Intertextual Estella: *Great Expectations*, Gender, and Literary Tradition

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SOMETHING ABOUT CHARLES DICKENS'S *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*, perhaps its first-person narration, tempts us to understand its female lead from within the limited views of its characters. As Margaret Flanders Darby says in "Listening to Estella," Estella has most often been fixed "into the Pirrip pattern," meaning that critics "limit her to Pip's associations with her name" (216). For example, George Bernard Shaw called her "a born tormentor" who relishes her work (41), while Humphrey House claimed that "she has been trained to be a tormentor and has learned the lesson gladly" (51), and so on through the history of critical commentary on her "frigid glitter" (Stange 13), "cold contempt" (Moynahan 84), or "destructive pride" (Lansdown 109): "the mocking Estella" (Bloom 2) is "emotionally vacant" (Hutter 117), "narcissistic" (Brown 49), "spiteful," and "an exquisite tease" (Gervais 104, 105). In response, several analyses of *Great Expectations* handle Estella independently of Pip's presentation of her, taking pains to illuminate the ways that she was a victim of circumstance—adopting, in fact, not the "Pirrip pattern" but the descriptions voiced by Estella herself. Such arguments claim that if she is heartless and proud, it is only because she was made that way by Miss Havisham or by a combination of parental nature (the Mag-witches) and Miss Havisham's nurture.[1] This reading sees Estella as Pip's mirror image, counterpart, even "incestuous love object."[2] If the hostile accounts of Estella objectify her (as Pip does) as a femme fatale, the defenses tend to fix her (as Estella herself does) as a creature of others' manufacture without much autonomy, "as if our association were forced upon us," as Pip says, "and we were mere puppets" (268). In these readings she becomes an emblem of either Victorian feminine ideals made nightmare or parenting as overly controlling

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self-replication.[3] In essence, the argument between these ways of reading Estella turns on whether the critic is listening to Estella or to the other characters in the novel.

The author, by contrast, has put both articulations of her into the novel, developing each carefully, so that the resulting figure gains complexity or mystery. These qualities intensify once this contradictory figure makes her one autonomous choice, the decision to marry Bentley Drummle. This moment, which should give us a glimpse into her emotional motivations, only seems to create disagreement among her defenders, for even the most sensitive listeners to Estella claim different motivations for her choice. Jennifer Gribble and Lucille Shores both suggest that she makes it out of altruism or what Gribble calls "a strange kind of integrity" (138), since Drummle is the man least likely to notice that she will be, as Estella says, no "blessing to him" (364). Stanley Friedman proposes the interesting interpretation that she "wishes to achieve her foster-mother's revenge on a victim who is like Compeyson in being a false gentleman" ("Estella's Parentage" 413), while William Axton claims that the revenge is on Miss Havisham herself. Robert Garnett suggests astonishingly that "though she despises Drummle, he is nonetheless sexually more interesting to her than Pip" (38). Darby offers perhaps the most commonsensical explanation: Estella marries "as means of escape" (224).

It seems to me that each of these critical assessments captures a piece of the Estella figure. She is cruel; she is formed in victimizing circumstances; she does make a self-destructive choice out of a strange mix of altruism and vengeance. I would venture to say that this critical history articulates incoherences in her psychology, gaps in her characterization between "bad" and "innocent" Estellas. Bridging these gaps would help us understand not only who she is and how her author came to make her the way she is but also something more complex about the relation between traditionally canonical texts and gender ideology. Dickens bridges those gaps not only with the actions or assessments of the other characters but also with the intertextual references he uses to enrich Pip's limited first-person narrative. I hope to show here that unraveling the threads from the novel's major intertexts—George Lillo's 1731 play *The London Merchant*, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*—might usefully illustrate one way feminist criticism could recuperate such figures as Estella, who seem on their surfaces to promulgate the worst gender types of their times but who are in fact more than type. The most exciting thing to me about reading Estella is watching her author exceed his own limitations by manipulating his intertexts in ways that question the ideological messages they contain.[4] Thus, I hope to suggest a means to move beyond simple either-ors in our readings of characters like Estella and in our treatment of the relation between "male-authored" texts and gender ideology.[5]

"I Am What You Have Made Me": Estella and Millwood

The first extended intertextual reference that we encounter in *Great Expectations* is Mr. Wopsle's performance for Pip and Pumblechook of *The London Merchant* on the evening of Orlick's attack on Mrs. Joe. The principal characters of this play are a young apprentice merchant, George Barnwell; his master, Thorowgood; his friend and fellow apprentice Trueman; Barnwell, his uncle; the master's daughter, Maria (secretly in love with George); and "a lady of pleasure," Sarah Millwood. Young Barnwell is seduced away from his good master and the moral and ethical values the master represents by Millwood, who persuades him twice to steal money from Thorowgood and then to murder his uncle (who raised him as a son) for more money. When the uncle is murdered, Millwood's servants inform Thorowgood of her

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actions, Millwood calls in the authorities on young Barnwell in an attempt to deflect all the guilt onto him, and Thorowgood and Trueman confront her with her crimes. She and Barnwell are imprisoned and sentenced to hang. In prison he repents and is tearfully reconciled to his former friends before he dies, while she goes to hang vociferously—even satanically—unrepentant.

