ESSAY

# Possible Persons: Dickensian Character, Violent Play

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Nineteenth-century literature is littered with broken toys. From Maria Edgeworth's "disjointed dolls, maimed horses, coaches and one-horse chairs without wheels, and a nameless wreck of gilded lumber" (Edgeworth and Lovell 1), to the Brontë siblings' dismembered wooden soldiers,[1] to Maggie Tulliver's maltreated "Fetish,"[2] they trip up readers, attesting to violent or distressed childish feeling that is not quite domesticated or socialized by the marriage plots and bildungsromans of the century's fictional corpus. Melanie Klein was the first to theorize the anxious aggressive child and to posit a complex object relating in which the damage and repair of toys mediated and modulated the unmanageability of infantile emotion. This essay turns to Charles Dickens's fiction to argue that nineteenth-century representation gives formal inklings of both Klein's version of the child and her therapeutic insights. Focusing in particular on the dynamics of characterization, it traces a proto-Kleinian rhythm of aggression and reparation in an early and a "mature" Dickens text. Klein's work, which was highly contested by the Freudian psychoanalytic establishment both in her hometown of Vienna and in Berlin, where she first began practicing, was enthusiastically embraced when she came to England in 1926 and went on to provide the foundation for a distinct British school of object-relations psychoanalysis.[3]

Dickens's novels, it has often been observed, feature a series of characters that seem suspended between childhood and adulthood. Rosemary Bodenheimer contends that "the Dickensian child does not grow up in the ordinary sense. Instead of developing, it changes places; it moves on" (13). Noting the difficulty of determining the age of Dickens's younger characters, she in particular references

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"Dickens's 'little women,' Nell Trent, Amy Dorrit and Fanny Cleaver, aka Jenny Wren": figures that occupy an "amorphous borderland between childhood and adulthood" and whose exhibited smallness "presents them to the world as children" even once they are grown in years (15). Laurie Langbauer suggests that such miniatures establish an uncanny seriality across Dickens's oeuvre: "all the Little Nells and Tiny Tims, in their seemingly redundant appellations—'Little,' 'Tiny'—insist on a kind of uncanny reiteration that we regard them as small children, hence as different, diminutive, in need of our care" (92). Alternatively, Lauren Byler refers to the "self-miniaturizing rhetoric" of the Dickensian little woman (224), arguing that insistent minimization is a key weapon in the arsenal of the sentimental Dickensian heroine.

While Dickens's child-women were beloved by his wider readership, fin de siècle aesthetes advertised their resistance to their appeal, withholding the emotion that mass audiences notoriously displayed. Oscar Wilde laughed at the death of Little Nell. Algernon Charles Swinburne was unsettled by "the child [that] has never a touch of childhood about her," claiming that Nell's invariable evenness of temper makes her "a monster as inhuman as a baby with two heads" (183). Henry James dwelled viciously on what he regarded as the disturbing abnormality of Jenny Wren:

> Miss Jenny Wren is a poor little dwarf, afflicted, as she constantly reiterates, with a "bad back" and "queer legs," who makes dolls' dresses, and is for ever pricking at those with whom she converses, in the air, with her needle, and assuring them that she knows their "tricks and their manners." Like all Mr. Dickens's pathetic characters, she is a little monster; she is deformed, unhealthy, unnatural; she belongs to the troop of hunchbacks, imbeciles, and precocious children who have carried on the sentimental business in all Mr. Dickens's novels; the little Nells, the Smikes, the Paul Dombeys. (786)

James's characterization of Dickens's sentimental monsters is formulated in response to a wager: "What do we get in return for accepting Miss Jenny Wren as a possible person?" James invokes the fictional compact that bridges the sentimentalism to which Dickens remains, in his opinion, too wedded, and the realism that was to be his own preferred genre: that we acknowledge character as human substitute. James's and Swinburne's brutal displacement of character with caricature, purported humanity with gothic monstrosity, attempts to disrupt the flow of sympathy toward Dickens's "eccentric children" (Moore 473) by asserting that there is no possibility of readerly identification with these fictional subjects.

If Dickens's "little" figures are often perceived as unrealized, a parallel set of observations focuses on the thinglike qualities of Dickensian characters, and the reciprocal animate qualities of his objects. G. K. Chesterton read *The Old Curiosity Shop*'s cast as one of motivated curiosities: "The comic characters in the book are all like images bought in an old curiosity shop. Quilp might be a gargoyle. He might be some sort of devilish door-knocker, dropped down and crawling on the pavement. The same applies to the sinister and really terrifying stiffness of Sally Brass. She is like some old staring figure cut out of wood" (63). Dorothy Van Ghent proposed that in Dickens's novels "predications about persons or objects tend to be statements of metabolic conversion of one into the other" (426). George Orwell accounted for the vividness of Dickensian character as an object effect: "Dickens's people are . . . always in a single unchangeable attitude, like pictures or pieces of furniture" (74); J. Hillis Miller noted the "metonymic reciprocity" between Dickens's characters and their contexts (128). For Herbert Sussman and Gerhard Joseph, Dickens's shift "between representing characters as self-acting 'things' and as 'people' . . . registers a Victorian discursive practice where the boundary between the machine and the human tends to dissolve" (617), an insight crucially amplified and nuanced by Tamara Ketabgian in her examination of the intertwined "animal, mechanical and prosthetic traits" of Dickens's and other Victorian literary characters (167).

