family, making and maintaining a home—may be a genuine source of happiness for some, others may simply share the commonly held belief that a domestic role is a good thing (especially for women) and brings (especially women) happiness. Happiness is a powerful incentive—why would you not want to be happy? As Ahmed argues, it has also been consistently considered to be ‘what gives meaning, purpose, and order to human existence’ (572). In other words, the lives of those who don't strive for happiness, in the sense that they don't orient their lives toward socially accepted ‘happiness objects,’ are by the same logic defined as meaningless. A meaningful life is a happy life; more precisely, a life which derives its happiness from those things that are commonly believed to promise happiness. The idea of happiness can thus be used to make people want certain things such as a domestic role—or, rather, to make people want to want them. It also serves to alienate those who cannot bring themselves to want these things, or who have them and fail to be made happy by them.

Marriage as ending is clearly integral to the coercive power of Martin's rhetoric. All it takes for them to be ‘cheerful’ is for Mary to be his ‘little wife’: a marriage of the cosy, homely kind associated with that diminutive. Could it then not be possible that marriage is at fault here rather than plot? The answer is, emphatically, yes. And at the same time, no. For whilst the marriage plot is often treated like a sub-category of novel plots, in fact it constitutes in many ways the ur-plot of the novel as it is understood today. Going back at least as far as Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, the development of the theory of the novel, and especially its emphasis on plottedness, cannot be extricated from the heteronormative ideology of married happiness as what gives meaning. Watt credited Samuel Richardson's 1740 novel *Pamela* with the invention of the teleological structure of the novel:

The importance of Richardson's position in the tradition of the novel was largely due to his success in dealing with several of the major formal problems which Defoe had left unsolved. The most

important of them was probably that of plot, and here Richardson's solution was remarkably simple: he avoided an episodic plot by basing his novels on a single action, a courtship. (135)

One of the curiosities of Watt's argument is that he seems to be in two minds about the role of courtship. On the one hand, he substantiates his claim about the inherent plottedness of the novel with the observation that 'the great majority of novels written since *Pamela* have continued its basic pattern, and concentrated their main interest upon a courtship leading to marriage' (148-9). On the other hand, Watt's transhistorical theory of the novel marginalises courtship. Richardson wrote a book that included, among other things, a courtship plot; Watt construes this as the invention of the 'most important' formal attribute of the novel tradition: plot. What matters is Richardson's (admittedly 'simple') ruse of focusing on a 'single action.' That this happened to be a courtship is presented to be of little importance to the novel form.

As it turns out, the opposite is the case. Kelly Hager argues in *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce* that

in nominating the story of courtship as the novel's most typical plot, Watt spotlights the emotional desires of an individual, training novel readers to look for them in determining the main action of a novel and to read a stabilized sexuality as the signal that the novel's story is over. (18)

Hager is saying that the 'single action' or 'main action' that Watt presented as a formal characteristic of the novel genre has in fact been imposed on Victorian novels by readers working in a critical tradition heavily influenced by Watt's claims about the courtship plot. And further, that this privileging of courtship underlies some of the basic tenets of our understanding of the Victorian novel form, including but by no means limited to its teleological, centripetal structure. I think that Watt's own contextualisation of the courtship plot indicates why his thinking gravitated toward that particular plot, and why he did not grasp the significance of this choice. He argued that courtship—for Richardson—constituted a rather recent addition to the list of possible 'single actions' that could solve the 'formal problem' of plot. Watt suggests that a courtship could serve as the 'dynamic aspect of narrative,' could provide that 'line of intention and ... portent of design,' precisely because

marriage had recently become something young women wanted rather than accepted. '[A] variety of economic and social changes' including economic individualism and the rise of the nuclear family, he explains, 'were combining to make marriage much more important for women than before, and at the same time much more difficult to achieve' (137). With '[m]arriage primarily the result of a free choice by the individuals concerned,' married happiness was becoming a viable end to plot for (138). Watt here explicitly links the potential of the courtship plot to serve as 'single action' to the rise of marriage as happiness object, as something which is considered to promise happiness and therefore desirable. I want to suggest that Watt's focus on the marriage plot must be read in that same context. That is to say, the formal paradigm that in Victorian novels 'the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*' derives from readings of novels that happen to end with a represented event widely considered to give meaning, purpose and order in the culture novel theorists continue to be a part of: (happy) marriage.

The critical notion of plot, I have argued, cannot be thought apart from marriage, from institutionalised heteronormativity and male privilege. I am by no means disputing the role of the marriage-plot-ending to a lot of cultural, hegemonic work in the Victorian era and beyond, on the contrary. I am suggesting that to treat Victorian novels as paradigmatically plotted is to fuel this cultural work that is attributed to the marriage plot in the Victorian era and beyond. What I am trying to do, then, is to shift away from the question whether and how 'plotted' a given novel is. In fact, my point has been that how 'plotted' a novel is depends on how prepared a given reader (or rather, a privileged group of influential readers) is to assimilate and subordinate, and on the other hand to reject, textual elements. To undo the teleologically biased structure of our knowledge of these texts, we need an alternative way of reading: an approach that can account for a text's engagement with and interest in plotting as well as for those elements a teleological reading devalorises or suppresses.

Part of the problem in literary critical practice, however, is a lack of alternatives.<sup>8</sup> This problem was already of concern to *Martin Chuzzlewit*, a novel that soon finds itself ravaged by plot. Selfishness manifests itself primarily in a tendency for plotting in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which features many professional plotters, from Montague Tigg/Tigg Montague to Pecksniff, who, as architect and land-surveyor, deals in designs and plots—though, having ‘never designed or built anything,’ primarily in designs and plots of the other kind: he adds to his income from rent-collecting by ‘ensnaring parents and guardians’ with promises of a bright future (12; ch. 2). But like young Martin’s plan of making his fortune in America, plots and schemes have a tendency to go horribly wrong in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. They rarely lead to the end plotted for, and when they do, that end comes at considerable cost. Westlock’s promise ‘that the end is the point of the story’ seems to share Brooks’s theory about what ‘makes us read,’ or, in this case, listen. Once several narratives have been related to Martin and the way in which it all connects is plain, a point has been made: there is a possibility that Jonas has murdered his father. But the conclusion John and Martin have reached is that this, still, is not in fact the end of the story. They have finished *in medias res*: the story they have been piecing together is likely still in progress, as other people are now exerting control over Jonas. Jonas has of course himself become hopelessly entangled in his schemes, becoming more and more desperate to reach the conclusive ending which the novel dangles before him like a teleological carrot. He comes to the realisation that there is only one end that is certain (in practice, at least) rather late in the novel. Interestingly, this realisation is also what sets *Martin Chuzzlewit*’s battery of plots in motion. The novel begins with one of its titular

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<sup>8</sup> See Furneaux, ‘Even Supposing—’ 190. Theresa de Lauretis wrote in *The Technologies of Gender* (1987), ‘[t]he problem, which is a problem for all feminist scholars and teachers, is one we face almost daily in our work, namely, that most of the available theories of reading, writing, sexuality, ideology, or any other cultural production are built on male narratives of gender ... bound by the heterosexual contract; narratives which persistently tend to re-produce themselves in feminist theories’ (25). Judith Roof elaborates the special role pertaining to narrative in this ‘problem’: ‘[a]s a set of ordering presumptions by which we make sense of perceptions, events, cause/effect relations (and even the idea that sense can be produced by a notion of cause/effect), and life, narrative permeates and orders any representation we make to ourselves or to others’ (xv).

characters looking with dread at the possibility of being ‘wound up,’ as Dickens often referred to ending a book, and out of this dread emerges an alternative value system.

‘The arena of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is the present, a present which is irrevocably cut off from the past,’ writes J. Hillis Miller (*Charles Dickens* 103). More than any other Dickens novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit* refrains from harking back to the time before the setting in motion of its own story. There are no endless Chancery suits in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, no illegitimate daughters by Army officers turned law-writers, no rich great-uncles’ bequests to the youngest daughter of a wronged woman’s patron’s brother, no testamentary clauses of arranged marriages, not even a returned convict, abusive ex-husband, or old scar. The pretensions of pedigree raised in the original title have been thoroughly ridiculed and debunked by the end of the first chapter.<sup>9</sup> Yet *Martin Chuzzlewit* runs into problems of inheritance whichever way it turns. Chapter 3 introduces the elder Martin Chuzzlewit, plagued less by his money than by the bothersome problem of having to pass it on to some one sooner or later:

I have so corrupted and changed the nature of all those who have ever attended on me, by breeding avaricious plots and hopes within them; I have engendered such domestic strife and discord, by tarrying even with members of my own family; I have been such a lighted torch in peaceful homes, kindling up all the bad gases and vapours in their moral atmosphere, which, but for me, might have proved harmless to the end; that I have, I may say, fled from all who knew me, and taking refuge in secret places, have lived, of late, the life of one who is hunted. (39-40)

Martin’s wealth has caused so much bad blood because it creates an opportunity not only for gain but for plotting. It is not there for the taking, but an end that might be gained in time. Thus, whereas inheritance in Dickens’s novels usually constitutes an entanglement of the present in the past, here it entangles the present in the future. Martin’s relations plot, as Brooks put it, in ‘anticipation of retrospection.’

The trouble is that the future present they look forward to is defined by Martin being past. The end they’re plotting to gain is simultaneously his end, his death. As long as he is

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of the novel’s first chapter, see Bowen, *Other Dickens*.



alive, 'tarrying;' as long as the end isn't settled, there will be plotting for his death. This may sound like an overstatement, but considering the ideas floated at the Chuzzlewit's 'general council' and Anthony's fate it isn't. Martin's money inscribes his future pastness, his being dead, in the present, which is still *his* present. 'I hate it,' he says to Pecksniff. 'It is a spectre walking before me through the world' (38). This Martin's narrative plot is thus fuelled by a desire not to gain, but to put off, a certain end: a desire to savour the middle. And that means more immediately a desire to put an end to plotting. This desire is reflected in the alternative relationship he has established with Mary. Rather than on heteronormative traditions of succession and transmission, in which the inheritors gain by some one's death, this alternative relationship is based on dependence: gain hanging upon existence. Martin explains to Pecksniff: 'She is bound to me in life by ties of interest, and losing by my death, and having no expectation disappointed, will mourn it, perhaps: though for that I care little' (40). Martin makes sure that Mary, like he himself, has no interest in his death, having nothing to gain by it. Further, he gives her an interest in him being alive, a set of conditions that eventually makes the growth of personal affection possible. With old Martin, then, *Martin Chuzzlewit* sets up a plot structure that is starkly at odds with the teleological plots that grow wild in the novel. This plot structure is not interested in finality. It values the middle, though not as a middle, the thing working from beginning to end, but as existence. The end he anticipates—his end—can't be helped, but he doesn't want it to overshadow the time that still lies between him and it.

What would it mean for literary critics to appreciate that bulky part of a Victorian novel traditionally known as 'the middle' in terms of existence? How can we resist anticipating retrospection—something I find myself doing almost by reflex? I want to suggest that one first step toward such an appreciative model, a step that can inform a teleological reading but is not already informed by it, is to study characters in terms of *how* they take up space in a text. Though that question may be easier to answer phrased as, what are they given space

for? Its primary objective is not to arrive at a more accurate or 'truer' understanding of a certain character, or to compile what Uri Margolin refers to as a 'character profile,' in which all information pertaining to a character is 'continuously accumulated, structured, and updated as one reads on, until the final product ... is reached at the end of the reading act' (76). It wants to know, rather, what is a given character's business in the text? What are they *doing* there?

A text gives all its characters space, regardless of whether they take up a whole lot of space like Sairey Gamp, or are deprived of it, like Mary. In fact, if we look again at Martin's silencing of Mary's worries about and in the meantime, we find that it is documented by the double em-dash or 'mutton' interrupting Mary's speech on the page: 'In the meantime, dear Martin——'. This is the only instance in the novel where two muttons instead of one are used to denote interrupted speech. Joined up, they allude to the way a line is drawn through text to indicate its deletion. Sign of Martin's interruption, the double mutton strikes out what Mary was about to say.<sup>10</sup> As Hugo Bowles has shown, a long horizontal line like a mutton was also Dickens's shorthand symbol for 'long': one of his personal, 'quasi-pictographic' additions to Thomas Guerne's *Brachygraphy* (17). Bowles suggests that this symbol built on the shorter horizontal line denoting the letter 'n' in Guerne's system (as in 'long'), combining it with a pictorial rather than symbolic representation of length (16). But unlike Dickens's 'invention of a square-shaped symbol to represent the word *square*,' the long horizontal line isn't just a pictorial representation of the concept of long (ibid.). Its pictorial quality relies on this line being physically longer than the symbol for the letter n, making the space it takes up on the page signify. The two muttons marking Martin's interruption can thus be read as portioning out a length of text for Mary's middle; a length of text which Mary,

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<sup>10</sup> Three mutton dashes set off from the surrounding words are used to indicate that one whole word is missing. *Martin Chuzzlewit* has one case of this usage, incidentally in the same monthly number: Mark Tapley's 'I'm damned' was changed to 'I'm ——' at proof stage (230; ch. 13). Later in the novel, Jonas says 'it's a d—d strange thing,' leaving less space for interpretation (716; ch. 46).

significantly, doesn't get to fill with words; a length of text for her to be interrupted in, which in its emphatic silence documents Martin's marginalisation of the young woman's concerns with and in the middle of this novel.

### **Part two: Sairey G., 'worth her weight and more in goldian guineas'**

Entering *Martin Chuzzlewit* in its 19th chapter, Mrs Gamp is rather late to the party. Fashionably late, judging from the great commotion with which she is introduced. *Martin Chuzzlewit* goes through a series of delayed recognitions—Pecksniff's recognition of old Martin at the Dragon, Tom and young Martin's recognition of each other in the Salisbury tavern, Pecksniff's recognition of Anthony and Jonas in the coach, Jonas's recognition of Montague Tigg in Tigg Montague, Mrs Lupin's recognition of Mark upon his return from America—but nowhere else is a character ushered into the text with so much razzle-dazzle. Whereas chapter 2 has the reader wondering, who is this old gentleman and what will happen to him?—one of the usual questions for the beginning of a novel—chapter 19 whets the reader's appetite for Mrs Gamp, midwife of 'great repute' and 'performer of nameless offices about the persons of the dead' (311, 310). The narrator doesn't exaggerate when he says that Mr Pecksniff's first visit to Holborn is 'in quest of Mrs Gamp,' for getting to this 'officer in the train of mourning' requires knightly determination (311, 310, emphasis added). The reader learns that in her capacity as midwife, Mrs Gamp 'was easily assailable at night by pebbles, walking-sticks, and fragments of tobacco pipe' (311). But a series of unfavourable coincidences keep stalling Pecksniff's enterprise. First of all, Mrs Gamp, having been up all night, is 'fast asleep.' 'If [her landlord,] the bird-fancier had been at home, as he ought to have been, there would have been no great harm in this'—but of course it chances that he is out (ibid.). So Pecksniff turns to the door-knocker for help, unknowing that it 'was so constructed as to wake the street with ease, and even spread alarms of fire in Holborn, without making the smallest impression on the premises to which it was addressed' (ibid.).

The knocker brings forth not Mrs Gamp but ‘whole troops of married ladies (some about to trouble Mrs. Gamp themselves, very shortly),’ who aid Mr Pecksniff in his quest—‘don’t lose no more time than you can help—knock at the winder!’ (312).<sup>11</sup> And although Mrs Gamp now finally appears, she does so only in voice, speaking from ‘behind the curtains, as she hastily attired herself: a reverse strip-tease marking the narrative’s final withholding of this character (ibid.). But, at the same time, mistaking Pecksniff’s errand for a prospective father’s rather than a mourner’s, the brigade of pregnant ladies adds an urgency to the curiosity the text has been creating around Mrs Gamp. Whereas until this point everything seemed to take too long, now suddenly there’s a (mis)conception that things are moving much too fast: ‘Is it Mrs. Perkins?’ cries Mrs Gamp, ‘Don’t say it’s you, Mr. Whilks, and that poor creetur Mrs. Whilks with not even a pin-cushion ready’ (ibid.). When Mr Pecksniff abruptly frustrates this mistaken urgency ‘with his corpses,’ the disappointment and anger of the ladies is so great that it overshadows the actual appearance of Mrs Gamp, who, after nearly three pages of anticipation, is now bathetically ‘hustle[d] with very little ceremony into the cabriolet’ (315).

At the novel’s other end, Chapter 49, ‘In which Mrs. Harris, assisted by a Teapot, is the cause of a Division between Friends,’ stages an encore of Pecksniff’s difficulties. Although this time Sweedlepipe is in fact at home, John and Martin spend a large part of the chapter ‘standing on the stairs, outside the door, nearly all the time, trying to make [Mrs Gamp] hear’ (754). This time, the commotion takes place inside rather than outside, but otherwise the chapter is complete with mistaken reference to a prospective client (“‘Not young Wilkins!’” cried Mrs. Gamp. “‘Don’t say young Wilkins, wotever you do,’ 745), and repeated terrification

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<sup>11</sup> The text here powerfully demonstrates the magnetic power J. Hillis Miller ascribes to Mrs Gamp: ‘[t]hus everything in her proximity is evidence of her presence—the pattens, the umbrella, the rearrangement of her patients’ rooms (and the patients) for her comfort, the famous bottle on the chimney piece—all testify to the existence of Sairey Gamp’ (*Charles Dickens* 120).

of the ‘little bullfinch in the shop, that draws his own water’ (754).<sup>12</sup> The reader, like Mrs Gamp, only learns of the hold-up in retrospect, since the novel now narrates the scene from the perspective of those on the inside of the door, rather than those on the outside. And yet John and Martin’s exertions at Mrs Gamp’s door ‘while you were pelting away, hammer and tongs!’ reminds you of how you first angled for Mrs Gamp’s attention with Mr Pecksniff, how the text made you want her, stoking that desire by withholding gratification (754).

What is it about Mrs Gamp that merits this desirability? *Martin Chuzzlewit* clearly derives great value from this character, and I think one can begin to understand this value by looking at what the text gives her space *for*, what it gives her room to do (or say). The text of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, I am going to argue, gives Mrs Gamp space in the text to take up space in the represented world of the novel. I’m referring, rather simply, to the fact that Mrs Gamp is immensely large. Not fat and nimble, ‘astonishingly light and easy’ like Count Fosco in *The Woman in White* (222). No, Mrs Gamp’s bulk is obtrusive, gloriously cumbersome. It comes with an engrossing tendency of making spaces—both textual and represented—her own.

To start with, Mrs Gamp not only ‘was a fat old woman,’ but also an aggressive accessoriser (315; ch. 14). Her opulence is intensified by a number of ‘appendages,’ to wit: a large bundle, a pair of pattens, and ‘a species of gig umbrella’ (757; ch. 49, 315; ch. 19). These compelling extensions of her body tend to make spaces, especially small spaces, uncomfortable for others. In the hackney cab, she ‘play[s] innumerable games at quoits, on Mr. Pecksniff’s legs’ with her pattens (315; ch. 19). In the coach, it’s her large umbrella that ‘several times thrust out its battered brass nozzle from improper crevices and chinks, to the great terror of the other passengers’ (468; ch. 29). On the crowded wharf, she ‘perform[s] a short series of dangerous evolutions with the umbrella,’ after having ‘caught [Tom Pinch] round the throat ... entangling his ankles ... wandering about his hat, and flapping at it like a

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<sup>12</sup> Still a goldfinch in chapter 19 (311), a discrepancy Margaret Cardwell attributes to ‘speed of composition’ (*Martin Chuzzlewit* xlv, xlvii).

great bird ... pok[ing] or thrust[ing] below the ribs' with the same formidable instrument (623-4; ch. 40). Mrs Gamp's rogue accessories render her presence invasive, 'dangerous', terrible.

Mrs Gamp claims the spaces of the cab, the coach, and the wharf for herself by making them uncomfortable to others. Curiously, however, it seems that this happens through no ill will of hers. She dresses Lewsome with 'every button ... wrenched into a wrong button-hole, and the order of his boots ... reversed,' 'mak[ing] one of [his] legs shorter than the other' (465-6; ch. 29). Lewsome's shape is contorted, squeezed into a space that doesn't at all fit it. Not out of malice or even on purpose, but out of an utter and complete disregard for the realities of space. Like her bundle, which Mrs Gamp 'endeavour[s] for the first half mile to force ... through the little front window' of the hackney cab, Lewsome's body is violently distorted because she seems to be utterly immune to the idea that he might not fit into a space of that shape (315; ch. 19). Mrs Gamp's experience of space is intensely incompatible with others'. Stubbornly adhering to her conception of what will fit and what won't, she leaves behind a trail of such contortions in space (as well as in those occupying it) wherever she goes. This is most pronounced in her apartment. Something between a practical joke and a death trap, Mrs Gamp's apartment is difficult, not to say dangerous, to navigate because it doesn't follow the conventions of making use of space. First and foremost, it is so full of stuff, but of her oversized bedstead in particular, that guests have a hard time. 'Remembering the bedstead,' however, the narrator suggests, 'you might even stoop to look under the little round table for anything you had dropped, without hurting yourself much against the chest of drawers, or qualifying as a patient of Saint Bartholomew, by falling into the fire' (742; ch. 49). The bedstead aside, Mrs Gamp's furnishings are inexorably deceptive. Her chairs are 'covered with a shiny substance of a blueish tint, from which the visitor began to slide away with a dismayed countenance, immediately after sitting down.' Her chest of drawers, 'all the handles ha[ving] been long ago pulled off,' completely defies its purpose, as a conventional technology of using space is perverted into a means for squandering it. The drawers can only

be accessed 'either by tilting the whole structure forward until all the drawers fell out together, or by opening them singly with knives: like oysters.' And 'though every bandbox had a carefully closed lid, not one among them had a bottom; owing to which cause, the property within was merely, as it were, extinguished' (743). Most problematically, '[t]he sacking [of her bedstead] was low and bulgy, insomuch that Mrs. Gamp's box would not go under it, but stopped half-way, in a manner which while it did violence to the reason, likewise endangered the legs' (742-3). Mrs Gamp's careless way with space not only renders the spaces she frequents physically hostile; it deeply troubles other people's understanding of space.

To do further 'violence to the reason,' Mrs Gamp's body is not quite confined to a single location but proves a curious propensity to multiply—accessories and all. She manages to scrounge so many mourning outfits from her employers 'that the very fetch and ghost of Mrs. Gamp, bonnet and all, might be seen hanging up, any hour in the day, in at least a dozen of the second-hand clothes shops all about Holborn' (315; ch. 19). In the coach, 'Mrs. Gamp so often moved [the umbrella], in the course of five minutes, that it seemed not one umbrella but fifty' (468; ch. 29). And at Lewsome's bedside, 'she produced a watchman's coat, which she tied round her neck by the sleeves, so that she became two people' (412; ch. 25). There is always something ghostly, something disconcerting about these doubles and doublings of Mrs Gamp. Being woken by Lewsome's feverish ravings, she 'present[s] on the wall the shadow of a gigantic night constable, struggling with a prisoner' (ibid.). And in her bedroom

[s]ome rusty gowns and other articles of that lady's wardrobe depended from the [bed] posts; and these had so adapted themselves by long usage to her figure, that more than one impatient husband coming in precipitately, at about the time of twilight, had been for an instant stricken dumb by the supposed discovery that Mrs. Gamp had hanged herself. (743; ch. 49)

Both effects depend on a play of light and shadow investing them with a terrible spark of life, but life subdued. About the gowns in her bedroom especially there is nothing lifelike—only the sense of life having left.

J. Hillis Miller has argued of Mrs Gamp's obtrusive bulk that '[t]here is a hidden human malignity here acting blindly through insentient objects' (*Charles Dickens* 120). But Mrs Gamp herself falls victim to the spatial disturbance she causes. As far as the bandboxes in her room are concerned, the narrator intimates that Mrs Gamp's valuables 'were not ... as well protected as the good woman, by a pleasant fiction, seemed to think' (*ibid.*), and later she herself is assaulted by the wooden pippins ornamenting the frame of her bed, 'three or four of which came rattling on the head of Mrs. Gamp' (753). For Mrs Gamp's disregard for the realities of space is not the result of some disturbance in the space-time continuum—though it can seem to cause one—but the result of the fact that she is drunk, fuddled, 'a little screwed,' as the boys in the street put it (407; ch. 25). Mrs Gamp is not just any old alcoholic, however: she is a *bonne vivante*. *Martin Chuzzlewit* doesn't miss any opportunities when it comes to scenes of eating and drinking, even when it's just the left-overs—from the welcome dinner at Pecksniff's to American table manners, Montague's dinners, John making breakfast for Tom or Tom for Mark and Martin, and not least Ruth's beefsteak-pudding. Charity's wedding breakfast in the novel's last chapter is the only meal in the novel that goes untasted—to the aggravation of George Chuzzlewit, the bachelor cousin. And yet no one in the novel consumes food and drink in such quantities or with such extravagant relish as Mrs Gamp. She has an elaborate tradition of meditating 'with the bottle on one knee, and the glass on the other... until, in a moment of abstraction, she poured out a dram of spirits, and raised it to her lips' (321; ch. 19). When it comes to food, she insists on the best: 'Mrs. Gamp proved to be very choice in her eating, and repudiated hashed mutton with scorn,' the narrator informs us (322; ch. 19). She is particular: 'a new-laid egg or two, not biled too hard. Likeways, a few rounds o' buttered toast, first cuttin off the crust, in consequence of tender teeth,' she instructs the housemaid at Jonas and Merry Chuzzlewit's (705; ch. 46). She savours every last morsel, even 'supp[ing] up' vinegar 'with the blade of her knife' (411; ch. 25). Mrs Gamp, I think it's fair to say, is an early specimen of that turn-of-the-twentieth-century



phenomenon, the foodie. She thinks things like 'I don't believe a finer cowcumber was ever grow'd,' and is proud to have procured 'two pounds of Newcastle salmon, intensely pickled' for Betsey Prig's visit (411; ch. 25, 744; ch. 49). She always has an onion on hand. She knows when cucumbers are in season. She carries 'a soft biscuit ... in her pocket as a provision against contingent drams' of liquor (405; ch. 25).

Intriguingly, and rather disturbingly in fact, Mrs Gamp's enthusiasm for food also extends to her work. Like Mr Mould, Mrs Gamp betrays a tendency to consider patients commodities, much like a pound of Newcastle salmon or a pint of Brighton Tipper. In chapter 46, she looks at Chuffey 'with her head on one side, as if he had been a piece of goods, for which she was driving a bargain' (715). But although Mrs Gamp's terms are non-negotiable, financial gain doesn't seem to be her primary motive. Neither are the perks that come with her engagements, from fresh-laid eggs to 'cowcumbers,' though she does highly appreciate these: 'Many's the time that I've not breakfasted at my own expense along of your kind recommending,' she says to Mr Mould (322-3; ch. 19). No, Mrs Gamp's eager search for job opportunities is driven by appetite, as the narrator's observation that 'she went to a lying-in or a laying-out with equal zest and relish' indicates (316; ch. 19). During the preparations for Anthony's funeral, Mr Mould too, with his mask of commiseration on, 'looked as a man might who, in the very act of smacking his lips over choice old wine, tried to make believe it was physic' (317). And when Mrs Gamp looks at the feverish Lewsome,

a horrible remembrance of one branch of her calling took possession of the woman; and stooping down, she pinned his wandering arms against his sides, to see how he would look if laid out as a dead man. Hideous as it may appear, her fingers itched to compose his limbs in that last marble attitude. (410; ch. 25)

With Lewsome near death, Mrs Gamp is anticipating another engagement. But there's also a darker desire here. Relishing dead bodies, Mrs Gamp is a bit of a ghoul.

The better part of the space *Martin Chuzzlewit* gives Mrs Gamp is given to her for these enjoyments. Mrs Gamp's particular pleasure in eating and drinking is what the text takes

pleasure in. Here is a wonderful example from chapter 25, in which alone Mrs Gamp manages to take three meals:

She now proceeded to unpack her bundle; lighted a candle with the aid of a fire-box on the drawers; filled a small kettle, as a preliminary to refreshing herself with a cup of tea in the course of the night; laid what she called 'a little bit of fire,' for the same philanthropic purpose; and also set forth a small teaboard, that nothing might be wanting for her comfortable enjoyment. These preparations occupied so long, that when they were brought to a conclusion it was high time to think about supper; so she rang the bell and ordered it. (411)

In short, Mrs Gamp whiles away the time till supper with the preparation of snacks. But the point is that with Mrs Gamp, the novel knows no 'in short.' Mrs Gamp is particular—in the sense of exacting—when it comes to food and drink. '[A] little bit of pickled salmon,' she is about to instruct the assistant chambermaid, 'with a nice little sprig of fennel, and a sprinkling of white pepper. I takes new bread, my dear, with jest a little pat of fresh butter' (ibid.). Indulging in even the smallest details of Mrs Gamp's preparations, *Martin Chuzzlewit* reciprocates this particularity, with the result that her preparations 'occupied' not only 'so long,' but also so much text. With the novel taking as much care with Mrs Gamp's food as she herself does, the reader is left with the odd impression that Mrs Gamp is consuming pages and pages of text in the simple sense of ingesting them.

At the same time, Mrs Gamp consumes a lot of space due to her textual bulkiness: in dialogue especially, she cannot be contained in a line or two, but will have at least half a page. The novel gives her space to be bulky in, gives her particular anecdotal, circuitous way of talking free rein. This is to a great extent due to Mrs Harris, and is again a rather perplexing matter of doubling. Much like in her sleep under the watchman's coat, Mrs Gamp multiplies when she talks, becoming 'two people': herself and Mrs Harris. Their spiralling 'conversations' serve as a pleasant wrapper (or at least Mrs Gamp seems to think so) for anything from self-justifications to her terms and conditions:

“ ‘Mrs. Gamp,’ [Mrs. Harris] says, in answer, ‘if ever there was a sober creetur to be got at eighteenpence a day for working people, and three-and-six for gentlefolks—night watching,’ ” said Mrs. Gamp, with emphasis, “ ‘being an extra charge—you are that inwallable person.’ ‘Mrs. Harris,’ I says to her, ‘don’t name the charge, for if I could afford to lay all my feller-creeturs out for nothink, I would gladly do it; sich is the love I bears ’em....’ ” (316; ch. 19)

Mrs Harris, rather usefully, provides both unsolicited praise and supplies information Mrs Gamp seems to feel may sound too acquisitive coming from her own lips.

In addition to helping herself freely to space on the page, Mrs Gamp also has a disturbing effect on language. Her way of mangling words, like her way of mangling spaces, does ‘violence to the reason.’ ‘Satisfaction’ becomes ‘satigefaction,’ and ‘daughters’ ‘darters.’ This constitutes another potent source of her comedy and the novel has a lot of fun testing the possibilities of language with this character, fun that often borders on the nonsensical. Much of this, unusually for Dickens, takes place in writing—or, to be more precise, in the gap between the spoken word and its notation on the page. Half a page of small-talk in Poll Sweedlepipe’s shop turns ‘constitution’ into ‘constitooshun’ with just a whiff of double-o colonialism; ‘brazen’ into ‘Bragian’—a quality, one is led to believe, characteristic of the citizens of a country (or city?) called Bragia; and ‘conquer’ into ‘conker’: “‘Ah, dear!’” moaned Mrs. Gamp, sinking into the shaving chair, “That there blessed Bull, Mr. Sweedlepipes, has done his wery best to conker me. Of all the trying inwalieges in this walley of the shadder, that one beats ’em black and blue” (461; ch. 29). Using ‘conker’ as a verb recalls stoning. Especially in combination with the zeugmatic addition of ‘black and blue’ in the next sentence, it conjures up images of Mrs Gamp being pelted with conkers.

*Martin Chuzzlewit*, I have argued, gives Mrs Gamp space, rather simply, to engross both the spaces represented in the novel and the space of the novel. Mrs Gamp is always on the prowl, always eager to secure another situation, always hungry—for food, drink, work, corpses, space. But she isn’t a plotter. As a *bonne vivante*, she is concerned with the present, with instant gratification. She wouldn’t dream of living in anticipation of retrospection, squandering away the all-you-can-eat buffet that is the novelistic middle. *Martin Chuzzlewit* is eager to bring this existence for the sake of existence in conflict with the manic teleological pursuits of its many plotters, as in chapter 40. ‘The Pinches make a New Acquaintance, and

have fresh occasion for Surprise and Wonder,' dealing with the 'strange business on the wharf that puzzled John and Martin, marks one of the turning points of the tangled plot lines around Jonas. Mrs Gamp has no connection to the 'strange business' of Jonas's attempt to leave London, but has come to the wharf on business of her own: a combination of what seems to be sincere, compassionate anxiety for the pregnant Merry's health and a determination not to miss any opportunity for a job. This collision of interests results in a comical scramble for the chapter. Mrs Gamp is allowed to run away with the text for quite some time: with Ruth for an audience, she embarks on a characteristically circuitous explication of the dangers of men and their technology for pregnant women ('Them Confugion steamers,' 626), making reference to a railway guard (Mrs Harris's 'own relation by her sister's marriage with a master sawyer,' *ibid.*) and pointing out the present occasion for her plaint, Jonas rushing Merry onto the steam-boat to Antwerp. The text then retraces its steps, going back in time, because there is another group of characters that have a stake in this. Nadgett has been diverting Tom's attention, ironically with the same object of pointing Jonas and Merry out to him. Whilst the comedy in the first scene derived from Mrs Gamp's exaggerated sympathy with Merry ("She's a slippin' on a bit of orange-peel!" tightly clutching her umbrella. "What a turn it give me!" *ibid.*), the humour of this second rendition relies on Tom's slowness and Nadgett's frustration. For whereas Ruth had straight away caught sight of 'the lady who is with that man wrapped up from head to foot in a large cloak' (*ibid.*), it takes Tom several attempts, despite Nadgett's repeated and painfully obvious hints, to spot the 'gentleman in a large cloak down yonder, with a lady on his arm' (627). '[D]isregardlessness of the weakness of [female] natures' is not just an issue with men and their Confugion steamers, it would appear, but with men and their blackmail plots too, for once Tom has given Jonas the message entrusted to him by Nadgett, Merry is 'dragged' just as 'fiercely' off the boat as she was dragged onto it (626, 629).

But Mrs Gamp doesn't surrender the chapter so easily. Just as Montague, who has now arrived on the wharf to retrieve his 'partner' in business, picks up speed, she elbows her way back in. As Montague excuses his intervention in Jonas's travel plans:

'May I die!' cried Montague, 'but I am shocked. Upon my soul I am shocked. But that confounded bee-hive of ours in the city must be paramount to every other consideration, where there is honey to be made; and that is my best excuse. Here is a very singular old female dropping curtseys on my right,' said Montague, breaking off in his discourse, and looking at Mrs. Gamp, 'who is not a friend of mine. Does anybody know her?' (630)

Mrs Gamp's pushy politeness manages to interrupt even Montague's rhetorical torrent. Her presence is most disagreeable to Jonas, however, who feels like the world has banded together against him. "You are here too, are you?" he mutters "Ecod, there are enough of you" (ibid.). He would rather not have any one nosing about in his affairs who doesn't have any business there. Mrs Gamp, however, stands her ground, embarking on yet another long monologue beginning, somewhat ironically, with a rambling protestation that she is never too much—"Sairey," she says, "is it a public wharf?" "Mrs. Harris," I makes answer, "can you doubt it? You have know'd me, now, ma'am, eight-and-thirty year; and did you ever know me go, or wish to go, where I was not made welcome..." (ibid.)—and ending, as so often, in an enumeration and illustration of her general virtues. Defending her stake in this chapter pays off for Mrs Gamp: anticipating that she may 'brea[k] out again very shortly,' Jonas asks her to accompany Merry home (631).

Jonas's angry impatience to rid himself of the bumbling Mrs Gamp is rivalled only by the elder Martin Chuzzlewit, who—of all people—comes to show ambitions to claim the position of master plotter in the novel that bears his name. Having been delayed by the discovery of Jonas's crimes and his suicide, old Martin can finally disclose and conclude his 'design of setting Mr. Pecksniff right, and Mr. Pecksniff's victims too' in chapter 52 (791). And so he bestows Mary on Martin, Mrs Lupin on Mark, and (effectively) Ruth on John. Most importantly, however, he knocks Pecksniff down a final time—that is, almost. For just as Mr Pecksniff, dejected but oratorically unscathed, takes his leave,

the effect of his departure was much impaired by his being immediately afterwards run against, *and nearly knocked down by*, a monstrously-excited little man in velveteen shorts and a very tall hat; who came bursting up the stairs, and straight into the chambers of Mr. Chuzzlewit, as if he were deranged. (808, emphasis added)

This is Poll Sweedlepipe, Mrs Gamp's landlord, followed by Mrs Gamp herself, who is again afforded a gradual entrance ("If your brains is not turned topjy turjey, Mr. Sweedlepipes!" exclaimed another voice, "hold that there nige of yourn, I beg you, sir!" *ibid.*) and Bailey, who had been declared dead only three chapters before.

'You will not find it necessary to express surprise at their appearance,' old Martin had earlier in the chapter instructed Mark, who is entrusted with admitting the guests Martin has invited to his big *dénouement* (794). The ailing old man of the middle is now revealed as at once the novel's patriarch and its master plotter, as the reader and those Martin has gathered around him hear that everything that has happened—from Martin and Mary falling in love to Pecksniff falling back on his worst tricks—was his plan and intention. His comment to Mark betrays how proud he is in having created this scene. Martin wants to savour the success of his scheme, but above all, his revelation as the puller of strings: the scene at his chambers in the Temple is orchestrated down to the last detail in order to achieve maximum effect and surprise. Young Martin 'the old man, scarcely looking at him, pointed to a distant seat' (795); and the whole thing is exactly timed so as to bring Pecksniff up the stairs last. With the result that when Poll Sweedlepipe, Mrs Gamp and Bailey interrupt the gathering, they also interrupt old Martin's meticulously prepared *dénouement*.