The way this play is presented in *Great Expectations* invites us to find many parallels between the two works, starting with Pip's identification with Barnwell: Mr. Wopsle "appeared to consider that a special Providence had put a 'prentice in his way to be read at; and he laid hold of me, and insisted on my accompanying him to the Pumblechookian parlour" (117). During the reading, every circumstance of the play is made to refer to Pip:

> When Barnwell began to go wrong, I declare that I felt positively apologetic, Pumblechook's indignant stare so taxed me with it. Wopsle, too, took pains to present me in the worst light. At once ferocious and maudlin, I was made to murder my uncle with no extenuating circumstances whatever; Millwood put me down in argument, on every occasion; it became sheer monomania in my master's daughter to care a button for me; and all I can say for my gasping and procrastinating conduct on the fatal morning, is, that it was worthy of the general feebleness of my character. Even after I was happily hanged and Wopsle had closed the book, Pumblechook sat staring at me, and shaking his head, and saying, "Take warning, boy, take warning!" as if it were a well-known fact that I contemplated murdering a near relation, provided I could only induce one to have the weakness to become my benefactor. (117)

This infection in Pip's sense of himself persists into the next chapter during the investigation of the attack on his sister: "With my head full of George Barnwell, I was at first disposed to believe that *I* must have had some hand in the attack upon my sister, or at all events that as her near relation, popularly known to be under obligations to her, I was a more legitimate object of suspicion than anyone else" (120). The parallels between the characters extend beyond this primary identification between Pip and George Barnwell, moreover. The master's daughter, Maria, can be compared with Biddy (long suffering, modest, unrequitedly attached to the hero, and fruitlessly offering gentle help to him); Joe can be compared with the good master whose values the young apprentice violates; and Mrs. Joe to the "murdered" (or at any rate attacked) "near relation" and "benefactor." That leaves Estella, of course, to be the cold, scornful Millwood, who with her "arts" lures the young apprentice away from his master and his own better nature.[6]

These appearances are parallel enough, but the emotional dynamics running beneath the surface do not match up as well. Mrs. Joe is only an equivocal "benefactor" at best; Biddy and Joe have the sense to marry each other in the wake of Pip's emotional abandonment of them; and, most important, Pip is not guilty of stealing money from Joe or of the attack on his sister. Rather, he is ashamed and confused by his vacillating commitments and his incipient emotional betrayal of Joe and his values—Pip is guilty of emotional wrongs, in other words, but not of any criminal acts. The intertext can thus propagate a misreading of him by those who only see his surfaces (his status as apprentice and the nature of his family configuration). In his narration, however, Pip introduces the play as "the *affecting* tragedy of George Barnwell" (117; my emphasis), referring to the famously sentimental reactions it produced in audiences, who were reduced to tears by the tragedy of the young man's destruction and by the repentance in the final act. In the play as Lillo composed it, moreover, George Barnwell agonizes over his crimes, which Millwood has persuaded him to commit by playing on his tenderly protective attachment to her: she convinces him that she is in imminent danger from an evil guardian and that she desperately needs money to effect

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an escape. This emotional turmoil is the parallel with Pip that the intertext can illustrate to the novel's readers, if not to its characters. (Part of the satire of Pumblechook's and Wopsle's hypocrisy, in fact, is that they misunderstand Barnwell—and Pip—to the extent of reducing such moral dilemmas to "maudlin," "gasping" "feebleness of . . . character.")

Understanding more clearly the significance of the play for Dickens and his readers will help solidify this way of viewing the parallels as readers *of* the novel instead of characters *in* it and thus help us understand more fully the intertextual contribution Millwood makes to Estella's characterization. *The London Merchant* began with tremendous success as a new kind of tragedy—bourgeois, domestic, and written in prose. It ran with éclat in the Drury Lane Theater in 1731 and became a staple of theater companies throughout the following decade. Eventually, however, performances dwindled to traditional fare on Boxing Day, when it was performed specifically for the benefit of the young apprentices who tended to fill theaters on that day, and the play had pretty well died out of performance in the legitimate theater by the 1840s. By 1860 it was likely better known as a book (which perhaps served as a resource for amateur theatricals and the Boxing Day performances) than as a play.[7] We see evidence in the novel of the conviction about the work's moral benefit and of the debased form the play had taken: Wopsle has purchased it for sixpence as a book (called not by Lillo's title but "George Barnwell") and reads it especially for Pip's benefit, while Pumblechook intones, "Take warning, boy, take warning!" Similarly, an article in Dickens's own *All the Year Round*, titled "London in Books" (14 Oct. 1865), recounts an instance of a young apprentice who, after seeing one of those Boxing Day performances of *The London Merchant*, starring "Ross and Mrs. Pritchard in the parts of George Barnwell and Mrs. Millwood," repented of having stolen cash from his master at the behest of a woman (273). The work also persisted in popular memory well enough, as Klaus Stierstorfer explains, to become a common target of burlesque in such comedies as John Oxenford's *A Day Well Spent*, and it seems to have become a Victorian byword for bad melodrama.[8] Charles Lamb provides the clearest analysis of the play's shortcomings when he contrasts the shallowness of Lillo's criminal character, drawn, Lamb argues, solely in terms of actions instead of psychology, to the great depth of Shakespeare's criminal characters (Macbeth, Othello), who make us "think not so much of the crimes which they commit, as of the ambition, the aspiring spirit, the intellectual activity, which prompts them to overleap those moral fences" (35). Lillo's play, in other words, had become a sign for shallow, action-based melodrama and is offered as an example of the narrow understandings of the novel's characters, who judge Pip capable of Barnwell's crimes because, like Barnwell, he is an apprentice with benevolent and charitable near relations.

A similar misreading occurs with Millwood and Estella. Millwood *is* the awful thing Estella is accused of being: a calculating, icy seductress without psychology or feelings who sells her "arts" and charms in order to prey on men—a feminine monster in her rapacious economic-sexual practices. As with Pip and Barnwell, Estella is made to seem guilty of Millwood's crimes: of luring Pip away from Joe, poisoning his moral values, and heaping scorn on him the while. This picture does superficially resemble Estella's behavior and effect on Pip when they are children, but reading the emotional dynamics beneath the surface will show us that Millwood's thirst for revenge and her misandry more properly belong to Miss Havisham. If we return those motivations to that rightful owner, it becomes clear that Estella has been made guilty for a role—Millwood's role—that she is placed in by other characters (by Miss Havisham, for example, and even by Pip), just as Pip is

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placed in the role of corrupted apprentice with a "benefactor" for a "near relation."