The Dickensian character-object can be usefully understood, not just as any old thing, but as a toy. As Dickens moves from the earliest picaresque fictions

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to the psychologically richer portraiture of his "mature" novels, his increasingly interiorized protagonists are surrounded and mirrored by toylike figures that problematize the thesis of novelistic maturation, proving as essential to the depiction of a complex psychology as internal monologue, and reflexively highlighting the importance of wooden character and plot to the production of sentimental effects. Moreover, in his deployment of such characters Dickens appropriates for the novel a prescient understanding of the psychic work that toys can perform.[4] His virtuous "little women" are tailed by minor characters that, while explicitly foils, give expression to the rage that lies repressed in the sentimental child. In *Little Dorrit*, for example, Tattycoram doubles not only the spoiled Pet, for whom she has been effectively purchased as a toy, but Amy Dorrit herself, as she rails against and threatens to exceed her minor status. Tattycoram's role as one of Dickens's lucky foundlings is belied by her sobriquet, which combines "tatting" (rag gathering) with discipline,[5] identifying her as an abused rag doll. Maggy evokes an alternative version of the cherished soft toy, accompanying the heroine's maturation in benign arrested development. Bald, with "one tolerably serviceable eye" and a fixed smile, she is a broken doll destroyed by childhood beatings, which she reenacts by way of self-introduction ("Maggy . . . beat an imaginary child, and said, 'Broom-handles and pokers'" [142, 143]). As the outsized object of belated care, Maggy allows Amy Dorrit in turn to adopt the reparative role of "little mother" (130). The interaction in Dickens's novels between primary characters whose maturational status seems suspended and minor characters more toy- than lifelike, comes closer to object relating than to either depth psychology or *Bildung*.

Klein's insights prove particularly compelling for thinking about Dickensian character in such terms. In a key early paper, "The Psychological Principles of Early Analysis" (1926), Klein introduced her "*play-technique*," a combination of participation in child-directed activities, careful observation of the child at play, and symbolic interpretation of the game. It was Klein's contention that "in their play children represent symbolically phantasies, wishes and experiences"; that is, their play might be understood as a mode of free association. Arguing that children playing employ the same "language"—the same "archaic, phylogenetically acquired mode of expression"—as that of the dream, she suggested that their activities be approached using the analytic method Freud had established in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (134). *Spielzeugwerk* ("toy work"), as it were, replaced *Traumwerk* ("dream work"): play with toys or drawing or acting out substituted for the child's words as the content of the analysis, providing access to attitudes toward the primary love object, the parent. Klein took up the Freudian concepts of projection and introjection, refiguring these as "mechanisms" through which the child negotiates between reality and emotional life. In projection, "internal" or psychic relationships, particularly conflictual relationships, or those involving aggression, are projected onto external objects, so that things in the world become charged with feeling. Reciprocally, introjection involves the child's reincorporation of these "good and bad objects" so that they are understood to be present in the internal world, or ego. Later Klein would reconceptualize these processes as a more synthesized experience of "projective identification," whereby the child projects repudiated parts of itself (its aggression and envy) outward, eventually reaching a stage where its own ambivalence is tolerated and these parts can be accepted and reassimilated. Klein's complicated and evolving theoretical apparatus requires readers to keep contradictory conceptions of the object—toylike and human, material and symbolic, internal and external, destructive and therapeutic—simultaneously in play.

The wager of possible personhood, as both a mode of characterization and the potentiality of *Bildung*, is something Dickens had preemptively queried through the two types of undeveloped figures that populate his novels: the children who fail to reach maturity ("the little Nells, the Smikes, the Paul Dombeys"), and the wooden characters that never take on flesh. These two types of incomplete subject are brought into conscious, indeed self-reflexive contact within the play space of his novels,

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in order to manifest the kind of psychological dynamic that would soon be acted out and articulated within the Kleinian play-therapy session. James's invocation of the "possible person" preempts the terms of recent critical debate about the relationship between character and personhood. In *The Economy of Character*, Deidre Lynch poses the radical question "What happens if we do not assume that the history of character and the history of the individual are the same thing?" Contesting developmental histories of the novel that assume an evolution of character from the flat to the rounded or fleshed out, Lynch draws attention to "characters' quality of eerie thing-hood—their quality of being at once 'out there' and 'other-than-us,' the way that, like the commodities in *Capital*, they seem more autonomous, memorable, and real than their makers" (1, 18). Lynch recognizes the coexistence of exteriorized and vivid characterization and questions the imbrication of the notion of characterological interiority with claims for critical distinction: the deep character ratifying the deep reading. In his influential *The One vs. the Many*, Alex Woloch identifies Dickens's "radically distinct formulation of the minor character," which he argues "catalyzes new kinds of affective presence" (12, 128). He observes that Dickens's minor characters have a capacity, despite their instrumentalized roles, to somehow exceed the framework of their "narrative duties," compelling "intense attention, in-and-of themselves" (127). John Frow contests Woloch's reliance, in such formulations, on a notion of "implied being" and seeks to bear in mind the ontological hybridity of character: the fact that its identificatory appeal is always dependent on its constitution as a set of textual signs. Frow proposes that characters be rigorously understood as "quasi-persons" or "person-like entities": part modeled on living human subjects, and part purely "pieces of writing" (107, 2, 25). Toril Moi has, in turn, recently questioned the formalist "taboo on taking characters to be real" that she sees as exemplified by Frow's approach (29), suggesting that the split between sign and signified to which he draws attention is something unproblematically solved in the everyday experience of ordinary readers (58). Where Lynch sees psychological depth as the critical hallmark of achieved post-Romantic character, Moi notes the formalist critical pressure to reject notions of characterological interiority in favor of rigorous attention to characters' textual and semiotic constructedness, linking this to the modernist moment in which literary scholarship consolidated its relatively recent status within the academy.

Each of these arguments might, in fact, engage the toy as well as it does literary character. We understand anthropomorphic toys as "person-like entities" that are "able to do emotional as well as representational work" (Frow 36). Their "eerie thing-hood" renders them archetypal uncanny objects. They serve as both model and metaphor for minor character, catalyzing "new kinds of affective presence." And they embody and enact both the tendency toward and the taboo against treating character as real (indeed they provide the primal scene for this approach to literary character). So why insert the toy, surely a superfluous mediating term, into the well-nuanced evolving account of character's relationship to selfhood? Toy character makes manifest the slippage between a dream of the lifelike and rough-hewn construction. Furthermore, toy work bears a particular relationship to the formation of selfhood, which extends beyond anthropomorphism.[6] Klein chose "a number of small and simple toys" to use in her child analysis, including "little wooden men and women, carts, carriages, motor-cars, trains, animals, bricks and houses" (*Psycho-analysis* 16). As she was to show, their woodenness as much as their verisimilitude allows toys to perform significant affective labor. "Little wooden men and women" are, in her analytic lexicon, not simply mini-persons, approximating being, but also unequivocal things, which can be treated with expedient sadism.