Why bring Mrs Gamp and her posse back at all? Martin chiding her for her selfishness seems rather a poor excuse for this overspill of the middle, especially since her interruption constitutes an affront to what D. A. Miller calls the 'closural exigencies' of the novel. Miller observes that

[t]he text of obsession or idiosyncrasy is intrinsically interminable; as it can never be properly concluded, it can only be arbitrarily abandoned. The peripheral status of humor characters in the novels exempts them from the closural exigencies of reconstruction.... Closure occurring elsewhere allows the novelist not to realize this narratability, and the invocation of an 'etc. principle' disarms its persistence. (41)

Because characters like Mrs Gamp and Poll Sweedlepipe cannot be convincingly subordinated to closure, they pose a threat to the kind of ‘final coherence’ that ‘plot’ promises. For within the teleological model ‘[t]he interminable would be the meaningless, and the lack of ending would jeopardize the beginning,’ as Brooks put it in *Reading for the Plot* (93). Miller’s invocation of Ernst Gombrich’s ‘etc. principle’ is key here. The only way to put characters like Mrs Gamp to rest is to *not* return to them, letting ‘the assumption we tend to make that to see a few members of a series is to see them all’ do the rest (Gombrich qtd. in Miller 26-7). And so, although Mrs Gamp is rebuked for it, this interruption goes against the grain of old Martin’s serial knot-tying. In fact, I’d suggest that her appearance highlights this closural chapter’s inability to bring about proper closure, pointing toward the loose ends it leaves behind: Sweedlepipe and Bailey and Mrs Gamp themselves (and Mrs Harris, and her sister’s child ‘kep in spirits in a bottle,’ 809), but also the widowed Merry, whose tragic fate has already been utilised by her father. Mrs Gamp’s interest in ‘the lady which is widdered,’ albeit pecuniary, serves as a pointed reminder in this match-making orgy that marriages are beginnings as well as endings, and that they are followed by new middles—which may turn out well, but may also, as in Merry’s case, turn out miserable (810).

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At the end of chapter 35, in which Martin and Mark upon their return to England find Pecksniff reaping the rewards for Martin’s work, Martin learns another lesson:

‘Compare that fellow’s situation to-day, with ours!’ said Martin, bitterly.

‘Lord bless you sir!’ cried Mark, ‘what’s the use! Some architects are clever at making foundations, and some architects are clever at building on ’em when they’re made. But it’ll all come right in the end sir; it’ll all come right!’

‘And in the meantime,’ began Martin.

‘In the meantime, as you say sir, we have a deal to do, and far to go. So sharp’s the word, and Jolly!’

‘You are the best master in the world, Mark,’ said Martin, ‘and I will not be a bad scholar if I can help it, I am resolved! So come! Best foot foremost, old fellow!’ (555)

This reprise of Martin and Mary's exchange in chapter 14 features a similarly interesting play with present and future. Mark is telling Martin not to get too hung up on present annoyances. After all this is only the middle of the story and it'll all come right in the end. He alludes to this happy ending, however, to effect a change in the present: to get Martin to stop complaining and take the present by the horns. Mark's evocation of this anticipated end(ing) differs considerably from Martin's in chapter 14 then. Martin's goes to America without any concrete plans. It is as though he thinks success is simply a matter of going through the motions of the courtship plot (adventures lead to riches lead to marriage and happiness). Mark, on the other hand, is very clear that the doing and the going in the meantime matters precisely because all will come right in the end. What Mark, ever the optimist, means is, 'it'll all come right with time.' But he says, 'it'll all come right *in the end*,' as though he knew that the end of the book is coming. Mark's promise recognises the genericity of novel endings: bad deeds are punished, good ones rewarded, if necessary by means of a blatant act of *deus ex machina*. Meaning, then, must be found in the middle, for one cannot really, seriously expect to find it *there*.

All does come right in the end. Martin and Mary will get married, and so will John Westlock and Ruth Pinch, and Mark Tapley and Mrs Lupin. Of course one can read Mary as Martin's reward for undergoing a change for the better, and for realising the selfishness of his plotting. But that would be to ascribe to *Martin Chuzzlewit*—of all of Dickens's novels—a certain hypocrisy. Rather, I think the novel is giving its readers a chance here to catch on to that growing tendency the novel senses toward reading for the plot. What difference does the fact that they get married in the end really make to Mary in the meantime? Does it turn back the clock, unmaking Mary's 'monotonous endurance,' 'her slow anxiety'? If the promise of marriage didn't justify the marginalisation of Mary's trials in the meantime at the beginning of the book, how should it do so at the end?



## 2

### The Wonderful Depths of Flatness: Narrative Caricature in *Dombey and Son*

Those who dislike Dickens have an excellent case. He ought to be bad. He is actually one of our big writers, and his immense success with types suggests that there may be more in flatness than the severer critics admit.

E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* 76

Dickens's 'types' occupy a special position in Forster's second lecture on 'People.' In theory, they constitute near-perfect examples of what Forster calls 'flat characters.' In practice, Forster finds them rather captivating, precisely because they show up the limitations of his linear round-flat spectrum. In Dickens, he writes, 'nearly every one can be summed up in a sentence, and yet there is this wonderful feeling of human depth.' 'Part of the genius of Dickens,' he contends, 'is that he does use types and caricatures, people whom we recognize the instant they re-enter, and yet achieves effects that are not mechanical and a vision of humanity that is not shallow' (76). Without taking away from Dickens's 'immense success' with flat characters, it's fair to say that other writers have also created very successful types. Joseph Conrad wrote to John Galsworthy: 'Say what you like man lives in his eccentricities (so called) alone. They give a vigour to his personality which mere consistency can never do' (vol 2, 359). The starched chief accountant in *Heart of Darkness* and George Forsythe's 'Quilpish humour' immediately come to mind (*The Man of Property* 271). So do *Middlemarch*'s Mr Brooke, *Cranford*'s Miss Matty ('We can talk just as well by firelight, you know,' 100), *The Moonstone*'s Gabriel Betteredge, Benito Pérez Galdós's Doña 'Cosa Atroz' Cándida among

many others of his characters,<sup>1</sup> *Tom Jones*'s Thwackum and Square, *Othello*'s Iago, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s Anya ('Thousand-year-old capitalist ex-demon with rabbit phobia').<sup>2</sup>

Many readers have found Dickens's types and their quirky habits—their idiosyncratic gestures, tics, speech patterns, or ways of looking at the world—among the most pleasurable aspects of his art. 'At any moment some scene or character, which may come from some book you cannot even remember the name of, is liable to drop into your mind,' wrote Orwell. 'Micawber's letters! Winkle in the witness box! Mrs Gamp! Mrs Witterly and Sir Tumley Snuffim! ... Silas Wegg and the Decline and Fall-off of the Russian Empire!' (99). And Chesterton would have allowed 'one good character by Dickens'—Squeers, Mrs Nickleby, Pecksniff, Cousin Feenix—'all eternity to stretch its legs in' (84). But critical readings of Dickens's novels tend to avoid discussing flat characters. When a flat character is included, their flatness is generally either not acknowledged, or, as Woloch notes in *The One vs. the Many*, they are 'absorbed into the more "serious" thematic totality of the novel': read as allegories for the narrative's 'significant depth' (126).

Why are flat characters so unattractive to critics? Part of the problem seems to be that they appear to lack conceptual complexity. Forster observes that 'the really flat character can be expressed in one sentence such as "I never will desert Mr Micawber"' (73). So that once you've understood one flat character, it can feel like you see through them all—the only variable being the idiosyncratic gesture or speech pattern that is repeated. What's more, flat characters seem to require very little authorly, and thus readerly, care. Forster notes: 'flat characters are very useful to [the author], since they never need reintroducing, never run away, have not to be watched for development, and provide their own atmosphere' (74). In other words, you can trust them to stay out of the story because they are hopelessly self-

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<sup>1</sup> On Galdós's prolific use of the 'muletilla' (literally a 'little crutch': a characteristic speech pattern) and Dickens's influence on Galdós style, see Chamberlin and also Willem.

<sup>2</sup> The description is Willow Rosenberg's, 'Smashed.'

involved. ‘This side of boredom,’ D. A. Miller writes in the context of the narratable, ‘such characters are inexhaustible textual resources, on account of their refusal to develop: pure instances of Freudian repetition without Freudian working through’ (*Narrative and Its Discontents* 41).<sup>3</sup> And for Woloch, ‘like the shock inflicted by an invisible fence, each repetitive gesture by a minor character both presses up against *and* confirms the very limits of their subordinated circumscription’ (167). Note the sense of trauma in both accounts—trauma, however, that cannot be overcome, and yet cannot be repressed either but must be constantly revisited, relived, reinflicted. Moretti spells out the connection between this pathological self-involvement and lack of narrative interest:

What marks the vast majority of Dickensian characters is, after all, the very same impossibility to “escape from oneself” which in *Tom Jones* was the result of one’s “trade”, and in Dickens, who is writing about a socially more fluid world, is connected to something strictly personal.... But if meticulous and unwavering classification is the ideal for the comic, it is not at all so for the generation of a narrative plot. The latter, being a *dynamic* system of relationships, requires precisely those changes of position, modifying interactions and mutual hybridizations that a taxonomic order, for its part, seeks to exclude. (193-4)

Caught in a loop of their own, flat characters are ‘ideal for the comic.’ But with regard to plot, according to Moretti, they are unable to interact and thus unable to act at all.

Intriguingly, all three accounts betray that these characters still demand a not unconsiderable amount of attention. Fenced in, unable to ‘escape’ or ‘work through,’ they may not need to be watched for development, but they’re still playing havoc in the corner of your eye, keeping that fence buzzing, clowning around, reliving their trauma. Miller’s remark is especially clear on this point: flat characters are ‘inexhaustible textual resources, *on account of* their refusal to develop’ (emphasis added). Actually, they create plenty of text; just not the kind that can be conceptualised in terms of plot and character development.

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<sup>3</sup> Freudian psychoanalysis’s relationship with repetition is of course extremely complex and must not be taken for granted. Barbara Johnson argues in *The Critical Difference* that ‘[p]sychoanalysis is, in fact, itself the primal scene it seeks: it is the first occurrence of what has been repeating itself in the patient without ever having occurred. Psychoanalysis is not the interpretation of repetition; it is the repetition of a trauma of interpretation—called “castration” or “parental coitus” or “the Oedipus complex” or even “sexuality”—the traumatic deferred interpretation not *of* an event, but *as* an event that never took place as such’ (142).

This chapter is based on the premise that as literary critics, we have a responsibility to explain and appreciate how flat characters *in their ludicrous self-involvement* create text—and textual pleasure. If flat characters don't develop, don't interact with the story, if they're mere iterations of a simple pattern, how do we explain Dickens's readers making so much of them? I will suggest approaching flat characters in terms of narrative caricature: that is, as characters that are being caricatured by their text, rather than as static, pre-fabricated elements that only need to be set off like wind-up toys. Considering narrative caricature as something that Dickens's writing *does* will help explain flat character's contribution to their texts. It will also, I hope, showcase the exceptional artistic skill and invention that goes into such characters.

Dickens never tired of flatness. The readings that follow find him constantly at play, experimenting with, and pushing the boundaries of what narrative caricature can do. This chapter can thus only begin to examine the possibilities of flatness. The characters here discussed have been chosen both to demonstrate the basic workings of narrative caricature, and to suggest the immense range of its applications in Dickens's texts. *Dombey and Son* provides an ideal testing ground for this study because it is particularly sensitive to its characters' peculiar habits, tendencies, and customs. Mr Chick, for example, 'ha[s] a tendency in his nature to whistle and hum tunes'—"Merely habit, my dear," he pleads (11, 12; ch. 2); Mrs Skewton 'f[alls] into the habit of confounding the names of her two sons-in-law, the living and the deceased' (546; ch. 40); Mr Dombey is 'accustomed to take things literally' (417; ch. 30); 'business is merely a habit' with Sol Gills (41; ch. 4); it is Captain Bunsby's 'invariable custom, whenever he considered he had made a point,' 'to rejoin the Cautious Clara with all speed' (537; ch. 39); and even Mr Morfin, the novel's chief ruminator on 'habit,' mutters to himself 'that we were creatures of habit, and it was a sorrowful habit to be an old bachelor' (780; ch. 58). Dickens recognized *Dombey and Son's* fondness for habits with a humorous nod in his 1858 preface to the Cheap Edition of the novel:

I make so bold as to believe that the faculty (or the habit) of closely and carefully observing the characters of men is a rare one. I have not even found, within my experience, that the faculty (or the habit) of closely and carefully observing so much as the faces of men, is a general one. (834)

The text itself, it seems, has fallen into the peculiar habit of paying attention to peculiar habits. It is important to stress, however, that any other Dickens text would have served my purpose at least as well. The reason I've chosen to concentrate on a single novel is to avoid leaving the impression of having discussed all the most interesting specimens of flat characters in Dickens, and thus of having exhausted the subject. For above all, this chapter seeks to show that no two characters, no matter how flat, are the same or contribute to their respective texts in the same way. Any flat character, I believe, will reward critics for being a little less severe, as Forster put it.

Part one of my investigation recapitulates what precisely is meant by flat characters. Shifting the focus to narrative caricature, the stylistic device that brings about the effect of flatness, I explore in the abstract the ambivalent quality of flat characters, who are simultaneously extremely particular (or eccentric) and typical (or generic). Part two demonstrates how the interplay of these antagonistic tendencies toward the particular and the typical affects the anthropomorphic representation of a human being: Miss Lucretia Tox. This part pays special attention to how narrative caricature creates text, arguing that flat characters generate textual interest precisely by not developing. Part three looks in more detail at the ways in which flat characters become entangled in the novel's plots, first and foremost the comic misunderstanding. Whereas misunderstandings amplify the eccentric quality of flat characters, part four brings into focus some of the ways in which Dickens's writing explores the artistic possibilities of flat characters' tendency toward the generic.

### **Part one: Flatness, repetition, imitability**

Before I enter into my discussion of *Dombey and Son* I want to take a moment to reconsider what exactly 'flatness' refers to. For the concept is so unclear that it is often used

interchangeably with ‘minorness’ to denote a perceived lack of significance.<sup>4</sup> Part of the problem may derive from the fact that Forster, whilst emphasising the vivacity of flat characters, still introduced flatness as the counterpart to ‘roundness.’ Subsequent discussions of the round-flat distinction have largely mined Forster’s text for insights into round characters, considering flatness as simply the other end of a linear spectrum. With the result that ‘flatness’ has come to denote anything between a mere lack of roundness and ‘limited sophistication and interest’ (Figlerowicz 2). These accounts leave little trace of the affective vigour Forster ascribes to flat characters. Bal, for example, writes in *Narratology*:

Forster’s classical distinction between round and flat characters, which has been employed for more than seventy years, was based on psychological criteria. Round characters are like ‘complex’ persons, who undergo a change in the course of the story, and remain capable of surprising the reader. Flat characters are stable; stereotypical characters that exhibit/contain nothing surprising. (115)<sup>5</sup>

Only a tiny fraction of the ways in which round characters are interesting can be registered on the round-flat axis, Bal is about to point out. I want to demonstrate that the same is true for flat characters, and there is no better place to begin this endeavour than Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel*.

‘Flat characters were called “humours” in the seventeenth century, and are sometimes called types, and sometimes caricatures,’ Forster explains.<sup>6</sup> ‘In their purest form, they are constructed round a single idea or quality’ (73). What I want to call attention to here is the constructedness of flat characters, the artistry that goes into flatness. Successful flat characters for Forster are the result of intellectual vigour and artistic verve rather than authorial frugality, and this is by no means easy to achieve. It requires ‘deft and powerful

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<sup>4</sup> Flatness has also been construed as an indicator of minorness. Anna Gibson, for example, has suggested that ‘the inflexibility of compulsive actions and reactions may distinguish the minor from major roles in Dickens’s narratives’ (75).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Paul Pickrel’s reformulation of ‘flat’ and ‘round’ characters as ‘essentialist’ and ‘existential’ characters: characters ‘whose nature is a given that remains largely (essentially) unchanged’ and those whose ‘nature is shaped by experience’ (182).

<sup>6</sup> Other designations include ‘eccentrics’ (Orwell), ‘humor characters’ (D. A. Miller) and ‘excessive characters’ (Weitz), all of which highlight an important aspect of flat characters, as well as ‘Dickensisms’ (see Ford 211).

hands,' the hands of a writer of 'immense vitality,' to create flat characters that 'vibrate,' 'pulsate,' that 'jump about and speak in a convincing way' (76-7). A flat character, then, is not simply any character that doesn't develop, that isn't 'round.' The many fleeting drivers and cabmen in Dickens's fiction, for example, never develop, but one can hardly say that they are 'people whom we recognize the instant the re-enter' (many of them never do), or that they show Dickens 'striking with his full force at once' (76, 74). A flat character is not reduced to a single quality, but skilfully, imaginatively 'constructed round' one, like the coachman who conveys Tom Pinch to London in *Martin Chuzzlewit*:

of all the swells that ever flourished a whip, professionally, he might have been elected emperor. He didn't handle his gloves like another man, but put them on—even when he was standing on the pavement, quite detached from the coach—as if the four grays were, somehow or other, at the ends of the fingers. It was the same with his hat. He did things with his hat, which nothing but an unlimited knowledge of horses and the wildest freedom of the road, could ever have made him perfect in.... The guard, too! Seventy breezy miles a-day were written in his very whiskers. His manners were a canter; his conversation a round trot. (557; ch. 36)

Both coachman and guard are coachman and guard through and through. Every aspect of their characters oozes coachmanship; they are constructed round their occupation in a way that is dazzling, magical almost.

As Forster's nod to previous designations for flat characters implies, flatness is worked by a form of caricature: a character is represented in a way that ludicrously exaggerates a certain quality, such as coachmanship. This mode of caricature does not work off an original—we do not recognise the *Dombey and Son* character Mr Chick as the caricature of a real person, unlike a caricature of, for example, Boris Johnson. Therefore, caricature's distortions and exaggerations are projected seamlessly onto the character. The human personality implied by the character comes to fully own their peculiar quality *in its grotesquely exaggerated form*. That is, the reader is prompted to anthropomorphise such characters in their fully caricatured state. It is 'a tendency in [Mr Chick's] *nature* to whistle and hum tunes' with a persistence that is ridiculously exaggerated (emphasis added). This aspect of narrative caricature may be why many critics have interpreted the element of

caricature in flat characters as psychological phenomena. I am going to argue that, more importantly, it is critical to the affective force of narrative caricature because it inextricably links the human with the mechanised aspects of flat characters.

The mode of caricature that creates flat characters is worked in narrative time by means of repetition. It exaggerates in the original sense of the word, literally 'heaping up' instances of behaviour that all reference the same 'single idea or quality' or 'signature,' as Dorothy van Ghent called it (160). This exaggerative process is amplified by a second layer of repetition, Woloch points out. Flat characters (mostly) reappear several times throughout the course of a narrative, and their repetitive nature makes them particularly good at this: they are the kind of 'people whom we recognize the instant they re-enter,' as Forster put it (76). In return, a flat character's reappearance recovers and thereby reaffirms their characteristic peculiarity.

Importantly, this doubly cumulative pattern of narrative caricature creates flatness by means of emphasis rather than reduction, and this is where Forster's linear round-flat spectrum and his thoughts on flatness begin to diverge. Forster writes that 'when there is more than one factor in [flat characters], we get the beginning of the curve towards the round' (73). But narrative caricature can to a certain extent suspend this beginning 'roundness.' Mr Chick has many qualities, so does Mrs Micawber, not to mention *Cranford's* Miss Matty. But they are overshadowed by the one quality each character repeats, the one the text encourages its reader to remember them by: Mr Chick's casual humming, Mrs Micawber's bursts of "I never will desert Mr Micawber", Miss Matty's candle-scrimping.

Repetition alone doesn't make a caricature, however. For repetition is a key principle not only in flatness, but in character generally. In order to imply a plausible human (or animal) personality, a character must display a certain amount of consistency, and consistency can only be betrayed through repetition, through a character repeatedly showing kindness, for example, or pride. For repetition to effect narrative caricature the



character created must be caricaturesque: exaggerated grotesquely or ludicrously. This qualification is critical. It is also very vague. For it makes narrative caricature a question of personal inclination. Those who are, like *Oliver Twist*'s Charley Bates, 'blessed with a lively sense of the ludicrous,' will encounter narrative caricature in characters where others perhaps don't (101; ch. 16).

The picture I have painted of flat characters so far emphasises their particularity. Dickens's caricatures especially seem as unmistakable as they are unforgettable. In their exaggerated form, their habits are highly distinctive or 'eccentric,' and as a character soaks up their ludicrously exaggerated habit, it becomes idiosyncratic: peculiar *to* them. At the same time, however, there is something deeply generic, 'typical' about flat characters.<sup>7</sup> In order to illuminate this counterforce to the particularising effect of narrative caricature, I want to complement my reading of Forster with a discussion of Henri Bergson's thinking on comic 'types' in *Le Rire*. *Le Rire* may seem an odd choice, for Bergson is not at all interested in flat characters and mentions comic types exclusively for purposes of illustration. But Bergson's thinking on the comic, thoroughly criticised as a universal theory of laughter,<sup>8</sup> yields some valuable insights in the specific case of narrative caricature.

Bergson theorises laughter as a '*social gesture*' that seeks to punish and correct rigidity (20). For, he believes, 'sociability' depends on the opposite of rigidity: 'elasticity,' the 'wideawake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being' (9-10). Since it's rigidity that makes people laugh, rigidity constitutes 'the comic,' Bergson argues. Rigidity is interesting with regards to narrative caricature because for Bergson it manifests itself in repetition. 'If [our gestures] were as fully alive as we,' Bergson writes, 'they would never repeat themselves' (32). For Bergson, as soon as a person repeats themselves (a gesture, a

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<sup>7</sup> Vrettos discerns this ambivalence in her distinction between 'habit as eccentricity' and 'habit as routine' (417).

<sup>8</sup> For criticism of Bergson's theory, see Douglas (*Implicit Meanings* 149), or for more elaborate accounts, Prusak and De Sousa.

phrase, a certain way of looking at things) they become comic, and, what's more, they're at risk of turning into a caricature of themselves:

In one sense it might be said that all *character* is comic, provided we mean by character the *ready-made* element in our personality, that mechanical element which resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once for all and capable of working automatically. It is, if you will, that which causes us to imitate ourselves. And it is also, for that very reason, that which enables others to imitate us. Every comic character is a *type*. Inversely, every resemblance to a type has something comic in it. (148)

A comic character, for Bergson, does not repeat *itself*, accumulating glimpses of its 'true' elastic self. Every repetition adds something—that famous 'something mechanical encrusted upon the living': repetitiveness (37). Repetition creates something more than the self: an imitation, a 'character,' a typified version of the self. Particularity and typicality, then, are antagonistic effects of the same aspect: repetition. As a caricatured character grows more and more particular or eccentric, it also becomes more and more typical and generic.

This typified version has no separate existence from the self for Bergson; it becomes the self, assuming its living, breathing, talking, walking body. This is critical because 'rigidity' requires a remnant of human 'elasticity.' Something wholly mechanical, a machine devoid of any associations with animal life, is not funny according to Bergson; but something mechanical *encrusted upon the living* is. Here too, then, the human and the 'mechanical,' 'rigid,' repetitive element fuse. This fusion, as we will see, is critical both to the comedy and to the weirdness of flat characters.

It's worth lingering on the idea of a type as imitation a little, however. The repetitiveness of comic characters, Bergson suggests, is also what 'enables *others* to imitate [them]' (emphasis added).<sup>9</sup> It could be you who is imitating yourself, but it might just as well be some one else, or, for that matter, a piece of clockwork wound up. Bergson suggests that this imitability holds particular relevance with regards to characters in literature. Here the role

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<sup>9</sup> Implicit in Bergson's thinking here is what Derrida would later term 'iterability.' Bennington explains iterability using the example of a signature: because a signature, 'if it is to be a signature, must be repeatable or imitable by myself,' it 'entails just as necessarily the possibility that it can be imitated by another, for example a counterfeiter' (Bennington and Derrida 162).

of imitator often falls to the reader, whose laughter is, albeit supposedly punishing, not spiteful but pleasurable:

Look closely: you will find that the art of the comic poet consists in making us so well acquainted with the particular vice, in introducing us, the spectators, to such a degree of intimacy with it, that in the end we get hold of some of the strings of the marionette with which he is playing, and actually work them ourselves; this it is that explains part of the pleasure we feel. (16)

Bergson here puts his finger on the pleasure of predictability in flat characters; the gratification of being in on the joke, which makes it always a little bit sweeter than one had anticipated.

This potential in narrative caricature for imitation—by ‘others,’ ‘clockwork,’ or, as far as characters in literature are concerned, the reader—is however not simply a matter of repetition; it depends equally on the peculiarising effect of narrative caricature. If you’re repeatedly and reliably going through the motions of breathing more or less normally, for example, you would barely consider a person repeating the same motions to be imitating you. *Little Dorrit*’s Pancks, on the other hand, who snorts and sniffs and puffs and blows ‘like a little laboring steam-engine,’ is easily imitated because his peculiar way of breathing is particular to *him* (141; bk. I, ch. 13). In fact, one only needs to imitate that one aspect of his to evoke the man as a whole.

Dickens’s writing is keen to explore this imitability, and *Dombey and Son* in particular lets no habit pass by without giving it a good spin. Mr Dombey’s characteristic stiffness has a whiff of the automaton, ticking and creaking and ‘turning his head in his cravat, as if it were a socket’ (54; ch. 5).<sup>10</sup> Mrs Skewton falls into her old habits after her paralytic stroke ‘as if in mockery of her fantastic self’ (510; ch. 37). And Doctor Blimber’s manner of speech is so ‘grave,’ so weighted down with importance, that ‘when he ceased, the great clock in the hall seemed (to Paul at least) to take him up, and to go on saying “how, is, my, lit, tle, friend, how,

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<sup>10</sup> Mr Chick, tellingly, ‘gave Mr. Dombey his hand, as if he feared it might electrify him’ (ibid.).

is, my, lit, tle, friend,” over and over and over again’ (145; ch. 11).<sup>11</sup> Strikingly, in all three instances the imitable aspect of narrative caricature troubles the boundaries of character. Doctor Blimber’s typicality allows the clock to ‘take up,’ usurp, his character. This troubling of the boundary is what Bergson refers to when he writes, ‘[i]t is comic to wander out of one’s own self,’ or as the French has it, ‘[i]l est comique de se laisser distraire de soi-même’—literally, it is comic to let oneself be distracted from oneself. Repetition always comes with the danger of getting you caught up in something else, like Blimber in the clock. But underlying this danger is another sense of distraction: a repetitive character is no longer contracted, focused—whether that be in an individualised body enveloped in skin or, as in the case of Mrs Skewton, in an individual mind. Rather disturbingly, narrative caricature here takes an implied human personality across the limits of how human beings are traditionally understood in the Western world.

This tendency of flat characters to become ‘distracted,’ *Le Rire* suggests, is also how they get involved with what are loosely termed ‘stock types.’ The passage I just cited continues:

It is comic to wander out of one’s own self. It is comic to fall into a ready-made category. And what is most comic of all is to become a category oneself into which others will fall, as into a ready-made frame; it is to crystallise into a stock character. (149)

Bergson makes this falling and being fallen into sound deceptively orderly. One either ‘fall[s] into a ready-made category,’ like *Martin Chuzzlewit*’s Hannibal Chollop, whose eccentric habits of spitting, conversation, and self-enrichment repeat those of some of the other middle-class American men Mark and Martin have met. Or one ‘become[s] a category oneself into which others will fall,’ as it happened, famously, to Pecksniff, Podsnap, Gamp and Scrooge. In practice, however, the relationship between a ‘category’ and those ‘falling

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<sup>11</sup> Other authors were also drawn to this imitability that narrative caricature creates. As the mocking effigy of Mr Brooke is raised during his speech on the Balcony in *Middlemarch*, accompanied by a ‘parrot-like, Punch-voiced echo of his words,’ the narrator notes: ‘The most innocent echo has an impish mockery in it when it follows a gravely persistent speaker, and this echo was not at all innocent; if it did not follow with the precision of a natural echo, it had a wicked choice of the words it overtook. By the time it said, “The Baltic, now”, the laugh which had been running through the audience became a general shout’ (504). In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow observes of the chief accountant: ‘His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser’s dummy’ (21).

into' it is rather tangled. Bergson uses the French expression 's'insérer,' which means to incorporate or 'fit' oneself into a larger series: to become joined up with it.<sup>12</sup> To 'fall into a ready-made category' such as the everyday American cut-throat, is then not to fall in line, but to *take on* and *take over* the line. Chollop is caricatured through reference to a type, but he also actively contributes to the type by recovering, honing its defining aspects. As with Blimber, exchange takes place in both directions.

Interestingly, repetition also sabotages any claim to primacy. There is no 'original' American that Chollop simply copies; the type is the result of a number of performances (including Chollop's) piled up. Does the clock take up Blimber's rhythm or has Blimber, after years and years of 'Gentlemen, we will resume our studies at seven to-morrow,' taken up the clock's (159; ch. 12)? But not only is the original no longer the original, no longer in a privileged position; the imitator isn't either, as becomes clear in this exchange between Mrs Chick and her husband regarding said 'tendency in his nature.' The occasion is Fanny Dombey's death:

'I am sure,' she said, 'I hope this heart-rending occurrence will be a warning to all of us, to accustom ourselves to rouse ourselves and to make efforts in time where they're required of us. There's a moral in everything, if we would only avail ourselves of it. It will be our own faults if we lose sight of this one.'

Mr. Chick invaded the grave silence which ensued on this remark with the singularly inappropriate air of 'A cobbler there was;' and checking himself, in some confusion, observed, that it was undoubtedly our own faults if we didn't improve such melancholy occasions as the present.

'Which might be better improved, I should think, Mr. C.,' retorted his helpmate, after a short pause, 'than by the introduction, either of the college hornpipe, or the equally unmeaning and unfeeling remark of rump-te-iddity, bow-wow-wow!'—which Mr. Chick had indeed indulged in, under his breath, and which Mrs. Chick repeated in a tone of withering scorn. (11-12; ch. 2)

Mr Chick's habitual humming is without doubt 'unmeaning and unfeeling,' albeit very funny, in this situation. But his wife's habit of reducing life to the making of individual efforts is possibly even more so, as Mr Chick's appropriation of her theme ('it was undoubtedly our own faults...') implies. Mrs Chick's attempt to return the favour backfires, though. Her husband's rhythm is taken up easily enough, but it turns on Mrs Chick as she falls into the

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<sup>12</sup> *Le Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé*, insérer, verbe trans., A.2.b., B.1.b.

nonsensical ‘rump-te-iddity, bow-wow-wow’ that brings this comic spar to a head. The ridiculous habit here ends up making a fool of its imitator, rather than the other way round, by undermining her stern, scornful tone.

Bergson’s image of the marionette has types surrender fully to the ‘vice’ they repeat, just as Bal described flat characters as ‘stable; stereotypical characters that exhibit/contain *nothing* surprising’ (emphasis added). I hope to have shown that narrative caricature does something much more complex and exciting. The extended readings of some of *Dombey and Son*’s flat characters that follow seek to show how the antagonistic forces of particularity and typicality stimulate each other, creating highly typical highly particular characters that prove in their predictability quite unpredictable.

## **Part two: Catching up with the Dombey, or, appreciating the text of non-development**

If they don’t develop and don’t work for the plot, how exactly do flat characters produce text—text that is moreover pleasurable and fun? In other words, how does narrative caricature contribute to a novel like *Dombey and Son*? I want to tackle this problem by exploring one individual flat character, Miss Lucretia Tox, and how *in her ludicrous self-involvement* she generates narrative interest. I will begin by detailing how Miss Tox’s personality, which is by no means clear-cut or predictable, is shaped by the repetitive motion of narrative caricature. In a second step I explore how Miss Tox’s inability to develop contributes to *Dombey and Son*, and showcase how much resourcefulness and action is required of this character to maintain her flatness.

Miss Tox’s defining peculiarity, her ‘single quality,’ is her precarious socio-economic position. An heiress with however only a very ‘*limited* independence,’ Miss Tox occupies a position of inferiority in the genteel circles she frequents (7; ch. 1, emphasis added). This social inferiority is given ludicrously exaggerated expression in her deferential demeanour, and particularly in her devoted savouring of the Dombey’s condescension. Miss Tox’s

flatness isn't steadily accumulated through repeated appearances in the narrative though. By a favourite ruse of *Dombey and Son*, she enters the novel pre-flattened. For Miss Tox is the first of many characters that the text remarks for their peculiar 'habits,' for their repetitiveness. In fact, Miss Tox's habits have gained the upper hand, and are playing her like a marionette indeed: 'From a long habit of listening admiringly ... her head had quite settled on one side' and '[h]er hands had contracted a spasmodic habit of raising themselves of their own accord as in involuntary admiration' (6; ch. 1). 'Habit' here becomes a feat of what Gérard Genette calls 'iterative' narration: a multitude of events—here a multitude of deferential gestures—are expressed in one summary narrative act. The effect is one of cultivated inferiority: Miss Tox's social status, *in its ludicrously exaggerated form*, has become second nature. The text thus makes it clear that this character is flat before she even gets a chance to repeat herself, and holds the marionette-strings of her character out to you invitingly.

But the initial description of Miss Tox that emphasises her typical deference begins with an exception, and this is important:

The lady thus specially presented, was a long lean figure, wearing such a faded air that she seemed not to have been made in what linen-drapers call 'fast colours' originally, and to have, by little and little, washed out. *But for this she might have been described* as the very pink of general propitiation and politeness. From a long habit of listening admiringly ... her head had quite settled on one side.... (ibid., emphasis added)

From this point onwards, the narrator's language gradually gives way to hyperbole. Beyond her marionettish gestures, Miss Tox's voice is 'the *softest* voice that ever was heard' and 'her nose, *stupendously* aquiline,... tended downwards towards her face, as in an *invincible* determination *never* to turn up at anything' (6-7, emphases added). The beginning of the next paragraph, however, reminds the reader of that initial 'But for this,' sullyng the clear-cut superlatives of the previous sentences in fresh ambivalence: 'Miss Tox's dress, though perfectly genteel and good, had a certain character of angularity and scantiness' (7). Here the tables are turned: the hyperbolic certainty ('*perfectly* genteel') now occupies the position of

the exception. But in the place of the vivid description of Miss Tox's faded air waits no neat simile: 'had a certain character' oscillates between 'had definitely a character' and 'had some character.' And how exactly does this word, 'character,' reconcile the *perfectly* genteel with the angular and scanty?<sup>13</sup> Miss Tox turns out to be a miscellany of such loose ends or undecidabilities: 'it was observed by the curious, of all her collars, frills, tuckers, wristbands, and other gossamer articles—indeed of everything she wore which had two ends to it intended to unite—that the two ends were never on good terms, and wouldn't quite meet without a struggle' (ibid.). She isn't just phallic, with her 'tippetts, boas, and muffs, which stood up on end in a rampant manner,' but hermaphroditic, constantly closing-releasing 'small bags with snaps to them, that went off like little pistols when they were shut up': purse and pistol at once (ibid.).<sup>14</sup> The typical element in Miss Tox is constantly at odds with another side that is extremely particular, so particular it renders this character quite indeterminable.

And then this jarring ambivalence of the typical or marionettish quality of her character on the one hand and its particular quality on the other is yet again resolved in habit. The novel concludes its description of Miss Tox with a reference to 'her habit of making the most of everything,' taking us back to her complex socio-economic position (ibid.). Miss Tox's particularity is, just like her typicality, *a result of* habit, repetition, caricature. What's striking is that this character, who is being heavily caricatured here, is by no means 'stable' or predictable, on the contrary. There is nothing in Miss Tox that is not rooted in that single quality, her tricky socio-economic position. But by reliably sticking to the 'habit of making the most of everything'—acquaintance, outfit, gender—that comes with this position, Miss Tox creates a presence for herself that is imaginative, resourceful, and full of surprises.

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<sup>13</sup> Tellingly, the *OED online* omits the subordinate clause when citing this sentence as the first quotation for sense 2. of 'angularity': 'Of personal appearance: Want of rounded outline....'

<sup>14</sup> At Paul Dombey's christening, she takes 'an early opportunity of promoting the circulation in the tip of her nose by secretly chafing it with her pocket handkerchief, lest, by its very low temperature, it should disagreeably astonish the baby when she came to kiss it,' refiguring purse and pistol as lips and an astonishing tip (57; ch. 5).



Whilst all this is achieved ‘iteratively,’ *Dombey and Son* goes on to present Miss Tox with plenty of opportunities to repeat herself. Miss Tox is never far from the novel’s plot. She brings together Mr Dombey and the Toodles, provides the reference to Mrs Pipchin that initiates Paul and Florence’s stint in Brighton, and is also at the root of Major Bagstock’s introduction to Mr Dombey, which in turn paves the way for the Dombey-Edith plot line. In all of these developments, however, she constitutes nothing more than a go-between. In the last instance in particular, her contribution is emphatically passive: the Major contrives a way of introducing himself to Dombey out of spiteful jealousy of ‘the distinguished friend to whom [Miss Tox] attached so much mystery,’ with Miss Tox merely constituting the conduit in a homosocial love triangle (126; ch. 10). In structural terms, then, Miss Tox is a non-functional actor. The act—Polly Toodle being brought to meet Dombey—is critical to the story, but who accomplishes it (i. e. Miss Tox) is with regard to the event insignificant. I emphasise this point because *Dombey and Son* indicates that the significance of this character lies precisely in her insignificance, which is, again, the result of Miss Tox’s social inferiority. ‘Paul’s Progress and Christening’ sees Miss Tox ‘[e]levated ... to the godmothership of little Paul, in virtue of her insignificance’ (49; ch. 5). Dombey, feeling his pride confirmed by her fawning devotion to his heir, wants to appreciate that she ‘seems to understand her position so thoroughly.’ The narrator clarifies:

Let it be no detraction from the merits of Miss Tox, to hint that in Mr Dombey’s eyes ... they only achieved that mighty piece of knowledge, the understanding of their own position, who showed a fitting reverence for his. It was not so much their merit that they knew themselves, as that they knew him, and bowed low before him. (47)

Dombey is surprisingly generous in his acknowledgment of the marionettish avowals of relative insignificance that fuel his pride.