Reading beyond the surface parallels, however, we will find another quality for which Estella, Millwood, and many other such figures have been condemned throughout patriarchal culture: a capacity for penetrating, rational critique. We can see this quality especially clearly in the scenes in which each character explains herself to the people she believes have made her the way she is. In act 4 of *The London Merchant*, when Millwood is confronted with her crimes and "wicked arts" by Thorowgood and Trueman—especially "the abuse of such uncommon perfections of mind and body"—she acquits herself magnificently:

> If such I had, well may I curse your barbarous sex who robbed me of 'em, ere I knew their worth, then left me, too late, to count their value by their loss. Another and another spoiler came, and all my gain was poverty and reproach. My soul disdained, and yet disdains, dependence and contempt. Riches, no matter by what means obtained, I saw secured the worst of men from both. I found it, therefore, necessary to be rich and to that end I summoned all my arts. You call 'em wicked; be it so! They were such as my conversation with your sex had furnished me withal. (64; sc. 18)

Some of this reproach belongs to Miss Havisham—the misandry, especially. But when Estella explains her inability to love her adopted mother, we find much the same rationale. When Miss Havisham "reproaches" her "for being cold," she is ready with her answer: "'You should know,' said Estella. 'I am what you have made me. Take all the praise; take all the blame; take all the success, take all the failure; in short, take me'" (304).

Again, when Thorowgood suggests that Millwood's "conversation" must only have been with the "worst of men," she replies with a devastating critique of the "men of all degrees and all professions I have known" (64), ending with the priesthood:

> Whatever religion is in itself, as practiced by mankind it has caused the evils you say it was designed to cure. War, plague, and famine has not destroyed so many of the human race as this pretended piety has done, and with such barbarous cruelty as if the only way to honor Heaven were to turn the present world into Hell. (66)

Estella shows an equal capacity for penetratingly critical analysis of herself, her world, and especially the contradictions in her adopted mother's desire for love:

> "Or," said Estella, "—which is a nearer case—if you had taught her [your adopted daughter], from the dawn of her intelligence, with your utmost energy and might, that there was such a thing as daylight, but that it was made to be her enemy and destroyer, and she must always turn against it, for it had blighted you and would else blight her; if you had done this, and then, for a purpose, had wanted her to take naturally to the daylight and she could not do it, you would have been disappointed and angry?" (306)

In both scenes, the accusations are turned back on the accusers so justly and so lucidly that neither accuser is left an argument. "Truth is truth, though from an enemy and spoke in malice," says Thorowgood (66), while Miss Havisham collapses—"settled down, I hardly knew how, upon the floor, among the faded bridal relics with which it was strewn" (306)—unable to answer at all.

Understanding the work performed by *The London Merchant* in the novel in this more complex way shows us the novel's critique of the characters' moral judgments, which are based on the creation of shallow parallels, or stereotyping. If we do not read beyond the circumstantial parallels, which serve to distract us from the truth hiding below the surface, we end up reading the novel's characters as they read each other and miss the actual questioning of the social-sexual ideologies lurking behind the surface of Pip's

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narration. Just as Pip's status as apprentice supplies his interlocutors with an easy way to pronounce him guilty (and thus belittle him), Estella's appearance as scornful seductress supplies her interpreters inside and outside the novel with an easy way to ignore the formidable social analysis her point of view is capable of producing. I do not claim here that Dickens is protesting outright against the gender ideologies of his era, but it does seem to me that he exhibits a deeper intuition of the female experience, particularly of being interpreted only erotically despite having intellectual power, than he is usually credited with.

The problem Dickens creates for himself by invoking Millwood, however, is the satanic nature of that figure's outspoken defiance (*Paradise Lost* provides an important intertext for Lillo). He has to find a way to make visible in Estella the kind of probing struggle with a conflicted conscience that so clearly characterizes Pip and that does not appear in Millwood, however smartly she voices the ills of patriarchy. One possibility for making such a struggle visible is to put it into action. And, indeed, marrying Drummle seems to Estella a way of acting on the promptings of such a conscience, in that she sees herself as "disengaging" from a life of which she has grown weary: "'What!' said Miss Havisham, flashing her eyes upon her, 'are you tired of me?' 'Only a little tired of myself,' replied Estella, *disengaging* her arm, and moving to the great chimney-piece" (303–04; my emphasis). However, this rebellion against Miss Havisham's rebellion in fact replicates its "sin": it enacts an emotional abandonment of Estella's "mother by adoption" and of her only friend, and it ironically puts Estella into exactly the oppositional stance that is the keynote of Miss Havisham's character. In it, she demonstrates the fruition of the lesson every parent actually teaches: "do as I do." Instead of abandoning the world to align herself in vengeful opposition to a Compeyson who connives and deserts, however, Estella abandons her friends to align herself in vengeful opposition to a Drummle who "beats or cringes" (390). It is difficult to perceive a conscience at work in these actions, especially since Estella's own account of her weariness ("Only a little tired of myself") is oblique and ironized. To ensure the visibility of this complexity, of this interior conflict between the innocence of simply being alive and subject to others' machinations and the guilt of compliance with those machinations exhibited in her rebellion, Dickens infuses another, and an opposite, female figure into her.

