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RECENT DICKENS STUDIES

By Frederick R. Karl

THE CRITICAL AND SCHOLARLY attention to Charles Dickens and his body of work in the last few years is quite varied, ranging from detailed critical analysis of singular aspects of his work to broader studies of his role as commentator and critic in Victorian England. Dickens scholarship, which once might have led to articles in PMLA, has morphed into historical-critical studies using deconstruction, Lacanian analysis, the new historicism, and other disciplines. One omission, surprisingly, in this latest batch is the passing over of Dickens's flaws as a novelist and thinker – so that in turning him into an iconic figure critics have often glossed over his shakiness of structure, his contradictory ideas, and his failure to achieve a consistent fictional ideology. I emphasize a "fictional" ideology, since we have no reason to demand that a novelist sustain any consistent social or political agenda. A fictional one becomes necessary in order for the novelist to uphold his or her own voice, personal tone, that meeting of the reader's expectations with the writer's sense of order (or disorder).

These latter remarks are called into question by Andrew Sanders's *Dickens and the Spirit of the Age*. Sanders handles Dickens's fiction as if it were social and political treatises, not in some cumbersome way, but without the urgency of fictional transformation. Narrative strategies, use of metaphor and tropes, psychological ambiguities, for example, are slighted as Sanders makes his way through what Dickens "means" to the nineteenth and, by implication, the twentieth century. After a seemingly futile burst attempting to sort out "Modern," "Modernism," and "Modernity," Sanders comes to see Dickens as "modern" in a way that sweeps the two centuries together. While this type of analysis might prove fruitful – Dickens was modern for his period, but hardly Modern – it often muddies rather than clarifies matters.

Sanders cites four areas in which Dickens "reacted to the particular circumstances of the age in which he lived and wrote" (4): (1) its political and technological innovations; (2) its growth in urban living; (3) its shifting social classes and increasing mobility; and (4) its dynamism as it separated itself from the previous century. These are all themes essential to any understanding of Dickens beyond the entertainment of his pages; but, unfortunately, they omit as much as they attempt to include. Sanders pursues these four areas quite intelligently, seeing Dickens as the man who arrived from nowhere and would become the main character in his own Bildungsroman. With this, Sanders perceives him as someone who can view Victorian life, culture, and society from particular angles of vision, unique and innovative because of his own skewed relationship to everything. But the argument in these four areas

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cannot account for the humor, the convoluted narratives, the overwhelming hostility to real change, even while Dickens mocks the old order. Even Dickens's handling of Dedlock in *Bleak House,* while full of biting mockery, finds something admirable in the lord's support of Lady Dedlock; and this ignores the poisonous political and social order Dedlock upholds. Even his courtliness toward his wife cannot balance out his condescension toward everyone else.

Furthermore, the four areas in which Sanders has chosen to examine Dickens are already well trod. Few commentators on *Hard Times*, for example, have stinted on the subjects of technology, the educational system, and laissez-faire capitalism. In terms of shifting social classes and mobility, virtually all commentators on *Great Expectations, Little Dorrit*, and *Our Mutual Friend* have remarked on class, caste, mobility, and hierarchies. As far as Dickens's portrayal of his century's removal from the previous one, nearly everything after *The Pickwick Papers* indicates he saw not only subtle change but a radical alteration of earlier values and standards. All of his work, as has been commented upon, could be observed as creating new forms of behavior to take into account rapid and ceaseless social and cultural alterations. What he feared, however, was that change would bring about incoherence and disorder, even while he was seen as the champion of such change. One needs to enter that ambiguity, as Dickens did in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Once that is said, Sanders is particularly effective on locating Dickens as socially neither here nor there. He cites early biographical studies (pre-Forster) which skip over Dickens's humble beginnings and, of course, omit his experience in Warren's Blacking factory at twelve years old. Early citations also evade Dickens's skimpy educational background; some point to his attendance at a London school, while others omit details. Dickens himself, acutely attuned to the vicious English class system, presented himself as somewhat above what he had experienced. His silence, except to Forster, about the blacking episode – plus his playing with Bounderby's lies about his background in *Hard Times* – suggests how alert he was to being considered socially inferior and, therefore, of little consequence. Sanders shows how biographical sketches of other writers (male) indicated their Oxbridge associations, or else their public school attendance. But Dickens, rightly must be located socially in an intensely morbid class system as someone who constantly reinvented himself. From nondescript lower middle-class background – and not always this side of the legal system – Dickens emerged as someone new, and because of that could represent how the "new" was turning Victorian England away from the previous century. Yet pulling Dickens back toward the "old" was his fear of disorder and incoherence. As we have observed, Sanders does not pursue the ambiguities so much as he probes the residue.

One measure of Dickens's ambiguities comes in defining his secularity – something Sanders takes for granted. We can say, generally, that the major Victorian novelists – the triumvirate of Dickens, Thackeray, and Eliot – all pursued a secular view, which ran counter to the overt religiosity of more mainstream Victorian England. Yet we cannot leave the story there. While Dickens was mainly secular – and like most of his contemporaries mocked the clergy for hypocrisy, joining here also with Trollope – he did probe deeply into what we call spirit, or even soul, without the heavy freight of religiosity. Many of Dickens's heroines, for example, are descendants of the Madonna, spiritualized creatures who communicate with another, purer world. If they are not believers, they do believe, nevertheless, in an alternate behavior, an alternate social system based on deep Christian values – we need look no further than *Bleak House*'s Esther Summerson.

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Further, Dickens's most telling male protagonists – for instance, Pip – must learn, in order to achieve stability, that the Christian virtues are what count; that social climbing and greed must be shunned in favor of hard work, belief in one's own achievements, social justice, the whole complex of the Christian way to salvation. All this suggests that Dickens was not a purely secular novelist, any more than Eliot, who claimed to have rejected her early religious baggage; but a peculiar kind of secularist, of the Victorian variety, who was so deeply embedded in Christian ideology that his secularity is really religion without God, a true contemporary of Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin. Despite Sanders's keen insights, he needs to define his terms more stringently.

In *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins*, Carolyn Dever picks up an abiding theme in Victorian fiction – the missing mother, or the mother who, while not precisely missing, is insufficient. It is part of the trope of inadequate parents, but particularly the mother, in whom so much expectation is invested. We think of silly mothers early on in Austen – Mrs. Bennet; missing mothers in the Brontës; the rejectionary mother in *Daniel Deronda*; and of course remiss mothers in Dickens, especially in *Bleak House*.

Dever's point is well-argued, in that she sees the missing mother as creating an ideal image through not being there. "The maternal ideal in fiction," she writes, "thus takes its shape and its power in the context of almost complete maternal absence" (xi). Dever then carries this further, so that the missing mother is not only central but creates the need for "ambivalent compensatory structures" to fill in for the departed maternal figure; and then, still further, she cites the disruptive nature of these structures, which implode "at the inevitable point at which the repressed returns" (xi). The Freudian twist Dever places on all this is less persuasive. It is, however, necessary for her argument, since if she detailed the loss of the mother, or the mother's absence, she would have been repeating the obvious. But by linking this phenomenon in the Victorian novel to Freudian concepts of loss and maturation, Dever connects Victorian ideas with more Modern ones. Let us examine the linkage.