Forster attributes the memorability of flat characters in part ‘to the reason that they were not changed by circumstances; they moved through circumstances, which gives them in retrospect a comforting quality, and preserves them when the book that produced them may decay’ (74). Moving through circumstances unmoved—this is easier said than done,

however. For Miss Tox to stay flat means to stay deferentially devoted to the Dombey, and since the Dombey are constantly on the move, Miss Tox has to go to great lengths to keep up with them, beginning with 'The Opening of the Eyes of Mrs Chick.' After Paul has died and all hopes of becoming the second Mrs Dombey have been dashed for Miss Tox, this chapter severs Miss Tox's last link to the Dombey, as Mrs Chick, deeply offended by her brother's engagement to Edith, wreaks her anger on her friend. And so this exquisite comic duo goes out with a bang, leaving Miss Tox devastated. For it turns out that Miss Tox, 'if she were a fawner and toad-eater, was at least an honest and a constant one..., and had been truly absorbed and swallowed up in devotion to the magnificence of Mr. Dombey' (406; ch. 29). The affectionate admiration expressed by Miss Tox's marionettish deference, in yet another twist, is now revealed to be not a calculating performance but heartfelt and faithful: 'Her attachments, however ludicrously shown, were real and strong' (511; ch. 38). As circumstances change, this character must adapt—must undergo changes—in order *not* to develop accordingly.

Revealing Miss Tox's attachments to be 'honest' and 'real,' the novel does not redeem them from habit and thus caricature, on the contrary. The text reminds the reader that Miss Tox's attachments are 'ludicrously shown.' What's more, this development paves the way for Miss Tox's subsequent exertions to catch up with the plot line of patriarchal succession that has left her behind. If Miss Tox were a real person, one would advise her to get over Dombey (and his self-involved sister), to 'move on'—to a different story, a story of her own. But flat characters don't care for development, as Forster pointed out, and there is no getting over Dombey for Miss Tox. This exaggerated single-mindedness is not paralysing or benumbing, however, but sparkles with creative energy, as Miss Tox devises a number of schemes to catch up with the Dombey that are as ingenious as they are uncompromising. Coolly defying class and gender conventions, she dives into a pastry-cook's 'musty little back room usually devoted to the consumption of soups, and pervaded by an ox-tail atmosphere'

to hide her tears from Louisa Chick (511; ch. 38); she ventures out to the Toodles' working-class home with 'the tender motive hidden in her breast of having somebody to whom she could talk about Mr. Dombey, *no matter how humble that somebody might be*' (511-2, emphasis added); and she secretly frequents the Dombey's housekeeper's room, disguised in her servant's clothes, 'to revive her old acquaintance with Mrs. Pipchin, in order to get certain information of the state of Mr. Dombey' (687; ch. 51). A little like the Red Queen in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, it takes Miss Tox 'all the running [*she*] can do, to keep in the same place' (143). Running and running and running, Miss Tox carves out a space for herself in the novel that in its devotion rivals those of the Dombey's. Ironically, she does so by claiming for herself just those relationships she helped facilitate as an insignificant go-between and, true to form, making the most out of them.

Miss Tox does catch up with the Dombey's eventually, but still without a stake in terms of patriarchal succession. The novel's closing chapter notes that 'Miss Tox is not unfrequently of the family party, and is quite devoted to it, and a great favourite. Her admiration of her once stately patron is, and has been ever since the morning of her shock in Princess's Place, platonic, but not weakened in the least' (829; ch. 62). In the meantime, apart from the family party, the value of this character to the novel and the great pleasure the text takes in her depend on her stubborn cultivation of her 'single quality': on the fact that in this one respect, 'however ludicrously shown,' Miss Tox never weakens in the least.

This, then, is how flat characters generate text: by exerting themselves to stay unmoved, by doing what it takes to maintain their flatness. Think of how much the Micawbers have to move around—from the King's Bench Prison to Canterbury to Australia—to be always on the spot when anything doesn't turn up, and to give Mrs Micawber occasions to exclaim, 'I will never leave Mr Micawber!' But this is as far as any generalisation will go. For the steps any flat character has to take in order to stay flat are particular to their 'singular idea' as well as the changing circumstances they find themselves in.

### Part three: Misunderstandings, misplaced affections, and Mrs Mac Stinger

The text of *Dombey and Son* is alive with misunderstandings like that between Miss Tox, Mrs Chick, and Dombey. Defective exchanges and crossed conversations abound, and more often than not, some one's peculiar habit is of the party. Bergson writes that 'it is easy to see that the stage-made misunderstanding is nothing but a particular instance of a far more general phenomenon,—the reciprocal interference of independent series': individual eccentricities getting in the way of each other (98). The mechanics of 'stage-made misunderstandings' may be plain to the eye. But there is also an implication here that misunderstandings are symptomatic of flat characters, and more precisely, of flat characters as they interact with the world around them, most comically with other flat characters. For the student of narrative caricature this suggests two things: firstly, there should be much to learn from misunderstandings about the creative potential of narrative caricature, and specifically its tendency toward the particular or eccentric. Secondly, misunderstandings would constitute a key site of the ways in which flat characters do in fact interact productively with the world around them. Moretti supposed that because plot is 'a *dynamic* system of relationships' it depends on dynamic characters, characters capable of 'changes of position, modifying interactions and mutual hybridizations,' in other words, characters capable of development. Flat characters, whom Moretti considers essentially static, accordingly constitute a drag on plot. I want to argue that the opposite is the case for *Dombey and Son*, where misunderstandings constitute an important way in which characters initiate dynamic movement precisely because they remain static, remain true to their idiom.

The misunderstandings that arise as two characters' idiosyncrasies collide constitute a prime catalyst of action in *Dombey and Son*. The Dombey and Edith plot is structured around a misunderstanding. Edith believes that Dombey marries her 'with no art of mine put forth to lure him' (382; ch. 27), sure 'that all this was so plain more or less, to all eyes' (409; ch. 30). But Dombey is 'accustomed to take things literally' (417) and thinks her proud manner will

simply ‘chill[] his guests after his own manner’ (414). This plot line is in part so bountiful because it pits two characters against each other who positively wallow in their habits—he branded with his father’s name, she with her mother’s aspiration to one. But Miss Tox and Mrs Chick, too, misinterpret their respective relationships to Dombey, Dombey misinterprets Carker’s humility, and Carker fatally misinterprets Edith. As importantly, misunderstandings are one of the novel’s favourite comic resources. Mr and Mrs Chick are well-versed at misunderstanding each other, as well as Mrs Chick and Miss Tox (“Mis— Mis——” “Demeanour?” suggested Miss Tox. “No, no, no,... Mis——” “Placed affection?”... “Good gracious, Lucretia!... Misanthrope, is the word I want,’ 239; ch. 18). This also holds true for Paul and Toots, Dombey and Mrs Skewton, Toots and the Chicken, and Cuttle and Bunsby, though Cuttle does all the misunderstanding there. Others misunderstand each other without any practice, like Paul and Mrs Blimber or Mrs Pipchin and the weak-eyed young man. Some of these jokes, especially Miss Tox and Mrs Chick’s (Miss Tox later goes upstairs to comfort Florence, ‘on a faint pretence of looking for the *mis*laid handkerchief,’ 241, emphasis added) smile at the novel’s *sui generis* partiality for misunderstandings.

These misunderstandings emphasize just how peculiar, how odd, a character is by letting them loose on the world and demonstrating how their particularity prevents them from fitting in smoothly. Take this defective exchange between Miss Tox and Mr Toodle in the novel’s second chapter:

‘...Five children. Youngest six weeks. The fine little boy with the blister on his nose is the eldest. The blister, I believe,’ said Miss Tox, looking round upon the family, ‘is not constitutional, but accidental?’

The apple-faced man was understood to growl, ‘Flat iron.’

‘I beg your pardon, Sir,’ said Miss Tox, ‘did you?——’

‘Flat iron,’ he repeated.

‘Oh yes,’ said Miss Tox. ‘Yes! quite true. I forgot. The little creature, in his mother’s absence, smelt a warm flat iron. You’re quite right, Sir. You were going to have the goodness to inform me, when we arrived at the door, that you were by trade, a ——’

‘Stoker,’ said the man.

‘A choker!’ said Miss Tox, quite aghast.

‘Stoker,’ said the man. ‘Steaminjin.’

‘Oh-h! Yes!’ returned Miss Tox, looking thoughtfully at him, and seeming still to have but a very imperfect understanding of his meaning. ‘And how do you like it, Sir?’

‘Which, Mum?’ said the man.

‘That,’ replied Miss Tox. ‘Your trade.’

‘Oh! Pretty well, Mum. The ashes sometimes gets in here;’ touching his chest; ‘and makes a man speak gruff, as at the present time. But it is ashes, Mum, not crustiness.’

Miss Tox seemed to be so little enlightened by this reply, as to find a difficulty in pursuing the subject. (16-7; ch. 2)

‘Cindery and swart,’ Mr Toodle is constructed round the single idea of the railway (512; ch. 38). He calls his oldest son Biler (after the ‘Steaminjin’), and his life is governed by the railway timetable, reducing his existence to ‘three stages’: sleep, refreshment, and ‘tearing through the country at from twenty-five to fifty miles an hour’ (ibid.). His ludicrously exaggerated railway existence makes Toodle extremely odd. The extent of his oddity manifests itself in his speech, which is so ‘gruff’ with ashes that Miss Tox is unable to understand him. Dickens is asking his reader to listen with Miss Tox’s ears here—sense must be made aurally of the gap between Toodle’s utterances (perfectly clear on the page), the narrator’s befuddling comment that he ‘was understood to growl’ (understood by whom, exactly?), and Miss Tox’s puzzled middle-class politeness. At the same time, this short passage offers a miniature replica of *Dombey and Son*’s critique of class society. It’s no surprise Miss Tox is befogged, for Toodle is indeed a ‘choker’—choked financially to an extent that his wife leaves her six-week-old baby in order to contribute to the family budget, as he is choked by the pollutive ashes that get into his lungs. As Miss Tox’s clumsy attempts to console the Toodles later in the chapter betray, she can make no more sense of these working-class hardships than Toodle can of her exquisitely circuitous idiolect in a second, no less funny, dialogue in ‘Miss Tox improves an Old Acquaintance.’

The Tox-Toodle defective exchange supercharges caricature’s particularising effect. Many other misunderstandings in *Dombey and Son* simultaneously have characters’ ludicrously peculiar ways of looking at the world disrupt that world—in highly narratable and entertaining ways. I now want to turn to one such instance of the ‘reciprocal interference of individual series,’ in which a number of misinterpretations by a flat character, Captain Cuttle, goes so far as to actually ‘flatten’ another character: the ‘fell Mac Stinger’ (531; ch. 39).

Captain Cuttle's single idea is seafaring. But *Dombey and Son* really takes the idea of 'habit' to a new level with this character. Cuttle, a creature of habit in many ways, is first of all a creature *in* habit: the narrator remarks that '[t]he Captain was one of those timber-looking men, suits of oak as well as hearts, whom it is almost impossible for the liveliest imagination to separate from any part of their dress, however insignificant' (118; ch. 9). Dickens's mangled citation of David Garrick's 'Heart of Oak' is worthy of Cuttle, who has a habit of mangling citations. The heart is the oak's strongest part, right at the tree's centre. But the Captain is heart all over. Even the most insignificant article of his dress is integral, can't be separated from the man 'himself.' The Captain isn't himself without the 'wide suit of blue' and 'hard glazed hat': he can't bring himself to leave the house when Mrs Mac Stinger takes away the latter, and when Rob the Grinder wakes him with news of bad news, Cuttle 'shouldered him into the next room...; and disappearing for a few moments, forthwith returned in the blue suit' to prepare himself (344-5; ch. 25). Although Cuttle is technically no longer a seafaring man, he is, then, so in habit: both in his seafaring idiolect and in his attire: the wide suit of blue, the 'hook instead of a hand,' the 'loose black silk handkerchief round his neck, and such a very large coarse shirt collar, that it looked like a small sail' (43-44; ch. 4), the hard-glazed hat that imprints 'a red equator round his head' (131; ch. 10). And his habitation, in number nine, Brig Place, is 'on the brink of a little canal near the India Docks,' where land has turned to water and 'there was nothing to be smelt but rum and sugar' (117-8; ch. 9).

Cuttle's eccentric speech is especially vivid because it is eccentric: as out of place in this landlubberly novel as Mr Toodle is out of place in Dombey's upper middle-class home. Sol Gills, advised to 'only lay your head well to the wind, ... and you're all right,' 'went and laid it against the back parlour fireplace instead' (124; ch. 9). Rob the Grinder, requested 'to "heave a-head"' asks, perplexed, 'Do you mean, tell you, Captain?' (345; ch. 25). And the good-natured Toots, 'who seldom had any notion of the Captain's meaning,' yet sees no harm in

it: “To clap on, is exactly what I could wish to do. Naturally” (644; ch. 48). But Cuttle’s habit meets its nemesis in Mrs Mac Stinger, not because she can’t understand him but because he can’t understand her. The reader gets to know Mrs Mac Stinger as an emasculating, violent man-eater<sup>15</sup> given to obsessive cleaning, who makes Cuttle’s life hell on earth, haunting his memory long after he escapes her grasp. Mrs Mac Stinger is an extremely reliable specimen of a flat character, and the text makes no bones about the fact that caricature is what counts here: her youngest child is so much like a prop that he doesn’t age much over the period of at least six or seven years the novel covers after first finding him sitting on that ‘powerful restorative’ after punishment, ‘a cool paving-stone’ (320; ch. 23). But whilst readers of the novel will find Mrs Mac Stinger (un)pleasantly predictable, the opposite is true for Captain Cuttle. His troubles with Mrs Mac Stinger, he claims, originate in the fact that ‘that terrible fire-ship’ is unpredictable in her actions and methods (324; ch. 23):

‘She’s very hard to carry on with, my dear. You never can tell how she’ll head, you see. She’s full one minute, and round upon you next. And when she *is* a tartar,’ said the Captain, with the perspiration breaking out upon his forehead—. There was nothing but a whistle emphatic enough for the conclusion of the sentence....

It turned out, however, that Mrs. Mac Stinger had already changed her course, and that she headed, as the Captain had remarked she often did, in quite a new direction. (323)

At the bottom of Captain Cuttle’s comic inability to get along with Mrs Mac Stinger, it turns out, is his seafaring idiom. As endearing as it is to the reader, Cuttle’s attempt to make sense of Mrs Mac Stinger’s ‘course,’ to anticipate ‘how she’ll head’ based on his experience of maritime navigation, is bound to make a muddle. For ‘that terrible fire-ship’ isn’t actually a ship. Why should she behave in a way consistent with ships? The whole thing is a misunderstanding, raising the possibility that Mrs Mac Stinger’s flatness—the concentration of her character in a ‘single quality,’ unpredictable, irritable, intractable—is in fact a figment of Captain Cuttle’s *sui generis* way of navigating the world.

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<sup>15</sup> I’m referring not simply to her ambition to get married again, but to her blatant sexuality: when young Walter first seeks out Number Nine, Brig Place, Mrs Mac Stinger meets him ‘with her sleeves rolled up to her shoulders’ and the whole house is enveloped in an ‘artificial fog occasioned by the washing, which covered the bannisters with a clammy perspiration’ (118-9; ch. 9). When Florence and Susan go there in ‘Florence Solitary,’ the place is also exceedingly wet.



This figment of the fell Mac Stinger becomes idiosyncratic of Cuttle's existence at the little Midshipman, infusing the years he spends there with narrative interest. Utterly unable to find a course through the rapids of Mrs Mac Stinger's changeable temper, he doesn't have the guts to stand up to her and tell her he is moving out when called upon to relocate to the little Midshipman ('he knew that resolute woman would never hear of his deserting them,' 349; ch. 25). So he runs away at dead of night, '[p]ursued by the image of Mrs. Mac Stinger springing out of bed, and regardless of costume, following and bringing him back; pursued also by a consciousness of his enormous crime; Captain Cuttle held on at a great pace' (351). The thought of Mrs Mac Stinger marching the captured Captain through the streets in her underwear—Cuttle is somewhat squeamish around female sexuality—is hilarious. But this doesn't come to pass, fortunately. For much of the comedy of the Cuttle chapters derives from the anticipation of this event:

What the Captain suffered next day, whenever a bonnet passed, or how often he darted out of the shop to elude imaginary Mac Stingers, and sought safety in the attic, cannot be told. But to avoid the fatigues attendant on this means of self-preservation, the Captain curtained the glass door of communication between the shop and parlour, on the inside; fitted a key to it from the bunch that had been sent to him; and cut a small hole of espial in the wall. The advantage of this fortification is obvious. On a bonnet appearing, the Captain instantly slipped into his garrison, locked himself up, and took a secret observation of the enemy. (351-2)

Apart from the occasional visit from Toots, the Captain's time is occupied with devising elaborate barricades and secret signals, 'almost incessantly slipping in and out all day long,' and generally worrying about encountering Mrs Mac Stinger (352). The text indulges in these apprehensive activities, describing them in all their ludicrously exaggerated detail. Note the irony in the narrator's observation, '[t]he advantage of this fortification is obvious'—obvious to someone who's paranoid, yes. But Rob the Grinder, Cuttle's involuntary accomplice, soon finds himself 'debating within himself, for the five hundredth time, whether the Captain could have done a murder, that he had such an evil conscience, and was always running away' (440; ch. 32). And who can blame him?

Imaginary Mac Stingers become the Captain's constant companions: he only attends the Dombey wedding because he feels assured 'that the lady's attendance on the ministry of the Reverend Melchisedech rendered it peculiarly unlikely that she would be found in communion with the Establishment' (438; ch. 32); he 'become[s] cautious of reading the news, lest he should find himself advertised at full length by Mrs. Mac Stinger' (446); after a year 'he still observed a regular routine of precautions'—'although his fears of a visitation from the savage tribe, Mac Stinger, were somewhat cooled' (528; ch. 39). There is in fact a complex mixture of cowardice, guilt, and misinterpretation at the bottom of Cuttle's dread of Mrs Mac Stinger.<sup>16</sup> But by being repeated ad absurdum, it becomes mindless and shallow. Haunting his thoughts, Mrs Mac Stinger becomes Cuttle's 'single idea,' the definitive aspect of his existence. We have thus come full circle: the imaginary Mac Stingers that arose out of Cuttle's idiosyncratic misinterpretation of Mrs Mac Stinger have themselves become idiosyncratic of him. Let loose on the world, flatness comes to exceed any single 'single quality': as Cuttle grows more faceted, each facet is as ludicrously exaggerated as the first. Flatness is not dissolved in a 'curve towards the round' here; it proliferates, gaining rather than losing affective force. Though the Captain isn't strictly unmoved by the world, he remains uncompromisingly, thoroughly flat.

If the army of 'imaginary Mac Stingers' are the result of an idiom-based misunderstanding, what about the 'real' Mrs Mac Stinger? For there is an implied human personality behind this diffracted character. This Mrs Mac Stinger is extremely elusive because the reader always encounters her as experienced by Cuttle. Take the eventual confrontation between these two in 'Further Adventures of Captain Edward Cuttle, Mariner.' Mrs Mac Stinger does eventually manage to track Cuttle down, 'dash[ing] into the

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<sup>16</sup> Cuttle considers 'himself the *guilty* object of suspicion and distrust' (437; ch. 32, emphasis added), and is frequently overwhelmed by difficult situations: the idea of breaking the news of Walter's and Sol's (presumed) deaths to Florence inspires similar dread in him. As the text tellingly notes, he is 'scarcely less afraid of a visit from Florence, than from Mrs. Mac Stinger herself' (439).

parlour, bringing Alexander Mac Stinger in her parental arms, and confusion and vengeance (not to mention Juliana Mac Stinger, and the sweet child's brother...) in her train' (531; ch. 39). This long and fearfully anticipated meeting indeed engenders mostly confusion. Cuttle is surprised to find that it is the *manner* of his departure that incites Mrs Mac Stinger's wrath. The Captain, convinced of his desperate and perilous escape, didn't think that just disappearing, leaving his box and most of his belongings behind, might be misunderstood:

'A pretty sort of a man is Cap'en Cuttle,' said Mrs. Mac Stinger, with a sharp stress on the first syllable of the Captain's name, 'to take on for—and to lose sleep for—and to faint along of—and to think dead forsooth—and to go up and down the blessed town like a mad woman, asking questions after! Oh, a pretty sort of a man!' (535)

One might remember that at the exact same period in time, Cuttle made a very similar mistake (though technically, Gills *had* sent several letters) and

read of all the found and missing people in all the newspapers and handbills, and went forth on expeditions at all hours of the day to identify Solomon Gills, in poor little ship-boys who had fallen overboard, and in tall foreigners with dark beards who had taken poison. (349; ch. 25)

But Mrs Mac Stinger's understandable anger at Cuttle is stated in a dazzling tirade marked by inventive rhetoric ('in spite of all his guzzlings *and* his muzzlings,' 532) and wailing ('He hasn't the courage to meet her hi-i-i-igh,' 532-5). Mrs Mac Stinger's justified reproaches are also accompanied by altogether unjustifiable violence against her youngest son, which makes it difficult to sympathise with her. Meanwhile, Cuttle is torn between his fear of Mrs Mac Stinger—about to throw himself down the cellar-stairs 'like a man indifferent to bruises and contusions'—and his sincere guilt and affection for the children, who 'with lamentable cries' might be claiming him 'as their friend,' or might indeed be 'pinning him by the legs' to make sure he doesn't get away again (531-2). So that by the time Bunsby escorts Mrs Mac Stinger home, the reader, whilst having got a glimpse of an underlying personality that appears to be much more complex, is none the wiser where it ends and where Cuttle's (mis)interpretations begin.

Moretti writes that when it comes to flat characters, 'the dominant linguistic exchange ... is *misunderstanding*, which is the opposite of communication and the collapse of all

dialogue' (194). The misunderstandings that take place in *Dombey and Son* are however not cases of nothing being understood. Rather, information is understood wrongly, according to the idiom of the listener. Moretti uses 'collapse' in the sense of 'to break down' or 'come to nothing.' But a misunderstanding does not cause dialogue to break down in Dickens. In fact, the value of these mismatched dialogues depends on their ability to continue, on the characters involved in them being so flat, so self-involved and self-perpetuating. What's more, I hope to have shown that these dialogues come to quite a lot, both in terms of entertainment and insofar as they generate narrative instability. As importantly, these crossed conversations reinvest heavily into the caricature of their participants.

#### **Part four: Pushing the limits of character**

The misunderstandings I discussed above emphasise the particularising effect of caricature. I now want to attend to the productive possibilities afforded by the typical or generic quality of flat characters. This typical quality is at the bottom of critics' tendency to dismiss characters as 'mere' types—an influential instance of this is Slater's exclusion of Dickens's comic female figures from his discussion in *Dickens and Women* because they were 'adopted more or less straight from established stock types of traditional farce' (226). The implication here is that such characters are negligible as implied human beings because they vanish almost completely into the pre-existing pattern they have got caught up in. Looking at some of *Dombey and Son*'s servant characters, a group that is especially prone to this criticism, I want to argue that Dickens's writing is highly aware of this effect, and in fact actively seeks it out.

There is incontrovertible evidence that many servants lived under abominable conditions, and even servants who were considered to be treated well were often exploited

by modern Western standards.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, recent historical research has emphasized how little is known about how servants were actually treated in the nineteenth century, except that conditions, and especially master-servant relationships, varied immensely from household to household.<sup>18</sup> In many homes servants were considered viable members of the family, especially in times of crisis.<sup>19</sup> Dickens's correspondence betrays that in his own homes the presence of servants was acknowledged by the family as well as their friends.<sup>20</sup> With regard to Dickens's writing, any reader looking beyond the novels' 'central characters' will encounter a multitude of servant characters. *Dombey and Son* being no exception, leaves no doubt that the upper middle-class household constitutes a 'domestic system' rather than a domestic ideal (23; ch. 3). It generally gives an upstairs-downstairs picture, the downstairs one being mostly the merrier. The servants keep a running commentary on the events in their household, from the housemaid's observation that 'marriage is a lottery, and the more she thinks about it, the more she feels the independence and the safety of a single life' (478; ch. 35), or Towlinson 'beg[ging] to know whether he didn't say that no good would ever come of living in a corner house' (689-90; ch. 51) to the young kitchenmaid of inferior rank's horrific thought, 'Suppose the wages shouldn't be paid!' (788; ch. 59). What's more, the two worlds, upstairs and downstairs, are constantly bumping into each other on the novel's many staircases. Paul meets 'Melia, who is in the middle of cleaning a stove, on the stairs at

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<sup>17</sup> Susan Nipper's observation, 'though I can bear a great deal, I am not a camel, neither am I, ... if I know myself, a dromedary neither,' is a pointed comment about the common practice of having teenage housemaids carry water up several stories by the bucket (316; ch. 23). Camelids are of course often believed to carry water in their humps.

<sup>18</sup> See Higgs 202, as well as Pooley 420.

<sup>19</sup> Hammerton observes that in accounts of domestic violence '[m]ost often ... servants, like children, appear as women's allies, witnessing violent treatment, rescuing them from dangerous assaults, intervening to drive off dangerous husbands, and providing safe refuge from further violence, sometimes by sleeping together in a locked room.... Servants, then, were far more than a threatening alien presence below stairs to be kept apart from or patronized by respectable employers, as some accounts have represented them' (*Cruelty and Companionship* 116).

<sup>20</sup> The letters detailing the last hours of Dickens's pet raven, for example, make much of Topping, the Dickens' groom, who, the letters imply, must have been known, and known by name, to both Daniel Maclise and Angus Fletcher (vol. 2, 230, 304).

Blimber's, and also the man repairing the clock. The native, 'coming straight up-stairs,' arrives just in time to catch the fainting Miss Tox in his arms, 'and to receive the contents of the little watering-pot in his shoe' (400; ch. 29). And in perhaps the unlikeliest of these encounters, Dombey runs into Mrs Perch (a regular guest in the kitchen) on the stairs, 'who, being (but that she always is) in an interesting situation, is not nimble, and is obliged to face him' (423; ch. 31). The novel seems determined to confront its middle-class characters—and its readers—with the people whose labour makes its middle-class homes comfortable.

These encounters give many of the masters in the novel an opportunity to express their unrestrained view on servants. "Young hussy"—that was Mrs. Pipchin's generic name for female servant,' the narrator explains (107; ch. 8). The advertisement for a wet nurse for Paul renders 'that dining-room down-stairs one mass of babies,' Mrs Chick reports (12; ch. 2). And for the Dombey wedding, Mrs Skewton hires 'a silver-headed butler (who was charged extra on that account, as having the appearance of an ancient family retainer)' (410; ch. 30). When it comes to servants, these middle-class masters tend not to see individual human fortunes but only the services they provide, the generic uniforms they fill. Intriguingly, many of the novel's servant characters are caricatured in a way that supports the novel's critique of their masters' attitude. Rather than rendering them as complex human beings sporting 'realistic' personalities, Dickens presents an ensemble of caricatures that are pointedly typical: ludicrously exaggerated personifications of the generic type their masters see in them. Cook, for example, is a typical Dickensian cook to begin with, wholesome, respectable, and just a little bit bossy—though meaning well. But as the text returns to Cook, it emphatically resist developing complexity. Whether '[s]he promises a little fry for supper, and struggles about equally against her feelings and the onions' after Paul's death, or gently admonishes the other servants 'whatever they do, let 'em stand by one another now' when the house is brought down, Cook's each and every appearance affirms her typicality, building a character that is exaggeratedly cook, but also exaggeratedly, pointedly generic (235; ch. 18, 787; ch. 59).

*Dombey and Son's* most elaborately generic servant character is Major Bagstock's 'dark servant,' the Native. The character of the Native, which is, like that of Cook, constructed round the way his master (ab)uses him, constitutes an integral part of Dickens's critique of British Imperialism, which is unusually sharp with the Major—he is an insatiable glutton who tends to bite off more than he can chew, and is continually choking himself, with food, drink, schadenfreude, or self-importance. Within the course of a single chapter, 'Shadows of the past and future,' the Native serves Bagstock as a mule (for the 'light baggage,' 356; ch. 26), a parasol, a punching bag, a talisman ('against the gout, and all other vexations,' 363), as cupbearer, as apothecary, as dog—who always rested on a mattress spread upon the ground at his master's door' (368). These physical exploitations piled on the Native cast him as emphatically, exaggeratedly primitive. This gives the Native a symbolic value for the Major that goes above and beyond his physical usefulness. For in much of the abuse the Native experiences, this 'unfortunate foreigner' primarily serves the Major as a stage prop: an object to demonstrate his Western superiority on (272; ch. 20). 'For the Major plumed himself on having the Native in a perfect state of drill,' while 'call[ing] the Native so many new names as must have given him great occasion to marvel at the resources of the English language' (362-3; ch. 26). The Native, thoroughly constructed round his otherness, is then just that: the Native. Not *a* native, which would point toward a diversity of possible others, but *the* Native: Imperial western ideas of primitivity—and the opportunities for exploitation it presents—personified.

The Native is not simply a personification, however; he is also a fully-fledged anthropomorphic character. The novel's critique derives its bite from this jarring contrast between the reader's impulse to imagine the Native as a human being and this character's lack of content. For whilst his status as a character automatically implies a human being, complete with (tormented) mind and (abused) body, the Native is, as such, *without* substance: empty. The text here takes the generic or typical element of narrative caricature to a point

where it actively wards off any sense of particularity, of individual personality. The Native doesn't just remain unnamed, like Cook. He is nameless: 'the Native ... had no particular name, but answered to any vituperative epithet,' the narrator observes (269; ch. 20). Emphatically devoid of a proper name, the Native is stripped of that most familiar indicator of subjectivity. The vituperative epithet by which the text itself refers to him—'the Native'—is in fact a satirical scrap of free indirect discourse: it originates with Miss Tox, who 'was quite content to classify [him] as a "native," without connecting him with any geographical idea whatever' (86; ch. 7). The irony is of course that nativity is a geographical concept to begin with. To classify someone as a native is a meaningless act unless one specifies the place someone is a native *of*. Miss Tox's self-sabotaging classification again says nothing about the Native other than that *she* couldn't care less about his history, couldn't care less about him as a human being. The Native thus constructed isn't displaced or uprooted, but wholly disconnected from any geographical idea whatever indeed.<sup>21</sup> Narrative caricature takes this character one step beyond classification, beyond the typical or generic, in order to take it beyond particularity. The 'single quality' this satirical character is constructed 'round' is complete lack of particularity, lack of identity: a human being voided of all humanity in the eyes of those who employ it.

Whilst the typical tendency of narrative caricature can effect this kind of vanishing of the individual into a 'type,' it also creates an opportunity for a single character to rope into the narrative an established type and the generic associations attached to it. This is what happens with Susan Nipper, Florence's maid. Susan is indisputably a flat character. Dickens endowed her, like Sam Weller, Mark Tapley and Flora Finching with a highly memorable rhetorical turn that is wholly peculiar to her, and I'll return to this. But Susan is also, as

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<sup>21</sup> Alan Horsman notes in his introduction to the Clarendon edition of *Dombey and Son* that a cancelled passage in the manuscript had called the Native Abdallah, which would also have 'connected' the Native to an Islamic country, very possibly located in the near or middle east (xxvi). This cancellation clearly indicates that the decision to create a character that is both nameless and originless was deliberate.



Florence's maid, one of a long line of talkative young women in service to an innocent young heroine imprisoned in a dilapidated, Gothic mansion. A line that goes back at least as far as Matilda's servant Bianca in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*.

*Dombey and Son* reverses the gendered distribution of *Martin Chuzzlewit*'s courtship plot: the heroic young lover, Walter Gay, is absent for most of the novel. The account of his adventures at sea is compressed into a couple of pages at the end of the book. Instead, the novel zooms in on Florence's patient endurance at home, a state of powerlessness and inaction that sets in when her father, in his grief for little Paul, coldly turns her away with the words, '[t]he whole house is yours above there' (253; ch. 18), much like Manfred in *The Castle of Otranto*, after the death of *his* son, rebukes his daughter: 'cr[ying], Begone, I do not want a daughter; and, flinging back abruptly, clapped the door against the terrified Matilda' (22). When soon after Mr Dombey leaves London to get a change of scene, Florence, at not yet fourteen years of age, stays behind in the great house with the servants. Dombey had had the furniture covered up after his wife's death eight years earlier, 'perhaps,' as the narrator remarks, 'to preserve it for the Son with whom his plans were all associated' (24; ch. 3). That son dead and Dombey's plans dashed, years of neglect suddenly begin to catch up with the house.

Within doors, curtains, drooping heavily, lost their old folds and shapes, and hung like cumbrous palls. Hecatombs of furniture, still piled and covered up, shrunk like imprisoned and forgotten men.... Boards, starting at unwonted foot-steps, creaked and shook. Keys rusted in the locks of doors. Damp started on the walls.... Mildew and mould began to lurk in closets. Fungus trees grew in corners of the cellars....

The grass began to grow upon the roof, and in the crevices of the basement paving. A scaly crumbling vegetation sprouted round the window-sills. Fragments of mortar lost their hold upon the insides of the unused chimneys, and came dropping down. The two trees with the smoky trunks were blighted high up, and the withered branches domineered above the leaves. Through the whole building, white had turned yellow, yellow nearly black. (311-2; ch. 23)

As the furniture fades and droops, nature reclaims the structure of the house. Damp, mould, grass, and other vegetation flourishes as suddenly as the thorns magically overgrowing the castle in which sleeping beauty rests until the Prince gets round to kiss her awake. But the growths sprouting in the Dombey house lack the quaint romance of the vigorous rosaceae

protecting sleeping beauty. They are noxious, scabby, corrosive.<sup>22</sup> ‘The spell upon’ the Dombey house, the narrator notes, ‘was *more wasting* than the spell that used to set enchanted houses sleeping once upon a time, but left their waking freshness unimpaired’ (311, emphasis added). Clearly, this is not the sugar-coated once-upon-a-time of fairy tales where heroines peacefully nap through times of difficulty, but the darker, danker, and much more threatening horror of Gothic novels. And, like Emily St. Aubert in Anne Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the ‘wronged innocence imprisoned’ in this mansion is not asleep, but sorely conscious of her isolation (ibid.).

But the neglected structure houses two young women, Florence and Susan, and Susan is pivotal to *Dombey and Son*’s Gothic exploration of the young woman’s lot. For, like Emily’s maid Annette in Radcliffe’s *Udolpho*, Susan is part of what Claudia L. Johnson calls servant ‘networks of unofficial lore,’ linking Florence with the outside world, giving her something to fret over (109). It is Susan who brings news of Mr Dombey’s departure, and of Walter’s appointment to the opening in Barbados. Susan gets news of the loss of the ship that carried Walter, and can also provide worrying information regarding Carker’s influence on Florence’s father.

As importantly, Susan is, like Annette and Bianca, very funny. Aided by the clumsy Mr Toots and the bullet-headed dog Diogenes, she provides comic relief to Florence’s grief and distress. Here’s a passage that illustrates their dynamic very nicely.

‘How long it is before we have any news of Walter, Susan!’ observed Florence....

‘Long indeed, Miss Floy!’ replied her maid. ‘And Perch said, when he came just now to see for letters—but what signifies what *he* says!’ exclaimed Susan, reddening and breaking off. ‘Much *he* knows about it!’

Florence raised her eyes quickly, and a flush overspread her face.

‘If I hadn’t,’ said Susan Nipper, evidently struggling with some latent anxiety and alarm, and looking full at her young mistress..., ‘if I hadn’t more manliness than that insipidest of his sex, I’d never take pride in my hair again, but turn it up behind my ears, and wear coarse caps, without a bit of border, until death released me from my insignificance, I may not be a Amazon, Miss Floy, and wouldn’t so demean myself by such disfigurement, but anyways I’m not a giver-up, I hope.’

‘Give up! What?’ cried Florence, with a face of terror.

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<sup>22</sup> Bodenheimer points out the Dombey house’s proximity to the Dickens’s home in Devonshire Terrace—and toward some possible parallels between life in these two homes (132-3).

'Why, nothing, Miss,' said Susan. 'Good gracious, nothing! It's only that wet curl-paper of a man, Perch, that any one might almost make away with, with a touch, and really it would be a blessed event for all parties if some one *would* take pity on him, and would have the goodness!'

'Does he give up the ship, Susan?' inquired Florence, very pale.

'No, Miss,' returned Susan, 'I should like to see him make so bold as do it to my face! No, Miss, but he goes on about some bothering ginger that Mr. Walter was to send to Mrs. Perch, and shakes his dismal head, and says he hopes it may be coming; anyhow, he says, it can't come now in time for the intended occasion, but may do for next, which really,' said Miss Nipper, with aggravated scorn, 'puts me out of patience with the man, for though I can bear a great deal, I am not a camel, neither am I,' added Susan, after a moment's consideration, 'if I know myself, a dromedary neither.' (316; ch. 23)

The text's layering of Florence's distress—the flush overspreading her face, her 'face of terror,' her paleness—with Susan's comic volubility follows closely in the footsteps of Radcliffe's *Udolpho*. It builds suspense as Susan, looking to spare Florence, tries to withhold and then downplay the news. It also emphasises, by contrast, Florence's anguish. As importantly, it allows *Dombey and Son* to present Florence's really rather depressing experience of her father's continuing neglect in an engaging and ultimately readable way.