"On Whom Should I Fling Myself Away?": Estella and Ophelia

The novel underscores the entry of the adult Estella with Wopsle's hilarious performance of *Hamlet*.[9] We might note, indeed, that while the Barnwell performance marks the end of Estella's childhood—Pip learns that she has left for Europe on that day—the *Hamlet* performance marks her return as a young woman. As with Millwood, the surface parallels between Estella and Ophelia are clear, once we begin to think about them. Both characters are daughters who have been raised in complete obedience to their families' teachings. Ophelia obeys brother and father with hardly a question: "I shall th'effect of this good lesson keep / As watchman to my heart," she says to Laertes (1.3.45–46), and "I shall obey, my lord," to Polonius (1.3.136). Estella affirms an equal loyalty to Miss Havisham's "good lesson": "I have never been unfaithful to you or your schooling" (306). Even more specifically, both have been most carefully and intensely schooled by their family members against the potentially deceptive "tenders / Of . . . affection" that they might receive from would-be lovers (Shakespeare, (1.3.99–100): Ophelia by Laertes and Polonius in her first scene in *Hamlet* and Estella in her training by Miss Havisham's example and teachings. And in terms of story, both are

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deployed by their parents as snares in plots to entrap the young heroes.

It is this role of snare or lure that the Ophelia and Millwood figures share and that constitutes the seam joining the two in Estella. However, the Victorian Ophelia, unlike Millwood, was invariably tender, loving, and melancholy. As William Hazlitt says, "Ophelia is a character almost too exquisitely touching to be dwelt upon. Oh rose of May, oh flower too soon faded! Her love, her madness, her death, are described with the truest touches of tenderness and pathos" (85). Victorian accounts of her nunnery scene with Hamlet (her scene as snare) also show that she is tenderly innocent of knowing participation in the court's designs. A reviewer of William Charles Macready's 1835 performance of *Hamlet* reports enthusiastically in the *Examiner* that the staging of this scene "was truly exquisite. It was the realization of Mr. Lamb's opinion, that the scene is a profound artifice of love, an attempt to alienate Ophelia by affected discourtesies, so as to prepare her mind for breaking-off of that loving intercourse, which can no longer find a place amidst business so serious as that which he has to do" ("Drury Lane" 645). There is no notion here that she has knowingly abetted the court's design; the focus is entirely on Hamlet's efforts to separate from her because of his own "serious business." Furthermore, in a description of Shakespeare's French source for *Hamlet* in an article called "Retouching the Lord Hamlet" in *Household Words* (1857), the author quotes François de Belleforest's description of a "'faire and beawtifull woman'" who is to entrap Hamblet "'in a secret place . . . with flattering speeches and all the craftiest meanes she could use . . . to allure his mind,'" explaining, however, that she informs him of the plot because she "'from her infancy loved and favored him, and would have been exceedingly sorrowfull for his misfortune, whome shee loved more than herselfe.' In all this (and more that I do not quote)," says the *Household Words* author, "we have . . . Ophelia distinctly foreshadowed" (546).

These accounts of Ophelia confirm and underscore the picture Estella wants Pip to see: that she has no willing part in the wicked designs on him; indeed, she seems as helplessly ensnared in that plot as he is: "'You speak of yourself as if you were someone else,'" Pip says, expressing this sense of her distance from herself in that role, a distance that she seeks to encourage in him as well, with her "tone as if our association were forced upon us and we were mere puppets" (266, 268). Also in keeping with the Ophelia paradigm is the affection for Pip that causes this protectiveness in her, "as one that from her infancy loved and favored him, and would have been exceedingly sorrowful for his misfortune." Of course, that degree of love has been trained out of Estella (as she patiently explains to Miss Havisham), but the dynamic of longstanding affection is certainly present in the account she gives Pip of their childhood relationship:

> "Two things I can tell you," said Estella. "First, notwithstanding the proverb that constant dropping will wear away a stone, you may set your mind at rest that these people [Miss Havisham's Pocket relations] never will—never would, in a hundred years—impair your ground with Miss Havisham, in any particular, great or small. Second, *I am beholden to you* as the cause of their being so busy and so mean in vain, and *there is my hand upon it*." (267; my emphasis)

Pip reports the seriousness of these recollections for her: "It was no laughing matter with Estella now, nor was she summoning these remembrances from any shallow place. I would not have been the cause of that look of hers, for all my expectations in a heap" (267). That Pip is unable to "take warning" (and that so many critics have been unable to read these nuances in Estella's character) testifies to the continuing power of the Millwood figure, which is not supplanted by Ophelia but rather combined with it. The resulting character is

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quite an interesting, because new, kind of female figure. The two lures operate together as something like the beloved of the courtly love tradition, whose beauty and virtue draw the hero on to deeds of great valor and moral rectitude.[10] In Estella, however, the allure sadly brings out the worst, rather than the best, in the hero. The more beautiful and virtuous she is, the more destructive is her effect.

And she knows it. Thus far, I have been exploring the ways the Ophelia and Millwood intertexts cross in Estella in her role as *object*. However, she is also a *subject* who chooses to act in accordance with that self-analysis, as her puzzling choice to marry Bentley Drummle proves. To recapitulate the critical explanations of that choice, we found that she makes it "as means of escape" "and to end Miss Havisham's abuse . . . by choosing another kind of abuse" (Darby 224, 227); or "out of a strange kind of integrity" that leads her to marry the one man whom she cannot harm (Gribble 138); or to take revenge either against Miss Havisham (Axton 290) or with Miss Havisham against the Compeyson-like "false gentleman" Drummle (Friedman, "Estella's Parentage" 413). We might notice now that all these strands make up the fabric of Ophelia's role, for revenge through self-destruction as an escape from intolerable circumstances is explored clearly with her in *Hamlet*. After all, Ophelia is a counterpoint to Hamlet's tragic circumstances and trajectory.[11] While the central theme of revenge is refracted through several male characters (Hamlet, Fortinbras, Laertes, the Ghost), it is also explored in a feminine register in Ophelia. She, too, has a father murdered—a wrong that her brother can (and does) seek to avenge in proper masculine form. But Ophelia, as a woman, cannot act in that way; the only means she can use to avenge at once the court's mistreatment of her beloved and her beloved's murder of her father is to destroy the one asset she has: the body through which these men could ensure their patrimonies (either the royal blood line if she became Hamlet's queen or the noble line of any other courtier she might marry).[12] By losing her reason and then her life, Ophelia removes herself from such patriarchal calculations. All through this process, however, she remains the tender, loving model of feminine virtue Dickens and his readers would have seen onstage, who harms no one but herself. The parallels to Estella's decision to marry Drummle should by now be clear. "'On whom should I fling myself away?' she retorted, with a smile. 'Should I fling myself away upon the man who would the soonest feel (if people do feel such things) that I took nothing to him?'" (364). Estella "flings herself away," to the contrary, on a man who will feel nothing but the impulse to violent control. Her escape, like Ophelia's, seems mad, but like Ophelia's it endows her with a virtuous femininity that produces a melancholy affection in her and for her, while also exacting revenge on all who had a stake in the disposition of her body: Miss Havisham, Pip, her other suitors—including Bentley Drummle himself, to whom she "takes nothing" and whom she outlives.