Freud's argument, as Dever presents it, posits loss, especially maternal loss, as part of the survivor's subjectivity, in which he or she repeats the loss and separation from the mother. The subject's maturation of course depends on the degree to which he or she can deal with the loss, and it is the mother, not the father, who creates the pathologies in the subject who cannot accept the separation. I have myself argued in my biography of Franz Kafka that it was his mother, not the notorious father, Hermann, who helped create the difficulties in Kafka's personal life.

The best test for Dever's linkage is in the reading of particular novels – *Bleak House*, for obvious reasons, although she also analyzes *Daniel Deronda* and fiction by Wilkie Collins. In *Bleak House*, Dever focuses on Esther Summerson's diary entries – obviously so, since Esther is missing a mother who is still alive, but unwilling to acknowledge her illegitimate daughter. There is a cat-and-mouse quality to Esther and Lady Dedlock: the former almost dead at birth and then dead to the mother, now capable of writing about her confusion; the latter, Lady Dedlock, alive and living with her husband, but dead to her daughter. Then, finally, the turnaround: Lady Dedlock will pass on, and the daughter will live, be courted, marry a suitable young man.

The sole fault line in Dever's otherwise brilliant analysis of this relationship in psychoanalytic terms is that she isolates it from the larger context: so that in her examination, she does not ask some significant questions. To what degree, for example, is Esther's narrative integral to the novel? to the Jarndyce case? to the social patterning? or to what extent is it

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digressive or even transgressive? Is there a sexual subtext that requires further probing? Finally, is Esther's narrative and her response to abandonment and mistreatment credible except within Dickens's sentimental plan, or does it lose credence once it moves out as a text which must be self-validating? More than anything, we would like to know how Esther's commentary fits into other areas of what we might call the "counterfeit": deception, falsity, shadows rather than substance.

Dever touches on some of this, but marginally, for her focus is clearly on substantiating her thesis, of the missing mother who is some way galvanizes the younger person into reinventing herself, in some cases into reinterpreting the role of women in a throwaway society. Esther is, after all, a castaway who must be rehabilitated in Dickens's terms – the innocent victim who eventually triumphs over an uncaring or insufficient parent. As Dever explains: "There is a direct relationship between abandonment and articulation, and specifically, between the death of a mother and the birth of an artificial subject" (81). In some way, the mother's absence or death energizes the surviving child, so that she, who otherwise shows no proclivity for writing, becomes a writer of her own story.

Dever, however, does not probe more deeply into narrative, for Esther's entries are, of course, Dickens's portrayal of Esther, and are what he believes the loss of a mother might be in a daughter. The longing for a lost ancestor is his, not hers; and, therefore, the narrative must take into account how much he can disguise himself by becoming her. In narrative terms, she then becomes an object, and he in this sequence is the subject, although in the novel's pretended reality, she seems the subject and he disappears. What this means, inevitably, is that Esther does not really experience any of this; she is a persona, and the psychological strategies Dever brings to bear belong to Dickens, not to Esther. This may not be a completely fair way of observing Esther's diary entries, but narrative when internal writing is involved is often ambiguous.

Once we give Dever her way, however, she is quite astute in seeing the alternating love and hate Esther feels for the mother who abandoned her; the young woman's sympathy is always tinged with anger. The more Esther yearns to be recognized, the more Lady Dedlock seeks disavowal, fearing that recognition would bring scandal and ruin. As a consequence of this reading, the young woman is in an unresolvable situation. As Dever writes: "In other words, the anxieties of authorship and parentage which Esther expresses early in her narrative are literalized after she is finally, literally abandoned by her mother. What transpires is a fight for her life, an attempt to replace her death with her birth, to rewrite the biography of an animated corpse" (85).

Dever argues further that the effect of Esther's drama of self-determination is also symptomatic "of the novel's anxieties about the terms of its women's power" (87). In this scenario, Lady Dedlock becomes dangerous to the degree she gains power over Esther's life; but this assumes that Dickens will let it happen, and it ignores all the conventions of Victorian fiction, in which it cannot happen. Dever somehow turns the characters into free, willing individuals when they are, of course, fictional figures trimming not their sails but Dickens's. In life, Esther's psychological response to Lady Dedlock's treatment would possibly unhinge her; but in Dickens's version – which fits Victorian literary convention – it only brings out the nobility in Esther. For Dickens, as later for Nietzsche, what would destroy her only makes her stronger. She becomes, in some asymptotic way, closer to perfection.

Another aspect to this needs addressing, in the same chapter on *Bleak House*. When Dever moves into thickets of difficulty with her argument, she cites an authority, here D. W.

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Winnicott (89). Winnicott has written on how children use dolls or other transitional objects to compensate for anxieties – Esther confides in her doll about her missing mother. Winnicott, however, does little for the argument, in as much as one could cite other authorities with other points of view. A Jungian analysis would make as much sense (or nonsense).

This use of outside sources – later Jane Gallop – sometimes offers opinions to settle somewhat speculative arguments within Dever's own point. For example, still citing *Bleak House*, Dever indicates how Dickens deconstructs the idea of domesticity, with its "traditional ethic of stability and constancy" (91), even as he establishes the maintenance of a home. This is a sound point, leading to the ambiguities in Dickens's thought as it is contextualized. Dever's shift, then, to Jane Gallop and her discussion of "The Significance of the Phallus" as a way of commenting on the maternal body evades the argument by trying to augment it with a different agenda.

When Dever explicates Gallop's point, she states the obvious, that the mother is equated with home and homeland, and then the argument loses focus when it becomes entangled with how home, language, and the child's lack of phallus all lead back to the missing mother. The argument which should concentrate on Dickens's ambiguities becomes strained and convoluted. Dever tries to tie it up by calling the world of *Bleak House* anomic and, therefore, part of the same logic she finds in Gallop. But not all of *Bleak House* is anomic. There are strong social norms, and even the very idea of the missing mother – so well argued in places here – reveals how a stricken young woman, rejected or deemed dead, can recuperate her powers through the written word.

As a somewhat parallel volume to Dever's study, Anny Sadrin's *Parentage and Inheritance in the Novels of Charles Dickens* focuses on how Dickens, while preoccupied with money, was more concerned with the ways it is passed on than with the sums themselves. Succession is his theme in most of his major novels, and succession takes on a variable role, linking parents, money itself, children, greed, inheritance law, wills, and all the related paraphernalia of Victorian fiction. Intermixed with these themes, all under the banner of succession, is the question of identity, naming itself. "What matters," Sadrin writes, "is not so much what his characters possess as what they lose or acquire and, still more urgently, the way they lose and acquire it" (3).

In what at first may seem to be an obvious procedure, Sadrin manages to come up with fine critical insights. In a discussion, for example, of the words "patrimony" and "matrimony," she shows not only gender distinctions but how the words apply to different worlds. Matrimony refers to marriage, not to inherited property; whereas patrimony refers not to gender but to property which the man will inherit from the father or uncle. The gender distinction disguises far more significant matter than "his" or "her"; it goes to the heart of how Victorian society saw wills, inheritance, property, succession.