Dickensian characters perform the intricate dance between charged interiority and recalcitrant exteriority of Kleinian projective identification, interacting through intense repudiation and equally intense recognition, and demonstrating their author's complex understanding of the ways in which attachment is object-oriented. By formulating character as toylike, Dickens offers a self-

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reflexive alternative to implied personhood. Dickens's career can be made to mirror the developmental account of the nineteenth-century novel, enacting a shift from the picaresque and crudely sentimental to the richly interiorized portraiture of an ascendant realism. Alternatively, he is represented as having failed quite to achieve psychological credibility because of his tendency to create character objects rather than quasi-human subjects. But if, as Lynch has noted, the evolution of the novel toward the representation of "psychological depth" as a corollary of Romantic individualism has become an "article of our literary faith" (6, 12), how might that assumed teleology look different if the psychological paradigm is one geared not toward depth and sophistication but rather toward regression and the expressivity of clumsy objects? This essay develops its arguments from child analysis in the arena of literary character, to propose that we might reconceive the way in which thing-like qualities and psychological interiority work together. Being toylike does not preclude psychological depth: rather, toy-object relations divulge a vexed interiority, an ambivalence that complicates the surface didacticism and apparently simple characterological oppositions of Dickens's representations of persons.

## Ugly Playthings

In the preface to the 1848 edition of *The Old Curiosity Shop* Dickens casts the novel's eponymous setting as a space of object relating: "In writing the book, I had always in my fancy to surround the lonely figure of the child with grotesque and wild, but not impossible companions, and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first foreshadowed" (8). The opening chapters elaborate this relationship between Little Nell and the things that surround her. Master Humphrey, the soon-to-be-discarded narrator, who has encountered Nell lost among the London backstreets and escorted her home, finds he cannot dismiss the thought of the "child in her bed: alone, unwatched, uncared for" (20), among an array of objects, "that might have been designed in dreams" (13). Curiosity might itself be defined as object-oriented affect: in the curiosity shop affect is both amplified and contagious. Master Humphrey conjectures, "I am not sure I should have been so thoroughly possessed by this one subject, but for the heaps of fantastic things I had seen huddled together in the curiosity-dealer's warehouse. These, crowding upon my mind, in connexion with the child, and gathering round her, as it were, brought her condition palpably before me" (20–22). The loneliness of the child is here made "palpabl[e]" by her objects, which in turn figure as self-motivated: huddling, crowding, gathering. As the novel progresses Nell will find herself among a cast of characters that further constitutes an object world: Kit, Quilp, the Brass siblings, Swiveller. Her childishness (Nell is thirteen, but always figured as "the child") requires objects for its articulation; but are these "fantastic things," which approximate the language of dreams, operating contrastively or expressively? Where Master Humphrey understands her curious companions, both material and characterological, as contextual background, situating Nell within "a kind of allegory" (22), they function in a more immediate sense metonymically, within a chain of grotesque and sinister objects charged with negative feeling that can only be expelled by violent destruction. These dolls and puppets and jack-in-the-boxes reconfigure narrative as abrupt, unhinged, and apparently unmotivated. Moreover, they provide expression not just for the loneliness but also for the shame, anger, and sadism of the ostensibly angelic "little" heroine.[7] Placing his childish protagonists in toy landscapes allows Dickens to give rein to the monstrousness of the minor, to act out the violence that lies dormant in the disciplined and virtuous Victorian child.

The most overtly toylike character of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and also its most articulate enactor of negative feeling, is Quilp, a figure whose description, as other critics have noticed, links him with the puppet Punch.[8] George Speaight, in his comprehensive *History of the English Puppet Theatre*, paints an evolving portrait of Punch commencing with his first appearance in England as Pollichinella, or Punchinello, during the Restoration (73). Initially

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a large marionette, Punch was traditionally rendered as a stout, stooped figure with a wooden baton, conical hat, and huge and bent phallic nose. In the nineteenth century, with the introduction of the traveling theater, carried on the back of itinerant puppeteers, Punch evolved into a smaller glove puppet. While the wooden body of the marionette was replaced by a cloth torso, Punch retained his wooden head, and little wooden bow legs would hang over the rim of his theater box. His domestic violence was also introduced in the nineteenth century, coincident with the elaboration of a domestic context as Judy, or Mrs. Punch, and Baby entered the show.

Like the nineteenth-century Punch, Quilp is "low in stature" with a disproportionately large head with "remarkable hard features" topped by a "high-crowned hat"; his expression is at once exaggerated and static, emphasized by "a ghastly smile, which, appear[s] to be the mere result of habit and to have no connexion with any mirthful or complacent feeling" (Dickens, *Old Curiosity Shop* 29). When at one point he disappears in quest of Nell and her grandfather, and is presumed dead, Brass and Mrs Jiniwin memorialize him in Punch-like terms: "Large head, short body, legs crooked" (372), while drinking glass after glass of punch ("Nothing but punch!" observes Quilp, in a surely not accidental pun). His reappearance is first announced by his protruding nose: "'Aquiline!' cried Quilp, thrusting in his head, and striking the feature with his fist" (373). Quilp's voice is characterized as high in pitch: he vents delight "in a shrill scream" (368). He is described baiting his nemeses Kit and Mrs Nubbles with the uncanny combination of squeaky voice and hard features:

> Making his voice ascend in the scale with every succeeding question, Mr Quilp finished in a shrill squeak, and subsided into the panting look which was customary with him, and which, whether it were assumed or natural, had equally the effect of banishing all expression from his face, and rendering it, as far as it afforded any index to his mood or meaning, a perfect blank. (362–63)