That Dickens and his readers were ready to attribute this kind of complex psychology to Shakespearean characters can be seen in the way they understood the plays generally. Unlike *The London Merchant*, which had descended into fodder for burlesque, the plays of Shakespeare were enjoying a revival onstage following their revival at the hands of the Romantic critics, who were still widely read and whose judgments Victorians still followed unquestioningly—note, for example, that the reviewer of Macready's *Hamlet* praised the staging of the nunnery scene specifically as "the realization of Mr. Lamb's opinion." Returning to Mr. Lamb now, we might recollect the terms on which he compared George Barnwell and the great "criminal characters" of Shakespeare. It was the psychologies of the latter, "the ambition, the aspiring spirit, the intellectual activity, which prompts them to overleap those moral fences," that he claimed

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were the objects of study in the plays and in which he located Shakespeare's real genius. The quintessential psychological drama for the Romantics (not only Lamb but also Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hunt, and Hazlitt) was *Hamlet*, which they all considered far too complex for any mortal actors to stage. Hazlitt sums up what remained the Victorian view of Shakespeare's achievement perhaps most succinctly in his discussion of *Hamlet*: "Shakespear was thoroughly a master of the mixed motives of human character" (85), and Hamlet supplied the richest mixture of all. To match these Romantic readings of the plays as closet dramas, Victorian stage revivals added lavishly researched and richly produced set and costume designs—and they restored the original language of the plays, some of which had been rewritten during the eighteenth century (mostly by John Dryden, Nahum Tate, and Colley Cibber) to conform more tidily to the Johnsonian ideals of that era.[13]

The most iconic feature of the Victorian Ophelia, however, was her singing of "sweet melancholy songs," as another article in *All the Year Round* puts it, in her mad scenes.[14] It is this Ophelia that Pip describes in Wopsle's production, comically representing the inept exaggeration of her that such amateur productions were likely to have presented: "Lastly Ophelia was a prey to such slow musical madness, that when, in course of time, she had taken off her white muslin scarf, folded it up, and buried it, a sulky man who had been long cooling his impatient nose against an iron bar in the front row of the gallery, growled, 'Now the baby's put to bed let's have supper!'" (254). Pip is describing what seems a staging of Ophelia's first song fragment, her lament or elegy for the father or the lover (her song could indicate either) who has died, which refers to a "white shroud"—the "white muslin scarf" that Wopsle's Ophelia folds up and buries:

> He is dead and gone, lady,
> He is dead and gone,
> At his head a grass-green turf,
> At his heels a stone.
> . . . . . .
> White his shroud as the mountain snow—
> . . . . . .
> Larded with sweet flowers
> Which bewept to the grave did not go
> With true-love showers.
>
> (4.5.29–32, 36, 38–40)

Some of these elements—the elegiac mourning for the loss of the parent and lover who constituted the largest element around which her identity was formed and the resulting focus on the graveside turf—appear in the novel's conclusion. There Estella expresses her own "sweet melancholy songs"—a lament for Satis House and "everything else" that is "gone from [her]": "'Poor, poor old place!' The silvery mist was touched with the first rays of the moonlight, and the same rays touched the tears that dropped from her eyes. . . . 'The ground belongs to me. It is the only possession I have not relinquished. Everything else is gone from me, little by little, but I have kept this'" (483). Even the "silvery mist" forms a kind of white shroud through which the scene is presented.

In this concluding scene—in the conclusions of both the original and the revised endings, in fact—we witness Pip's inability to see past the allure of the Millwood-Ophelia figure right to the end.[15] Here the softening effect of Estella's "sweet melancholy" and not the Millwood "arts" creates his illusion that Estella is drawing him to her—that her changed "heart" is a heart that has melted into love for *him*—but the fantasy controls him in just the same way. In the original ending, it produces the final words of his narration, "for, in her face and in her voice, and in her touch, she gave me the assurance, that suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham's teaching, and had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be" (509). However, when we remember his continuing inability to read her "face," "voice," or "touch" outside the idea that she is using

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them to attract him, we can see the contradiction between her conclusion that they "will continue friends apart" and his interpretation of her suffering as regret for *him*—"I saw the shadow of no parting from her"—spelled out in the published ending (484).

Important as it is to distinguish between Estella's and Pip's "endings," however, it is also important for our understanding of this novel's relation to gender ideology to distinguish between its narrator and his author. Only then can we realize whose patriarchal fantasy it is that "suffering has been stronger than Miss Havisham's teaching" (484 and 509). Before condemning Dickens for seeming to reinforce in his plot the ideology that, as Daniel Cottom describes it, "a woman needs to be beaten for culture to be instituted in this novel" (137),[16] we should keep in mind that Estella's "shaping" (including the "better shape" into which she has been "bent and broken") is part of the novel's critique of the ideological formation of identity. She has several shapers, both in the world of the novel and at the level of its narration. Through this system of characterization by characters, Dickens seems to have intuited the experience of being a woman who is shaped in accordance with the ideologies of those who would possess or explain her, from Miss Havisham to Herbert Pocket, Jaggers, Drummle, both narrating and narrated Pips, and even Estella herself. It is an intuition of femininity as a profoundly social—even artificial—construction, one whose artificiality is made visible to us by the intertextual layers that Dickens (as opposed to Pip) includes in order to suggest the psychology that is maimed and constricted by those socially constructed surfaces. Then, moving back to the plot, we can see that Dickens is critical of the artificiality: he composes a romance, after all, that turns on the devastating effects it has on both male and female participants. Thus, while I cannot claim that Dickens actively and consciously protests the traditional disposition of gender roles in his culture, I do think he understands thoroughly the malaise they could create for not only the men but also the women who lived in it.