In questions of identity, Sadrin demonstrates how the woman is swallowed up in the very act of naming. In *Great Expectations*, where Estella would seem to have the upper hand over Pip, she is nevertheless deprived of any family name. She is never known as Estella Havisham, nor, of course, as Estella Magwitch. Pip refers to her as "that girl" or as Estella, separating her from anything to do with patrimony and relegating her only to marriage material. All of Estella's venom is in this sense socially subverted by her lack of linkage to any family; so that in her way she is, like Pip, orphaned.

Even in *Bleak House* – for those who feel that Esther's diary empowers her – Sadrin shows that while she is narrating Rick Carstone's story, she is herself lost in a narrative

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that is not hers. Further, she exists only to the extent she tells Rick's story, for her narrative ends with Rick's death. As a daughter, she is obliterated, and even her name disguises her – "Summer-son" fudges her role as daughter and eliminates her as deserving of patrimony.

Sadrin then moves to the question of patricide in Dickens, a theme that runs through most of his novelistic career. Nearly all situations involving sons and fathers – and areas of succession – are Oedipal; but Dickens usually avoids actual parricide by having the fathers die, even while the sons carry murder in their hearts. "The patricidal impulse seems to be the only possible form of filial acknowledgment" (13). In *Great Expections*, Pip is ridden by the guilt of a son murdering his father, although his father is already dead. The point is made repeatedly through references to *Hamlet, George Barnwell*, and related parricides, both literary and journalistic. Dickens's male figures are frequently, even overwhelmingly, orphans, unfathered: Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby, Martin Chuzzlewit in the earlier novels, and then David Copperfield, Richard Carstone, Arthur Clennam, Charles Darnay, Philip Pirrip, John Harmon, Edwin Drood in the later. By creating so many orphans, Dickens suggests a wish-fulfillment – that to be adrift is arduous and perilous, but preferable to having a father who will disgrace the son, as John Dickens did. Sadrin, in fact, goes so far as to call Dickens "the great father-killer of the Dickens novel" (18).

She sees him as hiding from his father when he published anonymously under the name "Boz" until *Oliver Twist*. Why did he hide? was it resentment of the father, a matter of shame, or was it, perhaps, success which made him reveal himself? The answer possibly lies in *Oliver Twist* itself, where a boy who starts out with no origins miraculously gains a family. Sadrin is on to something resonant here, but she insufficiently probes the psychological impulses and the complicated context which these remarks suggest. She does draw on Dickens biography and demonstrates how obsessed he was with homelessness and dereliction, how he walked the streets of London, how Tom All Alone's in *Bleak House* was a place he had to revisit. Similarly, he revisited "no-name" Nemo, Esther's own night wanderings, Lady Dedlock's nightmarish journeys to the end of her world, and death itself, all in *Bleak House*. Sadrin suggests that what seems to be in that novel a tale about a drawn-out court case as an emblem of English injustice is really in its details a personal voyage out into the terrors of the unconscious, where all are orphans.

Sadrin then proceeds through several major Dickens fictions. In *Dombey and Son*, where succession is an obvious theme, she sees an Oedipal situation with Carker, the villainous manager of Dombey's enterprises. Carker is in one sense the successor, since he hopes to sleep with the owner's (Dombey's) wife, the spectacular Edith, and in that way slay the owner-father figure and assume control of the firm. In the novel, Dickens plays with successors, to fulfill the "son" of the title and Dombey's own yearnings. The son, of course, dies young, and the real "son" is the neglected daughter, Florence. What Sadrin does not sufficiently probe, however, is how Florence, by acquiescing to every poor treatment by her father, wins the battle; through seeming weakness, she shows enormous strength and turns the father into a quivering failure.

By the final few pages, she is in complete control, a turn on the Oedipal situation, in which the daughter has "killed" the father with acquiescence, kindness, and passivity – all of which were really weapons of strength in her conquest. Reverse psychologies lie here, perhaps in areas where Dickens was not himself aware of what he was doing; and the point would contradict Sadrin's theme of succession but paradoxically strengthen it by showing that succession can be achieved through different kinds of resistance.

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Sadrin attempts in *Bleak House*, and elsewhere, to forge a feminist dimension to Esther Summerson and others like her (Lizzie Hexam, for example). This is a subtext of a study which purports to be about inheritance, property rights, and succession. There is a problem, however – for whatever the details and temporary adjustments, Dickens comes down solidly on the side of normalcy in his major female characters, and normalcy for him means a bourgeois conclusion, marriage, family, a tidy, accommodating home. Feminism in any sense as meaning an independent or liberated woman was anathema to Dickens's portrayal, although we can validly claim he shifted hierarchies from the "angel in the house" type to something more varied and textured. Esther reveals this variousness, as do Lizzie Hexam, little Dorrit, and others. But for women who really attempt alternate lives, Estella or Edith Carker, for instance, misery is their fate (despite Dickens's alteration of Estella's lot on Bulwer Lytton's advice).

In Sadrin's terms, Dickens is triumphant in his insistence that origins are not destiny. Here he becomes one of the "bad boys" of Victorian culture, pushing an agenda disallowing the still narrow view of class and caste which gripped the nation's institutions. But in striking out at these institutions, Dickens tried to resolve several unresolvables. The father and son relationships, for example, reveal a pretense of parricide which cannot be reconciled with a utopian outlook. *Our Mutual Friend,* for one, bears out how Dickens is caught in his own idealism. In another, related area, Sadrin opens up the possibility that the parricidal act is not in the son's but in the father's mind – a notion she cites from René Girard's *Víolence and the Sacred*. But this notion coming in the brief conclusion leads to complexities Sadrin does not pursue. Yet as far as she goes, this brief book becomes a valuable part of contemporary Dickens criticism.

The argument in *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* by Juliet John goes that Dickens eschewed individual behavior in favor of community and society. He found in selfhood a form of villainy which contradicted the community he saw as salvational. "Dickens's belief," she writes, "in the principle of communality and cultural inclusivity made the notion of a psyche-centered approach to people and society seem individualistic, divisive, and potentially elitist" (3).

With this as a given argument for the "villains" in Dickens's work, John takes up *Hard Times*, although in very narrow terms which, it seems, distort the book. In Dickens's handling of Sissy Jupe, for example, he would appear to contradict John's reading as it pertains to individuality; surely, Dickens posits an individualistic Sissy Jupe as opposed to social cogs like Bitzer, the school people, Bounderby and their supposed adherence to what society and community expect. Sissy is subversive of all so-called stabilizing institutions – school, hard knowledge, science, social norms – and insists on the freeing power of the circus. True, the circus is a community, but its social organization, such as it is, falls well outside what we mean by "society." Its norms are collegiality and generosity of spirit.

We could argue that in Dickens we see a plethora of unresolved elements regarding individualism and society, none of which weakens but in fact strengthens his fiction. He does not reflect Victorian certainties, but mirrors the uncertainties involved in the play between individual and community. In this respect, as one of our critics reviewed here has insisted, Dickens is "modern," in ways that we often find as well in George Eliot. The matter of choice, whether one should be self-oriented or community-oriented, is full of ambiguities.