His timbre recalls the sound produced by the swazzle, the instrument devised to render Punch's distinctive shrill and rasping voice; his features, at once frozen and exaggeratedly expressive, recall those of the puppet. He is repeatedly described "hanging . . . out" of beds or window frames (103), from the edge of a carriage roof or over the back of chairs, like Punch either at rest or at the edge of his stage. He has a disconcerting habit of "screwing his head very much on one side" as though unjointed (42). He flourishes a wooden stick or cudgel, and displays a cruelty that is characterized by randomness and nonsensicality: "I'll pinch your eyes," he threatens Tom Scott (48); "I'm in the humour now. I shall be cruel when I like," he tells his wife (375). He is most at home when he confines himself to his wooden counting-house full of wooden furniture, a habitat that matches his astoundingly hard interior: a singular manifestation of his idiosyncratic violence is his ability to smoke and drink burning hot rum to the great discomfort of not only his tender wife but also the otherwise harsh and inhuman Samuel Brass and Richard Swiveller (himself a well-smoked and soaked individual). He has Punch's tendency to pop up unexpectedly ("Such an amazing power of taking people by surprise" [373]), emerging suddenly from a "little door" (360) in a cupboard when the Single Gentleman and Kit believe themselves far from him on the trail of Nell, like that related figure the jack-in-the-box.[9] Indeed, he twice sneaks up unexpectedly on his wife and mother-in-law as they are apparently reveling in his absence, in scenes so similar as to have the feel of the repeat performances of favorite requisite scenes in a puppet show or pantomime.[10]

Kenneth Gross, in his virtuoso study of the poetics of puppetry, focuses on Punch's "wit, violence, shamelessness, and unkillableness," which he relates to the puppet's constitution as "a thing with a head of wood, without human feelings of pain and shame" (69). Gross argues that Punch's particular strength is that of "a puppet who knows himself to be a puppet." This knowledge of his materiality, rather than his tenuous anthropomorphism, is key to his effectiveness. His murderous violence "tries to teach the other puppets he beats and kills with his stick . . . puppets who want Punch to

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obey human rules, to stop being a puppet, or at least to be a puppet that, like a human being, is obedient to law and custom . . . to know what they themselves are" (70). Punch embraces the subversive possibilities of pure puppetry. While Gross's emphasis is on stage dynamics, the wooden violence he identifies is also integral to Punch's appeal to audiences, which delight in the emotional release provided by enacted beatings. Focusing on audience dynamics, Rosalind Crone has related the effectiveness of this catharsis to the inability of the puppet characters convincingly to approximate personhood: "in performance, the comical and exaggerated features of Punch and Judy, as well as the inability of their wooden faces to express emotion or pain, are crucial as the audience is distanced from the violence and the characters become difficult to identify with" (56). For both Gross and Crone, wooden manufacture is essential to the channeling of negative affect that the Punch show enables. Again we might think forward here to Klein's therapeutic objects. When she came to patent her play-technique through a series of bespoke toys, Klein also favored the wooden and block-like. To "enable the child to express a wide range of phantasies and experiences," she claimed, "[i]t is important . . . that these toys should be non-mechanical. . . . Their very simplicity enables the child to use them in many different situations, according to the material coming up in his play" ("Psycho-analytic Play Technique" 127). "Touching wood" channeled the violence and sadism of child's play, which Klein's analysis then rendered explicit in its aggression and anxiety.

Dickens drew attention to the carnivalesque status of the Punch show's violence in a letter of 6 November 1849:

> In my opinion the street Punch is one of those extravagant reliefs from the realities of life which would lose its hold upon the people if it were made moral and instructive. I regard it as quite harmless in its influence, and as an outrageous joke which no one in existence would think of regarding as an incentive to any kind of action or as a model for any kind of conduct. It is possible, I think, that one secret source of pleasure very generally derived from this performance . . . is the satisfaction the spectator feels in the circumstance that likenesses of men and women can be so knocked about, without any pain or suffering. (Letter)[11]

For Dickens the puppet show's harmlessness inheres in the "relief" Punch affords from literal thinking: an insight that comes close to Klein's understanding of play as enabling a nonliteral representation of real feeling. For Klein the toy "bridges the gulf to reality" ("Symposium" 150). The child uses the play space to articulate what it finds unspeakable: it deploys "dolls and other playthings" turned up in the "box of toys" in Klein's rooms to depict internal associations, with the analyst "follow[ing] up the child's symbolic mode of representation" (149). Klein recorded the progress the child makes "in adaptation to reality" through a combination of play-object relating and the enabling interpretation of the analyst. First, "children begin to distinguish between the 'pretence' mother and the real mother and between the wooden baby doll and the live baby brother. They then firmly insist that they wanted to do this or that injury to the toy baby only—the real baby, they say, of course, they love." In the next stage of the analysis, and "only when very powerful resistances have been overcome," children come to "realize that their aggressive acts were directed against the *real* objects" ("Psychological Principles" 137). The shift witnessed here is one in the perception of object substitution, which might equally translate to an understanding of character. The child claims that its relationship to its toy is determined by the object's material status, only to reach an awareness that the feeling the toy generates has a real-world referent.

The toy can function in the way Klein theorizes because, like Gross's Punch, more than a crude analog for the human, it is a "violen[t], shameless . . . and unkillable" thing. The affect it channels can therefore wreak mediated havoc that exacts no consequences. During the nineteenth century, and concurrent with its increased emphasis on domestic violence (the most deliciously scandalous scene of which was the destruction of Baby, the representative infant), the Punch and Judy show nonetheless

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moved from being primarily adult to child entertainment. Children watching a child being beaten thus came to form an aspect of the puppet show's "secret source of pleasure." In his letter Dickens is explicit about the therapeutic effect of the performance, one dependent on the audience's understanding that its character world comprises insensate "likenesses of men and women." Like toy therapy, the theater of Punch works not, as Crone says, because "characters become difficult to identify with" but because they render identification without real-world harm or punishment possible.