Making Monsters

The distinction between the author and his narrator becomes explicit in the moments when *Frankenstein* enters the mix—moments when Pip glimpses his own status as creature and creator of his fellow characters. In "My Monster / My Self," Barbara Johnson claims that in *Frankenstein* "the monstrousness of selfhood is intimately embedded within the question of female autobiography" because the "very shape of human life stories has always . . . been modeled on the man," whose story consists in "the difficulty of conforming to the standard of what a *man* should be" (10). Dealing as I am with gender ideology in a fictional autobiography, I would shift the terms and say that in *Great Expectations* the monstrousness of *femininity* is intimately embedded within the question of a *male* autobiography whose story consists in the difficulty of conforming to the standards of what a *gentleman* should be. The novel's first reference to *Frankenstein*, in fact, depicts Pip attempting such gentlemanly conformity in the creation of the servant he calls his "Avenger":[17]

> I had got on so fast of late, that I had even started a boy in boots—top boots—in bondage and slavery to whom I might have been said to pass my days. For, after I had made the monster (out of the refuse of my washerwoman's family) and had clothed him with a blue coat, canary waistcoat, white cravat, creamy breeches, and the boots already mentioned, I had to find him a little to do and a great deal to eat; and with both of those horrible requirements he haunted my existence. (218)

We see here in comic deflation the Frankensteinian method of assembling a creature from parts ("the refuse of my washerwoman's family" and various items of clothing), a

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galvanic start-up ("I had to find him a little to do"), and a voracious appetite ("and a great deal to eat"). Beyond these surface parallels lies the commentary on class: the Avenger's monstrosity comes from the ambitions that inspired his creation, not literally out of body parts like Frankenstein's creature but from a livery that should signify the patronage and thus the higher status Pip is trying to achieve. (This social climbing parallels, again in comic deflation, Victor Frankenstein's Promethean ambitions.) Pip's discomfort with the Avenger and his "horrible requirements" reminds us, inevitably, of other moments in the novel when ill-fitting new clothes highlight the status dislocations of their wearers: Joe in his "Sunday penitentials" (23) and especially Pip in his own new suit of clothes, which makes him feel "suspicious after all that I was at a personal disadvantage, something like Joe's in his Sunday suit" (157). It takes no great stretch of the imagination to see in the above passage that Estella is the other creature to whom Pip "passes his days in bondage and slavery" and who "haunts his existence," made as she is out of his first childish impression of feminine beauty, self-possession, scorn, and especially superior social class: "being a girl, and beautiful and self-possessed; and . . . as scornful of me as if she had been one-and-twenty, and a queen" (56).

This business of creating monsters out of bits and pieces also begins to sound suspiciously like authorship. We might notice in the above passage, for example, that Pip's Frankensteinian method of making monsters resembles nothing so much as Dickens's method for making characters. After all, Dickens's popular reputation rested in part on the vivid minor characters evoked by collections of odd features, eccentric gestures or phrasal tags, and distinctive bits of clothing. *Great Expectations* is no exception, filled as it is with "Dickens characters." In this novel, however, the "Dickens characters" belong to Pip's narration, including his own narrated self (although the narrated Pip has more complexity than the narrating Pip could perceive in anyone else). To make Estella as well matched to Pip as Clara is to Herbert or Miss Skiffins is to Mr. Wemmick, therefore, Dickens must make her complexity visible to us despite his narrator's "Dickensian" technique of characterization and limited, infatuated perspective, a feat that he achieves by supplying the intertexts, whose fuller significance Pip cannot grasp, although he describes them as events.

Pip does grasp the "wretched" experience of being the object of such creatorly ambitions, an experience he reports in the novel's other reference to *Frankenstein*, in a passage in which Estella's "wretched" creaturely experiences are "intimately embedded" as well: "The imaginary student pursued by the misshapen creature he had impiously made, was not more wretched than I, pursued by the creature who had made me, and recoiling from him with a stronger repulsion, the more he admired me and the fonder he was of me" (339). This moment offers Pip an opportunity to understand Estella's experiences at the hands of her makers, if he could only grasp it. It explains, for example, that he feels in his recoiling from Magwitch's fantasy about his class status something like the recoiling from the fond admiration Estella might feel in response to suitors who pursue their own fantasies about her erotic status. However, if he cannot see this, we surely can—and can understand that the commentary on class consciousness articulated in Pip's monstrosities is comparable with the commentary on gender identity articulated in Estella's.

Intertextuality, Gender, and Dickens

"We have barely begun to explore the true intertextualities of intersexuality" (280), claims Barbara Johnson in "*Les fleurs du mal armé*: Some Reflections on Intertextuality," an essay in which she sets out to examine "the poetic uses to which women—both inside and out-

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side the text—have been put" by Victor Hugo, Charles Baudelaire, and Stephane Mallarmé (273), whose intertextual "oedipal dynamics" provide the launch for her analysis (267). One of the poetic uses to which Mallarmé puts women turns out to be a "sibylline whiteness," the "nourishing blanks [in his texts] without which the newborn poem might die of 'azure,' which, as we have seen, represents the weight of poetic history." These blanks, "extraordinarily privileged in Mallarmé's poetics," supply a means to critique and escape from the conventions and clichés ("azure") of the poetic language he inherited from the forerunners with whom, as purveyors of "poetic history," he engages oedipally. By "*activating* those blanks," Mallarmé "comes close to writing from the place of the silenced female voice," an analysis that leads Johnson to conclude that his "critique of logocentrism opens up a space for a critique of phallocentrism as well" (279–80). I have attempted an exploration of that intertextual, intersexual territory, begun by Johnson with the compass of Lacanian deconstruction, by trying what a historicizing compass might reveal in the case of an author who opens that "space for phallocentric critique" not by activating the "nonlanguages" of "music" and "blancheur sibylline" (279) to critique or escape the weight of poetic or literary history but rather by activating that history's very conventionalities and ideologies in ways that suggest their destructive, limiting power.