John is on more solid ground when she identifies Dickens as melodramatic rather than Romantic. She is careful not to claim Dickens was consciously anti-Romantic. He embraced terms like romantic and romance "when these terms bore the sense of fantasy and adventure,"

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but he rejected Romantic when its meaning "internalized intellectualized and individualistic emotional response" (14). John here proves a valuable guide through Dickens's ambiguities, how he tried to find a third way in many matters. She attempts to counter J. Hillis Miller's point in his well-known "The Fiction of Realism" that Dickens's texts are mediations between the critical text and the social world; she insists that Dickens's social criticism should not be lost by turning all his texts into self-reflexivity, "a self-contained intellectual performance" (20). John emphasizes that Dickens's realism cannot be ignored; and in this way she tries to find the middle between post-structuralist criticism and mimetic criticism, the first stressing the self-reflexivity of the text and the latter the fiction as social representation.

In her comments on dandyism, an abiding Victorian theme, John again draws useful distinctions. She perceives that Dickens's sense of dandyism – that which expresses the exterior while revealing an interior vacuum – is both comic and socially oriented. She observes that dandyism can be either expressive, as in "clothes and manner make the man or woman," or repressive, a means of disguising or hiding the inner person, who may be vacuous. Dickens revels in the aesthetics of dandyism, since so much of it leads to comic effect, but he also uses it as a weapon of social commentary, as in Skimpole and Steerforth, two obvious examples. She opposes Steven Marcus's definition of dandyism as "a parody of the self as a work of art" – although one wishes she had delved into that more thoroughly – and remarks that the dandy is "a parody of the self as a human being" (161). Within this context, she sees why Dickens was so ill at ease with Byron and his poetic protagonists, self-defining dandies, in Dickens's eyes, social morons. John then can argue that dandyism and villainy – part of her thesis – are linked, especially in John Chester (in *Barnaby Rudge*) and Rigaud Blandois (in *Little Dorrit*).

What she does not take up sufficiently is how seeming dandies like Pip and Eugene Wrayburn (in *Our Mutual Friend*) are transformed by guilt, love, and the sacrifice of others. One can argue that Pip, before his transformation, takes on the guise of a Byronic protagonist. In John's words, the latter is "a self-destructive role-player, whose pale, aristocratic features mask a mysterious inner life" (121). Omit the pale, aristocratic features, and Pip fits; he also fits into John's further definition of the type, as having his energy directed at his self, with a lessening regard for the outside world. Here we have Dickens playing with the type. Pip's redemption, of course, comes when he feels compassion and recognizes "true feeling" as against the dandy's veneer of social success. John puts it well, that a protagonist such as the Byronic hero is interested only in "the theatre of his own ego" (121).

As for women, John includes a chapter called "Sincerely Deviant Women." Her aim is to counterargue those who view Dickens as falling into stereotypes of his female characters, as either angelic or villainous – nightmarish or absent mothers, social butterflies, or even "grotesque men-women," as critic Michael Slater called them. John contends that Dickens "could divorce neither his conscious understanding nor his subconscious creative imagination from the models of womanhood he encountered in the nineteenth-century theatre" (200). Influenced by Claire Tomalin's analysis of theatrical women in her biographical study of Dickens's mistress, Ellen Lawless Ternan, John argues that the professional actress was "a more potent type of female amorality in the early and mid-nineteenth century than the female villain of melodrama" (201). Dickens was himself drawn to female types in melodrama and portrayed the "bad women" of this genre, rather than the women in traditional farces or the "fantastic types" in pantomime. Out of this, with his own peculiar comic twist, came the "deviant woman."

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The idea here is convoluted, for John's point is that even while Dickens emulated women in melodrama, he subverted the assumption in that genre that the ideal is the angelic woman. While this appears to be her point – since it makes Dickens's women more textured than they are usually granted – she introduces too many other considerations, such as the professional actress and her threat to a more tradition-bound audience. Other points conflate the actress playing the melodramatic role and the role itself. A further problem arises from John's failure to offer immediate examples of Dickens's deviant women while she is discussing the contexts for them.

She finally arrives at these deviant women only when the chapter is about half over: Madame Defarge, Rosa Dartle, Miss Havisham, Edith Dombey, Lady Dedlock. This is decidedly a mixed group, some of them what John calls "gender offenders" (not feminine enough), some who marry for money, or some who have an illegitimate child. Amidst this grab bag, John is particularly strong on Edith Dombey as a woman of several selves, combining stage performer with prostitute (marrying for money and position). Edith is a magnificent creation, a refutation to those who claim Dickens could not write about complicated women. In one respect, she becomes the epitome of John's argument about Dickens's "villains," mainly because she is so complex in her role-playing. For obvious reasons, she does not belong in the same group as Madame Defarge or Miss Havisham, who are far more singular and far less textured. For a book of only 237 pages of text, John perhaps tries to cover too much ground, even while she offers sound, mature views about Dickens, villains, female characters, and how the nature of theater penetrated into Victorian fiction.

For a change of pace from thesis-driven studies, Grahame Smith's *Charles Dickens: A Literary Life* provides an angular, but rewarding, view of biography. While much of the information is well-known, Smith's volume is valuable for its details. Even the most attentive of Dickens scholars does not know everything all the time, and Smith reminds us of several facts which possibly have escaped notice. He runs, for example, through the various editions and appearances and reappearances of *Oliver Twist*, after its first publication as a monthly serial in *Bentley's Miscellany*. Smith indicates that the novel was published in three volumes in 1838, *before* serial publication was completed. From this, he extrapolates that Dickens's way of publishing heralded a modern, professional procedure in which an author could find his work issued.

According to Smith, Dickens's pivotal work for publishing innovation is *The Pickwick Papers*, the initiator of his great success as a writer. *Pickwick,* in this reading of the cultural context, came into being as English publishing was in turbulence, to use Smith's description. Dickens's novel hit as a result of his determination, planning, luck, and chance – it was the right novel at the right time. Unfortunately, Smith does not offer an even larger cultural context which would explain why publishing was so unsettled, and why *Pickwick*, in that larger context, became so significant. More was going on than simply turbulence in publishing: there was the aftermath of the bitter passage of the 1832 Reform Bill; the changeover in the crown, to Victoria in 1837; rumblings from farmers and farm laborers, the early days of what would develop into Chartism; the development of the railroads, in themselves a source of great cultural significance.

In this regard, Smith's treatment of Dickens's response to the developing railroad system should be questioned. Smith cites several comments in Dickens's letters, indicating that he embraced the technology which included railroads. From this, Smith extrapolates that Dickens reacted positively to railroads and more generally to technology, something that the

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novels contradict. In *Dombey and Son*, Carker is struck down by a railroad, a technological evil colliding with a human evil. In *Hard Times*, Dickens opposes technology, science, materialism, and unequivocally resists hard-driven economics. His fondness for Sissy and the circus people belies any sympathy for technological or material progress. In *Our Mutual Friend*, hatred for the material world, and by extension technology, is part of the plot.