Gross refers to the "implicit self-reference" that is manifest in Punch's "exploring of the puppet's puppetness" (69): in his ability to teach the would-be-anthropomorphic figures of the drama their material function. And Dickens's creation of a Punch character in Quilp is equally self-reflexive. The puppeteer's hand is, like the authorial hand, a perfect synecdoche. Equally, the puppet is a perfect therapeutic object, allowing audiences to project and reassimilate ugly feelings, while turning violence to comedy. Dickens's recognition of the "secret . . . pleasure" of the Punch show—that "*likenesses* of men and women" can be subjected to violence without pain (my emphasis), anticipates the insights Klein gained into the sadism of the child through her play-technique. In Henry Mayhew's transcript of an 1851 Punch and Judy performance we witness erratic shifts between love and aggression:

**Punch.** Bless your sweet lips! *(Hugging her.)* This is melting moments. I'm very fond of my wife; we must have a dance.

**Judy.** Agreed. *(They both dance.)*

**Punch.** Get out of the way! you don't dance well enough for me. *(He hits her on the nose.)* Go and fetch the baby, and mind and take care of it, and not hurt it. . . .

**Judy.** *(Returning back with baby.)* Take care of the baby, while I go and cook the dumplings.

**Punch.** *(Striking Judy with his right hand.)* Get out of the way! I'll take care of the baby. . . . *(Punch continues rocking the child. It still cries, and he takes it up in his arms, saying,* What a cross child! I can't a-bear cross children. *Then he vehemently shakes it, and knocks its head up against the side of the proceedings several times, representing to kill it, and he then throws it out of the winder.)*

*Enter JUDY.*

**Judy.** Where's the baby?

**Punch.** *(In a lemoncholy tone.)* I have had a misfortune; the child was so terrible cross, I throwed it out of the winder. *(Lemontation of Judy for the loss of her dear child. She goes into asterisks, and then excites and fetches a cudgel, and commences beating Punch over the head.)*

**Punch.** Don't be cross, my dear: I didn't go to do it.

**Judy.** I'll pay yer for throwing the child out of the winder. *(She keeps on giving him knocks of the head, but Punch snatches the stick away and commences an attack upon his wife, and beats her severely.)* (54–55)

The symptomatic play of Klein's six-year-old patient Erna manifested the same abrupt and violent transitions evident here. In one game, she placed a toy woman and man in a wooden carriage:

> The two loved and kissed one another and drove up and down all the time. Next a toy man in another carriage collided with them, ran over them and killed them, and then roasted and ate them up. Another time the fight had a different ending, and the attacking toy man was thrown down; but the woman helped him and comforted him. She got a divorce from her first husband and married the new one. This third person was given the most varied parts to play in Erna's games. For instance, the original man and his wife were in a house which they were defending against a burglar; the third person was the burglar, and slipped in. The house burnt down, the man and woman burst and the third person was the only one left. Then again the third person was a brother who came on a visit; but while embracing the woman he bit her nose off. This little man, the third person, was Erna herself. (*Psycho-analysis* 36)

Erna's play in Klein's analytic space displays the wooden brutality, shamelessness, and anarchic identificatory freedom that Gross regards as essential to the effectiveness of the Punch theater. Klein remarks

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that her room "used to look like a battlefield after Erna left it," for "she used to break her toys or cut them up, knock down the little chairs, fling the cushions about, stamp her feet on the sofa, upset water, smudge paper, dirty the toys or the washbasin, break out into abuse, and so on, without the slightest hindrance on my part" (54). As in Punch, such "domestic violence" is the corollary of a domestic narrative, in terms of which objects provide a way for the child (audience member or analysand) to "abreact [its] affects" (54).

Quilp's brutality is supported and enabled by a cast of equally toy-resembling minor characters. Sally Brass, whose name possibly alludes to an "Aunt Sally," the figure of an old woman with a clay pipe in her mouth used as a cockshy in a fairground game and occasionally represented by a puppet, is a brazen Judy to his Punch, the narrative hinting that the Marchioness is their much-abused Baby. This Dickensian ludic speculation, like Erna's, reimagines the primal scene as an unceremonious and violent union of toy figures, producing an infant whose resilience is necessarily sadistic. Dick Swiveller is subject to "strange influences" in relation to Sally Brass, "mysterious promptings" to use her as a fairground Aunt Sally and "knock her headdress off and try how she looked without it" (Dickens, *Old Curiosity Shop* 258). He wishes she might, like a hard toy, survive violent assault ("If you could manage to be run over, ma'am, but not seriously" [269]) and flourishes a ruler near her head as play-therapy, to calm "the agitation of his feelings" (258). The Marchioness is, in turn, beaten by Sally, who is "impelled" by "some extraordinary grudge . . . to rap the child with the blade of the knife, now on her hand, now on her head," and to deal her "some hard blows with her clenched hand" (279). Sampson Brass asserts that, like a toy, she can deflect such violence without experiencing pain: "she's a light weight, and it don't hurt her much" (268). The Marchioness only properly emerges as a character once Nell has started to show the symptoms of her demise, and this negative correlation heralds a number of significant substitutions between these two "little" characters. Like Little Nell, the Marchioness is repeatedly referred to as "the child," as well as "small servant"; like Nell, her narrative is ultimately made to serve reparatively. She comes to substitute for Nell as Dick Swiveller's girl, "growing into a woman expressly on my account" and "saving up for me" (75, 552). Educated, matured, and partnered, she eventually reclaims the possibilities lost to the other child-woman: *Bildung* and marriage plot.