My historicizing compass is an adaptation of Claus Uhlig's vision of the shifting meanings of literary texts through history as a geologic accretion in which "the chronology of epochs becomes the stratigraphy of texts" and the resulting multilayered works "palimpsests" (501).[18] Since literary and popular characters can take on lives of their own in cultural history, they can also accrete "stratigraphic" layers of meaning. Exploring the receptions of such figures can help us gain a clearer picture of the ideologies they attract or critique, while studying the mixes of such figures (along with their reception histories) in an author's work will help us discern some of the complexities in his or her negotiations with those ideologies. And, finally, changes in an author's responses can be tracked through the receptions and mixes of intertexts taken up and abandoned during his or her career.

In Dickens's case, the mix that produced Estella and *Great Expectations* in 1860 is certain to be different from the one that produced (for example) Louisa Gradgrind and *Hard Times* a few years earlier or Bella Wilfer and *Our Mutual Friend* a few years later. Bella's story depends on her conversion from *desiring* gold, as a "mercenary little wretch" to *being* "the true golden gold at heart" (317, 752), a conversion brought about by a plot structure that Dickens lifted from a popular play by his friend James Sheridan Knowles called *The Hunchback* (1832) and from the avaricious models supplied by Frederick Somner Merryweather's *Lives and Anecdotes of Misers* (1850).[19] Once "converted" and married, Bella brings two other texts into her cozy household: "The Complete British Family Housewife" (the novel's fictional name for *Beeton's Book of Household Management* [1861]) and "Blue Beard of the secret chamber," as Bella playfully calls her husband (667, 726). This "Blue Beard" is likely the one who keeps the corpses of former wives in a secret chamber in Charles Perrault's well-known version (first translated by Robert Samber in 1792), but the motif of recipes, ingredients, and wifely competence in Beeton echoes unsettlingly another version, "an offshoot of the Blue Beard family" as Dickens describes it in "Nurse's Stories" (173), one of the essays collected in *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1860). In this version, the Blue Beard figure, called "Captain Murderer," makes his wives into meat pies and eats them, once they demonstrate their housewifely competence by mixing, rolling out, and shaping the pie crust.[20]

How intentional is Bella—or her author—about the gruesome implications of

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this commentary on domesticity? To answer such a question, we need more study of the intertexts as a specific mixture of palimpsests in their host text (along with the others in the novel, such as "Cinderella," "Red Ridinghood," and Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*). So, too, if we turn to *Hard Times*, we might ask what Scheherazade and *Coriolanus*—and indeed "Blue Beard"—are doing for, with, or to Louisa Gradgrind. Hilary Schor claims that this tale was "one of Dickens's favorite marriage narratives" (183), but does he always invoke the same version of it? Does it signify the same "marriage narrative" in every novel? (In *Hard Times*, in fact, it comes up in relation to Louisa's father instead of to her husband.) Fairy tales, Shakespeare's plays, tales from *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment*, the popular theater—all these and more are woven throughout Dickens's oeuvre, and the possible layers of meaning they supply have yet to be studied adequately in terms of his negotiations with gender and its ideologies through the course of his career.

In the concluding words of her important essay exploring the palimpsest presented by the Ophelia figure and "the responsibilities of feminist criticism," Elaine Showalter cautions us that "[w]hen feminist criticism chooses to deal with representation, rather than with women's writing, it must aim for a maximum interdisciplinary contextualism, in which the complexity of attitudes towards the feminine can be analyzed in their fullest cultural and historical frame" (91). For an icon like Ophelia, the interdisciplinary context is rich indeed, as Showalter's essay demonstrates. However, not all feminine literary figures have as rich an iconic status as Ophelia. The most useful approach for understanding "the complexity of attitudes towards the feminine" as exhibited by Estella, I have been arguing, seems to me to require a different focus: first, the "maximum . . . contextualism" is less interdisciplinary than intertextual, and, second, we should look not to a history of re-representations of Estella in twentieth- and twenty-first-century interdisciplinary contexts (which are relatively few) but to the particular intertextual history that made up the elements of her initial creation—of Estella as coalescence or descendant instead of source or ancestor. In this way, I hope to have opened a way for feminist criticism to restore these figures and their meanings in greater fullness than their subsequent histories as icons would allow.

But Showalter's essay also offers a second point about feminist criticism. It demonstrates that feminine icons like Ophelia are in many ways only partially readable in any given historical moment, that their meanings shift according to the way femininity is coded by the different cultural moments that evoke their figures. In this way, she concludes, they supply a useful means to understand the history of shifting gender attitudes. If I look at Estella's partial readability in the years since her first appearance and at my interpretations here, I can see that perhaps my own postmodern awareness causes me to perceive what seem to be insights into the artificial essence of social femininity that I am claiming Dickens uses to create Estella. More intimately, perhaps, I am also aware of my own artificiality, my own training as literary critic on the one hand and as wife and mother on the other, trainings that are as widely disparate and as crudely sewn together in me as any Millwood-Ophelia combination and that no doubt cause me to identify with Estella's condition. Surely this identification produces in me a desire to "recuperate" figures like Estella as a way to recuperate myself. Whichever way we look at this project, however, it seems to me that since the history of male representations of femininity has affected women's lives at least as deeply as the history of works by women authors, it is necessary to recover the way those representations work, how they developed, and what they signify rather than

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simply dismiss them as the inevitable products of a monolithic patriarchal ideology.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Axton; Barzilai, "Dickens's *Great Expectations*"; Garnett; Hagan; Holbrook; Houston; and Shores.