But whilst Florence and Susan clearly take up the rhythm of the established Gothic heroine-maid duo, *Dombey and Son* doesn't allow them to vanish into it completely, on the contrary. Susan's garrulousness in the dialogue above is marked as unmistakably hers by the figure of speech that is particular to her:

I may not be a Amazon, Miss Floy, and wouldn't so demean myself by such disfigurement, but anyways I'm not a giver-up, I hope.

though I can bear a great deal, I am not a camel, neither am I,... if I know myself, a dromedary neither.

The characteristically exotic frame of reference Susan brings to this figure—Amazons, dromedaries—ruptures the monochromatic scope of the Gothic. Formally, too, Susan's sayings point toward a more complex relationship with categories. She evokes these formidable authorities, from Amazons and camels to Indian widows, marble doorposts and Meethosalem, in order *not* to compare herself to them. Likeness is only implied by means of an explicit refusal of identity—'I am *not* a camel.' In fact, much of the humour of Susan's signature figure of speech derives from its overt discomfort with and suspicion of figural language. Susan's rhetorical allusion to an Amazon, by convention not to be taken literally,

is catapulted into an arena of actual physical possibility by the added comment, ‘and wouldn’t so demean myself by such disfigurement.’ Clearly one needs to be careful with such comparisons, or very real, very incisive consequences might ensue. Susan clarifies again and again that just because one shares certain qualities, such as not being a giver-up or being able to bear a great deal, that does not make one an Amazon or a camel, nor a dromedary neither.

Susan’s likeness to the well-known type of the Gothic heroine’s maid merits a similarly rigorous analysis of its limits. In fact, I want to argue that *Dombey and Son* takes up this pattern both to accentuate the hardships of Florence’s state of stasis and to simultaneously demonstrate how it deviates from this pattern. For whilst the Gothic castle constitutes an established site of transgressive male power, Florence is not technically imprisoned by a transgressive male villain. Dombey couldn’t care less whether Florence remains in the house or not. He’d happily have her stay with the Skettles or her aunt. Florence herself insists on secluding herself in the gloomy house—to be close to the memory of her brother, at first. But soon, Florence, in her grief, turns toward her father:

When no one in the house was stirring, and the lights were all extinguished, she would softly leave her own room..., and approach her father’s door. Against it, scarcely breathing, she would rest her face and head, and press her lips, in the yearning of her love. (244; ch. 18)

A young, motherless girl, who has just lost her only sibling—who can blame Florence for seeking solace and affection from her father? What interests me, however, is Florence’s idea of what that would look like:

in her one absorbing wish to be allowed to show him some affection, to be a consolation to him, to win him over to the endurance of some tenderness from her..., she would have knelt down at his feet, if she had dared, in humble supplication. (ibid.)

Florence’s grief is here mixed with striking ideas of what she expects fatherly love to look like: what Florence imagines is not solace and affection, but to have *her* love ‘endured,’ as though it were a burden; to have *her* daughterly submission recognised. This servile

reverence for her father only grows when Mr Dombey cruelly rejects her. ‘Her father did not know,’ Florence tells herself,

how much she loved him. She was very young, and had no mother, and had never learned, by some fault or misfortune, how to express to him that she loved him. She would be patient, and would try to gain that art in time, and win him to a better knowledge of his only child. (314; ch. 23)

Florence here tragically recasts her father’s shortcomings—his cold obsession with sons and the patriarchal line—as her own. If he doesn’t appreciate her, there must be something wrong with *her*. For there couldn’t possibly be something wrong with *him*. Florence’s hesitation to leave the mouldering house is motivated by this determination to patiently become worthy of her father’s attention: ‘she feared sometimes, that in her absence she might miss some hopeful chance of testifying her affection for her father’ (385; ch. 28). Although Florence is then not in fact imprisoned by her father, her belief that a daughter can only be appreciated for being submissively devoted to her father holds her prisoner in her own gloomy home.

It is Susan who voices the novel’s distrust of this female self-sacrifice, spelling out the critique of patriarchal power that is already implicit in the Gothic mood of Florence’s imprisonment. Susan refuses to romanticise Dombey’s neglect of the house that accommodates his daughter, rendering ‘rigid justice ... to its gloom’ (389; ch. 28). She is openly sceptical of Florence’s seclusion: when Florence, at the end of their visit at the Skettles’ looks forward to “... going back to our quiet home!” Susan dr[aws] in her breath with an amount of expression not easily described, and further relieving her feelings with a smart cough, answer[s], “Very quiet indeed, Miss Floy, no doubt. Excessive so” (383; ch. 28). Susan sees through Florence’s desperate attempts to ‘justify [Mr Dombey], and to find the whole blame in herself,’ and eventually she even gives Mr Dombey a piece of her mind (335; ch. 24). After his accident, Susan sneaks into his room and vents her anger at his treatment of her young mistress, a transgression that leads to her dismissal.

‘Miss Floy,’ said Susan Nipper, ‘is the most devoted and most patient and most dutiful and beautiful of daughters, there an’t no gentleman, no Sir, though as great and rich as all the greatest and richest

of England put together, but might be proud of her and would and ought. If he knew her value right, he'd rather lose his greatness and his fortune piece by piece and beg his way in rags from door to door, I say to some and all, he would!' cried Susan Nipper, bursting into tears, 'than being the sorrow on her tender heart that I have seen it suffer in this house!' (589; ch. 44)

Susan's rant betrays, in characteristically verbose manner, a thorough understanding of the way the novel links Dombey's neglect of his daughter to the capitalist thinking embodied by the firm of Dombey and Son, to which daughters are of no value.

Susan has been acutely aware of the role of gender in Florence's suffering from the novel's outset. '[G]irls are thrown away in this house,' she explains to Polly in chapter three (28). Her generalising use of the plural—'girls'—leaves no doubt that Susan understands that this has nothing to do with Florence herself; but that the injustice her young mistress experiences is categorical to her gender. As a girl, Florence could never be anything but a disappointment to her father. With Susan, then, narrative caricature creates a character that unmistakably 'takes up' the well-known type of the Gothic heroine's garrulous maid, complete with her associations with the Gothic novel's vilification of male transgression. But Susan doesn't simply take up this line. *Dombey and Son* lets her reference the Gothic mode to redirect and deepen its critique: girls, in this novel, are not confined, restricted in their freedom by individual transgressive men, but by gender ideology: by ideas of the 'natural' roles of fathers and daughters.

'*Girls* are thrown away in this house.' Susan's use of the plural indicates that Florence's suffering is a question of gender, endemic to Victorian culture. But it also points toward the fact that there is not just one girl who is 'thrown away' in Dombey's house. Susan herself is only fourteen when she makes this sharp observation—the same age Florence is when the house falls so suddenly into decay. Dombey tends to underestimate 'the young person,' as he refers to her, that is, until he throws her, too, away: out of the house (84; ch. 6). Susan is Florence's maid, but she also has stakes of her own in the novel's critique of patriarchal pride. And Dickens endows Susan her not just with a figure of speech that is wonderfully funny and refreshingly transgressive, but also with intelligence, learning and courage,

qualities that give this character a distinct allure of her own. Years of watching her beloved young mistress being slighted by Dombey because she is a girl—and of watching Florence torment herself because of notions of female submission—have turned Susan, ‘who was,’ as the narrator observes, ‘perhaps the most thorough-going partisan on the face of the earth,’ into a professed feminist (315; ch. 23). In fact, the end of the novel has her wealthy husband Toots promise that ‘[i]f ever the Rights of Women, and all that kind of thing, are properly attended to, it will be through *her* powerful intellect’ (808; ch. 60). ‘[A]nd all that kind of thing’ is classic Toots, well-meaning but awkward, of strictly emotional intelligence,<sup>23</sup> but even more in awe of his partner’s intellectual superiority. Susan, it turns out, is indeed not ‘a Amazon.’<sup>24</sup> She doesn’t go to war against men with bow and arrow but takes a rhetorical, though no less determined approach to creating change: politics. She is also not hard, masculine, and barren, but warm and womanly.

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‘I rely very much on Susan Nipper grown up, and acting partly as Florence’s maid, and partly as a kind of companion to her, for a strong character throughout the book,’ Dickens wrote to John Forster when he sent him the manuscript of the first four chapters of *Dombey and Son* (*Letters* 4.590). His outline of the novel lists Susan among proud ‘Mr. D,’ young Paul, Florence (‘the despised sister’), Miss Tox, and the Toodles, and concludes: ‘This is what cooks call “the stock of the soup.” All kinds of things will be added to it, of course’ (*ibid.*). Intriguingly, Dickens attributes foundational roles to characters that the critical literature tends to consider not only insignificant, but unproductive.

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<sup>23</sup> A victim of Blimber’s forcing system, ‘when he began to have whiskers he left off having brains’ (142; ch. 11).

<sup>24</sup> See also Gordon’s exploration of Dickens’s interest in ‘that stock figure, the breastless Amazonian harridan’ in ‘Female Figures in *Great Expectations*: In Praise of Mrs. Joe’ (245).

I hope to have shown that Susan, Miss Tox, and Captain Cuttle and Mrs Mac Stinger also, are indeed strong characters, characters *Dombey and Son* relies very much upon: not in spite of their flatness but because of it. Looking at such repetitive characters not as static effects but as implied human beings that are in the process of being caricatured draws attention to the artistic skill and inventiveness that Dickens brings to these characters. Further, this approach throws light on the constantly shifting tension between the particular or eccentric and the typical or generic tendencies of flat characters. Whilst the comic misunderstandings and appropriations of existing types I have looked at present of course only two of many ways in which Dickens's writing experiments with flat characters' vigour and weirdness, I hope that this chapter has at least begun to develop a palate for the characteristic flavour profiles of Dickens's novel kitchen.



### 3

## ‘Patches and Pieces of Other People’s Individuality’: Autobiography, Dismemberment, and the Second-Hand Market in *David Copperfield*

David Copperfield, Dickens’s most autobiographical protagonist, is notorious for his reticence to talk about his art, let alone his aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> But *David Copperfield* does afford some glimpses of its eponymous writer-protagonist’s artistic principles, as in this short paragraph following his often-cited comment about children’s faculty of observation:

I might have a misgiving that I am ‘meandering’ in stopping to say this, but that it brings me to remark that I build these conclusions, in part upon my own experience of myself; and if it should appear from anything I may set down in this narrative that I was a child of close observation, or that as a man I have a strong memory of my childhood, I undoubtedly lay claim to both of these characteristics. (II; ch. 2)

What interests me here is the misgiving to be ‘meandering’ that prompts David to explain how his previous paragraph conduces to the story he is relating. His *life* is studded with similar assurances of significance (I will italicise ‘life’ when using it in the sense of autobiography). Following his first detailed description of Littimer, for example, he squeezes in a one-sentence paragraph saying, ‘I am particular about this man, because he made a particular effect on me at that time, and because of what took place thereafter’ (256; ch. 21). Comments such as these betray a curious concern with not including too much, and especially not including anything that may not be significant, that doesn’t, in Brooks’s words,

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<sup>1</sup> Following Barbara Hardy, who considers *David Copperfield* ‘one of the strangest portraits of an artist ever written’ on account of its emphasis on ‘hard work’ (124), Irène Simon writes that ‘the novel is as different as can be from the art novels we know best’ (40). David’s work ethic, as Jennifer Ruth points out, made him for a long time ‘Victorian studies’ most unbecoming professional’ (53). Bodenheimer observes that Dickens himself also ‘wrote little about his own art. Even his letters to John Forster ... are more likely to express his difficulties with deadlines or the agonies of beginning a new book’—problems of workload and productivity—‘than to throw any light on the private process of composition’ (20).

‘progress toward meaning’. Somewhat ironically, David also refers to this aesthetic standard as his reason for not including any details of his literary works: ‘It is not my purpose, in this record ... to pursue the history of my own fictions.... When I refer to them, incidentally, it is only as a part of my progress’ (588-9; ch. 48).

Two things become clear here: firstly, that David is anxious that his autobiography, this *life* that recounts his progress, his *formation* as a person, should have form. That is, that it should conform to a racialising, heteronormative idealist aesthetics that strives for classical order, and thus demands that trivialities and minutiae be subordinated or altogether avoided—conform precisely to the aesthetics Dickens’s writing was frequently accused of violating. Secondly, that in *David Copperfield* these aesthetics must be secured in the margins, where David finds himself compelled to draw a line between that which should be included and all that shouldn’t.

David’s aesthetic vision for his *life*—of a body of text that is ‘formed,’ rationally laid out and clearly delimited, unsullied by unnecessary detail—corresponds nicely to the ideological impetus of the autobiographical genre, which has been considered to culminate in *David Copperfield*, most notably by D. A. Miller in *The Novel and the Police* and Mary Poovey in *Uneven Developments*. Miller’s ingenious reading of secrets in *David Copperfield* suggests that the writing of David’s autobiography is a self-disciplinary act that internalises an individualist social order, literally ‘boxing’ the subject ‘in’ (216-7). Poovey also reads *David Copperfield* in terms of the ‘textual construction of an individualist psychology’: David’s ‘psychological narrative of individual development,’ she argues, ‘both provided individual readers with an imaginative image of what identity was and created a subject position that reproduced this kind of identity in the individual reader’ (89). She shows that this individualist concept of identity is modelled on the ‘self-made, self-sufficient man’: David

(108).<sup>2</sup> The man-of-letters hero breathes life into the fiction that anyone can be successful and happy regardless of their circumstances and background, which Poovey argues was pivotal to ‘the legitimatization of capitalist relations’ (114). Emphasising the aesthetic dimension of his autobiographical project, *David Copperfield*’s autobiographer-narrator indicates that the *textual* construction of an individualist subjectivity that is essentially white, male and middle-class, in other words ‘formed,’ also has to have ‘form’ as a text. In *David Copperfield*, autobiography is thus doubly gendered, and doubly gendering.

*David Copperfield* doesn’t just tacitly replicate idealist aesthetics. As David’s fussing over the margins of his *life* betrays, this autobiographer-narrator is acutely aware of the aesthetic demands of autobiography as textual construction of an individualist subjectivity, and rather anxious about meeting those demands. Dickens was writing *David Copperfield* for an audience that was familiar with, and suspicious of the conventions of the autobiographical genre. Sean Grass has recently emphasised the immense popularity of autobiographical writing during Victorian times, as the publishing industry leveraged the Victorians’ belief that, at least ‘to a degree, the author’s subjectivity inheres in the autobiographical text, so that an equivalency or identity exists between them’ (8). Grass’s point is, however, that by the middle of the century autobiography was perceived as intensely commodified, especially in literary circles. The ‘spectacular profusion’ of fictional autobiographies, Grass argues, can be explained as

a culmination of particular aesthetic concerns, for instance as evidence of the maturation of writers who had been raised on the Romantic ideals of introspection and artistic self-revelation. But it seems likely that something more mundane was at work—the something that prompted a consummate businessman like Dickens to write *Copperfield* and expect it to sell. (19)

Grass’s readings of *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend* show Dickens keenly aware, and keenly interested in the commodification of subjectivity in autobiographical fiction. I want

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Toril Moi’s argument that in the related genre of the *Bildungsroman*, which was strongly influenced by Hegel, ‘men, but not women, can achieve self-consciousness, that is to say, become fully individualized human beings. Men achieve this by engaging in conflict and collaboration (work) with other men in the public sphere’ (156).

to argue that *David Copperfield*, too, must be placed in this historical context. Grass says that ‘it is hard to know how much *David Copperfield* reflects Dickens’s urgent psychological needs and how much it reflects his urgent desire to please readers’ (37). To please his readers, Dickens knew, one must above all not underestimate them.<sup>3</sup> We would do him an injustice if we did not expect to find *David Copperfield* eagerly exploring, both critically and fascinatedly, the ideological and aesthetic forces fuelling autobiography that were the talk of the town when the novel came out.

To bring into focus *David Copperfield*’s investigation of the genre of autobiography, I will consider both the recollected David and the recollecting, narrating David as characters. More precisely, I will read them as marginal characters: as characters *with* a margin and as characters *in* the margin. Taking a cue from Mary Douglas’s argument in *Purity and Danger*, I suggest that the margin, as a site of exclusion, constitutes the place where an individualised subjectivity must be consolidated. Douglas emphasises that exclusion is ‘a positive effort to organise the environment.... a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience’ (2). As Douglas points out, this also makes an organised structure vulnerable at its margins, which would explain David’s nervous attention to the margins of his *life*, where what is ‘part of [his] progress’ is winnowed from all that isn’t.

What exactly it means to be part of someone, let alone their progress, constitutes a persistent problem in *David Copperfield*, however. ‘I might have a misgiving that I am “meandering”’—as David’s use of quotation marks indicates, even this precept providing one of the sparse clues to David’s aesthetics of self-discipline doesn’t in fact originate with him. He has got it second-hand, from a nameless old lady with a hand-basket, who, not incidentally, occupies precisely that fine line between what’s part and what isn’t—or

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<sup>3</sup> Bodenheimer argues that ‘[t]o tell too much, Dickens thinks, is “to give an audience credit for nothing—which necessarily involved the forcing of points upon their attention—and which I have always observed them to resent when they find it out—as they always will and do”’ (22).

shouldn't be—part of David's *life*. The old lady with the hand-basket is how David's trouble with his parts starts—in the novel's first chapter, tellingly. David was famously born with a caul, and 'ten years afterwards' this caul

was put up in a raffle down in our part of the country, to fifty members at half-a-crown a head, the winner to spend five shillings. I was present myself, and I remember to have felt quite uncomfortable and confused, at a part of myself being disposed of in that way. The caul was won, I recollect, by an old lady with a hand-basket.... It is a fact which will be long remembered as remarkable down there, that she was never drowned, but died triumphantly in bed, at ninety-two. I have understood that it was, to the last, her proudest boast, that she never had been on the water in her life, except upon a bridge; and that over her tea (to which she was extremely partial) she, to the last, expressed her indignation at the impiety of mariners and others, who had the presumption to go 'meandering' about the world. It was in vain to represent to her that some conveniences, tea perhaps included, resulted from this objectionable practice. She always returned, with greater emphasis and with an instinctive knowledge of the strength of her objection, 'Let us have no meandering.'

Not to meander, myself, at present, I will go back to my birth. (2; ch. 1)

This passage constitutes an oddly riant foreboding of the tragic deaths of Ham and Steerforth later in the novel. As importantly, the episode with the old lady and the caul weaves an additional element into the autobiographical construction of subjectivity, and that's what interests me here. David's self, considered by generic convention to inhere in the autobiographical body of text, is here shown to also inhere in his *physical* body—including, rather more problematically, its parts. The old lady with the hand-basket troubles the boundaries of both, getting hold of a part of David's physical body—the caul—but also of a part of David's body of text. Her presence on the page must be curbed almost immediately to avoid 'meandering' and thereby violating the aesthetic demands of autobiography. Entering David's body of text to take away part of his physical body, I want to argue, the old lady with the hand-basket inscribes the blurred margins of David's physical body, its lack of boundedness as manifested in the dismembered caul, in the margin of his body of text.

This chapter re-examines *David Copperfield's* relationship to autobiography by means of a reading that is doubly de-centring. It seeks to demonstrate the great significance of the old lady with the hand-basket, as well as of a number of other characters who also take things away from David. These characters are given space (among other things) to trouble David's margins, to annoy and to embarrass him, and it will be necessary to look at how David

experiences this trouble in order to explain *their* contribution to the novel's exploration of the limits of autobiography. In other words, this reading actively marginalises David, in the sense that I use him allegorically, as a character who can help to elaborate and nuance those characters that are at the core of my reading.

The first section of this chapter, 'autobiographical business,' takes a closer look at David's notions of autobiographical recollection and how David's physical body becomes so problematically involved in them. A second section zooms in on the old lady with the hand-basket. It reads David's caul not just as a body part but first and foremost as a second-hand commodity. The old lady with the hand-basket is only the first of a number of emissaries of the second-hand market that persistently nibble the margins of both David's body and his body of text. Frequently verging on the criminal and unfair at best, the second-hand market systematically violates the boundary between that which belongs to David and that which doesn't. The concept of personal property is continually undermined in *David Copperfield*, beset by the money that may be got second-hand for anything from used bedsheets to body parts. These shady exchanges, a third section on 'dismemberment' suggests, forge both physical and textual relationships between David and the characters who come into possession of his possessions, in a peculiar way that constructs an alternative, de-individualised human existence. David's trouble at and with his several margins, I argue, shows him engaged in a futile struggle to impose order upon a life—and a *life*—that is and remains inherently disorderly.

### **Part one: Autobiographical business**

Autobiography, as a genre, is by no means rigid. Recent research has demonstrated the benefits of extending critical thinking about autobiography, and nineteenth-century autobiography especially, 'to include,' as Grass puts it, 'not just comprehensive and carefully composed "lives" but also memoirs, diaries, and volumes of letters ... as well as [for example]

books of travel and exploration' (II). *David Copperfield* is however interested in autobiography in the shape of precisely those 'comprehensive and carefully composed "lives"' that serve to 'box' their subject 'in,' and it is such *lives* that I will refer to as 'autobiography' in this chapter.

On a very basic level, an autobiography in this narrow sense is 'an account of a person's life given by himself or herself.'<sup>4</sup> Compiling this account, as David emphasises repeatedly, involves a process of recollection. Recollection in the sense of to remember, or 'take stock.' But also recollection in a quite literal sense of collecting, of gathering the events and impressions of a life up and collecting them in a *life*. As David's careful distinguishing between parts and non-parts betrays, this collecting aspect of recollection also involves a degree of curation: putting one's life 'in order' creates order in the first place. This order is for David based on functionality: to be included in his autobiography, events, impressions, people must not only have been part of his life, but part of his progress. The qualification is critical, for 'progress' is always progress toward something, in this case progress toward the man David considers to have become.<sup>5</sup> Recollection is then not just about giving *an* account, but about turning *to* account, about making profitable. Thus David, in the first rush of enthusiasm following the news of his aunt's ruin: 'What I had to do, was, to *turn* the painful discipline of my younger days *to account*, by going to work with a resolute and steady heart' (444; ch. 36, emphasis added). His turn of fortune renders the harsh discipline David experienced from Murdstone, Grinby, and Creakle profitable to his personal development.<sup>6</sup> David is, in other words, writing for the plot. Retrospectively making connections such as

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<sup>4</sup> *OED online*, 'autobiography, n.' Even this comparatively narrow definition is by no means without its problems, as Phillipe Lejeune's 'The Autobiographical Contract' amply demonstrates.

<sup>5</sup> Dickens had a much more complex notion of and ambivalent relationship with personal progress than David betrays here. See Bowen, *Other Dickens* 95.

<sup>6</sup> Brooks observes a similar desire for 'plottedness' in Pip. 'Pip's story,' he writes, 'becomes more and more as it nears its end the working through of past history, an attempted return to the origin as the motivation of all the rest, the clue to what must else appear, as Pip puts it to Miss Havisham, a "blind and thankless" life' (134).

this one, and editing out those details that don't connect, he imposes form upon his life, creating next to a *life* also the semblance of an independent subjectivity that is fully rational and clearly delimited.<sup>7</sup>

Accounts, taking stock, profitability: this is the language of business. Dismemberment obstructs this business of autobiography, as Mr Dick's experience in the novel suggests. Mr Dick has the singular problem that his head is assailed by the thoughts that troubled Charles I's head—'after it was taken off' (173; ch. 14). Mr Dick's is a fascinating (and very funny) case of dismemberment, but what interests me here is how those around him respond to it. Betsey Trotwood turns the problem into a rhetorical one: 'That's his allegorical way of expressing it,' she says. 'He connects his illness with great disturbance ... and that's the figure, or the simile, or whatever it's called, which he chooses to use' (175). Mr Dick, Betsey insists, is in no way mad. But the rhetorical figure of dismemberment is out of place, she argues, in autobiographical writing, for Mr Dick too is at work on an account of his own history.<sup>8</sup> "It's not a business-like way of speaking," said my aunt, "nor a worldly way. I am aware of that; and that's the reason why I insist upon it, that there shan't be a word about it in his Memorial'" (ibid.). David's own 'firmness,' his business-like manner, is as much the product of Betsey's positive example as of Murdstone's negative influence. So it comes as no surprise that he should attribute his literary success to a determination '[n]ever to put one hand to anything, on which I could throw my whole self' (518; ch. 42).<sup>9</sup> Ironically, however, David's adaptation of the phrase 'to put a *hand* to something' has a dismembering effect here. Confronted with the idea of the 'whole self' the 'hand' is strangely literalised, as though

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<sup>7</sup> On the importance of the concept of a coherent autobiographical subject—the imagined 'real' author—to autobiography and especially its role in individualist ideology, see Spicer, especially p. 399.

<sup>8</sup> Dickens's humorous mangling of his own name in this character (*Charles I's* thoughts in *Mr Dick's* head) is only one of many plays on his name and initials. See Bowen, *Other Dickens* 39, and Steven Marcus, *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey* 246.

<sup>9</sup> Possibly a pointed mangling of Carlyle's Teufelsdröckh's injunction, 'Produce! Produce!... Up, up! Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might' (*Sartor Resartus* 146).



David's hands could go off and work on projects of their own, like Charles I's head. And of course, David's hand here stands for his mind, since his writing, albeit put to paper by his hand, is the product of his mind. As David's mind is thus membered and simultaneously dismembered in his hand, it is easy to see why Betsey recommends avoiding figures, similes, or whatever it's called of dismemberment when it comes to business.

Aunt Betsey's aesthetics should be taken with a grain of salt, for Dickens's writing is, like Mr Dick's, constantly drawn to dismemberment, betraying a fascination with the body's relation to its parts. Dismemberment is one of the trademarks of Dickens's comic vision, which often imagines a dismembered body part when only part of the body is seen, as when Pecksniff, eavesdropping on Mary and Tom in the church, '[l]ook[s] like the small end of a guillotined man, with his chin on a level with the top of the pew' (487; ch. 31).<sup>10</sup> Even more pervasively, dismemberment is critical to many of Dickens's 'grotesques.' As Bakhtin points out, emphasis of a certain body part—its setting apart—is also a form dismemberment (328). Think of Jiggers's forefinger, Miss Murdstone's eyebrows, Mrs Merdle's bosom. Beyond the stylistic, *David Copperfield* alone serves up an impressive array of lost or displaced body parts. The Canterbury butcher and Uriah Heep each have a tooth knocked out; Traddles keeps a quartered clerk; Creakle's voice has been displaced onto Tungay, who in turn has a wooden leg; Mr Omer loses both limbs and breath and is nevertheless thankful to be 'as *hearty* as a man can be' (626; ch. 51, emphasis added); Mr Micawber doesn't 'regret [his] hair,' while his son 'hold[s] his head on with both arms as if he felt it loose' and further has a tendency to 'producing [his feet] at distances from himself apparently outrageous to nature' (456, 454; ch. 36); and Barkis, 'too rheumatic to be shaken hands with,' asks David 'to shake the tassel on the top of his nightcap' instead (262; ch. 21). In fact, the novel is deeply suspicious of bodily unity, as with Mr Spewlow, who constitutes the perfect embodiment of genteel collectedness:

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<sup>10</sup> See also Malcolm Andrews's discussion of Dickens's comic fragmentations in ch. 5 of *Dickensian Laughter*.

‘He was got up with such care, and was so stiff, that he could hardly bend himself; being obliged, when he glanced at some papers on his desk, after sitting down in his chair, to move his whole body, from the bottom of his spine, like Punch’ (299; ch. 23).

Somewhat surprisingly, these characters take their respective dismemberments with aplomb, and, in Mr Omer and Barkis’s case, even with good cheer. In contrast, David remembers to have felt ‘uncomfortable and confused’ when he experienced dismemberment at first hand. I want to argue that this has to do with the problem dismemberment poses to the autobiographical project of business-like (re)collection.

I was born with a caul, which was advertised for sale, in the newspapers, at the low price of fifteen guineas. Whether sea-going people were short of money about that time, or were short of faith and preferred cork-jackets, I don’t know; all I know is, that there was but one solitary bidding, and that was from an attorney connected with the bill-broking business, who offered two pounds in cash, and the balance in sherry, but declined to be guaranteed from drowning on any higher bargain. Consequently the advertisement was withdrawn at a dead loss—for as to sherry, my poor dear mother’s own sherry was in the market then—and ten years afterwards the caul was put up in a raffle down in our part of the country, to fifty members at half-a-crown a head, the winner to spend five shillings. I was present myself, and I remember to have felt quite uncomfortable and confused, at a part of myself being disposed of in that way. (1-2; ch. 1)

The caul is simultaneously part and not part of David’s body, and as such it grates uncomfortably with the autobiographical production of an individualised subjectivity, as David’s experience at the raffle illustrates. ‘I was present myself, and I remember to have felt quite uncomfortable and confused, at a part of myself being disposed of in that way.’ The caul, this part of himself that is yet apart from himself, immediately makes the word ‘myself’ difficult to use. David, who, unlike his mother, Mr Micawber, Spewlow, Mrs Gummidge, and Uriah Heep, uses ‘myself’ as an emphatic pronoun only very reluctantly, here feels compelled to literally make his (other) presence known, to assert himself, with the converse result, however, that ‘myself’ is no longer clearly delimited, but—like his body—scattered, flung to the opposite ends of this sentence. This is particularly problematic because autobiography relies at a most basic level on the referential work of first-person pronouns

such as 'myself,' which identifies the 'I' writing 'I remember' as referring to one and the same person as the 'I' in 'I was born with a caul.'<sup>11</sup>

All this fuss about 'myself' obscures another, prior act of rhetorical dismemberment. The caul is an odd part of David, because it's apart from him but also because if it wasn't, it would be too much. Generally a part of the inner lining of the amnion, the caul isn't strictly a part of David, nor of his mother: it was part of *them* in their togetherness. The caul is a token of the corporeal connection between a mother and her child that's by no means particular to Clara and David. Many of the mothers populating David's *life* maintain a close attachment to their children: Mrs Steerforth laments the disappearance of her 'son ... from whom I have had no separate existence since his birth' (401; ch. 32); Mrs Micawber, whose twins were 'hardly ever ... detached from Mrs. Micawber at the same time' (135; ch. 11) later 'renewed her youth, like the Phoenix,' in Miss Micawber (453; ch. 36); and Sophy 'is quite as much a mother *to* her mother, as she is to the other nine' girls (421; ch. 34). David's emphatic 'myself' echoes disturbingly in Uriah Heep's frequent expression '*mother and self*' (emphasis added), and comically in Mrs Crupp's 'statement of universal application, which fitted every occurrence of her life': 'I'm a mother myself' (419; ch. 34). The fact that David instinctively claims the caul for himself betrays that his idealist textual aesthetics overlap with a bodily aesthetics of what Bakhtin (with reference to the idealist forms of [neo-]classicism) called the 'classical' or individualised body. The classical body, Bakhtin argued, is 'cleansed ... of all the scoriae of birth and development.' In fact, it depends on rejecting such reminders of the 'unfinished and open body' that 'is contained not in the biological individual,' but constantly renews itself as it 'outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits' in a cycle of death and birth (25, 26, 19).<sup>12</sup> Turning the caul, 'scoriae of birth' par excellence, into a problem all about

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<sup>11</sup> This autobiographical equivalence is extremely complex and riven with problems. See Lejeune 197.

<sup>12</sup> The classical body, as a number of feminist scholars following Bakhtin have showed, is also clearly gendered as male. I have found Gail Kern Paster's book *The Body Embarrassed* particularly helpful in this respect.

'myself' is critical to the fiction of a clearly delimited body, a 'myself' unified enough to be dismembered. This fiction of a clearly delimited body is itself dismembering, for it cuts out an 'individual'—David—not only out of his mother, but out of the cycle of life, in much the same way as the autobiographical fiction of a clearly delimited, self-made man severs an individual's progress from the privileged social circumstances that facilitated it.

### **Part two: The second-hand market**

This line of argument, however, disregards the old lady with the hand-basket and misses her important role in both David's dismemberment and his autobiography. Essentially a centripetal reading, it considers the old lady with the hand-basket only in terms of the narrative work she does for the protagonist, presenting her as a non-functional actor carrying out his dismemberment. It dissolves her into a metaphor of David's individual progress, relegating her to a rhetorical figure in the same way in which Betsey disarms King Charles I's head. Whilst it forms only a very small part of the interpretation I want to offer, it's worth following it just a little further.

David's treatment of the old lady with the hand-basket as a character doesn't discourage the kind of centripetal interpretation I have pursued, which considers this character only as a narrative worker. For the old lady with the hand-basket, and in fact the whole episode of the caul's disposal 'in that way,' is marginalised, in a very literal sense. David confines her to the margin of his body of text—its very beginning—getting this troublesome topic out of the way as soon as possible, one might infer. The paragraph I cited above—it's the novel's fourth—continues:

I was present myself, and I remember to have felt quite uncomfortable and confused, at a part of myself being disposed of in that way. The caul was won, I recollect, by an old lady with a hand-basket, who, very reluctantly, produced from it the stipulated five shillings, all in halfpence, and twopence halfpenny short—as it took an immense time and a great waste of arithmetic, to endeavour without any effect to prove to her. It is a fact which will be long remembered as remarkable down there, that she was never drowned, but died triumphantly in bed, at ninety-two. I have understood that it was, to the last, her proudest boast, that she never had been on the water in her life, except upon a bridge; and that over her tea (to which she was extremely partial) she, to the last, expressed her indignation

at the impiety of mariners and others, who had the presumption to go ‘meandering’ about the world. It was in vain to represent to her that some conveniences, tea perhaps included, resulted from this objectionable practice. She always returned, with greater emphasis and with an instinctive knowledge of the strength of her objection, ‘Let us have no meandering.’  
Not to meander, myself, at present, I will go back to my birth. (2; ch. 1)

Importantly, this is the only instance in the whole novel of David leaving the strict chronological order of recollection. Irène Simon points out David’s ‘careful selection and ordering of his materials’ (44). And indeed, everywhere else *David Copperfield* is confined to two temporal planes: the plane of the recollector, and the strict chronology of David’s progress. The recollector may choose to briefly merge these two planes when he slips into free indirect discourse, or adumbrate his present knowledge of future/past events as part of the remembering-process.<sup>13</sup> But he never jumps through time as he does here—not just once, by ten years, but again, by an unspecified number of years to the time of the old lady’s death.

My initial, centripetal reading of the episode with David’s caul marginalises this character in the depreciatory sense. Since it is only interested in her as an agent of dismemberment, this reading would likely go on to infer that the recollecting David’s marginalisation of this character constitutes a form of abjection: depreciating the old lady, he reestablishes the distinction between self and Other that was threatened by the caul as a reminder of David’s, and Clara’s, dismemberment.<sup>14</sup> The character of the old lady with the hand-basket is compressed and concentrated in this anachronistic manoeuvre, this reading would suggest. She is allowed to repeat her eccentricities—the halfpence, the boasts of never having been on the water, the partiality to tea, the injunctions not to ‘meander’—only ‘iteratively;’ her stubborn repetitiveness is communicated exclusively through bits of phrasing such as ‘without any effect,’ ‘to the last,’ ‘always.’ Summarising her in these terms, the centripetal reading would observe, the recollecting David actively forecloses the affective and comedic vigour of the old lady with the hand-basket. He not only transplants

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<sup>13</sup> Chapter 3 has an often-cited example: ‘There has been a time since..., when I have asked myself the question, would it have been better for little Em’ly to have had the waters close above her head that morning...’ (31).

<sup>14</sup> On abjection, see Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*.

her from the middle to the very margin or boundary of the text, this interpretation would conclude, but further confines her there, taking care to fully wind her down before he begins his *life* a second time, how he meant to begin: without meandering.

Against this line of argument I want to set the proposition that by compressing her character, the recollecting David does indeed concentrate the old lady's affective vigour, but in the sense of intensifying it; and that this summary presentation of her repetitive character is in fact what elicits her caricaturesque potential. The old lady's idiosyncrasies, unlike Mrs Gamp's or Susan Nipper's, pivot on what she says rather than how she says it, and what is fun in summary may have proven tedious when painstakingly accumulated. What's more, I want to argue that when David squeezes the old lady with the hand-basket in the margin of his *life*—in that troublesome grey area between what should and what shouldn't be a part of David's progress—he actually puts her in a particularly powerful position. 'All margins are dangerous,' Douglas argues in *Purity and Danger*. 'If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins' (121). 'Any structure of ideas' refers to any *ordered* structure. Douglas is interested in societal ideas of pollution: that which is considered dirty, defiling or impure in the context of the structure and must therefore be rejected or expelled. For Douglas it is rejection that creates order. Thus 'order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made' (94). To achieve order, that which doesn't belong—in the case of David's autobiographical text, that which isn't a 'part of his progress'—must be excluded. 'Rules of avoidance' that set out what is 'dirty' or 'disorderly,' according to Douglas, create 'a visible public recognition of [the] boundaries' of a given 'structure of ideas' (159). An ordered structure of ideas, whether that be a whole society, an individual body, or the account of a life, is thus consolidated, given shape to, in its extreme margins, where what is 'orderly' or 'in order' is separated from what is 'disorderly.' According to Douglas's thinking, cleaning up the boundary of his body (by marginalising the old lady in his text, putting this mere

human detail in its subordinate place), the recollecting David positions his ‘irritants’—the caul and the old lady with the hand-basket—precisely where the orderly, carefully restricted textual body of his autobiography is most vulnerable. What’s more, I will argue that he does so knowingly. For by the time he begins writing his *life*, as we’ll see, David has become an expert in personal margins and the difficulties they pose for autobiographical individualisation.