As little Quilp shadows Little Nell he, on the other hand, articulates the violence that attends her story, manifesting an aggression whose absence in Nell herself leaves many critics uncomfortable: an inadequate registration of the various forms of abuse apparent in her short life.[12] He enters the novel in Nell's wake ("the child was closely followed" [29]), the hard-surfaced puppet to her "wax-work child" (240). We understand that she has visited Quilp regularly on her grandfather's behalf, and she initially indicates more amusement than fear in his presence, "plainly showing by her looks that while she entertained some fear and distrust of the little man, she was much inclined to laugh at his uncouth appearance and grotesque attitude" (51). Like the tantalized child audience at the puppet show, she witnesses Kit and Tom Scott tussle violently and Quilp intervene:

> "I'll stop 'em," cried Quilp, diving into his little counting-house and returning with a thick stick, "I'll stop 'em. Now, my boys, fight away. I'll fight you both. I'll take both of you, both together, both together!"
>
> With which defiances the dwarf flourished his cudgel, and dancing around the combatants and skipping over them, in a kind of frenzy laid about him. (54)

The scene, which reads particularly like a Punch script, discloses an affective impetus for Quilp's rage. Kit has reportedly commented that Quilp is "an uglier dwarf than can be seen anywheres for a penny" (55). Quilp adverts to this insult with growing fury as the novel progresses, seeking first to contain and expel Kit through imprisonment and transportation and then acting out his thwarted aggression on another toy object, "a great,

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goggle-eyed, blunt-nosed figure-head of some old ship," made to stand for Kit and be punished as such:

> "Is it like Kit—is it his picture, his image, his very self?" cried the dwarf, aiming a shower of blows at the insensible countenance, and covering it with deep dimples. "Is it the exact model and counterpart of the dog—is it—is it—is it?" And with every repetition of the question, he battered the great image until the perspiration streamed down his face with the violence of the exercise. (463)

As with Klein's child patients, Quilp's exaggerated toy "bring[s] out his aggressiveness" ("Psycho-analytic Play Technique" 127), the figurehead's combined resemblance and insensibility providing palpable relief.

Yet the taunt with which Kit has irreparably offended Quilp is hinged to an identical insult, directed at Nell. Kit's remark has been provoked, he explains, by Tom Scott's denigration of Nell: "'Then why did he say,' bawled Kit, 'that Miss Nelly was ugly?'" (Dickens, *Old Curiosity Shop* 55). Quilp's brutal intercession here, it is significant to remember, comes at Nell's request ("Oh pray stop them, Mr Quilp!" [54]). The insult recalls the taunt of later-nineteenth-century critics that Nell is monstrous. It links Quilp and Nell as shamed and denigrated small creatures, his violence enacting an enraged protest that the sentimental child heroine cannot make. Where Quilp as small person insistently asserts heft and resistance, Nell is reflexively slight. She walks "printing her tiny footsteps in the moss, which rose elastic from so light a pressure and gave it back as mirrors throw off breath" (187); after her death her grandfather, unable to tell the difference between her living and dead form, recalls how "I often tried to track the way she had gone, but her small fairy footsteps left no print upon the dewy ground to guide me" (536). That Nell fails to make an impression is reiterated by every critic that cyclically declares a failure to attach to her character and instead confesses their "secret pleasure" in the more obviously monstrous Quilp, who demonstratively resists any imputations of flatness ("Aquiline, you hag. Do you see it? Do you call this flat?" [373]). Just as *The Old Curiosity Shop* anticipates and thematizes reader responses to its little characters, however, so it makes explicit their codependence. Quilp's perfect, baby bear fit in Nell's little bed as he occupies her house of curiosities marks their characterological symmetry. And his unintentional drowning, registered by a shift in Quilp's third-person pronoun from "him" to "it," occurs two days before Kit, Garland, and the Single Gentleman reach Nell, only to find her two days' dead. The sentimental child and the "ugly plaything," "toyed" with by the tide, expire, necessarily, together (512).

## Miniature Work

There is much evidence across Dickens's fiction that he understood the more aggressive cathexes of childhood play. Take its depiction as tormenting "sick fancy" in *Great Expectations* (59); Esther Summerson's "half ashamed" burial of her favorite doll before she leaves a substitute home in which she has been mistreated (*Bleak House* 70); or, to return to *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Sally Brass's inaugural toy story: she is "remarkable, when a tender prattler, for . . . her exquisite manner of putting an execution into her doll's house" (274–75).[13] Dickens's recognition of the ways in which rage, envy, and shame are acted out in play is matched by his insistence on its therapeutic benefits. David Copperfield must retrieve "the first objects" that surround, focus, and express childish feeling as a way of coming to terms with his past (12). The depiction, in *Hard Times*, of the Gradgrind children's relentlessly rational education, and its role in stunting their emotional growth, indicates that Dickens believed play to be essential to maturation, and fantasy to adaptation to reality. Excluded by her father from any toy imaginary, Louisa Gradgrind claims, "You have trained me so well, that I never dreamed a child's dream" (98), conflating dream and play in a perfect Kleinian equation. My suggestion in relation to *The Old Curiosity Shop* has been that we might extend these insights beyond a cursory acknowledgment that Dickens, like Sleary the circus rider, embraced the ludic principle (*Hard Times* 39–

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44), to think more concertedly about why characters that verge on caricature—that are toylike—carry such affective weight and generate such often perverse narrative sympathy.

Violent toy theater of the kind Erna exhibits is only one half of a process of Kleinian child analysis. As well as observing the abreactive aggression of children's play, Klein noticed the move toward reparation that succeeded injury of the toy. Within her therapy space of articulate play, toy damaging had a special significance. "I have found the child's attitude towards a toy he has damaged very revealing" ("Psycho-analytic Play Technique" 128), she wrote. "Often a toy is broken or, when the child is more aggressive, attacks are made with a knife or scissors on the table or on pieces of wood. . . . It is essential to enable the child to bring out his aggressiveness" (127). This childish violence is quickly followed by remorse: "Feelings of guilt may very soon follow after the child has broken, for instance, a little figure. Such guilt refers not only to the actual damage done but to what the toy stands for in the child's unconscious, *e.g.* a little brother or sister, or a parent" (127). Guilt, Klein argued, in turn leads to the impulse to make reparation, which includes "the variety of processes by which the ego feels it undoes harm done in phantasy, restores, preserves and revives objects" (133). I have suggested that the second part of this dynamic pertains to the evolving narrative of *The Old Curiosity Shop*'s other, shabbier "little" female, the Marchioness; the Punchmen, Codlin and Short, who perform Punch's brutal story and then repair their toy objects in order that they may undergo further violence for their composite adult-child audiences, participate reflexively in this dual process, elaborating Dickens's proto-Kleinian recognition that the pleasurable secret of Punch is the expression of violence devolved onto objects. While Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential reading has instated Kleinian reparation as a fundamentally affirmative and ameliorative process—the goal of, rather than a stage in, analysis—Elizabeth Wilson cautions that "[r]eparative gestures require . . . the recognition that sadistic attacks are inevitable" (70). Quoting Klein, Wilson reminds us that "the best we can hope for is that 'a relative balance between love and hate is attained'" (71).[14]