In his discussion of serialization, however, Smith is on more solid ground, in his responsiveness to both the positive and negative aspects of it. Yet once again in discussing the artistic dimensions of serialization, Smith omits the larger context, the cultural, social, and even political fallout of this kind of publication. In discussing Dickens's reading, Smith shows how compelling he can be when he marshalls his details, here to counter Dickens's supposed literary ignorance and to demonstrate how well-read he was, especially in Shakespeare and the Bible. Smith teases out from lines and scenes in Dickens's novels allusions and references that reveal a deep knowledge of literary history, with special emphasis on Shakespeare's plays. But, also, there is a chapter heading in *Hard Times* from Luke; the imagery in *Oliver Twist* and *Little Dorrit* is often from the Day of Judgment. Less persuasive is Smith's claim that the so-called "pilgrimages" in *Great Expectations* and *Little Dorrit* "echo and sometimes parody Biblical language" (42). Surely, these images, with their suffering, pain, and guilt derive from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a standard reference for nineteenth-century writers. Overall, however, Smith makes a solid case for a far more literate Dickens than is usually found in the Romantic interpretation of the unlettered genius.

In another valuable chapter, "Periodicals, Journalism and the Literary Essay," Smith runs through what Dickens drew upon to make such a compelling literary journalist as well as novelist. Here we find a sound roundup of background materials, much of it familiar, but it reminds us of Dickens's various roots in Lamb, Hogarth, periodical literature, essays, journalistic reports. Smith comments: "We can also trace here the roots of one of Dickens's most defining characteristics, a fusion of qualities that are usually seen as mutually exclusive in a writer, a commitment to the most minute, if vivid, recording of the social life of his time combined with the ability to translate the mundane into realms of fantastic and surreal comedy and tragedy" (73). While Ackroyd in his defining biography has already commented on this ability, Smith marshalls the evidence from Dickens's immersion in what are often considered fleeting materials.

As another dimension of this fusion of elements, Smith probes Dickens's relationship to theater in its broadest sense. Dickens's love of staged plays or just readings has been well documented, but smith widens his analysis to include all kinds of popular culture which Dickens enjoyed: prize fights, puppet shows, circus performances, and other spectacles. Smith here provides some contextualization for the writer beyond his literary life, by speculating that such light entertainment provided relief from a world or society which could, through accident or happenstance, suddenly go terribly wrong, as it did with Dickens. "The foreclosure of a mortgage in melodrama and the tumble from a beanstalk in pantomime would, in reality, be terrifying intrusions of fate into a social world which lacked welfare provisions except at the most basic level of the workhouse and personal charity. The laughter they generate in the theatre is thus a barrier erected against what would be their inevitable consequences in real life" (92). Smith might also have added that Dickens's glee in these lesser forms of cultural event invaded his novels to such an extent that he personally touched the contemporary reader in ways no other Victorian novelist accomplished. Trollope may have addressed the reader verbally in his novels, but Dickens reached out to him viscerally.

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As far as "accidents" occurring, Dickens had the experience of the blacking factory at twelve – which haunted him as proving he could be considered worthless – and a railroad accident much later in life which provided a bookend on traumatic events. The other side of his enjoyment of light entertainment, which blended with a darker dimension, occurred in his long walks through London's streets in the dark – a haunted experience, and dangerous given the extremely high urban crime rate. Those walks, if seen as entertainment, become not only dark and haunted, but obsessive, something near frenetic madness. For a man with a wife and ten children, Dickens spent most of his time not domestically but writing, editing, enjoying various entertainments, sitting with his friends, engaging in theatrical activities, and walking the streets. Among Dickens's commentators, only Peter Ackroyd captures the endless energy; Smith succeeds in catching it segment by segment.

Toward the end of this short book, Smith attempts to mold Dickens's artistic views to his focus on social matters. He carries this out in a close examination of *Great Expectations*, the final chapter. But here a lack of critical equipment makes Smith resort to plain statement, that Dickens's involvement with his material was transformed into social criticism. "The transformation of this material into the social panorama of the novels is a touchstone of his artistic process" (129). Although Smith does not really reveal how Dickens does this – a longer book and more critical analysis would be necessary, including more psychological probing – he does suggest that much of Dickens was heuristic, which can be considered part of a social involvement.

In writing about *Great Expectations*, the one novel handled in a chapter of its own, Smith attempts to link all the elements of Dickens's life and thought to a novel usually deemed among his best. Here Smith offers numerous details of how the book came into being, but this sidesteps the larger question of how Dickens's movement among high and low culture coalesced into a social critique. One area Smith avoids – and it is a corollary to his efforts at linkage – is the ambivalence Dickens felt toward social change, how fearful he was of real change, even while he mocked and parodied existing practices. Institutions had to stand, or else, he feared, the country would collapse into chaos – not only Dickens's fears, but the fears of his entire generation.

As part of the atomization of Dickens studies in the last decade or so, Jeremy Tambling's *Lost in the American City: Dickens, James, Kafka* seems promising, although there are problems. Tambling's point is to investigate how Dickens, Henry James, and Kafka perceived the American city, the metropolis of a foreign country. Dickens and James were, of course, familiar with New York and other American cities, but Kafka had never visited or lived in America. That fact alone creates a certain unevenness in any comparison or contrast. The Dickens segment about being lost is well-known and does not need retelling; while James's reaction, with his indebtedness to Dickens, is also not unknown to readers of his work, especially *The American Scene*. Their response to the city was highly subjective. For Dickens, it created a kaleidoscope of emotional responses, not least the need to remake himself so that he could conquer the city, whether it was London or New York. For James, the city, also subjectively perceived, was the "America" he needed as a measuring rod for his attraction to Europe, more specifically to London. The American city, as Tambling says, was structured to form an alternate life which James sought elsewhere.

For Kafka, America and its cities were the places in which one is truly lost, but his America – like much of his Prague – is an imagined place. He conjures up a landscape of urban areas and spaces bounded, seemingly, by the Statue of Liberty at the entrance to

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America and "Oklahoma," the spatial area of the heartland. Tambling might have cited Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* as a gloss on Kafka's *Amerika* (the German title better translated as "The Man Who Was Disappeared," not Tambling's "The Man Who Vanished"). Also, Mark Spilka's book on Dickens and Kafka (not mentioned in Tambling's index) covers some of the same ground. What Spilka discovered was that one could read Dickens another way, by filtering him through Kafka; that it was not a question of influence but of intertextuality in finding parallel tropes and narratives in Kafka which illuminated Dickens.

Tambling approaches the relationship somewhat differently, emphasizing a trope based on the Statue of Liberty. He makes much of Kafka's transformation of Lady Liberty's upraised arm into a raised sword; and from that, Tambling argues, torturedly, how Kafka penetrated into questions of language, homosexual relationships, and even criteria for art. As he writes about Liberty: "Masculinized with a sword the statue shows the sexually fissured nature of identity, which emphasizes that liberty and justice must themselves be gender concepts, and if gendered, they require a contradictory reading. Liberty's sword raises the castration threat for anxious males and makes feminine sexuality commanding" (187).