Admittedly, the old lady with the hand-basket doesn’t strike one as particularly dangerous.<sup>15</sup> She doesn’t really want David’s caul, and she doesn’t do anything with it once she’s got it. But this comic character’s crotchety stubbornness is deceptive. For importantly, it is not dismemberment per se that disturbs David. ‘I was present myself, and I remember to have felt quite uncomfortable and confused, at a part of myself being disposed of in that way.’ *In that way*—the qualification is odd, overshadowing the fears of dispersal that my initial reading focused on. It implies that David would have felt less (or perhaps not at all?) uncomfortable and confused if a part of himself had been disposed of in some other way—say straight away after his birth, at ‘the low price of fifteen guineas’ as advertised.<sup>16</sup> But the advertisement, we remember, had been a ‘dead loss;’ the caul flopped and was withdrawn from the market. As far as the caul is concerned, dismemberment specifically poses a problem insofar as it has made the caul available for being ‘disposed of’ in that mysterious, ominous ‘way’. But in what way precisely, and how is the old lady with the hand-basket entangled in it?

Without wholly dismissing the thought of dismemberment, let’s note that David never experiences the caul as a body part, only as a commodity: something that’s advertised, put to

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<sup>15</sup> Those who discuss the old lady with the hand-basket tend to consider her harmless, a joke at best. See, for example, Fromer 185.

<sup>16</sup> A not unreasonable price, as Forbes’s findings suggest. K. J. Fielding has suggested that Dickens based his price of fifteen guineas on an observation in *Suffolk Words and Phrases* by Edward Moor, who noted having seen a caul advertised to ‘captains, merchants, and seafaring people’ at this price in September 1822 (qtd. in K. J. Fielding 288).

market and withdrawn again, something that won't sell. But the raffle is different. It 'disposes of the caul not only at random, but more or less desperately, at any price that will be got for it. The caul is exposed as clutter rather than a valuable here. Having lain around for a decade among the other Murdstonian junk, the caul is essentially a used good. This is reflected in the price that can be got for it: whether the proceeds from the raffle go to Murdstone or to a charitable cause (both kinds of raffle seem to have existed at the time), the 6 pounds, 4 shillings, 9 pence halfpenny raised come nowhere near the caul's worth when it was new. And even then it remains a subject of barter, as the old lady with the hand-basket tries to scrimp her halfpence. 'In that way,' then, means second-hand.

The second-hand market remains in many respects uncharted territory across academic disciplines. Second-hand trade and consumption have become of interest to both cultural studies and economics only very recently, and the challenges second-hand trade poses for theories of consumption and the commodity chain can so far only be conjectured, as Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe show in their introduction to *Second-Hand Cultures*. Historically too, the role of the second-hand market has been only very partially explored, especially during the Victorian period.<sup>17</sup> As far as Dickens's writing is concerned at any rate, second-hand trade constitutes an integral part of Victorian life. Beyond the distrained goods, public auctions, pawnbrokers, 'Jews' (old-clothes dealers), brokers, brokers' shops and brokers' men, Marine-store shops, rag-and-bone shops, various kinds of second-hand-clothes shops (from Monmouth-Street to Holywell-street), rout-furniture-warehouses,

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<sup>17</sup> As Jon Stobart and Ilja Van Damme write in their introduction to the immensely useful *Modernity and the Second-Hand Trade*, '[a]nalyse of particular times and places have been useful in bringing attention to a largely neglected research field, but can only be considered a starting point' (10). It was long assumed that the second-hand economy declined steeply at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as production and distribution systems became increasingly efficient, swamping the market with new goods that were both affordable and fashionable. See, for example, Chapman 49, 58. Recent research shows that the second-hand trade was much more resilient and adaptive: whilst it may have declined with certain consumer groups in certain areas, especially middle-class women in London, it flourished elsewhere and even unlocked new consumer groups. See especially Toplis and Jones.



ladies' childbed-linen monthly loan societies, and silversmiths in *Sketches by Boz*,<sup>18</sup> suppliers of second-hand goods in Dickens's novels range from scavengers to auctioneers, including Fagin and his boys; Mr Lively of Snow Hill;<sup>19</sup> Scaley and Tix; Little Nell's grandfather (in theory, at least); Montague Tigg's go-to pawnbroker, David, who alone seems immune to Tigg's sweet-talking; Old Joe of Joe's beetling shop; Mr Brogley, 'sworn broker and appraiser, who kept a shop where every description of second-hand furniture was exhibited in the most uncomfortable aspect' (*Dombey* 115; ch. 9); Good Mrs Brown; as well as the 'herds of shabby vampires, Jew and Christian, the strangers fluffy and snuffy, and the stout men with the napless hats' who attend the sale of the Dombey household (790; ch. 59); Krook; Matthew Bagnet; Mr Venus; Old Harmon; Riah; and Pleasant Riderhood, who 'keep[s] what was popularly called a Leaving Shop' (*Our Mutual Friend* 345; bk. 2, ch. 12); Mr Sapsea, 'Aukshneer' (*Drood* 209; ch. 18); and Cloisterham's 'single pawnbroker' who 'offers vainly an unredeemed stock for sale' (*Drood* 23; ch. 3); as well as of course the scores of old clothes-men frequenting the streets of Dickensian London, not least among them the 'Jew,' who, having bought Oliver's rags from a servant at Brownlow's, enables Fagin to track the boy down and return him to his old life among the thieves (84; ch. 14). Jingle's distinctive green coat is second hand, and 'had evidently in those times adorned a much shorter man' (*Pickwick* 13; ch. 2); Bounderby boasts of having sold, as a child, 'the blacking bottles that I was overjoyed to use in cleaning boots with, ... when they were empty for a farthing a-piece' (*Hard Times* 197; bk. 2,

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<sup>18</sup> See 'The Beadle—The Parish Engine—The Schoolmaster' for distrained goods (17); 'The Boarding-house' for public auctions (361); 'Brokers' and Marine-store Shops' for pawnbrokers (213), brokers (211) and marine-store shops (213); 'The Pawnbroker's Shop' for silversmiths, another pawnbroker as well as another marine-store shop (222); 'The Streets—Morning' for 'Jews' (72); 'Meditations in Monmouth-street' for second-hand-clothes shops (96); 'The New Year' for rout-furniture houses (262); 'Seven Dials' for rag-and-bone-shops and yet more brokers (94); 'A Visit to Newgate' has yet another pawnbroker (239); brokers' men feature in 'The Broker's Man' (43) and 'Shops and Their Tenants' (83); finally, see 'The Ladies' Societies' for ladies' childbed-linen monthly loan societies (52).

<sup>19</sup> On *Oliver Twist's* economy of second-hand handkerchiefs in particular, see John O. Jordan's essay 'The Purloined Handkerchief.'

ch. 7); Wemmick banks on portable property;<sup>20</sup> and Bradley Headstone attacks Eugene Wrayburn dressed ‘in rough water-side second-hand clothing’ that imitates Rogue Riderhood’s, who later uses them to blackmail Headstone (*Our Mutual Friend* 618; bk. 4, ch. 1). Second-hand goods range from Arthur Gride’s favourite suit, ‘the bottle green’ (‘there was—he, he, he!—a tarnished shilling in the waistcoat pocket,’ *Nickleby* 631; ch. 51), to children (‘Mrs Lirriper’s Lodgings’ 523) to a ‘LADIES’ SCHOOL door-plate’ (*Our Mutual Friend* 42; bk. 1, ch. 4).

In *David Copperfield*, the caul is only the first of many of David’s possessions that are ‘disposed of’ second-hand, in that way. And many of these exchanges are, like that with the old lady with the hand-basket, more or less involuntary on David’s part. His waistcoat and coat David reluctantly sells at a couple of slop shops on the way to Dover, but mostly his participation in the second-hand market is anything but intentional:<sup>21</sup> the long-legged man with the donkey-cart takes off with his whole box; the violent tinker takes his silk handkerchief; then there is the ‘handy young man; against whom I had conceived a prejudice, in consequence of meeting him in the Strand, one Sunday morning, in a waistcoat remarkably like one of mine, which had been missing since the former occasion’ (351; ch. 28). Next to clothing, household goods are especially prone to being pilfered, from brandy (Mrs Crupp), teaspoons and groceries (Mary Anne), to Dora’s bonnet (the young person of genteel appearance), more clothes (pawned by the washerwoman), Dora’s name (the servant with a taste for cordials), Dora’s watch (the young page), wine, bread, sirloins of beef, and sheets (the cook). Apart perhaps from the edibles,<sup>22</sup> these items are not retained by the perpetrators, but directly entered into second-hand circulation—the page immediately spends what he got for Dora’s watch ‘in incessantly riding up and down between London and Uxbridge

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<sup>20</sup> On Wemmick’s financial strategies see Grass 85.

<sup>21</sup> Alison Toplis’s recent research into the second-hand economy’s relationship with theft during the Victorian period suggests that Dickens may not be exaggerating at all in this respect.

<sup>22</sup> Rebecca Stern points out that marine shops would also happily take ‘extra’ food off people’s hands (82).

outside the coach' (590; ch. 48). All these things belong to David and yet go astray, as the boundary between what's his and what isn't is constantly violated.

The old lady with the hand-basket, the long-legged man with the donkey-cart, the violent tinker, the handy young man, Mrs Crupp, Mary Anne, the young person of genteel appearance, the washerwoman, the servant with a taste for cordials, the young page, the cook—these people are not part of some bold conspiracy against David and Dora. Rather, I want to suggest, there is something the matter with personal property in this novel that attracts these characters' transgressions. Writing in *Capital*, almost two decades after the publication of *David Copperfield*, Marx assumed that once it has been exchanged, a commodity 'falls out of circulation into consumption' (211). 'Even when the commodity is sold over and over again', he clarifies in a footnote, 'it falls, when definitely sold for the last time, out of the sphere of circulation into that of consumption' (ibid.). In *David Copperfield* this state of 'definitely' is always just out of reach. Commodities' metamorphoses remain incomplete insofar as they are always reversible. Possessions, in *David Copperfield*, are always 'haunted by the spectre of dispossession,' in Peter Stallybrass's words ('Marx's Coat' 135). For there is nothing, it seems, that the second-hand market won't find a buyer for. The old lady with the hand-basket, as uncomfortable as David with her purchase, constitutes an exaggerated specimen of this buyer who will be found, by hook or by crook, and whose spending power threatens the concept of personal property.

It is somewhat of a curiosity that David's associations with second-hand commerce are strictly negative, especially in a novel that is so strongly interested in personal finance, from Dora's hopeless endeavours with the 'immense account-book' (550; ch. 44) to Mr Micawber's wise advice, '[a]nnual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery' (150; ch. 12). For a knowledge and understanding of the second-hand market was an indispensable resource for building economic resilience for all except the

very wealthy. Victorian advice manuals ‘recommended homemakers to purchase the best furniture that they could afford,’ Clive Edwards and Margaret Ponsonby write, ‘partly because such goods could fetch a reasonable price if resold’ (96). This advice reflects the rise in the nineteenth century of cheap, mass-produced commodities, especially clothing and furniture.<sup>23</sup> It was also good advice for a century of exceptional economic instability, when even established families like the Dombey household could find themselves in need of selling off the furniture. It seems to have been by no means uncommon in the Victorian era to take into account and even count upon the possibility to sell off a commodity when one first purchased it. In Dickens the second-hand economy even allows homemakers to buy not just the best furniture that they could afford, but better. Take Mrs Pipchin, who snatches up an easy chair—‘late a favourite chair of Mr. Dombey’s’—when the Dombey household is sold up late in *Dombey and Son* (794; ch. 59). Mrs Pipchin is rather smitten with this new possession of hers. Interestingly, at least part of her satisfaction seems to lie in the chair’s evident resale value. ‘People have had misfortunes before now,’ she says, ‘and been obliged to part with their furniture. I’m sure *I* have!’ (792). Experienced in navigating the financial instabilities of the nineteenth century, Mrs Pipchin knows that a good stock of possessions helps ensure financial stability. She buys the easy chair in the knowledge that she can convert it back into cash if she should ever again find herself in financial difficulties, as Dombey finds himself now. The thriving, highly diversified second-hand economy ensured that there would be a market for used goods, allowing people like Dombey to invest in quality, to spend money on furniture which they might otherwise have put aside for a rainy day. At the same time, the wide availability of used but well-made goods enabled those of lesser means, like Mrs Pipchin, to buy better quality than *they* could afford.

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<sup>23</sup> *Sketches* already referred to furniture ‘adapted to the taste, or rather to the means, of cheap purchasers...: the wood as green as the trees in the Park, and the leaves almost as certain to fall off in the course of a year’ (210). Such low-quality goods had to be replaced much more often than a good homemaker could like.

As a commodity was bought and sold and perhaps sold again, the initial outlay was effectively split, though over time and with a number of middlemen and -women taking a cut. Mr Dombey buys the easy chair at full retail price, but he gets part of his money back when he sells it to Mrs Pipchin, who in turn can expect to raise some money on it if she should find herself in financial difficulties again.<sup>24</sup> We get here a glimpse of an alternative model of consumption that is essentially communal. In the greater context of the Dickensian second-hand economy, to furnish a home is then not simply to spend money, but to *invest* it. Household effects constitute a kind of family emergency fund, and at times of financial crisis the wisdom of individual investment choices would prove itself. Before the sale of Dombey's household

herds of shabby vampires, Jew and Christian, over-run the house, sounding the plate-glass mirrors with their knuckles, striking discordant octaves on the Grand Piano, drawing wet forefingers over the pictures, breathing on the blades of the best dinner-knives, punching the squabs of chairs and sofas with their dirty fists, touzling the feather-beds, opening and shutting all the drawers, balancing the silver spoons and forks, looking into the very threads of the drapery and linen, and disparaging everything. (790; ch. 59)

Clearly, a lot of responsibility inhered in the purchase of household effects, down to every individual dinner knife.<sup>25</sup> According to the gendered split between (men's) work and (women's) consumption that is associated with the separation of spheres, these important choices are traditionally assumed to have been women's, though the question to what extent Dickens's writing reflects this gendered division requires further research in my view.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Pawnshops allowed for a second model of consumption that was detrimental rather than sustainable. In 'Marx's Coat,' Peter Stallybrass shows how Karl Marx would pawn his coat to pay bills only to redeem it again as soon as he could in order 'to situate him as a suitable citizen to be admitted to the Reading Room' at the British Museum, where he had to do research to earn money (184). This system made available to Marx a coat which he couldn't afford to own, but at a much higher price (the coat's purchase price plus several times the pawnbroker's interest) paid in instalments.

<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in *A Christmas Carol* Scrooge's things are 'severally examined and appraised by Joe' before he makes an offer for them (68). 'Ah! you may look through that shirt till your eyes ache; but you won't find a hole in it, nor a threadbare place. It's the best he had, and a fine one too,' Scrooge's washerwoman haggles with the second-hand dealer over the shirt her employer was to be buried in (69).

<sup>26</sup> It is John Jarndyce who furnishes Esther and Woodcourt's home in *Bleak House*, and Pip who 'had been always decorating [his and Herbert's] chambers in some quite unnecessary and inappropriate way or other' in *Great Expectations* (169; ch. 27). Dickens himself, Bodenheimer shows, insisted on micromanaging his several households himself (ch. 5).

Dunagan Osborne has recently argued that an important ‘mechanism of heteronormativity’ was that middle-class wives *felt* ownership of ‘[domestic] objects through access, proximity, use, and emotional connection’ without in fact having any legal claim on them (361). ‘Such unofficial ownership,’ she writes, ‘did not pose a threat to men’s legal ownership of economic power’ (ibid.). With the second-hand market in mind, however, the purchase of household effects gave a woman considerable influence on her husband’s finances, despite the fact that under coverture she purchased them *for him* and with *his* money. Especially in families who lived on low incomes or had no (other) savings, women were thus effectively tasked with the management of their husband’s personal finances—a circumstance that, as Hammerton shows in *Cruelty and Companionship* not unfrequently became a point of contention in domestic disputes (114).

As far as Dickens’s novels go, women are also often directly involved in second-hand businesses, like the wife of the keeper of the book-stall in the City Road where David ‘disposes of the Micawbers’ books. ‘More than once, when I went there early,’ David recalls,

I had audience of him in a turn-up bedstead, with a cut in his forehead or a black eye, bearing witness to his excesses over-night (I am afraid he was quarrelsome in his drink), and he, with a shaking hand, endeavouring to find the needful shillings in one or other of the pockets of his clothes, which lay upon the floor, while his wife, with a baby in her arms and her shoes down at heel, never left off rating him. Sometimes he had lost his money, and then he would ask me to call again; but his wife had always got some—had taken his, I dare say, while he was drunk—and secretly completed the bargain on the stairs, as we went down together. (141; ch. 11)

Hammerton puts pawning at the top of the list of Victorian ‘women’s survival strategies’ (114). But David is here passing between two women trying to provide for their families. Whereas Mrs Micawber is converting property into cash, the wife of the keeper of the bookstall has completely taken control over her husband’s finances. Hammerton writes that ‘[s]mall retail businesses often survived only through a wife’s intervention and management if a husband neglected it and turned to heavy drinking’ (ibid.). This particular small retail business depends precisely on the prescient purchase of goods for resale. The woman conducts it in

secret, with money she has taken from her husband—only a small step from pawning, which was also frequently considered an act of thieving when done behind a husband's back.

In his *Life of Charles Dickens*, John Forster claimed that David's account of the bookstall was taken 'word for word' from an 'account of the sales, as they actually occurred and were told to me long before David was born': an account of Dickens's own experience when his father was first imprisoned in the Marshalsea (21-2). 'Almost everything' the family owned, Forster explains, 'by degrees was sold or pawned, little Charles being the principal agent in these sorrowful transactions' (21). Whilst Dickens, as a young boy, may indeed have considered these transactions 'sorrowful,' it's important to note that David, as young boy, certainly doesn't. David is eager to help, and 'begged her to make use of me to any extent' once he understands that Mrs Micawber is asking him to sell off their belongings. He thinks back to these transactions as 'expeditions' and notes that 'there was a peculiar relish in these meals' provided of the proceeds, 'which I well remember' (141; ch. 11). 'Encamp[ing] in the two parlors of the emptied house in Windsor Terrace' holds more excitement. When Mrs Micawber and her children finally join Mr Micawber in prison, David moves into 'a quiet back-garret' of his own, 'and when I took possession of it, with the reflection that Mr. Micawber's troubles had come to a crisis at last, I thought it quite a paradise' (143). David's relished adventures in poverty become shameful only as he first remembers them, from a position of newly achieved middle-class stability in Canterbury. Only then does David realise that '[t]here are grades in pawning as in every thing else, and distinctions must be observed even in poverty,' as Boz had observed in 'The Pawnbroker's Shop' (222). Although the fashionable second-hand market grew considerably during Dickens's career, as antique furniture in particular began to capture the imagination of the upper and upper-middle classes,<sup>27</sup> Dickens's characters tend to come in touch with the second-hand market on their

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<sup>27</sup> For a detailed account of the rising trend in antique furniture see Edwards and Ponsonby.

way down rather than up. ‘Pawnbrokers’ duplicates, those turnpike tickets on the road of Poverty,’ the narrator of *Bleak House* observes (171; ch. 11). The pawnings, executions, furniture sales, and stolen handkerchiefs that characterise the second-hand market in Dickens’s texts clearly associate it with the lower classes, with thieves, crooks, prostitutes and all those who somehow find themselves struggling financially, who are constantly engaged in ‘calculations of ways and means’ like Mrs Micawber (140; ch. 11), or find themselves grudging their luck in a raffle as they reluctantly count out their halfpence like the old lady with the hand-basket.

For anyone who can afford to avoid it, it seems to be shameful to become involved with the second-hand market, as the younger Martin Chuzzlewit’s excessive hesitations to pawn his watch prove. The narrator notes that ‘he would have waited until after dark for this purpose, though it had been the longest day in the year, and he had begun it without a breakfast’ (219; ch. 13). Mrs Micawber, who prides herself on having married beneath her station, is quick to invoke this disgrace when she finds herself contemplating the fact ‘that there is nothing to eat in the larder.’ [T]o me, with my recollections of papa and mama, these transactions are very painful,’ she tells David (140-1; ch. 11). And eventually David, who considers himself, as Poovey pointed out, inherently middle-class,<sup>28</sup> comes to consider any association with this market as deeply humiliating, too. Granted ‘another Beginning’ in Canterbury, it is specifically his intimate knowledge of the second-hand market that he fears might injure his reputation with the other boys at Doctor Strong’s school:

troubled as I was, by my want of boyish skill, and of book-learning too, I was made infinitely more uncomfortable by the consideration, that, in what I did know, I was much farther removed from my companions than in what I did not.... Was there anything *about me* which would reveal my proceedings in connexion with the Micawber family—all those pawnings, and sellings, and suppers—in *spite of myself*? Suppose some of the boys had seen me coming through Canterbury, wayworn and ragged, and should find me out? (195; ch. 16, emphases added)

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<sup>28</sup> He notes that at Murdstone and Grinby’s ‘my conduct and manner were different enough from [the other boys]’ to place a space between us’ (139; ch. 11).



David worries that his ungentle past, characterised by ‘pawings, sellings,’ and those repasts of ‘peculiar relish’ Mrs Micawber provided on the money raised, has somehow taken hold in him (‘about me’) unbeknownst, ‘in spite of myself.’ Here again, ‘myself’ has to assert itself and this is again about drawing the boundary of the self, about clarifying that his part in the second-hand market is no part of himself, no part of his real middle-class ‘me.’ In a fascinating twist, these worries about that which mustn’t be a part of himself come to rest on the painful memory of the self *minus* some of its parts: on the ‘wayworn and ragged’ figure David had made without his coat and waistcoat, both of which he had sold on the way to Dover in order to buy food. Curiously, David’s middle-class get-up seems to be more ‘himself’ than his actual body here.

David successfully accomplishes his new beginning, graduating from Dr Strong’s school as head boy. He also doesn’t get into serious financial trouble again (though he sells some of his extravagant waistcoats upon hearing of Betsey’s ruin).<sup>29</sup> But he never manages to escape the grasp of the second-hand market, and his inability to do so reflects his lack of ‘firmness.’ Things come to a crisis during his marriage to Dora. ‘I begin to be afraid,’ he says to her, ‘that the fault is not entirely on one side, but that these people all turn out ill because we don’t turn out very well ourselves’ (591; ch. 48). For the Copperfields’ house is so disorderly it seems to encourage further offenses against order. Douglas points out that ‘dirt’ is inherently relative:

Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leaving cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors.... In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications. (35)

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<sup>29</sup> His nightmares at the time are also obsessed with rags, dispersed outfits and second-hand commodities: ‘Now I was ragged, wanting to sell Dora matches, six bundles for a halfpenny; now I was at the office in a nightgown and boots, remonstrated with by Mr. Spenlow on appearing before the clients in that airy attire; ... now I was hopelessly endeavouring to get a license to marry Dora, having nothing but one of Uriah Heep’s gloves to offer in exchange, which the whole Commons rejected’ (431; ch. 35).

These examples present a mild version of the Copperfield household, where the clocks are slow and the meals even slower (and yet undercooked!), Jip ‘walk[s] about the table-cloth’ at dinner parties, and generally ‘nothing had a place of its own’ (548; ch. 44). The result, as Phiz’s illustration ‘Our Housekeeping’ shows, is perfectly chaotic: a jar of pickles on the bookshelf, books on the floor, sheets of music all over the place. But whilst certain things, like the guitar and Jip’s pagoda, are easily recognised, the sheer number of objects, many of which have been dumped on the floor, chairs, desk, and cupboards indiscriminately, creates an overall impression of clutter, individual things turning into one big indistinguishable huddle of stuff. If order has never been established in the household, David’s comment to Dora implies, it is no surprise that the outside boundary of the household should be breached sooner or later, too.

David initially tries to put the responsibility for his property’s tendency to go out of his possession on Dora, not least perhaps because Agnes, the other woman in his life, keeps order effortlessly. “Oh, what an accusation,” exclaimed Dora, opening her eyes wide; “to say that you ever saw me take gold watches! Oh!” (591; ch. 48). David’s relationship with his ‘childwife’ is a cornerstone of *David Copperfield*’s comedy, and this is Dora at her drollest, but she also has a point. Dora doesn’t fare well with the servants, but neither does David, on the contrary. Turning the problems with their household into Dora’s problem, he shirks his own responsibility both as master to their servants and as a partner to Dora. At the same time, Dora’s misinterpretation of David’s intimation that the fault is not all on one side ridicules the wider middle-class tendency to associate the second-hand market with petty crime.<sup>30</sup>

David’s trouble with their property is brought to a comic crisis by the young page who steals and sells Dora’s watch, and who further knows of the other servants’ thievery. The

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<sup>30</sup> The perpetrators of these petty crimes take a more relaxed view. ‘Every person has a right to take care of themselves,’ explains the charwoman who is looking to sell the shirt Scrooge was to be buried in in ‘A Christmas Carol’ (67). ‘They’d have wasted it, if it hadn’t been for me,’ she adds (69).

problem with the young page is that he lets go of his intelligence ‘not in the lump, but by instalments’ in what appears to be a desperate attempt not to lose touch with the Copperfields (590; ch. 48). These uncontrollable outbursts of penitence, rubbing David’s nose in his inability to keep his stuff together, are gruelling because they sabotage David’s attempts to expunge the perpetrator from his life: ‘I got to be so ashamed of being such a victim,’ he recollects,

that I would have given him any money to hold his tongue, or would have offered a round bribe for his being permitted to run away.... I had no peace of my life until he was expatriated, and made (as I afterwards heard) a shepherd of, ‘up the country’ somewhere; I have no geographical idea where. (ibid.)

The parenthesis here emphasises the mild reprise of the anachronic manoeuvre that the recollecting David already resorted to with the old lady with the hand-basket. What makes the page so particularly irksome to David is the fact that after his first transgression, David is unable to shut him up and shake him off. So this character, whose offence is one of repetition, must by no means be allowed to score a repeat performance in the text. His end (note the pun on shepherd, the shearer or ‘fleecer’ of sheep like Dora and David) is therefore forestalled. For David to regain peace of his life—and his *life*—the dispersal of his property must stop, and its agent must be expelled from the autobiographical text: not only turned out of doors but indeed banished from the map of its world altogether.

### **Part three: Dismemberment**

‘I got to be so ashamed of being such a victim.’ David’s use of emphasis in this sentence—so ashamed, *such* a victim—betrays that there is much more at stake than social status in his inability to ward off the greedy clutches of the second-hand market. Intriguingly, David feels that it’s not the page and his fellow perpetrators who are building a track record of petty crime, but he. There seems to be something about him that invites others to take advantage of him and this is shameful. He is a ‘victim’ not in the sense of a random target then, but in the sense of a milksop, a feeble, ineffectual boy who is unable to enforce his boundaries, to

defend what's his. This strong emotional response suggests that the random things that go out of David's possession in the novel have for David a symbolic value over and above their direct use- and, in fact, exchange-value.

In 'Possessions and the Extended Self,' Russel Belk argues that 'key to understanding what possessions mean' in Western capitalist society 'is recognizing that, knowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves' (180). He specifies some of the ways in which possessions have been shown to form a crucial part of what in the social sciences is termed the 'extended self.' These include possessions that allow one to perform certain tasks; possessions, like clothing or a car, that provide a kind of 'second skin' (204); as well as things that store memories or are simply familiar. Joe Gargery covers all three aspects when, awkward and uncomfortable in Pip's lavishly decorated London sitting-room, he says: 'You won't find half so much fault in me, in my forge dress, with my hammer in my hand, or even my pipe' (173; ch. 17).<sup>31</sup> Joe is not just painfully out of place in Pip and Herbert's sitting-room in its 'most splendid appearance' (169). He is not himself: 'I'm wrong in these clothes. I'm wrong out of the forge, the kitchen, or off th' meshes' (173). '[I]dentity,' as Belk writes, 'sometimes may lie more in extended self than in unextended self' (192). As Sambudha Sen has argued, the real extent to which 'we are what we have' however only became clear to Victorians when possessions were 'lost rather than gained' (Belk 180; Sen 237). Sen shows that 'the social embarrassment attendant on loss of personal belongings, especially clothes,' formed the first stage of a systematic 'assault on [workhouse inmates'] sense of self' under the 1834 New Poor Law (236).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> A hammer of course also becomes what Mrs Joe identifies Orlick by.

<sup>32</sup> Dasgupta argues that 'for those' in Dickens 'who live in insecure spaces, where tenancy means dwelling to a strict time-limit ... [t]he act of decorating is a simultaneous act of self-expression and ostentatious display; if, on the one hand, it is a way for young gentlemen to present a version of themselves to the world ..., it is also a deeper emotional impulse. The pictures they paper the walls with are scraps of identity at a time when their identities are still up in the air, cheat sheets to remind them of who they are as they gaze around their lodgings' (107).

The second-hand economy deeply troubles this technology of self in a similar, if de-centralised way. When the broker takes possession of Traddles and Sophy's little round table and flower-pot and stand, these things are revealed to have a symbolic value for Traddles that goes far beyond their direct use-value of parlor-window decoration and affording a visitor 'a place to stand a cup of tea upon' (347; ch. 27). '[R]epresent[ing],' as Ushashi Dasgupta notes, 'both a financial and emotional investment,' they betoken his and Sophy's hopes and dreams for a shared future (101): "It's not a great deal towards the furnishing," said Traddles, "but it's something" (347). Faced with the broker, Traddles 'endured the liveliest apprehensions that his property would be bought by somebody else before he could re-purchase it' (423; ch. 34). Technically, the table and flower pot are no longer his 'property;' in fact, if they were, he would not be able to 're-purchase' them. Although the choice of words in this sentence humorously emphasises this contradiction, even conjuring up a 'somebody else' who might buy Traddles's 'property' at any time, Traddles sees the little round table and Sophy's flower-pot and stand as positively 'their property.' They are theirs, even though at this point in time, they don't actually own them (yet (again))—just as the caul is still David's even though it now belongs to the old lady with the hand-basket. To have the little round table and flower-pot and stand decorate somebody else's parlor-window would be to part with the only tangible token of his and Sophy's shared future during what 'is likely to be a rather long engagement' (346; ch. 27).

Traddles's relationship to the table and flower pot that feel so distinctly *his* is explicitly sentimental. David, on the other hand, obsesses over things that are really quite banal: bedsheets, handkerchiefs, teaspoons.<sup>33</sup> This is particularly striking given the recollecting

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<sup>33</sup> There is no indication that these things have in and of themselves any particular emotional value for David, unlike, for example, Mrs Tulliver's table-cloths in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*—'these cloths,' as she says to her children, 'as I spun myself ... and Job Haxey wove 'em, and brought the piece home on his back, as I remember standing at the door and seeing him come, before I ever thought o' marrying your father! And the pattern as I chose myself—and bleached so beautiful, and I marked 'em so as nobody saw such marking—they must cut the cloth to get it out, for it's a particular stitch. And they're all to be sold—and go into strange people's houses, and perhaps be cut with the knives, and wore out before I'm dead' (bk. 3, ch. 1).

David's concern to exclude what isn't directly part of his progress in order to conform to the aesthetic demands of autobiography. I'd like to suggest that the things that David loses to the second-hand market in *David Copperfield* become valuable precisely as they are taken away from him. Scattered from Uxbridge to I-have-no-geographical-idea-where, these random items come to signify something rather important to the recollecting David: unity, boundedness, collectedness, and the ideas about middle-class masculinity attached to this state. Apart from him, these things represent a clearly delimited togetherness or 'form' that has been violated, and in this respect, they are very much like the caul, recalling the way in which David's sense of self had become linked to his physical body and its parts. This is no coincidence, for second-hand articles (then as now) are generally considered second-hand because they bear traces of their previous owners' use (or neglect)—traces, more precisely, of their previous owners' bodies.<sup>34</sup> As Gregson and Crewe point out with regard to second-hand clothing,

Clothing ... is not just about fashion and adornment, body shape, disguise and aesthetics, or even functionality, but is an extension of our own corporeality. It becomes us; we personalize it and possess it through our own leakiness [referring to all kinds of bodily odour and secretions]. And this corporeal presence matters. It is what makes the recent discards of the unknown Other so troublesome. (171)

The previous owner's ownership has been inscribed on the commodity by their body. Whilst Gregson and Crewe limit their observation to clothing, other research suggests that this phenomenon applies to other kinds of commodities as well, as attested by the lively Victorian discourse around 'divestment rituals': acts that erased bodily traces, especially, as Robin D. Jones explains, scuffs, body odours, and bodily secretions (127).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Traddles and Sophy's table and flower pot and stand have of course not been in use yet.

<sup>35</sup> Divestment rituals are more common than one would expect. Whether you're putting a pair of trousers from the charity shop in the wash, dusting a shelf you got on eBay, painting the dark patches around the light-switches in your new house, or picking the previous owner's cat's hair out of your newly acquired mid-century armchair—these are divestment rituals that seek to erase the previous owner's bodily traces so you can leave your own, marking the commodity as yours. The most well-known divestment ritual in Dickens takes place at Fagin's den, as the boys remove the marks on stolen handkerchiefs, a task that Adam Abraham has argued 'encodes' imitators' plagiaristic way with Dickens's works, which the author had become rather used to by the time he wrote *Oliver Twist* (763-4).

It's precisely this 'corporeal presence' of a previous owner that inspires Boz's 'Meditations in Monmouth-street.' Considering a 'patched and much-soiled skeleton suit' Boz infers:

It had belonged to a town boy, we could see; there was a shortness about the legs and arms of the suit; and a *bagging at the knees*, peculiar to the rising youth of London streets. A small day-school he had been at, evidently. If it had been a regular boys' school they wouldn't have let him play on the floor so much, and *rub his knees so white*. He had an indulgent mother too, and plenty of halfpence, as the numerous *smears of some sticky substance about the pockets, and just below the chin*, which even the salesman's skill could not succeed in disguising, sufficiently betokened. They were decent people, but not overburdened with riches, or he would not have so far outgrown the suit when he passed into those corduroys with the round jacket; in which he went to a boys' school, however, learnt to write—and in ink of pretty tolerable blackness too, if *the place where he used to wipe his pen* might be taken as evidence. (99, emphases added)

The tokens of the boy's habits, family, upbringing and social background—the bagging, white knees, smears and ink stains—are all traces of his body, his running, playing, rubbing, nibbling, growing, wiping body. As Stallybrass points out in 'Marx's Coat,' lasting creases in the elbow of sleeves were called 'memories' in the second-hand clothing business (196). Clothing comes to commemorate its owner's living body in fabric.<sup>36</sup> The trouble with the 'recent discards of the Unknown Other,' then, is that the 'Unknown Other' are not in fact unknown enough.

*David Copperfield* is however more interested in the implications of this corporeal presence for the previous (and frequently lawful) owner: in the strange sensation that something that not only was yours, but that has in fact 'become you,' is now somebody else's. J. Hillis Miller, discussing the passage from 'Meditations in Monmouth-street' I cited above, sees in the relationship between the previous owner and the suits of clothes an interplay of metonymy and metaphor: 'The life which properly belonged to the wearers is transferred to the clothes.... The metonymic reciprocity between a person and his surroundings, his clothes, furniture, house, and so on, is the basis for the metaphorical substitutions so frequent in Dickens's fiction' ('The Fiction of Realism' 13). Metonymy and metaphor both

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Stallybrass's essay 'Worn Worlds. Clothes, Mourning, and the Life of Things.'

describe a transfer of meaning: meaning is carried across, in this case from boy to suit, in a way that keeps it more or less intact and whole, so that the suit can ‘substitute’ for the boy. I want to suggest that something much more uncomfortable is at work here. Dickens’s writing implies that the suit, especially when apart from the boy’s body, cannot in fact be thought apart from it: when the boy ‘rub[s] his knees so white’ ‘*his* knees’ are the suit’s knees; and the suit’s collar has turned into ‘just below the chin.’ Through daily wear, the suit has indeed become an ‘extension’ of the boy’s ‘corporeality,’ as Gregson and Crewe put it. It has literally been incorporated, become part of the body. Life, as Boz’s observations betray, isn’t ‘properly’ limited to the boy’s naked body. It belongs equally to the suit—if not sometimes more so, for whereas skin can be washed, some stains won’t come out of a skeleton-suit.

A body thus conceptualised, a body that incorporates clothing, furniture, and other commodities—my knees my suit’s knees—is a body that is not confined to one place, neatly bounded and held together by a more or less closed layer of skin. Parts can be physically apart from this body—like a chewed-up pen that has rolled into the dust under a sweat-stained sofa—and yet form part of its corporeality. This corporeality is already, so to speak, dismembered. More precisely, it has no self-contained bodily unity to begin with. In a novel like *David Copperfield*, where your property—that which has become incorporated, proper to you—is never properly, conclusively, *definitely* yours, never quite out of reach of the second-hand market, a body thus conceptualised is always at risk of being violated by others. ‘I’ll rip your young body open,’ the tinker on the Dover road prefaces his move on David’s silk handkerchief (159; ch. 13). And the owner of the slop shop in Chatham—another Charles, and in the place where Charles Dickens lived from age five to nine—beats down the price for David’s jacket by letting the boy believe that *he* is the one being ripped off, screaming ‘Oh, my *eyes* and *limbs*, what do you want? Oh, my *lungs* and *liver*, what do you want? Oh, goroo!’—as though David were after *his* parts (157, emphases added). Like the old lady with the hand-basket, Charley also doles out the money ‘in halfpence at a time’ (159).



What's more, in a novel like *David Copperfield*, where your property—that which has become incorporated, proper to you—is constantly being assailed by the second-hand market, your body is bound to become commingled, part by part, with somebody else's. The narrator of *Little Dorrit* observes of those coming into the Marshalsea as the gates open in the morning:

Such threadbare coats and trowsers, such fusty gowns and shawls, such squashed hats and bonnets, such boots and shoes, such umbrellas and walking-sticks, never were seen in Rag Fair. All of them wore the cast-off clothes of other men and women; were made up of patches and pieces of other people's individuality, and had no sartorial existence of their own proper. (87; bk. 1, ch. 9)

Some of the characters who dispossess David of patches and pieces of his individuality over the course of his autobiography become such patchwork creatures, like the handy young man whom David meets in the street wearing his waistcoat. But most of them simply exchange these patches and pieces with others, and they again with others, none of whom appear in the pages of the book. However, when David recollects the characters that carry off parts of him—the old lady with the hand-basket, the young page, Chatham Charley, the long-legged man—in his *life*, he gives them part of his body of text, grafting patches and pieces of *their* textual 'individuality' upon his. Importantly, this patching and piecing takes place in the very margin of David's body of text, at the boundary between what is and what isn't part of his progress, so that the project of creating the textual semblance of a collected, clearly delimited individual is constantly undermined. David's autobiographical 'individuality,' like his bodily 'individuality,' bleeds into others' and theirs into his—none of them, in fact, individualities at all.