Bearing this less consoling version of reparation in mind, I want here to turn briefly back to that other denigrated "little" figure with whom I began this essay, *Our Mutual Friend*'s Jenny Wren, the doll's dressmaker. A fashioner and restorer, Jenny nonetheless remains both object and agent of violence and destruction, exemplifying the complexities of a Kleinian reparation that fluctuates rather than synthesizes.[15] Although, as we saw, Henry James regarded her failure to grow as commensurate with an inability on Dickens's part to give up childish things and develop from caricature to rounded character even in his late fiction, most recent critics have built a notion of mature characterization into discussion of Jenny's role. Katherine Inglis refers to her as "Nell, reinterpreted for the less sentimental 1860s as [a] glorious, contrary visionary" (19); Helena Michie argues that she represents an advancement on *Bleak House*'s first-person conception of female selfhood by underscoring "the self's necessary fragmentation" (209). Hilary Schor reads her as a self-reflexive character, "a sign for Dickens's fiction" (198); Ben Moore credits her with "continually pull[ing] apart identity, the basic category of realism" (477). Jenny is introduced in terms that suggest a composite of Nell and Quilp: "a child—a dwarf—a girl—a something" (Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* 222); Charley Hexam calls her "a little crooked antic" but puzzles as to whether she is "a child, or old person, or whatever" (228). Yet while she is "queer," Jenny explicitly avoids that charged descriptor, "ugly," that enrages Quilp, showing a "queer but not ugly little face" (Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* 222) and a mesmerizing head of golden hair.[16] She is nonetheless susceptible to a similar sense of insult, indulging fantasies of harm toward the children who have mocked her twisted back and legs "through [her] keyhole" with an aggression that, if primarily verbal, is comparable to that of Quilp assaulting the figurehead:

> Oh! *I* know their tricks and their manners. And I'll tell you what I'd do to punish 'em. There's doors under the church in the Square—black doors,

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> leading into black vaults. Well! I'd open one of those doors, and I'd cram 'em all in, and then I'd lock the door and through the keyhole I'd blow in pepper. . . . And when they were all sneezing and inflamed, I'd mock 'em through the keyhole. Just as they, with their tricks and manners, mock a person through a person's keyhole! (224)

Words, it appears, *can* harm Jenny, requiring brutal but also childish "redress," to choose an apt term for Jenny's version of retaliation. Her repeated location of aggressive impulses "through the keyhole" looks forward to the locked drawers of the Kleinian therapy room, from which child analysands would each draw their own toy box and begin to enact their sadistic fantasies in a curtailed world of play.

If Jenny indeed represents a more developed exploration of the psychology of play than Quilp's pure enraged projection, this is not the result of either the author's or the character's maturation. Jenny serves as a figure not of restorative resolution but of a therapeutic play figured as continued oscillation between sadism and reparation. Her interactions with her toys, both inanimate and human, express rage and shame in dialogue with a skilled practice of material and metaphoric amelioration. She occupies a world of projective identification, where dolls are fine ladies and fine ladies are mannequins: "I dare say they think I am wondering and admiring with all my eyes and heart, but they little think they're only working for my dolls!" (431). Jenny's impoverished family life similarly finds expression through inversion. Her father is an errant child, conflated in her angry response to his "tricks and . . . manners" with those who mock her through her keyhole (241). Before meeting "Mr. Dolls," Eugene Wrayburn assumes that when the childlike Jenny speaks of her "troublesome bad child" who "costs me a world of scolding," she refers to a toy: "'A doll?' said Eugene, not understanding and looking for an explanation" (239). She berates her father as "a pretty object for a parent's eyes" and wishes that his chattering teeth would "all drop down your throat and play at dice in your stomach" (523, 522). Jenny's fantasized disarticulation of her wayward "child" is matched by castigation of herself as failed parent. The "*desire to restore*," Klein was to observe, "springs from the unconscious wish for the death of the parent: reparation in the play world makes amends to those injured in phantasy" ("Weaning" 294). Jenny's needle and scissors stab at her imagined victims, even as they clothe and repair.

Jenny's domestic life and her work in the toy world involve a quotidian conflation of character and person: the same substitutive logic allows her to refigure disappointing parent as failing child, or to reposition fine lady as servant of her vision. In the resolution of the novel's marriage plot, this flexibility proves crucially therapeutic. Jenny's ability to locate the critical word "wife" (Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* 722) that will reclaim both Eugene Wrayburn and Lizzie Hexam is attributed to her dexterity in the microcosmic realm of dolls: "the natural lightness and delicacy of touch which had become very refined by practice in her miniature work, no doubt was involved in this" (720). Dickens suggests that manual and material skills morph seamlessly into the linguistic: Jenny's capacity rightly to understand human subjects is mediated and refined through her toy work. In this sense she is, as other critics have noted, a substitute for the author and his work in the world of character. But she is also the proto–child analyst, moving life plots forward through the astute and enabling decipherment of object-mediated human relations. Might we even speculate that Dickens's "little" figures—ambivalent, volatile, modelling the therapeutic efficacy of aggressive play—are in part responsible for the eager British uptake of Klein's case studies, whose sadistic, envious, or shamed child characters narrate stories of fractured development through the medium of broken, cherished, and discarded toys?

## Notes

1. A set of toy soldiers given to Branwell Brontë in June 1826 became the cast in a series of fantastical and violent games that were subsequently elaborated in the Brontë siblings' juvenile writings. Charlotte Brontë's account of the arrival of the soldiers is published in Alexander 5; Branwell Brontë's account appears in Neufeldt 138.