Tambling then connects this with the gross Brunelda (in *Amerika*), and so on into Kafka's ambiguous presentation of sexuality. Since Tambling's main topic is Dickens, at this stage we would expect some intertextual reading of *Great Expectations*, with Satis House and the regendering of the situation between Pip and Estella, as well as the degendering of Miss Havisham. Here, the anxious male, to use Tambling's words, is figuratively castrated, not by an upraised sword in the hand of Lady Liberty, but by two scheming women who deprive him of his sexuality. It is, we can say, as ambiguous and brutal in Dickens as in Kafka.

Once Tambling moves into deep psychological contexts, he needs a broader theoretical frame of reference. What he offers for Kafka should also apply to Dickens and James. As Calvino says in *Invisible Cities*: "However the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it. Outside, the land stretches, empty to the horizon; the sky opens, with speeding clouds. In the shape that chance and wind give the clouds, you are really intent on recognizing figures, a sailing ship, a hand, an elephant" (14). Tambling needs more of that imaginative stretch.

David Holbrook's *Charles Dickens and the Image of Woman* is a casual book which reprises a good deal of what we already have known about Dickens's handling of women. Holbrook's study may prove valuable to someone not familiar with the Dickens literature, or who has not thought much about the Dickens novels he or she has read. Beyond this, however, are several areas where one might disagree with Holbrook, as he struggles to establish his point about the variety of women in his subject; and some of his debatable points arise in his statements about fathers. "But on the whole," he writes, "Dickens seems to idolize the father status" (11) – which as part of Holbrook's argument means that women (with some exceptions) do not gain Dickens's full attention.

Yet any number of cases contradict the argument about idolizing fathers, some of which Holbrook mentions and some of which he sidesteps. Obvious poisonous father relationships occur with Dombey and Florence, David Copperfield with stepfather Murdstone, little Dorrit with Dorrit – these Holbrook grants; but others abound: Turveydrop and father, Pip manipulated by a well-meaning father-surrogate Magwitch, the abdication of fathers in the Jellyby and Pardiggle families, and so on. One reason that so many of the relationships between brother and sister are sounder than vertical family lines is that the parental formation is badly skewed or poisonous.

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Any psychological reasoning applied to Dickens must account for the children parenting their parents: how siblings, as Michael Slater has shown, have happier "marriages" than the parents. Holbrook touches on this but ascribes it to the absence of sexuality which makes the sibling linkage work; but sexuality, while significant, is not the whole story. Dickens shows, as does Jane Austen, a disenchantment with the entire idea of parenting, which in his case might also be attributable to his own difficulties as a parent and a sense he had of his failure, duplicating in a way his own parents' disregard of him. Here, his letters – now carried down to the end of his life – could be of use. This is speculative – as is the topic itself – but the insistence of Dickens's negative portrayal of parenting suggests a subjective bias that must be followed through. Readable and accessible, Holbrook's study simply does not contain a sufficient practical or theoretical base.

John Bowen in *Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit* had the idea of tackling Dickens from a perspective he felt had been neglected. He would read Dickens's early work, *Pickwick, Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby, The Old Curiosity Shop, Master Humphrey's Clock, Barnaby Rudge*, and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, along with some ancillary materials, as seriously as critics have read *Bleak House, Little Dorrit, Great Expectations*, and *Our Mutual Friend*. He is careful to voice the caveat that the "best method seemed to be that of reading all the novels in order, not to show Dickens's 'development' or growth to maturity but to witness to each text's singular force" (2).

The plan is to co-opt Dickens's own way of working from high to low, from low to high, and to follow his excursions into popular culture and popular entertainment even while he expressed serious social opinions. Bowen would not evaluate this novel or that as better than any others, but see them in their own time and place within Dickens's body of work. He is aware that most critics have "placed a higher value on the later novels" (3), on grounds that these later novels are better plotted and integrated, and that their vision of society is darker and, therefore, more true to life. In fact, they are, and one comes away from Bowen's plan with some misgivings, since an elongated, episodic, unintegrated *Martin Chuzzlewit*, for example, can here be compared, let us say, to *Great Expectations*; or that the vision of society in *Pickwick* or *Nicholas Nickleby* – however compelling these fictions intermittently are – can be compared to that in *Bleak House* or *Little Dorrit*.

Bowen has attempted a nearly impossible task, since whether critically or biographically, the early fiction serves as a platform on which Dickens could explore his talent and then move on into becoming the social conscience of the period. The early fiction, while often dark and shadowed, is concerned, mainly, with Dickens's desire to find order in his still disoriented young manhood; whereas the later fiction recognizes that only disorder is possible except for the occasional individual who escapes the chaos. The darker vision Dickens brought to his work is based on the tragic dimension that disorder creates in family, social, and political life – that is in the entire run of how a society organizes itself. It is hard to find that vision sustained in early Dickens, despite the many episodes of a dark life – *Oliver Twist* is certainly dark, but miracles are about to occur. The miracles become fewer later on, where character is fate, and social contexts help determine even destiny's child.

From several books which touch on succession here, we can see how Dickens's attitude toward heredity shifted during his career. In reading Dickens's response to nineteenth-century views of heredity, Goldie Morgentaler in *Dickens and Heredity: Where Like Begets Like* cites goodness as a hereditary factor. In Dickens's early middle career, with *David Copperfield*, David's goodness is inherited from his mother, in a direct line; whereas by the time of *Our*

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Mutual Friend, near the end of Dickens's career, Lizzie Hexam exudes goodness which could not have derived from her river-rat father. Dickens's journey in this area is of considerable interest, and Morgentaler gives us context, historical precedent, an overview of contemporary scientific theory, and then a reading of Dickens's own response in his work.

Morgentaler makes a solid case for heredity in *Dombey and Son*, demonstrating how it plays into gender roles as Dickens and the Victorians held them to be. While exploiting Victorian beliefs that the son, not daughter, is the true inheritor, Morgentaler reverses the working out of Dombey's obsessive need to have a son in his own image. Yet persuasive as the argument for heredity is, it neglects what I believe to be a deeper process at play, more psychological than heredity-based. In the psychological argument, Florence Dombey, seemingly the weaker vessel, is the real tower of strength. Many images of castration exist in the novel, but as Dickens probes the psychological context of Florence's deference, he shows how she can triumph through seeming surrender. This reading, which is not the entire story by any means, gives much thicker texture to the narrative, since it provides Florence with a gender role that moves outside of Victorian platitudes, and reveals the ambiguities in Dickens's own novelistic practice.

While Morgentaler pursues her goal – more heredity in *David Copperfield*, far less in *Great Expectations* – an inevitable predictability accrues in what was once a dissertation. Recognizing this, she works hard to probe peripheral matters, and her comments on class, caste, and related contexts help relieve some of the repetitiveness. *Great Expections,* in fact, creates its own set of circumstances. Morgentaler must, obviously, include this novel as one of Dickens's major achievements, and yet it does not fit into her pattern. Here she shifts ground from heredity – after all, Pip gains a "father" in Magwitch who is not a blood connection – and does a graceful dance into questions of identity. Hidden identity becomes significant: Estella, not as Miss Havisham's child, but the daughter of Magwitch and the gypsy murderess; Pip, not as the gentleman's son he pretends to be, but the beneficiary of Magwitch; Mrs. Joe, while Pip's closest relative, really his closest enemy; Joe Gargery, as Pip's father/mother figure, but, as brother-in-law, not any blood relation; and so on.