Marx famously argued that the 'social relation between the products of labour'—the way in which commodities stand in relation to each other, seemingly independently of the people who are looking to exchange them—reflects, and obscures, relationships between those who produce them (164). Marx is of course talking about producers of commodities rather than first-hand buyers/owners, and about 'the social characteristics of men's [*sic*] own labour' rather than individual human beings (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, as far as *David Copperfield*

is concerned, commodities can be extremely helpful in charting social relationships between men—and women, for, as we have seen, the second-hand market is by no means a male arena in Dickens. These relationships are however not in fact relationships *between* people, for whereas ‘between’ refers to the space that separates distinct entities, what happens in *David Copperfield* through the exchanges of used goods is a blurring of entities, a making *indistinct*. The relationships established through these second-hand exchanges in the novel are illuminated from two points of view: David’s corporeal fraying showcases how patches and pieces of one’s own become worked into others’ bodies, whereas the patching and piecing at the margins of his body of text brings into focus the opposite movement of patches and pieces of others’ textual bodies working into oneself—although these processes of course render the distinction between ‘oneself’ and ‘others’ obsolete. In combination, they manifest a being that is in body and self not merely ‘open’ or un-limited, but social. David ends up textually constructing a subjectivity that fails to be individualised, a subjectivity that is inextricably bound up in all genders and all classes, including the very lowest. This social being exceeds both memory and collection. Neither David nor the reader ever learns who bought his incorporated coat and waistcoat, sheets and teaspoons; or to whom the old lady with the hand-basket bequeathed his caul after she died triumphantly in bed.

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David remembers ‘to have felt quite uncomfortable’ when his caul was disposed of ‘in that way.’ For a long time, having his belongings taken away betokens for David an embarrassing want of knowledge of the world and its people. Traddles loses his table and flower-pot because he naively trusts Mr Micawber and puts his name to a bill for him. And Doctor Strong, the only character to rival David’s long list of dispossessions, also has his head in the clouds. As Alexander Welsh puts it, he ‘is innocent and considerate, but his Dictionary will never be completed or read by anyone’ (116). The Doctor’s lack of suspicion, as Mr Wickfield

calls it (196; ch. 16), manifests itself primarily in a form of extreme charity that has become proverbial among his students:

Outside his own domain, and unprotected, he was a very sheep for the shearers. He would have taken his gaiters off his legs, to give away. In fact, there was a story current among us ..., that on a frosty day, one winter time, he actually did bestow his gaiters on a beggar-woman, who occasioned some scandal in the neighbourhood by exhibiting a fine infant from door to door, wrapped in those garments, which were universally recognised, being as well known in the vicinity as the Cathedral. The legend added that the only person who did not identify them was the Doctor himself, who, when they were shortly afterwards displayed at the door of a little second-hand shop of no very good repute, where such things were taken in exchange for gin, was more than once observed to handle them approvingly, as if admiring some curious novelty in the pattern, and considering them an improvement on his own. (204; ch. 16)

A neat summary of the experiences of Traddles and David: an innocent out in the world is deprived of a piece of property, which is re-entered into circulation ('in exchange for gin') on the second-hand market requiring an assertion of the self ('the Doctor *himself*'). But it also travesties the younger men's perception of the second-hand market, for the Doctor doesn't identify the gaiters as his. This is what makes the beggar-woman's practical joke, for everyone else does recognise the pilfered gaiters—'being as well known in the vicinity as the Cathedral.' Even when he holds the gaiters in his hands, the Doctor doesn't realise that he's been humbugged. He doesn't experience an attack on his sense of self, let alone a dismemberment, because he doesn't recognise the gaiters as a part of himself in any way. He doesn't even recognise them as a possession, ironically discovering 'novelty' and 'improvement' in this object that should be familiar.

This anecdote of Doctor Strong and the beggar-woman follows on the heels of David's worries about his involvement in Mrs Micawber's sellings and pawnings and those meals of 'peculiar relish'—a passage in which the recollected David feels a strong need to edit his story, to clarify what is part and especially what isn't part of himself in order not to feel so far 'removed from my companions,' so different from his middle-class surroundings. These starkly contrasting passages mark an important point in David's development. His arrival at Doctor Strong's school puts him back on track with his middle-class 'hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man' (133; ch. 11). James Buzard has argued that 'the security

of his [David's] accession to mature self-possession,' which Buzard suggests is at the heart of 'the progressivist narrative in *David Copperfield*,' is settled with David's arrival in Canterbury. 'Mature self-possession' is secured, Buzard argues, by David 'surviv[ing]' and putting behind himself the 'attempts to bring him down' the boy met with on his flight from London to Dover (236). What Buzard refers to are the 'attempts' of the young man with the donkey cart, the tinker and Chatham Charley. But these 'attempts to bring him down' are in fact attempts on David's possessions, and as such they have been altogether successful. What's more, such attempts on his possessions continue, and they continue to bring him down, continue to make him feel 'quite uncomfortable' indeed. In *David Copperfield* the only way to not be brought down by the second-hand market, the only way around feeling 'so ashamed of being such a victim,' seems to be to accept that you'll be dispossessed of certain possessions—or to give them away freely, like Doctor Strong. For the Doctor, despite being the butt of beggars' jokes, is happy in his innocence, and, as the famous resolve of the mystery around his wife Annie and her cousin demonstrates, his kindness and 'simple faith' continues to be rewarded. As a boy fresh out of danger and desperate to fit in, David may consider the Doctor's falling prey to the second-hand economy evidence of his naivety. But what turns out to be naive in *David Copperfield* is the belief that the second-hand market can be eluded; the belief that an individualised, clearly delimited existence is a realistic possibility to begin with. Perhaps that's the reason why the Doctor is writing a dictionary rather than an autobiography, a text that is interested in contextualising individual words—in etyma and 'Greek roots' rather than in genteel collectedness and purloined gaiters (203; ch. 16).

At the time of writing his *life* David too seems to have reconciled himself with the social nature of both his body and his textual self. On the novel's first page, even before the episode of the caul, he jokes regarding his assumed privilege to see ghosts: 'I do not at all complain of having been kept out of this property; and *if anybody else should be in the present enjoyment of it*, he is heartily welcome to keep it' (1; ch. 1, emphasis added). This is a double pun on

‘property’ and ‘inheritance,’ both of which can refer to objects and commodities that can be acquired, stolen, or bequeathed, but also to faculties, abilities, or dispositions that can be genetically passed on to a child but not transferred from one person to another. The property here referred to is of course a property in the sense of a faculty or ability. And yet this is a property that is bestowed, like an inheritance, by birth. An inheritance can be passed on or you may in fact be kept out of it by an ‘anybody else,’ as David is by Mr Murdstone—in this respect an inheritance is no different, as Barkis’s frequent exclamations humorously indicate, from a box full of ‘old clothes!’<sup>37</sup> The ability to see ghosts, on the other hand, is (or at least one would assume it to be) something properly proper to David, the kind of property that is not in any way transferable to someone else. But then again, the property that superstition attached to the caul was indeed believed to be fully transferable: it was the *present* owner of the caul who was believed to be lucky. The autobiographer-protagonist of *David Copperfield* here seems well aware of, and even a little bemused by the impossibility of pulling yourself together when somebody else is constantly pulling you apart. It is out of this easy, almost cheerful awareness that the idea of a clearly delimited, (re)collected autobiographical subject will be ultimately unattainable, that he takes the old lady’s farcical injunction not to meander—so characteristically, so thoroughly hers—as his own.

‘Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show’ (I; ch. 1). When David thus states his ambition for his autobiography, a considerable part of the question, I have tried to argue, is whether there can be such an *I*, whether ‘these pages’ can turn out an autobiographical *I* that is apart enough from all those anybody elses—from the old lady with the hand-basket and her unknown heirs to the long-legged young man—to claim this *life* as ‘his own’ and only his.

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<sup>37</sup> Barkis, whose other catch-phrase is ‘Barkis is willin,’ provides a comic commentary on issues of property and inheritance. When opened after his death, his box contains no clothes at all, but, next to Barkis’s money, will, and a lot of rubbish, a ‘silver tobacco-stopper, in the form of a leg,’ another severed body part (381; ch. 31).

The judgment is up to you. But any reader who shirks the choice, who, disregarding its margins, takes that 'I' for granted, performs yet another dismemberment: the interpretative carving out of an individualised subjectivity that David himself feels obliged to attempt, but knows, even in starting, will be virtually impossible to achieve.

# 4

## *Little Dorrit's* Symptomatology of Domestic Terrors

Shortly before his death, Mr Dorrit makes his way to Clennam and Co. to inquire into the mysterious disappearance of Blandois. By the time he reaches the gloomy house, his 'imagination' has been 'so powerfully ... impressed' by the 'mysterious and dismal aspect' of the area, that he is 'half afraid of the dark look of the place' (602; bk. 2, ch. 17).

As there was only one house in the enclosure, there was no room for uncertainty, so he went up the steps of that house and knocked. There was a dim light in two windows on the first floor. The door gave back a dreary, vacant sound, as though the house were empty; but, it was not, for a light was visible, and a step was audible, almost directly. They both came to the door, and a chain grated, and a woman with her apron thrown over her face and head stood in the aperture. (603)

Intriguingly, the formidable Gothic atmosphere exuding from this house, which sounds empty of human life but isn't uninhabited, is here checked by a distinct element of bathos. In a humorous foreshadowing of the anticlimactic revelation of the source of the mysterious noises that haunt the Clennam house (decaying beams), the ghostly chain-grating, the light and the disembodied step that 'came to the door' as of their own accord are revealed to have a very natural origin: Affery Flintwinch, Mrs Clennam's servant. Who is donning a poor excuse of a white sheet, almost as though, in thundering ridicule of Mr Dorrit's anticipation of a ghost, she were about to loudly exclaim 'Boo!'<sup>1</sup> That night, Mr Dorrit's restless mind 'haunted the dismal house' (608). But it's not Jeremiah's 'weird appearance of having hanged himself at one time or other,' or the thought of Mrs Clennam on her 'bier-like sofa' that Mr Dorrit cannot shrug off (37, 33; bk. 1, ch. 3). This is particularly curious considering the terrifying picture of Clennam and Co.—'compound of man and woman, no limbs, wheels,

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<sup>1</sup> 'Exploited by hoaxers and used in literary and pictorial representations over the centuries,' the white sheet was an established cliché by the time *Little Dorrit* was published in 1855-7 (Davies 20).

rusty screw, grimness, and gaiters’—that Flora set up in his mind earlier in the chapter (601). No, it is Affery, by far the least scary of the three, who ‘runs hot’ in Mr Dorrit’s thoughts, or, as he remembers her, ‘the woman with her apron over her face’ (608). In a fascinating twist, the white apron veiling Affery’s face—emblematic of the absence of a ghostly presence on the level of narration—for Mr Dorrit comes to constitute a catalyst of Gothic horror.

Affery’s peculiar habit of throwing her apron over her head, too absurd to curdle blood and yet too weird to be funny, blends terror and comedy in a way that is typical of the Gothic mode in Dickens.<sup>2</sup> This bewildering quirk of hers also turns Affery into a flat character. As E. M. Forster puts it, she ‘can be expressed in one sentence’ (73): ‘the woman with her apron over her face.’ One sentence of which every element bristles with significance.

The apron unmistakably identifies Affery as a servant or ‘domestic’—one who is literally ‘of the home’—stressing the weird relationship between the gloomy home and the woman with her apron thrown over her face. More precisely, blending associations of labour and domesticity, the apron identifies Affery as a female servant, who were considered crucial to the dissemination of ghost stories, and often played a considerable role in Gothic romances themselves.<sup>3</sup> Hiding Affery’s face, there is also something secretive about this apron, and this secrecy is critical to the Gothic vigour of the woman with her apron thrown over her face. At the same time, Affery’s ‘ghastly manner’ is inextricably linked to the ‘pale affrighted face’ the apron covers. Presently,

a dry old man appeared, whom Mr. Dorrit thought he identified by his gaiters, as the rusty screw. The woman was under apprehensions of the dry old man, for she whisked her apron away as he approached, and disclosed a pale affrighted face. ‘Open the door, you fool,’ said the old man; ‘and let the gentleman in.’ (603; bk. 2, ch. 17)

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<sup>2</sup> Bowen suggests that Dickens, ‘like many of his post-Romantic generation,’ often considered the Gothic novel ‘an outdated and intermittently absurd literary form’ (‘Charles Dickens and the Gothic’ 246-7). Cf. Wood 90.

<sup>3</sup> Servants were considered to be superstitious with regard to ghosts until well into the twentieth century (see McCuskey 422). They were also often decried to circulate ghost stories and perpetuate the irrational belief in ghosts, especially in children (Davies 138). Dickens himself remembered the ghost stories ‘that I found I had been introduced to by my nurse before I was six years old’ in his 1860 essay ‘Nurse’s Stories’ (*Selected Journalism* 93).



The 'dry old man' is Affery's husband, and this brief interaction—her hurried removal of the apron, his pejorative epithet—suffices to give Mr Dorrit an understanding of the distribution of power in their relationship. Mr Flintwinch is abusive (and isn't afraid to show it), and his wife is bodily afraid of him. The ghostly whiteness of Affery's 'pale affrighted face' reinforces the sense of Gothic horror that has been disconcerting Mr Dorrit, linking it to Affery's terror of her violent husband.

Thrown over Affery's head, the apron further evokes a maelstrom of associations that resonate strongly with Affery's experience of intimate partner violence. It references the bed sheets traditionally donned by churchyard pranksters, who were not uncommon in the Victorian era. As Owen Davies points out, ghosts were originally believed to appear in the attire they were buried in, which for several centuries had been large white winding sheets for all but the very wealthy, and not uncommonly the bedsheet a person had died on (20). And whilst many people in Victorian England still died in their beds, this was of course also the site where marriages were consummated. At the same time, covering Affery's face, the apron acts as a veil, associated both with the Christian tradition of vilifying the female body, and with the legal doctrine of coverture that had come to consolidate this misogynist tradition in English common law.

This chapter explores the relationship, crystallised in Affery's habit of throwing her apron over her head and face, between the Clennam house's Gothic vibe and Affery's experience of her husband's violence. 'There never was such a house for noises,' Affery says to Arthur. 'I shall die of 'em, if Jeremiah don't strangle me first. As I expect he will' (669; bk. 2, ch. 23). I will argue that Dickens's writing builds on the rudimentary Gothic appeal of Affery's experience—the shadow and gloom, the constant threat of bodily harm—to create an imaginatively 'psychologised,' highly political portrayal of domestic violence. The first section of this chapter, 'Affery, afraid,' contextualises *Little Dorrit's* portrayal of Affery's experience of intimate partner violence within contemporary feminist efforts against

coverture, the legal doctrine whereby, upon marriage, a woman's legal rights and obligations were consolidated into those of her husband. The campaign for married women's right to own property leveraged the existing public outrage with regard to wife-beating, a rhetorical achievement that helped structure public understanding of intimate partner violence around male control. *Little Dorrit*'s exploration of intimate partner violence, too, zooms in on the emotional power structures organising the Flintwinchs' relationship. Affery's name, which was likely inspired by the inscription 'To the Memory of Affery Jeffery (a female)' on a tombstone in Folkestone churchyard,<sup>4</sup> is almost homophonous with 'afraid,' and fear, I will show, is what defines her relationship with her husband. Jeremiah resorts to a wide array of physical violence, threats, and coercive behaviour—strategies of intimidation that have rendered Affery helpless against him. I will suggest that this detailed portrayal of the Flintwinchs' complex power dynamic betrays a degree of insight into intimate partner violence and a complicity with contemporary feminist arguments that demand a re-examination of Dickens's stance on this issue that cut domestic ideology to the quick.

The second section, 'Affery, bodily,' is interested in how *Little Dorrit* depicts Affery's experience of domestic violence. Intriguingly, while Affery is rendered in great psychological complexity, the novel eschews the burgeoning literary interest in 'interiority.' Instead, *Little Dorrit* appropriates one of Gothic romance's favourite tropes, 'emotional display,' for a symptomatological depiction of Affery's state of mind: the novel brings into focus the emotional and psychological impact of domestic violence by showcasing how Jeremiah's abuse perceptibly alters Affery's behaviour, specifically the way she physically carries herself. Affery's maiming fear is however not simply externalised; rather, the symptomatological approach reveals the full scope of her terror, which is both emotional *and* physical. Finally, 'Affery, bodily,' looks at how this symptomatological exploration of

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<sup>4</sup> See *Notes and Queries*, 10th series, IV, Dec. 9, 1905, p. 466.

Affery's experience of abuse becomes entangled with the nagging sense—inspired by Affery's perception of mysterious sounds and tremors—that the Clennam house is haunted.

Central to *Little Dorrit's* critique of intimate partner violence and excessive male 'authority' is the issue of class. Dickens's portrayal of intimate partner violence in *Oliver Twist* has been argued to dissociate the middle and upper classes from the issue of wife-beating. The feminist campaign for married women's property rights, too, has been criticised for focusing their rhetoric on the lower classes. This disproportionate rhetorical emphasis, Ben Griffin points out, served to preserve male authority and, further, helped consolidate 'an alternative strand of liberal discourse which was instrumental in legitimating a project to privilege the wealthy over the poor' (62). It appears, however, that such compromises were necessary prerequisites for reform. As Griffin emphasises in his conclusion, whilst the reformers' focus on the poor and working classes 'was not without costs for the women's movement, ... it proved an essential condition for legislative change if the class and gender identities constructed by legislators were not to be an insuperable obstacle' (87).<sup>5</sup> The often extreme living conditions of the working classes, where a husband's right to seize his wife's earnings could have life-threatening consequences for her and her children, arguably helped illustrate the urgency of reform.<sup>6</sup> As importantly, the focus on the working classes enabled reformers to leverage the public interest in intimate partner violence. While middle-class women's bodies remained mostly taboo until the institution of the divorce court in 1857, working-class female bodies and the damage inflicted on them had been under daily public scrutiny since the passing of the 1828 Offences Against the Person Act. *Little Dorrit's* vivid

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, a case for reform could only be made on behalf of middle- and working-class wives. For, as Lee Holcombe has shown, especially the more successful 1882 Married Women's Property Act must be contextualised within the rigorous legal reforms of the second half of the nineteenth century. Married women's right to own property constituted a prime example of common law and equity law clashing. As Holcombe puts it, 'the rules of equity relating to married women's property were diametrically opposed to the rules of the common law,' privileging those wealthy enough to appeal to equity law (37).

<sup>6</sup> Hester Dethridge, in Wilkie Collins's *Man and Wife* (1870), offers the best summary of the realities of coverture for abused working-class women I have come across. See parts 4-8 of her manuscript (ch. 59).

symptomatological treatment of Affery's experience of domestic violence similarly exploited this loophole offered by the working-class female body.

Hammerton emphasises in *Cruelty and Companionship* that the changes feminists achieved in matrimonial law 'ultimately owed more to the willingness of ordinary women to declare the limits of their submission than to the great names, such as Caroline Norton and her parliamentary allies,' with 'the part played by ordinary "inarticulate" women's publicly advertised grievances' especially being likely gravely underestimated by scholars (165). Whilst focusing the conversation on the poor and working classes allowed middle and upper class men—not least the MPs working for reform in parliament—to dissociate themselves from an allegedly more ruffian working-class masculinity, I want to suggest that the spotlight on working-class women's experience of marital cruelty affords a glimpse of the construction of working-class femininities in action. Working-class women were critical to the feminist campaign *as women*. Charwomen, factory workers, milliners, domestic servants were talked about, emphatically, as women, and these conversations routinely refer to working-class femininity. A particularly obvious example provides Joseph Charles Parkinson's 'Slaves of the Ring,' a long article Dickens ran in *All the Year Round* to support George Shaw-Lefevre's Married Women's Property Bill of 1868:

Polly Comber earns her two pounds a week at factory work, and is in constant employment. She is cursed with a husband who left her, years ago, but who turns up periodically to break up her home, to sell the bits of furniture she has gathered together laboriously, to seize upon her savings, and then to wallow in the mire again, leaving her to begin her nest-building for herself and the little children anew.... She is prudent, self-denying, industrious, cleanly, God-fearing, virtuous. The man she married, is practically changed into a Beast. (86)

Clearly, the middle-class author is embellishing and simplifying Polly Comber's character here. But note Parkinson's assertion that in Polly's circumstances, the 'prudent, self-denying, industrious, cleanly, God-fearing, virtuous'—in one word, the 'feminine' thing to do, is to work full time at a factory, to earn money which *her husband* spends, and not least, to be a single mother: to venture out into the public sphere to earn money *and* to make a comfortable home for her family. Whilst this is a particularly plump example, the sense that

femininity manifests itself differently in different economic circumstances is commonplace in accounts of the exploitation and abuse working-class women suffered under coverture.

It is my contention that *Little Dorrit's* Affery, too, is portrayed explicitly as a woman, and demands to be read as a woman. A woman who is old and ugly and not at all matronly in figure, and yet is to Arthur 'one of the few agreeable early remembrances I have' (670; bk. 2, ch. 23). A woman for whom standing up for the child she helped bring up means to stand up to her husband. 'I'll up for Arthur when he has nothing left, and is ill, and in prison, and can't up for himself. I will, I will, I will, I will!' as Affery puts it, finding language that is assertive whilst betraying great apprehension, language that is unmistakably lower-class and unmistakably, gender-bendingly phallic, and yet strongly resounds with those feminine qualities, with emotional warmth, care, and selflessness (746; bk. 2, ch. 30).

### **Part one: Affery, afraid**

A woman as soone as she is married is called covert, in Latine nupta, that is, *veiled*, as it were, clouded and over-shadowed, [that is,] ... she is continually sub potestate viri.

*The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights* 125, emphasis added

Aprons thrown over faces like veils are shorthand for female reservations to marriage in Dickens. Rosa Bud welcomes Edwin Drood 'a charming little apparition with its face concealed by a little silk apron thrown over its head,' only a couple of chapters before breaking off their engagement, which had been arranged by their fathers (17; ch. 3). And in *David Copperfield*, Peggotty reacts to Barkis's advances by 'beg[inning] to laugh, and thr[owing] her apron over her face' (94; ch. 8). Peggotty and Barkis end up getting along well enough, but she does marry him out of economic necessity, in the absence of 'a suitable service' after losing her place at Murdstone's (116; ch. 10). 'I wouldn't have him if he was made of gold,' she had told her mistress only three months before (95; ch. 8).

By the time Dickens was writing *Little Dorrit*, the veil as a sign for coverture had become irrevocably entangled in the rhetoric of the burgeoning feminist movement. As recently as 1854, Barbara Leigh Smith had cited in her highly popular pamphlet *A Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women; Together with a Few Observations Thereon* the passage from its 1632 precursor, *The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights*, that serves as my epigraph, linking the veil to women's precarious legal status under coverture. Leigh Smith was one of the leading figures in the persistent feminist efforts for married women's right to own property, leading eventually to the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, which, though its immediate impact was somewhat underwhelming, removed many of the legal ramifications of coverture for women and helped pave the way for the women's suffrage movement.<sup>7</sup>

One of the rhetorical corner-stones of the feminists' long and arduous campaign to reform marital rights, especially in its early stages, was their ability to take advantage of the heated public discussion around 'wife-beating' or 'marital cruelty'—what is today referred to as intimate partner violence.<sup>8</sup> Since the 1828 Offenses Against the Person Act had come into effect, newspapers daily reported cases of working-class marital violence brought before the magistrates, often in gruesome detail. Early feminist campaigners were keen to leverage the attention these assaults garnered. On 14 March 1856, Leigh Smith presented to Parliament the *Petition for Reform of the Married Women's Property Law*, backed by 26,000 signatures, which listed the fact '[t]hat newspapers constantly detail instances of marital

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<sup>7</sup> It has recently been argued that the intended and actual effects of the 1882 act, which resulted from the efforts of both predominantly female feminists and a group of exclusively male MPs, have been sugar-coated by historians. See Griffin for a detailed discussion of how the 1882 act helped 'safeguard male authority' and consolidate class differentiation (83), as well as Hayward for an overview of recent criticism of the Act (74).

<sup>8</sup> Whilst the Victorian terms explicitly refer to violence between husband and wife, men's assaults against women 'who had been living with [them]' were also included in the discussion, seemingly without reservation (Hansard, HC Deb 10 March 1853 vol 124 c 1416). For a detailed account of how the debate around marital cruelty facilitated marital rights reform see Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship*, as well as Surridge's introduction to *Bleak Houses*.

oppression, “wife-beating” being a new compound noun lately introduced into the English language,’ as a direct result of the coverture doctrine (238). Harriet Martineau was happy to put her name to the petition, commenting sarcastically ‘that there is joy in the spectacle of all sorts and conditions of men trying to explain their attitude towards wife beating!’ (qtd. in Garnett 310). Two years earlier, in her polemic *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century*, Caroline Norton had detailed her own experience of intimate partner violence at her husband’s hands ‘as an example of what can be done under the English law of 1853’ (22).

Dickens was well aware and in fact involved in these interlocking conversations around the legal doctrine of coverture and marital cruelty. He followed the detailed coverage of the Norton’s renewed dispute with her husband in the press. In a letter to Angela Burdett Coutts he refers to the *Times’s* account of a Thrupp v. Norton hearing on 19 August 1853, and it is very unlikely that he missed Caroline Norton’s long letter to the editor in the next day’s edition.<sup>9</sup> In turn, Norton epigraphed *English Laws for Women* with a quotation of *Bleak House’s* Mrs Bagnet, as Hager points out (124). In 1868, *All the Year Round* uncompromisingly supported Shaw-Lefevre’s Married Women’s Property Bill with the publication of ‘Slaves of the Ring,’ even urging that ‘the intervening time’—the bill had gone to committee—‘be employed in such a way as to make the result certain’ (88). As the essay’s title suggests, Parkinson relied heavily on the rhetoric of feminist campaigners, who had—quite problematically—compared coverture with the institution of slavery in North America for a long time.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> He also mentions having ‘sp[oken] of them as we did’ with Burdett Coutts not long before (*Letters*, vol. vii, 133). In the late 1830s, Dickens had reported for the *Morning Chronicle* when George Norton took Lord Melbourne to court for criminal conversation.

<sup>10</sup> See Holcombe 38. ‘But have we ever found that the best mode of cultivating the higher virtues was to take away, as far as the law can do it, all the common rights of our nature, and to leave the individual in a state of utter subjection? All the experiences of slavery unite in one loud contradiction to so monstrous a proposition; and it is not in free England that it ought to be entertained for an instant,’ argued Caroline Frances Cornwallis on behalf of the Law Amendment Society in *The Westminster Review* in 1856 (339). J. S. Mill would make much of the parallels drawn with slavery in *The Subjection of Women*.

The feminists' appropriation of the domestic violence discussion was not without effect on public understanding of this prominent issue. John Stuart Mill, together with Harriet Taylor Mill, had been among the first to explicitly link the pervasive practice of marital cruelty to coverture. In a series of articles in *The Morning Chronicle* in the late 1840s and early 1850s the Mills argued time and again that:

The baser part of the populace think that when a legal power is given to them over a living creature—when a person, like a thing, is suffered to be spoken of as their own—as *their* wife, or *their* child, or *their* dog—they are allowed to do what they please with it; and in the eye of the law—if such judgments as the preceding are to be taken as its true interpretation—they are justified in supposing that the worst they can do will be accounted but as a case of slight assault. It is the duty of the Legislature to teach them the contrary. (*Morning Chronicle*, 28 August 1851, reprinted in Taylor Mill 125)

The Mills point to the widely held opinion that a husband's *legal* power over his wife—coverture put a wife 'under the authority and protection' of her husband—totally subordinated a married woman to her husband's will. This male monopoly on household authority was backed by a simple explanation. 'If a woman was to be allowed to assert her will,' as Griffin paraphrases, 'then disagreements would follow and the precious order of the home would be torn asunder' (63). As late as 1870, Lord Penzance was able to squash the Married Women's Property Bill in the House of Lords by stoking fears of 'two holders of the purse, *two powers*, co-equal at first and likely to become adverse in the end' (qtd. in Holcombe 174, emphasis added). This strong belief in the male right to rule, which, as Griffin shows, posed many stumbling blocks to the campaign for married women's right to own property, was where the high-profile issue of marital violence came into play.<sup>11</sup> Husbands' legal power over 'the purse,' the feminist campaigners argued, legitimised their control over their wives: control that could—and in a lot of relationships would—ultimately be enforced by means of violence.

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<sup>11</sup> Griffin writes that '[t]he most striking feature of the debates on the Married Women's Property Bills is how little time was spent discussing the principle of sexual equality, and how much time was spent discussing the idea that giving married women property rights would cause discord in the home' (62).



Raising the issue of marital cruelty as proof of the need to limit husbands' power over their wives, the feminist campaigners stressed the desire for control that drives domestic violence. Coverture put a wife 'under the authority and protection' of her husband. But authority turned too easily into 'tyranny,' especially in economically precarious circumstances. Marital cruelty, used to assert authority when it was contested, was framed as a prominent type of such tyranny. Dickens himself had as early as *Sketches* pictured 'a wretched worn-out woman,... whose face bears traces of recent ill-usage' rush out of a pawnbroker's shop with her young child, as 'her "natural protector" follows her up the court, alternately venting his rage in accelerating her progress, and in knocking the scanty blue bonnet of [her] unfortunate child over its still more scanty and faded-looking face' (227). Boz's direct reference to the man's privilege under coverture clearly implicates the legal doctrine in his violent assertion of his authority, which is only fuelled by the wife's miserable pleading. In the following, I want to show that this desire for control driving intimate partner violence is also at the heart of *Little Dorrit*'s exploration of Jeremiah's abuse of Affery.

Affery enters the novel in its third chapter, compellingly entitled 'Home.' 'Home' doesn't depict Jeremiah assaulting Affery. From the outset, marital cruelty is about much more than physical abuse in *Little Dorrit*. As of 2020, the UK government defines intimate partner violence as

any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to: psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotional. (par. 1)

The breadth of this definition points toward the many forms domestic violence takes. In fact, in almost all cases abusers resort to a repertoire of violent behaviour. Jeremiah, too, not only habitually assaults and threatens Affery, but isolates her from sources of support—'Is there no getting rid of him!' Arthur grumbles, desperate for a chance to talk to Affery alone—and, not least, attempts to undermine her sanity (666; bk. 2, ch. 23). But whichever form it takes, Jeremiah's abuse always revolves around fear, either inspiring or exploiting it. It is Affery's

fear of Jeremiah that gives him power over her. And it is Affery's fear that unambiguously characterizes her as a victim of continuous abuse in 'Home.' Affery is a little too careful not to anger her husband, 'bending over [Arthur] to whisper' and rushing off in the middle of a conversation exclaiming '—There's Jeremiah on the stairs!' She's a little too eager to comply with his wishes, 'hasten[ing] to gather ... up [sheets from a press], and to reply, "yes Jeremiah,"' when he gets impatient (36, 40, 37; bk. 1, ch. 3). Affery is visibly terrified:

His shuffling footstep coming towards them caused her to retreat to the other end of the room. Though a tall hard-favoured sinewy old woman, who in her youth might have enlisted in the Foot Guards without much fear of discovery, she collapsed before the little keen-eyed, crab-like old man. (37)

Although Affery is much stronger in stature than Jeremiah, as the reference to the Foot Guards implies, he has intimidated her to an extent that completely cancels out this physical superiority.

Affery's harrowing fear gives Jeremiah control over her that is difficult for others to grasp. Arthur is rather surprised to find her married to Flintwinch.

'I should have thought that neither of you would have married; least of all should I have thought of your marrying each other.'

'No more should I,' said Mrs. Flintwinch, tying the pillow tightly in its case...

Seeing, as she patted the pillow into its place on the bolster, that he was still looking at her, as if waiting for the rest of her reply, she gave it a great poke in the middle, and asked, 'How could I help myself?'

'How could you help yourself from being married?' (38)

Arthur's incredulous echo points to the enormity of Affery's apathetic comment. Her 'How could I help myself,' intended to shrug the matter off, bespeaks a policy of tacit submission even when it comes to conjugal relations. Jeremiah has control over Affery that prevents her from talking back, undermining her ability to exercise her will freely.

'Why, if it had been—a Smothering instead of a Wedding,' Affery continues, 'I couldn't have said a word upon it, against them two clever ones' (39). This vivid comparison of her wedding with a murder chimes in with contemporary feminist campaigns around wife murder and coverture. The courts frequently punished a man's murder of his wife with sentences such as six months' prison with hard labour, when the usual punishment for

murder was death by hanging. ‘The vow to protect thus confers a license to kill,’ the Mills had written in the *Morning Chronicle* in August 1851 (Taylor Mill 124). At the same time, Affery’s smothering/wedding comparison points toward the issue that women ceased to exist in the eyes of the law under coverture. This was one of the cornerstones of Caroline Norton’s arguments. In *English Laws for Women* she wrote:

A mock-trial, in which I do not ‘exist’ for defence; a gross libel, in which I do not ‘exist’ for prosecution; a disposition of property, in which I do not ‘exist’ either for my own rights or those of my children; a power of benefiting myself by literary labour, in which I do not ‘exist’ for the claim in my own copyrights:—that is the negative and neutralizing law, for married women in England. (162)

Entering into marriage, Affery underwent a kind of legal death. At the same time, Jeremiah gained ownership of Affery’s body. ‘A woman’s body belongs to her husband; she is in his custody, and he can enforce his right by a writ of *habeas corpus*,’ as Leigh Smith summarised the case in *Laws Concerning Women* (4).<sup>12</sup> What’s more, Affery would have been considered to have consented to sleep with Jeremiah as part of the marriage contract, and would not have been entitled to withdraw this consent at any later point in time. The text is rather obvious about the fact that Jeremiah makes use of his claim on Affery with regard to sex: Affery explains how she came to be married as she makes the bed, getting together the linen, speaking now ‘with an end of the pillow-case between her teeth,’ next ‘tying the pillow tightly in its case,’ ‘patt[ing]’ it ‘into its place on the bolster’ and ‘g[iving] it a great poke in the middle,’ and finally ‘spread[ing] the upper sheet over the bed, and the blanket over that, and the counterpane over that’ as she remembers Jeremiah saying ‘because you’re going to take it’—‘it’ referring to his surname, and all that this involved (38-9).

‘Home’ unmistakably makes use of feminist rhetoric that framed the legal doctrine of coverture as conducive to marital cruelty. Whilst marital cruelty is clearly not limited to physical abuse here, it becomes clear as the novel unfolds that Jeremiah’s use of physical violence is essential to his ability to intimidate and thus control Affery. Affery is

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<sup>12</sup> A husband’s right to lock up his wife at home against her will was not revoked until 1891. See Holcombe 30, for details on the landmark decision in *R v Jackson*.

understandably afraid, for Jeremiah's day-to-day assaults are gruelling. I quote some descriptions of his violent attacks at length to emphasise the explicit physicality and vivid detail in which the text renders them:

he pounced upon her, and shook her with such heartiness that he shook her cap off her head, saying between his teeth, with grim raillery, as he did it, 'Affery, my woman, you must have a dose, my woman! This is some of your tricks! ... What does it mean? Speak out or be choked! It's the only choice I'll give you.'

Supposing Mistress Affery to have any power of election at the moment, her choice was decidedly to be choked; for she answered not a syllable to this adjuration, but, with her bare head wagging violently backwards and forwards, resigned herself to her punishment. (340; bk. 1, ch. 30)

he took such umbrage at seeing his wife with her apron over her head, that he charged at her, and taking her veiled nose between his thumb and finger, appeared to throw the whole screw-power of his person into the wring he gave it. (671; bk. 2, ch. 23)

'... and he said to me, "Now, Affery," he said, "I am a coming behind you, my woman, and a going to run you up." So he took and squeezed the back of my neck in his hand, till it made me open my mouth, and then he pushed me before him to bed, squeezing all the way.' (670; bk. 2, ch. 23)

Dickens's attention to detail in these descriptions easily rivals that of contemporary newspaper reports on cases of marital cruelty.<sup>13</sup> Affery's 'bare head wagging violently backwards and forwards,' the squeezing of her neck 'till it made me open my mouth,' the 'whole screw-power of his person' that Jeremiah wrings her nose with: these minutiae illustrate the vehemence of Jeremiah's assaults. The last passage in particular is strikingly reminiscent of Caroline Norton's account of one of her husband's attacks, except that it reverses the direction from out of bed to into bed:

Mr Norton desired I would 'cease my contemplations,' and retire to rest, as he had already done; and this mandate producing no result, he suddenly sprang from the bed, seized me by the nape of the neck, and dashed me down on the floor. (32)

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<sup>13</sup> Henry FitzRoy, the MP for Lewes, read some examples when he presented the bill for the better prevention and punishment of aggravated assaults upon women and children to the House of Commons on 10 March 1853. Since they all follow the same pattern, I cite only one: "On the 23rd of November, 1852, at the Westminster police-court, Frederic Giles appeared to answer the complaint of Susannah Preston, who had been living with him for two years. After being out all night, she returned in the morning, and saw Giles putting into a basket some food which she had provided, in order to carry it away; she remonstrated; he struck her; and on her then abusing him, he beat her with the buckle end of a strap about the neck, arms, and hands, till she was one mass of bruises, and covered with blood. A constable heard her scream, went to the spot, and found her clothes saturated with blood, and a ring on one of her fingers beaten into the flesh to the bone; she was conveyed to a hospital, and the ring was cut out.' HC Deb, 10 March 1853, vol. 124, c 1416.