2. This is the essence of Shuli Barzilai's very interesting take on Estella in "Dickens's *Great Expectations*," which follows a similar suggestion made by Peter Brooks.

3. For the former, see Houston; for the latter, see Hagan; Axton; and Hutter.

4. Hilary Schor argues, e.g., that if Dickens's novels seem like "machinery for the entrapment and consumption of gullible girls" (1), the "girls" inhabit a more alienated stance in that machinery—and therefore Dickens demonstrates a greater awareness of its problematic nature—than previously thought. Helene Moglen reaches a related conclusion in her reading of *Dombey and Son*, taking the position, as I would like to do, that "[t]he social relations of a culture are not simply oppositional after all, but are multiple and complexly interactive" (160).

5. This goal seems to put my project loosely in the "movement" of "new formalism" as described by Marjorie Levinson in "What Is New Formalism?" One principle held in common by the two branches of this movement, which Levinson names "normative" and "activist," seems almost an exact description of the underlying premises of my essay: a "complexity [that] is attributable to the artwork and recoverable only through a learned submission to its myriad textual prompts . . . explains the deep challenge that the artwork poses to ideology, or to the flattening, routinizing, absorptive effects associated with ideological regimes" (560).

6. Michael Tatham draws all these parallels carefully but claims that "Miss Havisham and Estella, it turns out, are essentially one and the same person—Millwood" (107), whereas I will keep Estella and Miss Havisham separate individuals. The only other reading of *The London Merchant*'s role in *Great Expectations* is Monica R. Morgan's; however, her interest is in "the novel's rhetorical purpose," which Morgan claims matches that of the play and "is crafted to prod its audience's guilty consciences, encouraging them to confess and seek forgiveness" (87).

7. This kind of cheap edition is cited in John Ashton's *Chapbooks of the Eighteenth Century*, first published in 1882.

8. Excellent accounts of the critical and histrionic traditions of the play can be found in William H. McBurney's introduction to his edition of the play and in Stierstorfer.

9. Friedman, "Echoes"; Wilson; and Worth are the three substantial readings of the role *Hamlet* plays in the novel. All of them concern themselves with Hamlet and Pip or with Miss Havisham, Magwitch, and the Ghost but not with Estella and Ophelia.

10. Aaron Landau reads Estella and Pip's relationship as a courtly love affair, noting that Estella's "cold and astral inaccessibility" (161) is conventional to romance, as is Pip's attraction to her beauty and higher social status. Michael Slater goes even further, claiming that Estella is simply a "fictive device" out of the different "literary mode" of "romance" and not a realistically developed character (281).

11. For this reading of Ophelia, see Finkelstein; Fischer; and Neely.

12. Leonard Tennenhouse analyzes the way the play's political conflict rests on conflicting claims on Gertrude's body (as that of Claudius's wife and of Hamlet's mother), a female situation analogous to Ophelia's.

13. Paul S. Conklin provides an excellent history of the play's critical reception, while G. C. O'Dell and Richard Foulkes, separately, present useful histories of histrionic practices.

14. "Much Better" 19. Also see Showalter for a full account of Ophelia's history as icon.

15. Like Schor; Newey; and Darby, I think it is important to distinguish the different perspectives Estella and Pip each bring to the conclusion of their story.

16. Lucy Frost makes a similar argument.

17. Iain Crawford and Kath Filmer each treat *Frankenstein* as an intertext for *Great Expectations*, but both read Pip as the monster of Magwitch's making without exploring the issue of authorship and narration as I will do here.

18. This geologic metaphor shares the layering image with the musical metaphor chosen by the editors of the March 2007 "polyphony" issue of *PMLA*, which was devoted to exploring intertextual theory and practice in new ways (and whose release after I completed this essay prevents me, sadly, from engaging its ideas as fully as I would like here). Geologic and musical stratification share many elements, particularly in the way one might "read" each product—the piece of landscape, the piece of music—by sorting out, through, and among the layers. Polyphony emphasizes especially well the ways texts become "entangled with" or "folded into" each other (and readers with them)—as Patricia Yaeger describes the workings of one mode of intertextual citation in her editor's column (438–40). Polyphony does not include the gradual "accretion" (of meanings) suggested by the geologic metaphor, however, which is crucial to my project of excavating details from the historical strata that produced Dickens and his mid-Victorian readers and that might have caused them to become entangled in their texts differently from the way we might. Perhaps in our imaginaries geology and music naturally suggest each other. The two metaphors get enfolded in Yaeger's essay as she cites the geologic imagery of Wai Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents* to help clarify her own meditations on intertextuality as polyphonic enfolding. In another register, I think also of the creation myth in J. R. R.

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Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, whose Middle Earth is sung polyphonically into existence by "the voices of the Ainur" (15): music and geology as one *musica mundana*.

19. Source studies of *The Hunchback* and *Lives and Anecdotes of Misers* provide us with valuable information about these works and their influence on the novel (see Eigner on *Hunchback*, Dvorak on *Lives*), but not about the female characters their sources contain or what each might reveal about gender.

20. Schor notices the Blue Beard reference but does not give it extended attention (183), although her reading of the novel demonstrates that Dickens was struggling with conflicting attitudes toward the inheritance-marriage plot on which it is centered. In "The Bluebeard Barometer" Barzilai infers from this Blue Beard allusion that Bella's husband has been engaging in a "bride-test" (519) that expresses "the Dickensian fantasy that he would capture the heart of the young woman who has captivated his own" (521).

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