Morgentaler tries to work through questions of identity to link it to heredity, and this becomes a stretch. She is excellent, however, on peripheral matters, as in the following passages, where she connects classes: "What is more, the real secret of hidden identity which the novel reveals is that this apparently marginalized world exists at the core of society, interacting with the aristocracy, breeding with the middle class, turning all princes into potential felons under the skin" (83).

Morgentaler takes up the illegitimate child (the victimized child), the question of villainy, the negative aspects of heredity, the class structure – all of which are, perhaps, her biggest contribution to her argument, since heredity, once cited, becomes obvious. That argument mixing class, caste, and heredity is particularly apt in Dickens's later fiction, where a simplistic acceptance of the role of heredity in the generations gave way to a more nuanced and subtle argument. We might cite only *Our Mutual Friend*, where Morgentaler's argument works well, in what is a very useful and often compelling study of a neglected area in Dickens studies.

Although brief (fewer than two hundred pages of text), Deborah Vlock's *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre* is important not only for Dickens but for the Victorian novel. Unlike most of the other studies here, Vlock attempts to reread Dickens and his contemporaries without sacrificing close readings of Dickens himself. Vlock succeeds in

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carrying out a more "open" way of reading his fiction. She rejects in part Michel Foucault's type of analysis, in books such as *Discipline and Punish* and *Madness and Civilization,* whereby structures dominate and, in Vlock's view, reduce. She prefers the expansionism she finds in Bakhtin, whose dialogic novel "reverberates with theatrical voices, a more public entity than the one permitted by Foucault's vision, but subject to the same humanizing desires described in *Discipline and Punish*" (3).

In reading Dickens, as well as his contemporaries, Vlock is interested in revealing how controls (Foucault) are themselves subverted by what Bakhtin called heteroglossia. Without rejecting the first, she wants to wed it to the second – although it is clear that she prefers subverting social forms to applying controls.

This subversion, as it were, is created by the inroads of the Victorian popular theater – an oral, vocal, noisy, intrusive invasion. She explains:

> 'What this means is that the Victorian novel did not really resemble the discrete textual unit we receive it as today, the self-contained package Miller [D. A. Miller's influential *The Novel and the Police*] imagines as privately and personally consumed, but was loose and fluid – particularly when published serially, as so many novels, including Dickens', were – and attentive to the theatrical developments which were at once its source and its competition' (3).

Her argument must show that theater, as she understands it, was not synonymous with drama; and that this difference signifies that novelistic narrative must not be confused with dramatic narrative, but with theatricality. Further, such an interpretation means that Victorian novels, but especially Dickens's, cannot be read correctly as linear, chronological sequences, "presuming logical 'storied' relationships" (3).

Vlock then pursues this idea in readings of Dickens's texts. She takes up the major novels and interprets them as if they were theatrically-located narratives in which characters play oral roles. One of her most compelling examples is the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *Nicholas Nickleby,* which turned the novel into an oral display, that is, into theater. "Speech in *Nickleby,*" Vlock says, "is a social and dramatic agent, a force that creates people and stories, polyvalent, interactive, constantly forming and reforming the novel's socioaesthetic reality . . . a collection of dialogic speeches setting the stage for a play that is about . . . the resonance and relationship to human voices" (13).

Vlock notes that the nineteenth-century theater "referenced real life" and simultaneously served as escape and entertainment without social and political contexts. A part of these theatrical codes were verbal gestures, and this of course carries over into Dickens's fiction. Later in his career, he took on all the voices of his characters in his dramatic readings, bringing to his audience not only the written word but the sound of life as it had entered his novels, the people themselves telling their stories. Vlock makes her case in an elegant little book, and it is hard to see how readers and critics of Dickens can ever again neglect the theatricality of his novels. It is not enough to say Dickens was deeply interested in theater – we have always known that – but that theater was never far from his very conception of fiction.

Hilary M. Schor's point in *Dickens and the Daughter of the House,* which she exemplifies with a long list of Dickens's "daughters," is that the novelist's treatment of daughters – and by implication women – is more complicated and textured than he is routinely given credit for. This is, by now, a trend in Dickens studies. She notes how Dickens has been condemned by contemporary readers, and particularly by feminists, "as evidence against a writer as insidious

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as his own 'Captain Murderer,' who marries young virgins only to turn them to pie-making" (1). She cites George Orwell's parodic characterization of such daughters as Little Nell, Agnes Warfield, Esther Summerson, Amy Dorrit, to whom we could add Florence Dombey, and several others – as "legless angels."

But is this the whole story? Is there a narrative for these young women? Schor finds an answer: "The hesitations and silences, the pensive retrospection, of the daughter, the unexpected critical power of the most passive person within the story: all these are present in every Dickens text, and mark the daughter's story as a central place of narrative authority" (3). Such strategies suggest Dickens's ambivalence about how daughters fitted into the social and legal system, and suggest, further, that while he did not wish to seem too radical, he was leading into areas that would threaten the status quo. Running parallel with Dicken's methods were several laws in the making, but especially those pertaining to the married woman's property rights, questions of divorce and custody rights, all of them hitherto weighted heavily against women.

The process within Dickens was complicated, and Schor attempts to negotiate his dilemmas as they occur in his fiction. While he was eager for legal reform – and Schor insists on this – he was at the same time troubled by daughters who might fall outside the law, or who might create their own stories of subjectivity. Here, he enters into thickets of property rights, inheritance, and related issues, all of which we observe abundantly in *Dombey and Son*. The only way to see Florence Dombey is to recognize how she, despite Dickens's bitter satire of a father's obsession with his son, falls into the interstices of the writer's own interests, and emerges only in ways that remain ambiguous. Is she deferential to her cruel father because it is in her nature, a genetic trait from her mother? Does she defer, instead, because she hopes to conquer him through passive resistance, both a social and political strategy? Is she merely trying to survive in any way she can, without foreseeing the consequence? Was Dickens himself aware of what he had created, the dreaded "intentional" question? Is her awareness of manner a disguise for a steely resolve which ultimately breaks Dombey? Schor opens up numerous possibilities and offers a response to much feminine criticism which has attacked Dickens for his presentation of (young) women. Daughters, Schor insists, have their own way of claiming their identity.

Although not concentrating solely on Dickens, Ginger S. Frost's *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England* provides several kinds of contexts for his novels. She begins with the breach of promise parody in *Pickwick Papers*, which serves as a springboard for her chapter on the legal history of breach of promise. Then follow chapters, based on historical sequencing, on the major elements which feed into or nourish Victorian fiction: the court system, gender roles, courtship and marriage, situations ensuing from broken engagements, the taboos of premarital sex, debates among elite men and then among elite women. In the midst of all this, she offers as illustration four case studies of breach of promise, mainly among the well-to-do or upper classes. The central concept is breach of promise in marriage or marriage situations – and all the subsidary information leads into that. The four case studies, for which ample court records exist, solidify the particulars of what starts out as a broadly general Victorian preoccupation and legal concern. The book is quite valuable for touching on so many relevant themes.