The difference is, of course, that Jeremiah doesn't assault Affery only in moments of extreme anger. His violent attacks are a normal part of their life together, day in, day out.

Jeremiah's capricious attacks have sent Affery into a state of constant terror and fright. Even when Jeremiah isn't in the room, her dread of him has a firm grasp on Affery.<sup>14</sup> This effect is heightened by frequent threats. Ranging from 'get along with you, while you know you're Affery, and before you're shaken to yeast' (349; bk. 1, ch. 30) to '[t]hen go before, and down, you Affery... or I'll come rolling down the bannisters, and tumbling over you!' (666; bk. 2, ch. 23) to 'You shall have a sneezer, you shall have a teaser!' (ibid), threats augment Jeremiah's violent repertoire. Undeniably imaginative with a clear tendency toward nonsense, Jeremiah's menaces are nevertheless compelling—a sneezer can refer to anything exceptionally strong or violent, and 'teaser' is another term for a poker, the weapon of choice in Victorian domestic disputes.<sup>15</sup> Rolling down the bannisters and squashing a person below sounds rather difficult to pull off, and would take the Flintwinchs into the territory of slapstick representations of domestic violence like the Punch and Judy shows that were regaining popularity at mid-century.<sup>16</sup> But in theory such declarations are terrifying, keeping Affery on her toes.

The threat of violence also plays an instrumental role in Jeremiah's most sophisticated strategy of intimidation, which revolves around Affery's curious dreams. The enigmatic

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<sup>14</sup> Affery is rivalled in her terror only by the bride in Dickens and Collins' 'The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices': 'The girl was formed in fear of him, and in the conviction, that there was no escape from him. She was taught, from the first, to regard him as her future husband—the man who must marry her—the destiny that overshadowed her—the appointed certainty that could never be evaded. The poor fool was soft white wax in their hands, and took the impression that they put upon her. It hardened with time. It became a part of herself. Inseparable from herself, and only to be torn away from her, by tearing life away from her' (388).

<sup>15</sup> Hammerton points out that pokers, rivalled only by chamber pots (including their contents), likely played such a crucial role due to their easy accessibility (*Cruelty and Companionship* 91). In *David Copperfield*, Betsey Trotwood, filled with anger at her own choice of husband, 'hope[s] ... that [Peggotty's] husband is one of those Poker husbands who abound in the newspapers, and will beat her well with one' (169; ch. 13).

<sup>16</sup> Rosalind Crone argues that whilst the much more respectable Punch and Judy shows of the middle of the century essentially stayed true to the earlier, low-brow shows' theme of contested authority in the home, the exaggerated, knock-about violence long associated with Punch and Judy's interactions was considered so far from reality that it was harmless, suitable even for children's educational amusement (1077).

nature of these dream experiences derives from the fact that, as William Wall writes in his meticulous reading of Affery's role in the plot line around the Clennam secret:

The line between sleeping and waking is none too clear, so the reader must question whether the 'dreams' are in fact dreams, or whether they are real and Mrs. Flintwinch chooses to call all incomprehensible events, dreams. (202)

Why would Affery *choose* to call incomprehensible events dreams? Wall's wording is especially jarring if one considers Affery not just in terms of her contribution to the plot line around Arthur's birth, but as an implied human being—a human being who has experienced domestic abuse for years, whose physical and emotional stability has been systematically undermined. I want to suggest that the carefully crafted ambivalence of Affery's dreams is rather designed to make the reader wonder whether they are in fact dreams, or whether these experiences are real and Affery is manipulated into believing that she has dreamt them. Such manipulation, targeting another person's relationship with reality, is not uncommon in abusive relationships. It is today referred to as gaslighting.

The term 'gaslighting' derives from Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play *Gas Light* and refers to coercive behaviour that makes the victim question their perception of reality, even doubt their sanity, in order to gain control over them. The parallels between *Gas Light* and Affery's story are uncanny: *Gas Light* also features presumedly ghostly noises and an abusive husband involved in a criminal scheme who tells his wife that she has been dreaming to make her doubt her experiences. Written more than eighty years before *Gas Light*, and more than a century before gaslighting would receive attention as a real-life phenomenon,<sup>17</sup> *Little Dorrit*'s fourth chapter, 'Mrs Flintwinch Has a Dream,' relates how Affery has 'a curiously vivid dream,' a dream that '[i]n fact ... was not at all like a dream, it was so very real in every respect' (40, emphasis added). Both dream and chapter conclude with Jeremiah, who

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<sup>17</sup> According to the *OED online*, 'gaslighting' was first mentioned as such by Anthony F. C. Wallace in his 1961 book *Culture and Personality*, which tellingly concedes that '[w]hile "gaslighting" itself may be a mythical crime, there is no question that any social attitude which interprets a given behavior or experience as symptomatic of a generalized incompetence is a powerful creator of shame, and thus of anxiety, in those who experience or behave in the "symptomatic" way' (228).

... took her by the throat, and shook her until she was black in the face.

'Why, Affery, woman—Affery!' said Mr. Flintwinch. 'What have you been dreaming of? Wake up, wake up! What's the matter?'

'The—the matter, Jeremiah?' gasped Mrs. Flintwinch, rolling her eyes.

'Why, Affery, woman—Affery! You have been getting out of bed in your sleep, my dear! I come up, after having fallen asleep myself, below, and find you in your wrapper here, with the nightmare. Affery, woman,' said Mr. Flintwinch, with a friendly grin on his expressive countenance, 'if you ever have a dream of this sort again, it'll be a sign of your being in want of physic. And I'll give you such a dose, old woman—such a dose!'

Mrs. Flintwinch thanked him and crept into bed. (43)

Sooner or later, the reader will realise that Affery hasn't been dreaming. She really woke up in the middle of the night to find her husband's side of the bed empty. She really went downstairs, and really witnessed an altercation between Jeremiah and his 'Double'—that is, his twin brother. She really saw Jeremiah entrust an iron box to Double and was really caught spying by him on the stairs, before being escorted back to their bedroom and shook by the throat as cited above. But Affery isn't simply 'choos[ing] to call all incomprehensible events, dreams,' either. Rather, Jeremiah, suspecting what Affery has seen downstairs, shakes and yells at her as though to wake her, imprinting on her mind that she has been dreaming, sleep-walking, and further, that *he* had fallen asleep 'below,' a sight that could easily have become confused in a sleep-walking, dreaming state. This is an attempt to alter Affery's perception of what has just happened: a sinister attack on her sanity that is reinforced by Jeremiah's physical assault—he shakes her with his hands on her throat 'until she was black in the face'—and by the incantation of his favourite threat, that of the dose of physic. Physic, usually administered to ameliorate or remedy a physical affliction and restore a normal bodily state, here clearly is meant to *inflict* physical pain and injury to return things to order (that is, to return Affery to quiet submission). This attempt to mess with Affery's sense of reality is, at least for a time, successful.

The gaslighting that is behind Affery's curious 'dreams' is however disclosed only gradually. Especially in this first dream chapter, the text creates a strong sense of uncertainty. Why shouldn't Affery be dreaming? The title of the chapter, 'Mrs Flintwinch Has a Dream,' is unequivocal. The narrator's expository remarks—'She had a curiously vivid

dream that night.... It happened in this wise'—set out clearly, even a little plumply, that what follows is the description of a dream (40). The doubling of Jeremiah feels like the stuff of dreams (though a reader familiar with Dickens will probably catch on to the novel's twin motif here). There is of course the undreamlike nature of Affery's experience: 'The staircase was as wooden and solid as need be,' the narrator notes, 'and Affery went straight down it without any of those deviations peculiar to dreams,' and later '[t]he sequence of things was so ordinary and natural, that, standing there, she could hear the door open, feel the night air, and see the stars outside' (41, 43). But then the narrator has already accounted for this, when he noted that the dream was 'curiously vivid,' that '[i]n fact it was not at all like a dream, it was so very real in every respect' (40).

Dickens's third-person narrators rarely lie, and I don't think that this is the case here either. I find it much more productive to read the uncertainty this chapter creates in terms of a focalisation strategy. Without delving into the narratological intricacies of focalisation, the immediate value of this category is its ability to describe and conceptualise the information available to a third-person narrator. The bulk of 'Mrs Flintwinch Has a Dream,' for example, is a case of internal focalisation: the third-person narrator, who elsewhere in *Little Dorrit* is omniscient, narrates only what Affery sees, hears, feels, and otherwise experiences, at points even slipping into free indirect discourse. The narrator's voice is merged with Affery's restricted ability to perceive what happens in and around her, as in this passage from the chapter's middle:

Mrs. Flintwinch crossed the hall, feeling its pavement cold to her stockingless feet, and peeped in between the rusty hinges of the door, which stood a little open. She expected to see Jeremiah fast asleep or in a fit, but he was calmly seated in a chair, awake, and in his usual health. But what—hey?—Lord forgive us!—Mrs. Flintwinch muttered some ejaculation to this effect, and turned giddy.  
(41)

As this passage shows, internal focalisation, while restricting the information available, not only gives the narrator access to the emotional and sensory experience of Affery—



information that would be available to an omniscient narrator anyway. More importantly, its limitations allow him to present to the reader the world *as Affery experiences it*.

*Little Dorrit's* dream chapters take this productive limitation to an extreme. For the conflation of the narrator's voice with Affery's capacity of perception does not set in with the narration of what she experienced, but is already in place when the narrator is still occupied with his own business. Breaking with convention, Dickens lets Affery's limited, violently manipulated mind usurp his third-person narrator's authoritative, past-tense voice when it is still concerned with chapter headings and exposition; with framing Affery's experience rather than relaying it. Affery's mangled perception of reality (*I have been dreaming, as Jeremiah says, though it didn't feel like dreaming*) is presented by the text as what actually happened and in the manner of how what actually happened is conventionally presented. Thus taking up Affery's point of view in its deeply intimidated state, the text projects her inability to discern between reality and her husband's manipulations onto the fabric of the story.

This formal idea, which structures several of the 'dream' chapters, seems to have struck Dickens suddenly and all at once. He had considerable trouble coming up with material to fill the remaining pages of *Little Dorrit's* first number, following on 'Home.' As Harvey Peter Sucksmith points out in his introduction to the Clarendon edition of the novel, what is now chapter iv, 'Mrs Flintwinch Has a Dream,' must have been written after Dickens had already completed the novel's second number and even begun the third, about a month after putting the finishing touches to the rest of the first number (xxi). The complete lack of notes for this chapter in the number plan for no. I, where he simply inserted,

Add  
Chapter IV  
Mrs Flintwinch has a dream

as well as the note regarding chapter xv on the plans for the fifth number, 'Carry on the idea indicated in last Chapter of N<sup>o</sup> I,' indicate that this piece of the puzzle eventually just fell into

place (807, 811). In 'Mrs Flintwinch Has a Dream' the formal ruse of portraying Jeremiah's gaslighting serves a twofold purpose. On the one hand, the uncertainty created through Dickens's unorthodox use of focalisation helps establish Affery, who is going to be the reader's eyes and ears in the Clennam house, as potentially unreliable. The question as to what is contained in the mysterious iron box is delayed: was a mysterious iron box exchanged at all, or was this the product of the not particularly stable Affery's unconscious? On the other hand, this chapter creates further interest around Affery. The question 'what is going on at Mrs Clennam's?' is coupled with the question 'what is going on with Affery?' The formal sleight of hand simultaneously adds to the interest of the Clennam secret and delves deeper into the exploration of Affery's experience of intimate partner violence, not only giving the reader access to the world as Affery experiences it, but giving them access to Affery's terrified, fragmented, deeply destabilised way of experiencing the world.

At the same time, 'Mrs. Flintwinch Has a Dream' marks the beginning of Affery's painfully slow extrication from Jeremiah's grasp. Whilst it is unclear whether this is the first instance of Affery being 'dreamed' or whether Jeremiah has resorted to this ruse before, the 'curiously vivid' nature of this particular dream rouses Affery's suspicion. In 'Mrs. Flintwinch Has Another Dream,' Jeremiah's efforts to delegitimise Affery's better judgment seem at first to gather strength. Again making ample use of internal focalisation, this chapter throughout relates Affery's experience as though she only imagined it: 'She *thought she was* in the kitchen getting the kettle ready for tea,' 'Mistress Affery *thought that* on reaching the hall, she saw...' (173; bk. 1, ch. 15), 'That she then went up-stairs with her shoes in her hand...' (174), and finally 'Mistress Affery *dreamed that* the figure of her lord here began walking up and down the room' (176, emphases added). The narration only returns to the world of fact when Affery, '[m]ore afraid of her husband at the moment than of the mysterious sound' that has startled her, returns to the kitchen, where Jeremiah 'roused her'—again, as from a dream (181). But this time, it is Affery who tells Jeremiah, 'I have been a-dreaming,' when

really, she has been hiding in the kitchen to ‘recove[r] her breath’ (ibid.). This is also the first instance of her ‘thr[owing] her apron over her head’ (ibid.). Giving her time to compose herself, this allows her to keep her knowledge of her masters’ conversation secret from Jeremiah (or at least an uncertainty), and to loosen his control over her just slightly, but just enough. It would appear that *Little Dorrit* gives its reader the chance to catch on to Jeremiah’s efforts to revise his wife’s experience just in time, just as Affery herself starts to doubt Jeremiah’s authority and to wonder whether he has not perhaps been messing with her.

*Little Dorrit*’s portrayal of Affery’s experience betrays a strikingly sophisticated understanding of the power structures of intimate partner violence, and especially of the emotional control an abuser can gain over their victim by means of intimidation. This understanding is very much of its time: the middle of the nineteenth century was seeing a shift in jurisdiction toward an emphasis on the ‘unreasonable’ assertion of male control rather than on the specific, physically violent nature of abusers’ damaging actions—a shift culminating in the divorce court judges’ landmark ruling in the case of *Kelly v Kelly* in 1869, that ‘without disparaging the just and paramount authority of a husband, it may be safely asserted that a wife is not a domestic slave, to be driven at all costs, short of personal violence, into compliance with her husband’s demands’ (qtd. in Hammerton, ‘Victorian Marriage and the Law of Matrimonial Cruelty’ 288). And yet Dickens’s portrayal of Jeremiah’s ability to control his wife is somewhat surprising. For Dickens is considered firmly on the conservative side on the issue of marital cruelty.

I believe this is due to the fact that Dickens’s stance on marital cruelty has been gauged exclusively against Nancy’s refusal to leave Sykes in *Oliver Twist*. Nancy and Sykes have been the go-to couple for introductions and first chapters of monographs on domestic violence in Victorian literature, serving to sketch out a conservative status quo that ‘naturalized the abuse against working-class women,’ even ‘sequester[ing] domestic violence within the poor and working classes’ (Tromp, *Private Rod* 65; Lawson and Shakinovsky 10). At the same time,

Nancy's refusal to leave Sikes, protecting him even at the cost of her life, has served as a lynchpin of Dickensian gender identities. Nancy has been considered a personification of what Slater called 'Dickens's preoccupation with devoted women—wives, mothers, sisters—who are rewarded for their devotion by ill-usage yet who go on loving and trying to care for their brutish men' (239). Today, this 'devotion' is usually referred to as 'loyalty,' despite the fact that in helping Oliver, Nancy *betrays* Sikes, provoking his fatal assault. 'Loyalty,' lacking devotion's strong overtones of emotional investment, connotes the 'companionate ideal' of marriage that was to consolidate male power at mid-century. Read along these lines, Nancy's refusal to leave Sikes takes on a dark irony. As Lisa Surridge puts it: 'while Nancy's loyalty traps her in delinquency and removes her from the protection of middle-class reformers..., at the same time it appeals powerfully to the values they cherish most' (40).<sup>18</sup> In other words, Dickens sacrifices Nancy to his middle-class patriarchal values: she stays with the man who will brutally murder her because loyalty—i. e. submission—is key to Dickens's notion of female nature.

Dickens indubitably valued devotion and loyalty, both as a quality in human beings and as a literary theme, even in its extreme form of martyrdom. There is also no doubt whatsoever that Dickens had unjustified ideas of female loyalty. But whereas Sidney Carton's end at the guillotine is exalted, Nancy's death is utterly miserable. And *Little Dorrit's* acute interest in the power structures of abusive relationships raises the question as to what is behind Nancy's deadly devotion, especially since the interplay of intimidation and control depicted in *Little Dorrit* is pivotal to many of Dickens's portrayals of intimate partner violence, regardless of class and gender. The narrator of *Martin Chuzzlewit* notes of Jonas and Merry: 'As he made an angry motion with his hand, she shrunk down hastily. A suggestive

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<sup>18</sup> Bodenheimer concludes in a similar vein that 'Dickens writes frequently of the loyalty of the abused woman in his early work, but in this melodramatic version, the loyalty that will culminate in Nancy's extinction is the final sign of her redemption' (85).

action! Full of a cruel truth!’ (712; ch. 17). Whilst physical abuse is only implied in this passage, it describes a violent act using fear. Jaggers, in *Great Expectations*, betrays that he knows these things all too well when he comments on Drummle’s marriage to Estella, ‘[i]f he should turn to and beat her, he may possibly get the strength on his side’ (291; ch. 29). And Doctor Marigold echoes Affery’s helpless ‘how could I help myself?’ when he describes his violent marriage.

The worst of it was, we had a daughter born to us, and I love children with all my heart. When she was in her furies, she beat the child. This got to be so shocking as the child got to be four or five years old, that I have many a time gone on with my whip over my shoulder, at the old horse’s head, sobbing and crying worse than ever little Sophy did. For how could I prevent it? Such a thing is not to be tried with such a temper—in a cart—without coming to a fight.... And then the poor child got worse terrified than before, as well as worse hurt generally, and her mother made complaints to the next people we lighted on, and the word went round, ‘Here’s a wretch of a Cheap Jack been a beating his wife.’ (576)

The Doctor has clearly struck back now and then. But eventually, he too submits to his wife’s temper—even as she beats their daughter—because resistance only makes matters worse. The child dies soon after, but the Doctor stays with his wife until she drowns herself.

The passage from ‘Doctor Marigold’s Prescriptions’ especially betrays an awareness of the stereotypes that were associated with domestic violence. The Doctor does suggest that crowded living conditions fuel tensions. ‘There’s thousands of couples among you,’ he says, ‘getting on like sweet ile upon a whetstone in houses five and six pairs of stairs high, that would go to the Divorce Court in a cart’ (575). But he also clearly criticises society’s prejudices and generalisations when it comes to domestic violence: that perpetrators are always male, and that nothing else is really to be expected from the working class. Now, to be fair, Dickens may not have had this knowledge a quarter of a century earlier, when he was writing *Oliver Twist*.<sup>19</sup> But then there is Nancy forcing her laughs to make nice; Nancy ‘point[ing] hastily to some livid bruises upon her neck and arms’ as evidence of Sikes’s punishment for her

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<sup>19</sup> In my opinion this is unlikely. Even Sarah Stickney Ellis, who never missed a chance of pointing out to her female readers ‘your position as a woman, which is, and must be, inferior to his as man,’ considered ‘the fear of a husband’ the ‘*worst of all slavery*’ (*The Wives of England* [1843], 17, 13).

intervention, ‘beseeching [Oliver] in such tones of agony to remember her’ (132; ch. 20); Nancy attesting to ‘hav[ing] such fear and dread upon me to-night that I can hardly stand’ (312; ch. 46). Sikes’s control over his lover is difficult to miss in these small gestures, which reek of Nancy’s (legitimate) fear. We must consider the possibility that Nancy, like Affery, like Merry, like Doctor Marigold, stays with her abuser not out of loyalty, but because she, too, is afraid. Because Sikes has emotional control over her that she cannot elude.

‘It has been observed of this girl,’ Dickens wrote of Nancy in his preface to the third edition of *Oliver Twist*, ‘that her devotion to the brutal housebreaker does not seem natural’ (lxiv). Rose Maylie puts it more bluntly. She calls Nancy’s determination to ‘resign every future hope’—and ‘for such a man *as this*’: ‘madness’ (274; ch. 40). At the time, Dickens justified Nancy’s devotion with the often-cited assertion that

[i]t is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE. Every man who has watched these melancholy shades of life knows it to be so. Suggested to my mind long ago—long before I dealt in fiction—by what I often saw and read of, in actual life around me, I have, for years, tracked it through many profligate and noisome ways. (lxv)

*Little Dorrit*’s portrayal of Affery’s experience of intimate partner violence is proof, I believe, of Dickens’s realisation that this assertion, ‘it is true,’ was not enough. By the mid-1850s, only a decade and a half after Dickens first had Sikes kill Nancy, the rhetorical association of intimate partner violence, male authority, and coverture set forth in *Sketches by Boz* and *Oliver Twist* had become unambiguously feminist. But it was also being fervently argued against by powerful conservatives, who claimed that submission was natural to women. ‘[I]t is not the law, but nature which gives the man authority over the woman,’ Caroline Frances Cornwallis paraphrased this line of argument on behalf of the Law Amendment Society, ‘it is *might* rather than *right* which he exercises, and the natural law of strength cannot be abrogated’ (356). This kind of thinking is not unfrequently attributed to Dickens, too. Take, for example, Tromp’s recent observation that ‘[w]e could hardly imagine *Oliver Twist*’s

Nancy ... returning Bill's blows in the moments before her death and still retaining the reader's sympathy' ("Til Death Do Us Part. Marriage, Murder, and Confession' 132).

With Affery, Dickens explored the counterintuitive truth of abused women further. This time, his answer to the question, why doesn't Affery leave Jeremiah? is not 'because! Women stay with violent partners all the time,' but: 'because Jeremiah has systematically intimidated her and undermined her confidence to a degree that renders her helpless against him.' *Little Dorrit's* stance towards intimate partner violence is much more explicit, leaving considerably less space for interpretation. What's more, it unmistakably sides with the feminists campaigning for marital reform and backs their conviction that the problem of intimate partner violence could not be tackled as long as husbands' authority over their wives was not curtailed.

## Part two: Affery, bodily

... according to Saint Paul, only the veiled woman can prophesy in the temple because the head of every man is identified with Christ and the spirit, while the head of every woman is associated with the body and therefore must be covered .... [A]cceptance of the veil becomes a symbol of the woman's submission to her shame.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 476

Mid-Victorian feminist campaigners emphasised the image of the veil for its connotations with the legal doctrine of coverture, which both naturalised and authorised women's subordination to their husbands. At the same time, the apron veiling Affery's face betokens her submission to underlying Christian tenets of women's shameful physicality, which continued to permeate Victorian society despite the rise of the domestic ideal of female nature.<sup>20</sup> The veil, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, doesn't erase woman's shame, her sexual

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<sup>20</sup> 'The representation of woman not only as dependent but as needing the control that was the other face of protection was integral to the separation of spheres and everything that followed from it, because this image provided a defensible explanation for inequality,' Mary Poovey writes in her seminal book *Uneven Developments* (11).

difference, but symbolises and ritualises it. And so Affery's apron, thrown over her face like that, lays stress on the (shameful) physicality of her female body as it covers it. So, too, does the apron-veil-sheet's allusion to churchyard pranksters, whose corporeality is highlighted by contrast with the immaterial apparitions they aren't.

This double emphasis on Affery's physicality should caution us against receiving *Little Dorrit* too smoothly into the established reading list of progressive Victorian literary portrayals of physically abusive relationships. Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, George Eliot's short story 'Janet's Repentance'—these texts have been observed to keep their distance from their middle- and upper-class heroines' battered bodies, not necessarily because they are abused, but because they are female and therefore taboo. '[T]he invisibility and silence that attaches itself to the female body, and to intimate domestic experience generally,' Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky argue, 'ensures that even physical violence yields evidence that is "suggestive" but not definitive' (15).<sup>21</sup> They refer this point to a literary practice Helena Michie terms 'moralised description:' a Victorian representational code in which 'the heroine's body disappears to be immediately replaced by a more spiritualized account of her psyche' (*Flesh Made Word* 86). George Eliot is by no means afraid of getting into the nitty-gritty details of Dempster's violence against his wife Janet—or, for that, matter, of her heroine's body. Nonetheless, 'Janet's Repentance' has some compelling examples of this descriptive barter.

The stony street, the bitter north-east wind and darkness—and in the midst of them a tender woman thrust out from her husband's home in her thin night-dress, the harsh wind cutting her naked feet, and driving her long hair away from her half-clad bosom, where the poor heart is crushed with anguish and despair. (275; ch. 15)

It is hardly fair to accuse Eliot of rendering her heroine's body 'invisible.' This description of Janet's exposed and vulnerable body—'tender,' covered only by a 'thin night-dress,' her feet

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<sup>21</sup> Judith E. Pike makes a similar observation (without reference to Lawson and Shakinovsky's work) of Isabella Heathcliff's phrase in *Wuthering Heights*, 'but you don't know all, so don't judge,' which is simultaneously suggestive and elusive (374).



naked, her 'bosom' only 'half-clad'—is, like many others in the story, strikingly explicit. However, the text doesn't let the physicality of Janet's body stand. As this image of Janet's distress reaches its climax, the literal corporeality that characterised the bulk of the sentence is neutralised in the *figure* of yet another body part: the heart. Janet's half-clad bosom is immediately wrapped up tight in a soft blanket of sexually safe interiority, as physical distress is superseded by mental suffering.

This concealment of the female battered body was likely facilitated by nineteenth-century authors' burgeoning eagerness to depict their characters' interior lives, a literary trend that, recent research indicates, was itself fraught with gender bias. Paul Dawson argues in 'Fictional Minds and Female Sexuality' that the novelistic 'consciousness scene'—gendered scenes of internal scrutiny, of communion with and critical reflection of one's feelings—developed out of a close discursive relationship with eighteenth-century conduct books for young women. These prescribed regular examination of one's own conduct as the only means of achieving and cultivating a normative female 'nature' that was chaste, modest, virtuous. 'The technology of the self encouraged by conduct books,' Dawson writes, 'provides the cultural impetus and structural frame for the formal method of rendering characters' interiority, establishing the generic scene of heroines reviewing their conduct as a convention that persists into the twentieth century' (163). The turn-round of the sentence from 'Janet's Repentance' toward interiority is then not only inoffensive but 'innocent' in the word's heavily gendered sense, bearing the full ideological weight of normative Victorian femininity.

Although *Little Dorrit* renders Affery in great psychological complexity, the novel resourcefully avoids the kind of interiority created by 'moralised description.'<sup>22</sup> Affery voices

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<sup>22</sup> Juliet John has argued that Dickens's use of melodramatic aesthetics was also motivated by the opportunity the genre affords 'to explore the inner life whilst eschewing subject-centred, "psychological" *analyses* of character' (104).

that she's afraid, and the text relates in detail what she hears, sees, thinks, and, sometimes, feels—but never *how* she feels. With Affery there's none of Janet Dempster's self-reproach, none of Helen Huntingdon's 'inward struggle' (Anne Brontë 176). Rather, building on Affery's Gothic appeal, *Little Dorrit* resorts to a technique loosely known as 'emotional display.' Coral Ann Howells has shown that an 'extraordinarily heightened sense of the inter-relatedness between physical and emotional responses' is typical of Gothic romances' presentation of their heroines (8).

Though [Gothic writers] always insist on the powers of feeling and imagination they tend to concentrate on external details of emotional display while leaving readers to deduce for themselves complex inner psychological movements, from such evidence as a 'certain wildness of aspect' or a 'settled paleness of the countenance'. (15)

*Little Dorrit*, too, gives its readers access to Affery's feelings almost exclusively through descriptions of her battered body. Throughout, the novel reveals Affery's mangled state of mind by means of body language: her 'startled manner' (334; bk. I, ch. 29), her 'quivering lips' (752; bk. 2, ch. 30), her 'flustered' and 'trembling' state (340; bk. I, ch. 30, 750; bk. 2, ch. 30), her tendency to 'retreat' and 'shrink' (37; bk. I, ch. 3, 669; bk. 2; ch. 23). Dickens, who ran a tight ship at home, knew intimately what fear looks like: 'Kate and Georgina quail (almost), when I stalk by them,' he wrote to Lavinia Watson, in 'a state of inaccessibility and irascibility which utterly confounds and scares the House' (*Letters* 5.419).<sup>23</sup>

Howells observes that the Gothic offers 'the gestures of feeling rather than any insight into the complexity of the feelings themselves' (16). Physical gestures, she is suggesting, cannot do justice to the complexity of interior lives. With Affery, however, Dickens offers us 'external details of emotional display' that are not vague (a '*certain* wildness of aspect?') or abstract (a '*settled* paleness?'), but ample, explicit descriptions. What's more, these descriptions are not limited to her face but encompass her whole body. Most importantly, however, Affery's fear lends itself particularly well to this Gothic representative code

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<sup>23</sup> See especially Bodenheimer's fifth chapter for a detailed account of Dickens's views on household management, and of what it was like to live with him.

because after years, perhaps decades, of abuse, it consumes her fully. The novel presents her as a psychologically complex human being, but, crucially, the feeling of immense fear that trammels her is not in fact complex. It is undiluted, always present, impossible to hide. Affery's physical responses are not 'gestures' of fear, but symptoms: they constitute a viable part of her fear, part of what gives Jeremiah control over her, as in the passage from 'Home' I cited above:

His shuffling footstep coming towards them caused her to retreat to the other end of the room. Though a tall hard-favoured sinewy old woman, who in her youth might have enlisted in the Foot Guards without much fear of discovery, she collapsed before the little keen-eyed crab-like old man. (37; bk. 1, ch. 3)

The text has no need to name Affery's emotion by a series of abstract nouns here, let alone to resort to a scene of self-reflection to communicate to the reader her crippling fear. Affery's fear is literally, physically crippling.

By and by, this symptomatological exploration of Affery's fear and insecurity becomes organised around the spectral presence she senses in the house. The novel first suggests the idea of the house being haunted in 'Mrs. Flintwinch Has Another Dream.' The 'dream' begins this time 'at twilight,' in another moment of welcome rest between duties, Affery 'having been heavy all day':

She thought she was in the kitchen getting the kettle ready for tea, and was warming herself with her feet upon the fender and the skirt of her gown tucked up, before the collapsed fire in the middle of the grate, bordered on either hand by a deep cold black ravine. She thought that as she sat thus, musing upon the question, whether life was not for some people a rather dull invention, she was frightened by a sudden noise behind her. She thought that she had been similarly frightened once last week, and that the noise was of a mysterious kind—a sound of rustling, and of three or four quick beats like a rapid step; while a shock or tremble was communicated to her heart, as if the step had shaken the floor, or even as if she had been touched by some awful hand. She thought that this revived within her, certain old fears of hers that the house was haunted; and that she flew up the kitchen stairs, without knowing how she got up, to be nearer company. (173; bk. 1, ch. 15)

The Clennam house, of course, is *not* haunted. Neither have Mrs Clennam and Jeremiah a 'madwoman' in the attic, as Affery suspects at one point.<sup>24</sup> Arthur's birth mother, of whom

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<sup>24</sup> A hypothesis encouraged by the faint echoes of *Jane Eyre*: the suspected ghost, the old lover locked up, the top floor full of old furniture: 'All these relics gave to the third story of Thornfield Hall the aspect of a home of

Affery, like the reader, learns only in the novel's last number, has never stepped foot in the place. She has died alone in her cell in some lunatic asylum, a horrific injustice that cannot be redressed. No, the noises and tremors Affery perceives here are caused by the decaying house, which had already begun, '[m]any years ago,... to slide down sideways' and is held up by 'some half dozen gigantic crutches' (32; bk. 1; ch. 3). We have here a case of that 'much-maligned' Gothic device Ann Radcliffe was so partial to: the 'explained supernatural' (Castle 120).

Although the house does eventually collapse, the text continuously emphasises that the signs of its decay are in fact barely noticeable. 'Rats, cats, water, drains,' Jeremiah shuts Affery down, unfazed (he might have added, 'mouldering beams,' 181; bk. 1, ch. 15). Mr Dorrit, too, is politely underwhelmed: 'If there were any sound at all, it was so slight that she [Affery] must have fallen into a confirmed habit of listening for sounds; but, Mr. Dorrit believed he did hear a something, like the falling of dry leaves' (607; bk. 2, ch. 17). In fact, the intense Gothic atmosphere of the Clennam house is altogether lost on most visitors. Arthur may be appalled by his mother's deadly charade, but Flora and the Patriarch, blaming the gloom of Mrs Clennam's room on smoke—'which was to be expected with time and which we must all expect and reconcile ourselves to being whether we like it or not'—are happy to take a cosy snack of 'tea, anchovy paste, and hot buttered toast' there (665, 661; bk. 2; ch. 23). On their 'tour of inspection,' Flora even welcomes the darkness as an excuse to cuddle up to Arthur (667). To Jeremiah, the house is merely 'very dingy, and very bare.' Rigaud even calls it 'picturesque,' conceding that 'an old house is a weakness with me' (352; bk. 1, ch. 30).

And yet *Little Dorrit* is studded with moments when these visitors, usually so blasé about the Clennam home's Gothic vibe, are suddenly struck by something ghostly. Twitchy around the murderous Rigaud, Affery betrays great uneasiness over the teapot, causing 'a few

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the past,' Jane observes (90; ch. 11). In *Little Dorrit*, the 'worn-out furniture' keeps alive the nightmarish memories attached to Arthur's childhood bedroom (38; bk. 1, ch. 3).

ghostly moments' in Mrs Clennam's room, 'when they were all confusedly staring without knowing why' (348; bk. 1, ch. 30). And whilst Mr Dorrit, Jeremiah, and Mrs Clennam may not have been struck by anything ghostly about the slight rustling sound, '[t]he woman's terror, for a very short space, seemed to touch the three; and they all listened' (607; bk.2, ch. 17). Note the choice of words here: Affery's terror, given voice by her cry, 'seemed to touch' the others, just as that 'awful hand' seemed to touch *her* in the kitchen: touching without actually touching, another ghostly touch. In both situations it is Affery who sets the Gothic impulse.

What's happening here, I want to suggest, is a very early instance of a variety of ghost story which, in Nick Freeman's words, 'focu[ses] on the experience of being haunted, rather than the shock effect of a supernatural materialization' (335). Limited to the symptoms of a haunting, these stories capitalise on a profound sense of uncertainty that troubles the boundaries of the genre itself: are we—characters and readers—actually dealing with a ghost? Or is some (other) thing the cause of these symptoms? Is this actually a ghost story? Dickens's 1866 story 'The Signalman' is usually credited with having initiated this sub-genre of the ghost story, but I would suggest that *Little Dorrit's* plot line around Affery is an even earlier, and at the same time more radical instance of this tactic. For whereas 'The Signalman' is ambivalent as to whether there's an actual ghost haunting the tunnel at Mugby Junction or not, Affery experiences a haunting in the definitive absence of a deceased person's soul. Although *Little Dorrit* eventually explains the perfectly natural origin of the strange sounds and tremors, it does so only in its last monthly number. For the bulk of the novel, the possibility of a ghost produces a strong sense of enigma. Could the house really be haunted? Perhaps something to do with '[t]he shadow of a supposed act of injustice, which had hung over [Arthur] since his father's death' (311; bk. 1, ch. 27)? Possibly even the ghost of Arthur's father himself? Is not '[t]he room [he] had occupied for business purposes ... so unaltered that he might have been imagined still to keep it invisibly' (54; bk. 1, ch. 5). And let's not forget the echo of Hamlet's dead father's words in the urging inscription on his

silk watch-paper, D. N. F.—Do Not Forget. Or could some mysterious live person be frequenting a secret chamber, like Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, perhaps, or like *Bleak House*'s Mrs Snagsby who, half-mad with jealousy, 'is so perpetually on the alert, that the house becomes ghostly with creaking boards and rustling garments' (408; ch. 25)? What has Affery heard Mrs Clennam and Jeremiah talk about that makes her so certain of a presence in the house?

This strange and supernatural potentiality emanates from Affery, who experiences the (supposed) haunting. The rather unremarkable noises derive their Gothic vigour from the fact that the novel makes its reader acquainted with them in the kitchen, *as Affery perceives them*: as 'a shock or tremble' that 'was communicated to her heart, as if the step had shaken the floor, or even as if she had been touched by some awful hand.' Affery's heart skips a beat. And, whether an actual physical shock has gone through the house or whether Affery, startled in her drowse, is herself the source of a tremble—the conviction that there's an otherworldly presence in the kitchen derives from the spine-chilling nature of Affery's bodily sensation. The sounds of shifting weight and groaning wood, banal in the ears of others, are rendered ghostly by the strong physical reaction of terror they trigger in Affery.

Affery's 'old fears ... that the house was haunted' surely butt in here. Some mysterious noises would hardly suffice to convert a resolute non-believer in ghosts. But these old fears don't explain the intensity of her physical sensation. Mr Dorrit's thought that 'she must have fallen into a confirmed habit of listening for sounds' does. Affery is indeed always listening for sounds—for Jeremiah's 'shuffling footstep' more precisely—and she constantly believes to be hearing it. And, given Jeremiah's 'habit of ... making springs after her on the staircase, and shaking her,' Affery is 'always nervously uncertain when she might be thus waylaid next' (334; bk. 1, ch. 29). She perceives disturbances that others don't because she is so highly strung, so tense with fear. Affery's sense of being haunted must then also, at the same time,

be read as an integral part of the novel's portrayal of her experience of intimate partner violence.