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2. Early in Eliot's *Mill on The Floss*, Maggie Tulliver vents painful feeling by beating the torso of a wooden doll, termed by Eliot "the Fetish" (78–79).

3. Klein was invited to give six lectures to British Psychoanalytical Society members in 1925. The society's president, Ernest Jones, reported in a letter to Sigmund Freud that "she made an extraordinarily deep impression on all of us and won the highest praise both by her personality and her work" (qtd. in Grosskurth 138). In 1926 Jones proposed that Klein come to London. She became a key and, after the arrival of the Freuds and other members of the Vienna school in the late 1930s, a divisive figure in the British Psychoanalytical Society, presenting numerous papers that developed an increasingly complex theory of object relations, subsequently extended to the analysis of adult psychoses, from her initial observations of children's play.

4. My argument here touches on and departs from Ketabgian's impressive critique of the consensus that "industrial character" in the Victorian novel is "dull, wooden, and emotionally undeveloped" (8). Ketabgian proposes that figures of mechanical power and force pervade the realist novel, modeling a version of affect as force-impelled and "rooted in the non-human" (167). She, too, regards such representation as prefigurative, particularly of early psychoanalytic thought, registering how "Freud consistently likens the psyche's conflict to the hydrodynamic processes of a steam engine—its energy conversion, circulation, storage and release" (165). However, whereas Ketabgian's mechanical model leaves a primarily metaphoric Freudian trace, this essay proposes that the novelistic play dynamics it explores are reiterated by Klein's psychoanalytic praxis.

5. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the phrase "to have one under coram" means to have something "under discipline or correction" ("Coram," def. b).

6. This essay is, of course, not the first to attend to the toy or to the dynamics of play in rethinking nineteenth-century identity formation. Marcus scrupulously traces the ways in which Victorian women were fashioned by doll culture; Kaiser parses play as both practice and privileged metaphor of a Victorian world in flux.

7. Several critics have foregrounded the anger that underwrites the modesty and humility of Dickens's most explicitly 'little" heroines, Amy Dorrit and Nell. Most comprehensively, Byler has argued for the "passive aggression" of these little women, whom she regards as enacting a covert sadism through the limited but potent medium of self-control. Where Klein would show the child's relationship to persons to be mediated through violence done to objects, Byler argues that in such texts "selfhood can only be discerned through the violence done to a person (or to one's person) and can only be asserted through aggressive acts towards others" (237). The problem with this diagnosis is that it posits an uncomfortable composite of the "knowing" child and the cunning woman ("Nell . . . is adept at using her own vulnerability to influence the behavior of certain adult characters" [231]; little Dorrit's "hard work at being invisible draws all kinds of attention" [239]). One of the most demonstrably therapeutic aspects of Kleinian toy work and the analyses it motivated was a complete absence of judgment regarding the psychic rewards of childish bad feeling. Things were precisely not persons; harm was enabled but also contained by the object world.

8. Bennet; Schlicke (125–31); Amigoni (49–50). Alternatively, Gray, while acknowledging Quilp's resemblance to "a range of fairy-tale monsters or lawless vice figures, pre-eminently Punch," focuses her analysis of the woodcuts for *The Old Curiosity Shop* on a perceived animalism, which she regards as contradicting his puppetlike qualities (97).

9. Inglis has analogized character in *The Old Curiosity Shop* to a different toy model, the automaton. She takes a number of the features I have isolated here as puppetlike ("Quilp's habit of bursting from concealed niches," the frozen expression of his face, and his capacity to subject "his small frame to gustative ordeals") as evidence of "mechanical affinities" that "Clockwork Quilp" is said to share with Little Nell (14, 16, 13, 2). However, my focus on the psychic compensations of toy character leads me to concur with Bennet, Schlicke, and Amigoni in understanding Quilp as belonging to the wooden toy world of the puppet theater rather than the mechanized realm of the automaton.

10. My reading of this repetition contradicts Kincaid, who argues for the freshness of each of Quilp's acts of domestic sadism: he "must, over and over again, come up with new tricks and new devices, new torments for his wife" to satirize the "regularity and redundancy in Kit's sit-com plot" (44).

11. The letter, to Mary Tyler, was written some eight years after the publication of *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

12. Kincaid has been the main exponent of the forms of abuse, particularly pedophiliac, that are manifest in and, by his argument, enabled by Dickens's fiction. Kincaid proposes that Quilp "parodies the Nell plot; that is, he energizes that plot by setting himself up as its opposite" (43).

13. One of a number of examples illustrating Sally's "legal childhood" (274), the execution in question may be either a seizure of goods or an infliction of capital punishment on her dolls.

14. Other critiques of a purely benign understanding of reparation include Wiegman; Love; and Laubender.

15. There is, of course, another kind of toy work that Jenny Wren more immediately exemplifies: that of Victorian child labor. For discussions of doll work and its relationship to exploitation in *Our Mutual Friend*, see Kanwit; Gubar (152–53).

16. Zieger argues that the queerness of Dickensian children inheres in their scrambling of the "normative temporal sequence of childhood, maturity and parenthood." She lists Jenny Wren in this context but does not include her in her more detailed discussion of examples of the "wizened child damaged by market forces" that, across Dickens's oeuvre, becomes "a queer source of radical class and social reorganisation" (145, 146, 155). For extended theorization of queer childhood in a different context, see Stockton.

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**Abstract:** This essay proposes a new way of thinking about Dickens's "little" characters in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Our Mutual Friend*, referencing Melanie Klein's "play-technique." Klein was the first to theorize the anxious aggressive child and to posit a complex object relating in which the damage and repair of toys mediated and modulated the unmanageability of infantile emotion. Dickensian characterization, often criticized as object-like and lacking complex interiority, can be understood to intuit the developmental dynamics that Klein would locate in interactions between the child and the thing. Dickens's increasingly interiorized protagonists are surrounded and mirrored by toylike figures that problematize the thesis of novelistic maturation, proving as essential to the depiction of a complex psychology as internal monologue or achieved *Bildung*.

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