Three books of essays range through many aspects of Dickens's work, although few of the essays – should we be surprised? – touch on matters of biographical detail or use the Dickens letters to their fullest. One collection, *Dickens, Europe and the New Worlds*, edited

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by Anny Sadrin, covers the most ground. Some categories: Dickens on France and Italy, then on America, the colonies, and elsewhere; Dickens and his world; the uncanny in Dickens; Dickens and science; finally Dickens and our world. One of the more interesting pieces creates a linkage between Dickens's views on Africa and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* in "Borrioboola-Gha: Dickens, John Jarndyce and the Heart of Darkness," by Jennifer Gribble. Gribble's point counters Edward Said's dismissal of Dickens (in his *Culture and Imperialism*) as insufficently engaged with Africa and, by implication, as being part of the colonial mentality rife in England. Said indicates that the Jellybys have "eccentric ties to Africa," a dismissive comment which misses Dickens's harsh rejection of the very colonial attitudes Said is so eager to condemn that he reads fiction as political fodder.

Anny Sadrin in "Why D.I.J.O.N.? Crossing Forbidden Boundaries in *Dombey and* Son," demonstrates how Dickens moved close to Balzac territory with Dombey, Edith, and Carker, and then retreated from questions of infidelity and adultery. Had Dickens moved fully into the potentiality of this threesome, he would have tempted English morality and poached on French "wickedness," which, as England's leading novelist, he chose not to do. Had Sadrin probed into biographical possibilities here, she might have explored how Dickens personally, as early as 1847–48, was toying with the idea of infidelity, an indication of his failing marriage well before it failed.

Robert M. Polhemous provides a witty gloss on Joyce's references to Dickens in *Finnegans Wake*, in his "'Doveeyed Covetfilles': How Joyce Used Dickens to Put a Lot of the Old World into the New." For starters, "Doveeyed Covetfilles" refers to *David Copperfield*, in which the Dickens David harks back to King David, who covets young girls for his wife. In a way, this is a form of translation of Dickens into Joyce. Another kind of translation comes in Sylvère Monod's "Translating Dickens into French." Monod admits that no translation can be perfect, least of all Dickens, who presents innumerable problems, given that English and French are two such distinct languages. The very glories of Dicken's idiom make the translator work harder to find equivalents in French, even when, finally, the latter language can only be approximated. It is a tribute to Dickens's variousness.

In *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, edited by John O. Jordan, Graham Smith, in his essay "The Life and Times of Charles Dickens," raises the question of what kind of biography one can write about Dickens in a postmodern, poststructuralist age. Smith cites areas of Dickens's life which can be interpreted in several ways. He asks: How does the biographer respond to Dickens's self-pity over the blacking factory episode when he was twelve? How does one interpret Dickens's response to several women in his life, starting with his mother and continuing through Maria Beadnell, Mary Hogarth, and Georgina Hogarth, the latter two his sisters-in-law? Related to that, how do we contextualize his relationship to his wife, Catherine Hogarth, and linked to that, at what point in their marriage was he contemplating infidelity? Since Dickens's novels, as Smith demonstrates, are so close to the personal life, the clarification of such significant questions is essential to an understanding of how Dickens presented himself in *David Copperfield, Great Expectations*, and other self-revealing texts.

J. Hillis Miller, hardly an enthusiast for biography, strikingly asks somewhat similar questions, when in his essay he digs deeply into the interiority of *Bleak House*. In his "Moments of Decision in *Bleak House*," he links "decisions" at every turn in the novel to performative possibilities. By that, he insists on the written word – documents, letters, related evidence – as the way Dickens can strike at the legal system and expose its rot. He

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says it is insufficient to cite "constantive" texts, or factual material, as the interpretive act; but that it is words which are transformative, and those words are found in documents.

Miller's is an informative reading of *Bleak House* which could have done without the obligatory references to Benjamin, Derrida, and Kierkegaard. Incidentally, *Bleak House* has, rightfully, drawn a great deal of attention, not only in the books cited above, but in several other instances, for example: *Charles Dickens,* edited by Steven O'Connor, in 1996, and *Bleak House: Charles Dickens*, edited by Jeremy Tambling, in 1998. In the 2001 *Dickens Studies Annual* (Vol. 30), three essays on *Bleak House* explore painting, photography, puppet-shows, the uncanny, and the iconic nature of language in the novel. Only *Barnaby Rudge* receives as much attention, possibly because that novel still leaves some room for exploration.

Dickens and the Children of Empire, edited by Wendy G. Jacobson, contains essays on nationalism, colonialism, imperialism, and related topics as they affected "the child." One of the most notable pieces here is by James R. Kincaid on "Dickens and the Construction of the Child." While Kincaid's essay is not linked directly to imperialism or colonialism, it does offer many astute insights into how Dickens manipulated the idea of the child, how in some instances he created an "artificial" child, and how in other cases he created children who are precisely that, created. Kincaid writes: "The Pickwickian child is not the young person but the Edenic person who carries the garden within. Because of this, the child is not identified with age but angels" (36). He speaks of Oliver Twist as "our culture's paedophile pinup, the eroticized child so pure he has no story of his own, waits for us to write it for him" (37).

While Kincaid's essay is hardly connected to the subject of the book, the linkage of Dickens to the "children of empire," several other essays in the collection attempt to create a linkage and often have to stretch far. Inherent in the problem of trying to put together a collection on a theme by diverse contributors is that individual novels become twisted out of shape. Is it possible, for example, to emphasize that the "loss of narrative" so dear to postcolonial theorists is connected to Magwitch's spotty background in *Great Expectations*? Is the novel really concerned with Magwitch's background or with Pip's effort to find himself among several degenerative forces? Or Pip's need to sort out temptations and to anchor himself, finally, in what derives from him, rather than from parasitism? Similarly, in several of the other pieces, whether about *Martin Chuzzlewit, Hard Times*, or *Dombey and Son*, novels are exaggerated or outright distorted to fulfill the demands of the collection.

Nevertheless, if this sampling of recent critical and scholarly books on Dickens is any indication of what is happening and what is yet to come, Dickens studies are more than alive and well; they have turned their subject into an iconic figure, the prose Shakespeare. With the Pilgrim edition of Dickens's letters coming to the end of his life (Volume XII), we can look forward to even more scholarly digging which will nourish more critical approaches to the work.

The single omission I noted above in recent Dickens studies was the lack of biographical/critical approaches to the writer. Jane Smiley's brief life of Dickens, for the Lipper/Viking series of short biographies, is pastiche, the work of an imaginative Dickens reader, not a Dickens scholar. The availability of the *Letters*, with their superb referential material, however, opens up the possibility of more concentrated work in the biographical/critical area. Many speculative assertions from even the most meticulous of biographers can now be contextualized. While the letters give us Dickens's voice, the deep references provide that social, political, and cultural world in which Dickens tried to have it all. I am not suggesting that the Ackroyd biography, for example, has to be replaced;

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but the accretion of more material means that Dickens's life will pass through further transformations, as it did in the decades between Edgar Johnson's pioneering biography and Ackroyd's indispensable one. There are still several "Dickenses" yet to be done.

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