When, toward the end of 'Mrs. Flintwinch Has Another Dream,' Affery tells Jeremiah about the 'rustle and a sort of trembling touch' she has felt, he replies with a revealing threat: 'if you don't get tea pretty quick, old woman, you'll become sensible of a rustle and touch that'll send you flying to the other end of the kitchen' (181; bk. 1, ch. 15). Turning the mysterious rustling noise into the threat of a violent rustling (that is, shaking), Jeremiah reverses Affery's awry reasoning: the intense terror she attaches to the mysterious noises is indeed wrought by an 'awful hand,' though not a ghost's, but Jeremiah's. In a supreme reworking of the 'explained supernatural' device, Affery has come to project her terror of domestic violence—literally, of violence *in the home*—onto the physical structure of this home of hers. As she invests the perfectly natural signs of the ramshackle house's decay with dread of her husband's violence and her horror of what he and Mrs Clennam may be capable of (Affery goes on to overhear Jeremiah talk about Mrs Clennam not 'lean[ing] against the dead'), the physical structure of the building is charged with the terror governing Affery's experience, creating a compelling Gothic setting (175; bk. 1, ch. 15).

Importantly, the rotten house does not simply absorb Affery's intense fear, but refracts and transforms and enriches it, becoming an additional source of menace. '[W]ith these ghostly apprehensions, and her singular dreams,' the narrator explains in 'Mrs. Flintwinch Has Another Dream',

Mrs. Flintwinch fell that evening into a haunted state of mind, from which it may be long before this present narrative descries any trace of her recovery. In the vagueness and indistinctness of all her new experiences and perceptions, as everything about her was mysterious to herself, she began to be mysterious to others; and became as difficult to be made out to anybody's satisfaction, as she found the house and everything in it difficult to make out to her own. (182; bk. 1, ch. 15)

Affery's 'new experiences and perceptions'—of sensing ghosts, of overhearing Jeremiah and Mrs Clennam arguing, and of doubting the veracity of both experiences—put Affery into a mood that make others think of her as she thinks of the house: haunted, subject to ghosts.

This 'haunted state of mind' manifests itself again in 'external details': in her quickness to cry out, in a tendency to speak 'in a low, deadened voice,' and, not least, in her new habit of throwing her white apron over her head (534; bk. 2, ch. 10). These manifestations of Affery's fear perturbingly, fascinatingly combine comic exaggeration with affective horror. 'The woman's terror,' the narrator's words were, 'seemed to touch the three; and they all listened' (607). Affery's terror is palpable—literally. Like a ghost, Affery's dread is not a physical thing that can be touched, but somehow it touches those around her. Just as the rotting, creaking house serves as a Gothic amplifier for Affery's fear, Affery's highly responsive body serves as a Gothic amplifier for the ominous (albeit perfectly natural) noises.

As a servant, Affery lends herself extremely well to this role of Gothic catalyst. In 'Home,' her presence in Mrs Clennam's room becomes known to Arthur—and the reader—only halfway through his conversation with his mother.

'I have not been outside this door for—tell him for how long,' [Mrs Clennam] said, speaking over her shoulder.

'A dozen year next Christmas,' returned a cracked voice out of the dimness behind.

'Is that Affery?' said Arthur, looking towards it.

The cracked voice replied that it was Affery; and an old woman came forward into what doubtful light there was, and kissed her hand once; then subsided again into the dimness. (34; bk. 1, ch. 3)

Except for this brief moment, Affery is present but, melting into the room's shadowy recesses, not quite there. She seems to be more of the room than in the room—quite fittingly for a domestic, one who is literally 'of the house.' The dimness, where she can be at hand without her presence being acknowledged as such by her mistress, is Affery's proper place as an attendant. And throughout the novel, Affery diligently sticks to the house's darkest corners. Arthur and Affery are first 'alone together among the *heavy shadows* of the dining room' (36; bk. 1, ch. 3, all emphases added); 'her candle ha[s] died out' when she dreams about Jeremiah and his twin brother (41; bk. 1, ch. 4); we meet her 'listening and trembling in the *shadowy hall*' (176; bk. 1, ch. 15), 'standing *in the dark* with her apron thrown over her head' (534; bk. 2, ch. 10), 'open[ing] the door for [Arthur] *in the dark hall*' (533); and Arthur prefaces his appeal to her with the words '[h]e can't see me.... if I blow the candle out.... if I draw you



into this *black closet*' (669; bk. 2, ch. 23). This habit of cloaking herself in darkness augments the troubling effect Affery has on those around her. In her tendency to 'suddenly dart out of her dim corner' on an evening, 'and whisper with a face of terror... "There, Jeremiah! Now! What's that noise!"' she herself becomes one of the house's hidden terrors (182-3; bk. 1, ch. 15).

And then, in the novel's last monthly number, Affery emerges from the old house's gloom. In 'Closing In' the reader finds her sitting by a wide-open window. The metaphorical lifting of the veil, the divulging of the Clennams'—and the Clennam house's—secret that is about to take place is heralded by an actual lifting of the veil. Affery, the woman with the apron thrown over her head, has come out of the shadows into the light. She has also taken the apron off her face, which, in this act of being lifted, references yet another Gothic tradition. In 'The Character in the Veil,' Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that the lifting of veils is structurally integral to Gothic narratives, constituting a 'shift ... from *something* expected with a fascinated demand to something else that, simply because it is a substitute, voids and exposes the fascination' (258). This is precisely the bathetic shift *Little Dorrit* plays with when the door of the formidably gloomy Clennam house opens to reveal the woman with the apron thrown over her head: the fascination and dread pertaining to Mr Dorrit's anticipation of the unknown evaporate. When Affery finally casts off the apron in 'Closing In,' this Gothic motif is turned upon itself. Affery has nothing to add to Rigaud's narrative that the reader didn't know before. And yet this lifting of the veil-apron doesn't void the fascination attached to it. Rather, the fascination is transferred onto the apron itself. Once Affery has 'broke out now, and ... can't go back,' she puts the apron to new use (745; bk. 2, ch. 30):

Mistress Affery, fixedly attentive in the window-seat, biting the rolled up end of her apron, and trembling from head to foot, here cried out, 'Jeremiah, keep off from me! I've heerd in my dreams, of Arthur's father and his uncle....' Here she put her apron in her mouth again, as if she were stopping somebody else's mouth—perhaps Jeremiah's, which was chattering with threats as if he were grimly cold. (750-1)

Affery goes through this sequence of unstopping her mouth and ‘put[ting] her apron into her mouth again’ every time she speaks. This new compulsion ruminates the important practical value the apron has had for Affery until now: it has felt like a place of refuge. When Arthur asks her why she hides her face, she says, ‘[b]ecause I am afraid of seeing something’ (669; bk. 2, ch. 23). With the apron over her face, she avoids seeing (possible) ghosts. Much more effectively, the apron stops her from seeing ‘something’ that would incur Jeremiah’s anger, ‘something’ that might compromise him or his mercenary designs.

Affery’s ghastly, erratic need to throw the apron over her head is then also another manifestation of Jeremiah’s menacing control over her. He has intimidated her to a degree that she avoids getting him angry, complying with his desire to silence her. But in ‘Closing In,’ Affery breaks the silence:

‘You married me whether I liked it or not, and you’ve led me, pretty well ever since, such a life of dreaming and frightening as never was known, and what do you expect me to be but a heap of confusion? You wanted to make me such, and I am such; but I won’t submit no longer; no, I won’t, I won’t, I won’t, I won’t!’ (746)

And so Affery doesn’t just take the apron off but exposes it as the ghastly symptom of Jeremiah’s tyrannical control that it has been all along: a gag.

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By the time *Little Dorrit* began publication in 1855, slightly cracked servants were considered a rather hackneyed Gothic tradition. Sir Walter Scott had quipped in his 1826 preface to *Waverley*,

Had I, for example, announced in my frontispiece, ‘Waverley, a Tale of other Days’, must not every novel reader have anticipated a castle scarce less than that of Udolpho, of which the eastern wing had long been uninhabited, and the keys either lost, or consigned to the care of some aged butler or housekeeper, whose trembling steps, about the middle of the second volume, were doomed to guide the hero, or heroine, to the ruinous precincts? (431)

Recent scholarship has emphasised that the Gothic serves Dickens's writing as a rich repository of inspiration rather than a set of artistically restricting blueprints.<sup>25</sup> *Little Dorrit*'s investment in Affery presents a particularly opportune instance of this engagement with the Gothic. The novel leverages the rather cliché Gothic staple of the aged housekeeper—sometimes sprucing it up, sometimes playing upon, even exaggerating its tiredness—for an elaborate portrayal of domestic violence that shows Dickens at the height both of his powers of observation and insight, and of his literary originality.

The trembling steps of *Little Dorrit*'s aged domestic guide the reader not to the uninhabited wing of a medieval castle, however, but to the darker corners of the much more familiar middle-class Victorian home. Marital cruelty deeply troubled the Victorians' worship of the domestic; as Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund have pointed out, 'homes marred by abuse or tyranny, of course, turn even [virtuous female] persistence into a flaw, if not a vice' (16). With Affery Flintwinch, Dickens, who is today widely considered 'the novelist of hearth and home, the inventor of Christmas, genial paterfamilias,' mobilises the full potential of the Gothic to paint a less familiar, rather disturbing picture of 'home' (Hager 23).

*Little Dorrit*'s interest in Affery's relationship with her home is weird, not least, because Affery is a servant at Mrs Clennam's. In literary studies especially, servants are often considered to have 'maintained the domestic spaces of others without inhabiting such spaces fully as individuals,' as Kathleen Hudson has recently phrased it (3). *Little Dorrit*, a novel that, like Mr Meagles, counts 'individuality of home' as one of the key 'influences and experiences that [form] us,' strongly problematises this assumption (18; bk. I, ch. 2). For the great majority of *Little Dorrit*'s characters inhabit rather *imperfect* homes, homes that generally stint free individual development rather than encourage it.

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<sup>25</sup> Bowen writes in 'Charles Dickens and the Gothic': 'Gothic, then, is a pervasive and inventively used presence in Dickens's work, rarely a mere convention' (253). And Claire Wood observes that 'Dickens's engagement with the ghost story is characterized by invention and playfulness' (9).

In fact, throughout *Little Dorrit* the idea of 'home' resonates uncomfortably with the novel's imprisonment motif. For the resident doctor at the Marshalsea to be 'at home' is to be beleaguered by creditors and sheriff's officers (63; bk. 1, ch. 6). Mr Tite Barnacle 'is kept at home' by the gout (104; bk. 1, ch. 10). Jeremiah observes to Mrs Clennam of Arthur's father, '[a]nd when he brought you home here..., I didn't need to look at you twice ... to know who'd be master' (175; bk. 1, ch. 15). The prison children 'played at hide and seek, and made the iron bars of the inner gateway "Home"' (68; bk. 1, ch. 7). Old Nandy is one of the species of 'little old men' who are 'going *home* to the Workhouse; and on his good behaviour they do not let him out often...; and on his bad behaviour they shut him up closer than ever' (357; bk. 1, ch. 31, emphasis added). On the other extreme of the social spectrum, when Mrs Merdle is 'at home' she is 'in her nest of crimson and gold, with the parrot on a neighbouring stem': two extravagant birds in golden cages (383; bk. 1, ch. 33). Even the Meagles' seemingly perfect home is characterised by imposing boundaries: 'Here we are, you see,' Mr Meagles says contentedly, '*boxed up*, Mr. Clennam, within our own home-*limits*' (187; bk. 1, ch. 16, emphasis added).

This awkward blend of homes and prisons in the novel is literalised in the character of Amy Dorrit, the child of the Marshalsea. Amy's habit of tenderly referring to the Marshalsea as home 'ja[rs] upon' Arthur (95; bk. 1, ch. 9), who is full of pity for 'the devoted little creature ... in her jail-home' (374; bk. 1, ch. 32). 'Don't call it home, my child!' he finally appeals to her. 'It is always painful to me to hear you call it home.' 'But it is home! What else can I call home?' Amy retorts (256; bk. 1, ch. 22). Amy here puts into words the state of things for most of the novel's population, not least Affery. Yes, Affery is a servant in her home, at the very bottom of the domestic pecking order. As Bruce Robbins points out in *The Servant's Hand*, servants didn't look for 'work' so much as for a 'place' (53), and since for live-in domestics like Affery, this 'place' was also a place to live, their home was first and foremost a place of work, and

theirs only conditionally.<sup>26</sup> Places could be lost, and often were, like Peggotty's at Murdstone's. Affery's home is moreover defined by violence and coercion. But it is home—and has been for several decades. What other place can Affery call home? Affery's home has 'formed' her as a human being *such as it is*: hostile and abusive. Just as Amy's home has 'formed' her, and Arthur's has 'formed' him. Any assumption that servants did not inhabit the homes they maintained 'fully as individuals' not only obscures the way in which live-in servants' personal development was affected by their highly specific relationships with their homes, but outright denies a huge group of the Victorian population the emotional capacity for such development.

Terry Castle observes that in Radcliffe's fiction the Gothic heroines' phantasmata 'are the products of refined sentiment, the characteristic projections of a feeling heart.... [T]he cruel and the dull have no such hallucinations' (123). *Little Dorrit's* Gothic heroine collapses this implicit class-code that often sets a refined young lady off against her rather ordinary and 'dull' maid. Affery, who compares her wedding to a smothering, is Desdemona, who is smothered by Othello on what was to be their honeymoon. (Desdemona had told her maid Emilia, 'Prithee shroud me | In one of these same sheets': her 'wedding sheets,' which she had ordered to be laid out again to remind Othello of their love [4.3.22-3; 4.2.107]). But Affery is also, at the same time, Emilia, the servant who finally stands up to her husband Iago, insisting that his evil scheme come to light with the words,

No, I will speak as liberal as the north.  
Let heaven and men and devils, let them all,  
All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak (5.2.218-20)

—much like Affery, who refuses to 'take [her]self away' as instructed, asserting that she will 'say all I know. I will, at last, if I die for it. I will, I will, I will, I will!' (745; bk. 2, ch. 30).

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<sup>26</sup> Lest my use of the past tense be misleading, this is of course still the case for many live-in employees. One salient example are the many Asian and Central-American women employed as nannies in the US.

*Little Dorrit*'s contribution to the discussion of coverture and domestic violence depends at least as much on Affery's inferior position in the household as it does on her inventively rendered sensibility. As a servant, Affery is firmly working-class, giving the text cultural licence to talk about her body in detail and thus to portray both Jeremiah's physical abuse and the toll his emotional violence takes on Affery's psyche. At the same time, the constellation of the Clennam household in *Little Dorrit* creates a situation that blurs the class (and gender) boundaries that are considered to have governed middle-class Victorians' understanding of domestic violence.<sup>27</sup> Affery's husband may have started out at the Clennams' as a servant, but by the time he and Affery are married Jeremiah also works as a clerk, and soon even becomes a partner in the business—though not without holding on to his (potentially class-motivated) anger against his former mistress. Just as importantly, Mrs Clennam tolerates, and in fact encourages Jeremiah's abuse of her servant, as Affery is painfully aware.<sup>28</sup> And *Little Dorrit* draws a fourth person into Affery's abuse: Arthur. Affery is from the outset very open with Arthur about Jeremiah's abuse. But whilst Arthur, sensing that she has some knowledge of his parents' secret, is constantly asking for Affery's assistance, he offers *her* none. '[I]f it had been—a Smothering instead of a Wedding... I couldn't have said a word upon it,' Affery concludes the story of her marriage to Jeremiah. 'In good faith, I believe so,' Arthur replies—and changes the subject (39; bk. I, ch. 3).

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<sup>27</sup> To what extent Dickens was aware of these boundaries is somewhat unclear. He appears to have asked Wills to extend his discussion of the Act for the better Prevention and Punishment of aggravated Assaults upon Women and Children, passed on 14th June 1853 and targeting primarily the lower and working classes, to include men's abuse and molestation of middle- and upper-class women in a prominent article in the *Daily News* (*Letters* 7.133). The article gives the specific example of Dickens's close friend, the heiress Angela Burdett-Coutts, who had been continuously 'persecuted,' or, as one would put it today, 'stalked,' by one Richard Dunn for over a decade ('A very wholesome law...').

<sup>28</sup> Servants being considered fully assimilated members of the household, the abuse of servants by masters or superiors in fact appears to have constituted a common variety of domestic violence in the Victorian era. In 1850, the Mills wrote about the case of Mary Ann Parsons, a fifteen-year-old servant girl in Bideford, who died from injuries she suffered in the repeated, cruel assaults of her masters. The surgeon examining Mary Ann's body noticed among many other wounds that '[t]he nails of the [right] little and fore finger were gone, apparently some time. The two middle finger nails were also gone, apparently more recently, and in one the bone protruded' (Taylor Mill 105).

Affery and Arthur are of course both imprisoned in the ‘darkly threatening place that went by the name of Home’—unlike the Dorrits, whose prison has in a reverse movement become their home (568; bk. 2, ch. 13). To Arthur, who has spent the last 20 years in China, this ‘home’ is the place of his strict upbringing:

Austere faces, inexorable discipline, penance in this world and terror in the next—nothing graceful or gentle anywhere, and the void in my cowed heart everywhere—this was my childhood, if I may so misuse the word as to apply it to such a beginning of life. (20; bk. 1, ch. 2)

His mother’s house is inseparable from the ‘rigid and unloving home’ of his emotionally deprived childhood, which he has never come to terms with (158; bk. 1, ch. 13). As Mrs Clennam reads and prays ‘—sternly, fiercely, wrathfully—’ ‘years seemed to fall away from her son like the imaginings of a dream, and all the old dark horrors of his usual preparation for the sleep of an innocent child to overshadow him’ (36; bk. 1, ch. 3). Emotionally, Arthur has never left. Even after twenty years’ absence, this is still home and its cold discipline has him in shackles, his early experience of emotional deprivation denying him all sense of freedom and purpose. ‘[W]hat is to be expected from *me* in middle-life?’ he had said to Mr Meagles in Marseille (20; bk. 1, ch. 2).

*Little Dorrit* charts how Arthur regains both freedom and a sense of purpose. He has come home to give up his role in the family business and to take responsibility for the damage his mother’s self-righteous greed has done. He wisely begins this progress by removing to a coffee-house after spending only one night at home. Affery, too, extricates herself from her violent home: the novel picks up her story just as Jeremiah’s power over her begins to wane. In contrast to Arthur’s story line, however, the lengthy and difficult process of her emancipation takes place in situ. The violence Affery experiences is emphatically domestic, bound up closely with that amalgamation of physical structure, source of bodily and emotional sustenance, and familial relationships that goes by the name of ‘home.’ *Little Dorrit* underlines this domestic aspect of Affery’s suffering by projecting it onto the physical structure of their shared home, creating a formidable, highly resonant Gothic setting. It is no

coincidence that the building collapses only pages after Affery finally stands up to her husband. But before Affery can actually, physically leave, she has to learn to resist the psychological manipulations that chain her to her violent home. For it *is* home.

How is one to reconcile *Little Dorrit*'s thoroughgoing, topical critique of domestic violence and those who condoned it, with its author's treatment of his wife Catherine during their break-up in 1858—only a couple of years after he had Affery revolt against her abusers—and especially Dickens's serious attempts to have Catherine declared insane and locked up in a lunatic asylum?<sup>29</sup> My personal sense is that it cannot be reconciled, and should not be. Dickens's political views were 'inconsistent and at times incoherent,' as Bodenheimer puts it—his changing attitude toward Jews being perhaps the best-known instance (30).<sup>30</sup> More to the point, he was an irascible man. Burdett-Coutts considered him 'willful and impulsive' (Bodenheimer 161). A particularly salient example is Dickens's reaction to news of the Cawnpore massacre. Although his writing is consistently critical of British colonialism, in 1857 he could not extend to the Indian rebels the same benefit of the doubt Wilkie Collins did, as Nayder details in *Unequal Partners* (166-7). 'I wish I were the Commander in Chief in India,' he wrote to Burdett-Coutts.

The first thing I would do to strike that Oriental race with amazement (not in the least regarding them as if they lived in the Strand, London, or at Camden Town), should be to proclaim to them, in their language, that I considered my holding that appointment by the leave of God, to mean that I should do my utmost to exterminate the Race upon whom the stain of the late cruelties rested; and that I begged them to do me the favor to observe that I was there for that purpose and no other, and was now proceeding, with all convenient dispatch and merciful swiftness of execution, to blot it out of mankind and raze it off the face of the earth. (*Letters* 8.459)

Dickens is clearly in a violent temper writing this. 'I become Demoniactal,' he observes of himself in this letter. This was not a new state of mind to Dickens. In 1843, he had observed that 'I have a strong spice of the Devil in me; and when I am assailed, as I think falsely or unjustly, my red hot anger carries me through it' (*Letters* 3.493). But, as Claire Tomalin and

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<sup>29</sup> For details on Dickens's abominable scheme, see Bowen, 'Madness and the Dickens Marriage.'

<sup>30</sup> See especially Epstein Nord's article 'Dickens's Jewish Question: Pariah Capitalism and the Way Out.'



Bodenheimer suggest, Dickens found himself more often in this ‘demoniacal’ state in the ‘period of *explosive restlessness*’ before his eventual separation from Catherine in May 1858 (Bodenheimer 100).<sup>31</sup> This does not in any way justify his loathsome treatment of Catherine during their break-up. But neither does this loathsome behaviour undo the important work *Little Dorrit* did with Affery, on the contrary. The self-righteousness with which Dickens sought to undermine his wife’s self-assurance and reputation should emphasise the urgent need for the kind of keenly sympathetic, politically engaged writing on marital cruelty *Little Dorrit* offers with Affery.

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<sup>31</sup> See also Tomalin, chs. 19-20, and especially pp. 292-3.

## Conclusion: Toward Dickensian Realisms

This study has addressed the systematic exclusion from the critical conversation of a great number of characters and their pursuits. By way of an elaborate critical fiction of ‘minorness,’ these characters have been cultivated as devoid of interest for scholars. As such they constitute ‘negative knowledge,’ that is, an area of knowledge that we must not have in order for our discipline’s power relations to remain intact. Specifically, I have argued that this disciplinary closure is tied to a racialising, heteronormative idealist aesthetics, which, somewhat ironically, Victorian literary critics considered to be violated by realist novels, and by Dickens’s novels especially. My aim has been to develop and trial analytical tools for appreciating these characters that are customarily considered insignificant or ‘minor,’ and whose contributions to their texts (other than functional) have been systematically swept under the rug. My hope is that these tools will help scholars of Victorian novels break with the racialising, heteronormative categories of ‘central’ and ‘peripheral,’ ‘main’ and ‘minor’ characters, and to work towards a more rigorous critical practice: a critical practice that does not from the outset assume to find a centripetal distribution of significance even within Dickens’s texts, but favours a ‘loving’ approach that seeks to ‘want’ a text ‘*with all of its predicates.*’ It has further been my ambition to offer readings that illustrate that it is worthwhile to study what has been too readily considered peripheral to Victorian novels.

‘Minor’ or ‘marginal’ characters, I have argued, are more accurately marginalised characters. In other words, they have got a reputation of being marginal, and this reputation remains mostly unaccounted for—despite a wealth of available (albeit conflicting) theories of minorness. But these characters *are* in the text, they are given space on the page, the space of words and punctuation marks, and so they are bound to signify. One question that I suggested can be asked of all characters is: what are they given that space for? What are they

given space to actually do and say? This question can be asked regardless of *how much* space a given character is given, though it can be productively brought into conversation with how much space they are given (or not). It includes the way in which characters reflect, foil, or nuance others, as well as what they're represented to do, say and experience, without privileging either. While this question, *what is a character actually given space for?*, is easy to ask, I personally found it rather difficult to answer, especially when characters were concerned that I believed to know well. Thus, chapters three and four especially began as lists of verbs. Here is, for example, what Affery Flintwinch *does* in 'Home,' the chapter that introduces her: answer in 'a cracked voice out of the dimness;' come forward into what doubtful light there was, kiss her hand once, subside again into the dimness; clear the table, prepare Mrs Clennam's supper; offer Arthur some supper; encourage Arthur; retreat, collapse; collect sheets and blankets from a press, hasten, reply 'yes, Jeremiah;' narrate how Jeremiah married her *as* she makes the bed: getting a pillow into its case, tying the pillow tightly, patting it into its place on the bolster, giving it a great poke, spreading the upper sheet, blanket, and counterpane over the bed, tucking up the bed; gone in a moment ('There's Jeremiah on the stairs!'). This exercise may sound like drudgery, and that's what I've found it to be. And yet this was the only way I could put aside my knowledge of how Affery serves to nuance the interest of those characters I had come to consider as 'central,' specifically Arthur Clennam. The only way I was able to extricate my reading from what Barthes termed 'the already-read'—that which 'we have already learned to see before'—which stopped me from seeing what else Affery was actually given space to do and say, and stopped me from seeing not just her work as a servant and her imprisonment in an abusive marriage, but also the relationship between the two (Johnson, 'Review' 2).

Based on this approach of what some might term very close reading, I have presented interpretations of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield*, and *Little Dorrit* that explore what certain characters are given space to do in these novels. In and of themselves,

these interpretations by no means read ‘lovingly’ in the Agambian sense. ‘Love,’ according to Agamben, ‘is never directed toward this or that property of the loved one (being blond, being small, being tender, being lame)...: The lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates.*’ My readings are very much ‘directed toward this or that property’ of a novel; chapters one and four especially attend to only one or two characters, and I have shamelessly drawn other characters and issues into my interpretations, making use of them without concerning myself with what *they* are given space for in the text. But novels are not people, and whilst one person can want, or at least want to want, a Dickens novel with *all* of its predicates, it is not possible to critically appreciate a Dickens novel with all of these predicates in a paper, monograph, or even, probably, in one lifetime’s work. I have however directed my attention, my critical wanting, to characters in Dickens’s texts that have not received this kind of attention before, and this re-direction of attention has exposed concerns of Dickens’s writing that have been previously overlooked. But the greater motivation behind these readings hasn’t been to extend the unwritten list of central characters in Dickens to include Susan Nipper, Affery Flintwinch, or the old lady with the hand-basket. That move would only more strongly demarcate that other unwritten list of peripheral characters. (Removing from this second list characters that do signify after all, would only serve to affirm that it now really, reliably contains only characters that are positively ‘peripheral’ or ‘minor,’ characters that we can safely turn our attention away from.) My motivation has been, rather, to present evidence that demonstrates how untenable and, in fact, restrictive the categories of ‘central’ and ‘peripheral’ characters are that literary criticism has projected onto Dickens’s texts—not just in theory but in practice. The idea is not at all to deprivilege those characters that have been deemed ‘central’ or important, but to extend that privilege to all characters.

In contrast to centripetal models of distribution, my findings point toward a much more even—and thus much more disorderly—distribution of significance in Dickens’s texts.

Characters of little structural relevance like Mary Graham and Mrs Gamp, characters that take up extremely limited space like the old lady with the hand-basket, characters that are flat like Miss Tox, or that have, like Affery, simply been persistently marginalised by the academic establishment—such characters are nevertheless attributed great significance by their texts in their own right. Although I have only looked at an extremely small number of characters, these few characters nevertheless reveal aspects of their texts that already complicate considerably some of the novels’ overarching interests, from (selfish) plotting and patriarchy to autobiography and imprisonment. They also expose some new interests, like domestic violence and the second-hand economy. Beyond the horizons of their individual texts, the characters I looked at also demand renewed critical engagement with a variety of issues in Victorian literature and culture. My reading of Mary’s marginalisation in *Martin Chuzzlewit* strongly supports doubts recently raised by Holly Furneaux and others about the extent to which Dickens expects his readers to take the marriage plot—that mighty relic of the ‘cliché that the nineteenth century was a morally and socially conservative time’—at face value (Galvan and Michie 1). *Dombey and Son* and particularly *Little Dorrit* show Dickens making himself at home in the Gothic mode, breathing new life into even the most tired of Gothic tropes, the ‘explained supernatural.’ All of my readings throw light on the critically neglected art of narrative caricature or ‘flatness.’ ‘Flat characters,’ which are constructed around a single quality that they repeat to the point of absurdity, have been considered not just ‘minor’ or negligible, but pointedly unproductive, quasi-pathological even. Approaching flat characters in terms of what they are given space to do—to repeat themselves, to rub against the world in their growing eccentricity, and to rub against traditions, genres, and, not least, the bounds of the human (or what we are comfortable with considering as such) in their typicality—helps bring into focus their important contributions to their texts. It also showcases a side of Dickens’s genius that has been all but obscured by literary criticism’s bias against ‘minor characters.’

Although their direct concerns couldn't perhaps differ more, my readings together challenge the central role that has been attributed to the separation of spheres in Dickensian gender ideology. Gender identities, but femininity especially, are considered to have been inherently middle-class, because '[s]equestration in the home was not an option for most working-class women,' as Waters points out (365). Dickensian femininity is believed to have been constructed around domesticity; feminine qualities to have been matched to the duties of the homemaker. At the same time, femininity is thought to have been defined by an incompatibility with the public sphere: the relationship between the genders was cast as not just hierarchical but complementary and thus mutually exclusive.<sup>1</sup> My readings, limited as they are, suggest however that in Dickens at least, the private and public spheres are anything but separate. Many women work in Dickens, outside of the home and/or for money. It is *not* generally the case that servants or 'domestics,' so emblematic of the mixing of home and work, are 'made invisible' in Dickens's texts.<sup>2</sup> Wives manage their husbands' finances and sometimes businesses in Dickens, and there's no indication that they do so badly. What's more, many of these women who not only fail to uphold any separation of the public and private sphere, but actively violate it, are not presented as gender offenders or quasi-queer by their texts, but as womanly and virtuous.

At the same time, qualities that were at the heart of the feminine ideal as presented by Victorian conduct books—texts that have heavily informed critical writing on gender in Dickens—meet with deep suspicion in Dickens's texts. 'That heart where self has found no place and raised no throne,' the narrator of *Martin Chuzzlewit* writes of Mary Graham, 'is

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<sup>1</sup> How and to what extent writing about feminine domesticity, such as Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Daughters of England* or John Ruskin's 'Of Queens' Gardens,' alienated those women who could not afford to sequester in their home isn't clear—or even to what extent it reached them at all.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Martin Danahay's chapter 'Work' in *Charles Dickens in Context*, 201. Historical guide books and magazines frequently insist that female servants in particular were supposed to operate behind the scenes of the middle-class home and those servants who did attend on the family, 'although present, ... must consider themselves absent' (James Williams, *The Footman's Guide*, 1847, qtd. in McCuskey 360).

slow to recognise its ugly presence when it looks upon it.... Virtue is incredulous and blind' (243; ch. 14). And it is out of 'patient hope' and a 'loving heart' that Florence Dombey, the 'despised sister,' 'trie[s] so hard to justify' her father in his hatred of her, 'and to find the whole blame in herself' (334, 332, 335; ch. 24). Qualities like virtue, patience, and selflessness, which conduct books presented as women's 'healthy functions' and 'internal principles,' don't prepare Mary and Florence for the world, on the contrary (Lewis 64). These qualities, though in and of themselves lovely, render these intelligent and resourceful young women helpless and vulnerable in an increasingly hostile world governed by assertive men like Seth Pecksniff, Paul Dombey, James Carker, Edward Murdstone, and Jeremiah Flintwinch.

'The immense influence which women possess will be most beneficial, if allowed to flow in its natural channels, viz.—domestic ones,' Sarah Lewis wrote in her highly popular 1839 treatise *Woman's Mission* (52). The home was a cornerstone of conservative rhetoric throughout the century, and it's not difficult to hear its echoes in Dickens's writing, most famously perhaps in Esther Summerson's 'jingling about with my baskets of keys' and mortifying prattle of being 'a methodical, old-maidish sort of foolish little person' (695; ch. 45, 114; ch. 13). '[W]ithin his house, as ruled by' a woman, Ruskin wrote in 'Of Queens' Gardens,'

'unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, no only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division.' (122)

My readings of *Dombey and Son* and *Little Dorrit* in particular show Dickens painting a rather darker picture of the enclosed space of the home. A home is here a space that is not only hopelessly porous, but outright hostile to women. And there is not the least indication that Merry, Susan, Florence, or Affery have in any way themselves brought danger, temptation, cause of error or offence into their homes. One might as well accuse Dora Copperfield of taking gold watches.

Overall, my readings provide a glimpse of a somewhat unexpectedly progressive side of Dickens with regard to gender ideology, from *Martin Chuzzlewit*'s critical engagement with the marriage plot to *Little Dorrit* siding with the contemporary feminist campaign against coverture and domestic violence. Whilst Dickens was much too inconsistent in his political views to be called a feminist, my research adds to a body of work including Hager's *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce* and Gordon's reading of Mrs Joe indicating that Dickens had a much more nuanced understanding of and opinions about gender and patriarchal structures than has been previously assumed.

While I believe that the evidence I have presented is suggestive, it is nonetheless very limited, and undeniably too limited to make any concrete claims about what it *does* mean to be 'womanly' in Dickens. The womanly characters I have looked at, Mary Graham, Susan Nipper, the bookseller's wife, Affery, among others, are not one of a kind in their femininity, as those 'legless angels' Rose Maylie, Agnes Wickfield, and Lucy Manette are frequently argued to be. And so above all my point is that much more research has to be done into Dickensian gender identities and especially into the way Dickensian femininity and financial responsibility intersect. My readings have been too selective to generate valid insights into this immensely complex issue, but at the same time they have not been selective enough. Susan Nipper's experience cannot be compared with Affery's, though both are servants; and Miss Tox cannot be usefully lumped together with the old lady with the hand-basket, despite the fact that both are financially independent. In order to gain a better understanding of Dickensian femininity, more specific questions need to be asked. How does femininity relate to servanthood in Dickens, and, in that context, age? How do femininity and working-class entrepreneurship intersect? What is women's role in the management of working-class family finances? What other constructions of gender are we missing by holding on to the separate spheres paradigm? How are these constructions of



gender related to constructions of race, given that all women in Dickens, regardless of class and age, are white?

*Dickens Undone* has not even begun to answer these questions. But just as important, in my opinion, are the questions that have gone unasked. What is Mrs Bangham given space for in *Little Dorrit*? And Mrs Chivery? What about Mrs Corney, Miss Knag or the delightful Mrs Blockson? Mrs Miff, Mrs Mell, Clickett, Lavinia Wilfer, or George Silverman's mother? And what about Biddy, Ada, or Mrs Lupin? This is nowhere near a comprehensive list of economically independent, or (more troublingly) *somewhat* economically independent female characters in Dickens. And his oeuvre offers hundreds and hundreds of characters of all classes, sexes, and races who merit a closer look—not least because I think it rather likely that our wider understanding of Dickens's writing, as art and as culture, rests precariously on a racialised, heteronormative reading tradition that excludes 'minor characters.' In all probability our bias against these characters and their pursuits has limited the scope of more than one critical conversation.

Unlike Bagehot's, Lewes's criticism of realist literature was by no means directed towards Dickens alone.<sup>3</sup> Lewes complained of a perfect 'rage for "realism," which is healthy in as far as it insists on truth, has become unhealthy, in as far as it confounds truth with familiarity, and predominance of unessential details' (*Principles of Success in Literature* 81). Over time, however, Dickens has come to bear the brunt of 'detailism,' no doubt in part due to his immense popularity. Whilst there seem to be many different takes as to what precisely it means for a text to be 'Dickensian,' an abundance of details and characters tops the list for many.<sup>4</sup> Caroline Levine, for example, observes of HBO's *The Wire* (2002-8) that 'it

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<sup>3</sup> He did have plenty of criticism for Dickens only, though. See especially his essay 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism.' George Levine suggests that both Marian Evans and Lewes's 'critiques helped set the terms of literary antagonism for a century' (52).

<sup>4</sup> Abraham notes that 'Dickensian' was first used in 1840, tellingly to 'modif[y] the noun "verbosity"' (751). George Levine itemises twelve Dickensian aspects of *Middlemarch* and claims to 'stop arbitrarily' (50).

dramatically expands the usual number of characters while also connecting them to each other through multiple channels’—‘like *Bleak House*, but unlike almost any other fictional text’ (134). Dickens is indisputably among the top-notch detailists. But his writing is by no means as eccentric or abnormal as is often assumed. Even authors whose texts are understood to return to the more ordered, masterfully plotted form of idealist aesthetics<sup>5</sup> have not at all managed to escape the charge of ‘detailism’ (or ‘Dickensianism’). In *Dickens and His Readers*, George H. Ford points his readers to the ‘Dickensian’ side of Henry James, who, Ford emphasises, is usually ‘assumed to have remained altogether outside the orbit’ (211). More recently, in a paper provocatively entitled ‘The Dickensian George Eliot,’ George Levine has argued that Dickens and George Eliot’s ‘great differences are ultimately of less importance than their customarily overlooked similarities’ (49). I would suggest that the frequency with which a ‘Dickensian’ abundance of characters is observed across a wide variety of texts points toward the possibility that Dickens has become the poster-child—or the whipping-boy—for a tendency of Victorian prose fiction that goes far, far beyond this one author.

How, then, can a critical practice that seeks to read lovingly be applied to texts by other authors, especially those that seem to rival Dickens’s writing in their abundance of characters? Bertha Mason’s presence in *Jane Eyre* is fascinating, but is not Grace Poole, her keeper, in many ways a more complex and mysterious character—not least because for much of the novel she usurps Bertha’s injustice? What does the projection, in Jane’s white eyes, of the animalistic presence of an imprisoned Creole woman in the house onto a white British working-class woman betray about the relationships between gender, class, and race in the novel? If Tess Durbeyfield is, as Kathy Psomiades has recently argued, a ‘goddess’ in a ‘mythic sex plot,’ who cannot help her fatal attraction of those around her, should we not

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<sup>5</sup> To a certain extent, this return is also a ‘critical fiction,’ as Freedgood shows in *Worlds Enough*.

explain Retty Priddle's refusal to come, despite being repeatedly written to (57)? What do we make of Roland 'Wee-bey' Brice, high-ranking soldier and trusted friend of Avon Barksdale in *The Wire*, whose character as he goes into hiding and then prison becomes ludicrously constructed round his passion for aquarium keeping—despite the fact that it is during this later period that his personality is depicted in more and more complexity? Such 'noisome trivialities' and 'painful *minutiæ*' are there. Whether and how we attend to them in our reading and teaching is up to us.

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