

**DICKENSIAN DOMESTICITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY THEATRICAL  
ADAPTATIONS OF THE NOVELS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores nineteenth-century British theatrical adaptations based on a selection of novels from the first three decades of Dickens's career (1830s–50s). Focusing on melodramas that were staged between the 1830s and the 1880s, I examine how medium- and genre-specific conventions, theatrical trends, audience expectations, and the social and cultural contexts in which the plays were conceived shaped the adaptors' representations of the Dickensian domestic. I argue that a mixture of pragmatic and ideological imperatives prompted playwrights to modify Dickens's characters and plots and thus reconfigure his texts as more overt celebrations of domestic ideology. These little-known playwrights were active participants in the debates that shaped mid-Victorian domestic culture: my case studies address a variety of domestic themes and the discrepancies between their treatment in the novels and on the stage, from familial and quasi-familial relationships to depictions of the physical space of home and the ideological gendering of domestic roles. While I argue that reluctance to deviate from melodramatic convention compelled the adaptors to mute the ambivalence that characterises Dickens's depictions of domestic life, I also devote considerable attention to showcasing the playwrights' innovations and creativity. Dickens's Victorian adaptors have frequently been dismissed as pirates and plunderers who trivialised his works but, as my close readings demonstrate, the adaptation process was not merely one of simplification. These playwrights embroidered their source material, expanded the roles of minor characters, and deftly worked new scenes into Dickens's plots. This thesis highlights a crucial gap in our understanding of Dickensian domesticity by showing that nineteenth-century dramatic adaptations played an important, and previously unacknowledged, role in forging enduring popular conceptions of Dickens.

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## Introduction

Charles Dickens was routinely lauded as a passionate preacher of the gospel of home by his contemporaries, but few Dickens scholars today can ignore what Catherine Waters describes as the ‘remarkable disjunction between [Dickens’s] image as the quintessential celebrant of the hearth, and his fictional interest in fractured families’.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on a selection of Dickens’s novels published between the 1830s and the 1850s and British theatrical adaptations staged between the 1830s and the 1880s, this thesis examines the disparity between Dickens’s depictions of domesticity and those of his nineteenth-century adaptors. I consider how shifts in medium and genre, aesthetic conventions, theatrical trends, and the social and cultural contexts in which the plays were staged shaped the adaptors’ approaches to the Dickensian domestic. Ultimately, this thesis argues that a combination of pragmatic and ideological imperatives prompted dramatists to reconfigure Dickens’s texts as more explicit endorsements of domestic ideology. Their productions made an important, and hitherto unrecognised, contribution to the popular notion of Dickens as a proponent of family values and, perhaps unconsciously, strengthened audiences’ and readers’ cultural investment in this image.

Adaptations of popular novels were part and parcel of the Victorian theatre’s repertoire and novelists could do very little to prevent their works from being staged without their consent: the copyright acts of 1709 and 1842 entitled authors to compensation for the use of their texts but these laws did not apply to theatrical adaptations.<sup>2</sup> Alongside William Harrison Ainsworth’s *Jack Sheppard* (1839), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and the prolific output of Walter Scott, Dickens’s novels were amongst the most frequently adapted works of fiction in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Dickens’s campaigns for stricter copyright laws, his public feud with one of his early adaptors, William Moncrieff, and his assertions that hack dramatists were profiting from his creative output seems to suggest that he was unremittingly hostile to these adaptations. Yet, as we shall see, he did praise the adaptors’ efforts when he felt it

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Waters, *Dickens and the Politics of the Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Humpherys, ‘Victorian Stage Adaptations and Novel Appropriations’, in *Charles Dickens in Context*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 39–44, (p. 40).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

was warranted and even, on occasion, collaborated with them to produce ‘official’ dramatisations of his novels. This thesis uses Dickens’s letters to track his fluctuating responses to the plays, and situates his comments within wider discussions surrounding the practice of adaptation in the period. Nineteenth-century debates regarding the merits and shortcomings of adaptation deserve closer scholarly attention than they have hitherto received. As Sarah Meer points out, although ubiquitous in the theatre and Victorian culture more broadly, ‘Adaptation was [...] a site of significant vagueness’ in the period, and examining ‘its blindnesses, its areas of indecision, and nineteenth-century attempts to overcome them’ will help us to understand the significance of these early attempts to theorise and define adaptation practices.<sup>4</sup>

All of Dickens’s novels, without exception, were dramatised more than once throughout the nineteenth century, although his early works, and the Christmas Books, were by far the most popular.<sup>5</sup> I make no pretensions to offer a comprehensive survey of nineteenth-century Dickens adaptations; I have, however, examined a variety of plays based on a selection of Dickens’s novels from the first three decades of his career (1830s–1850s). I have omitted adaptations based on Dickens’s fictional output from the 1860s due to an abundance of primary materials and the necessity of placing limits on the scope of the thesis. Most of the plays are easily accessible through online databases such as the *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database*. I have also used the British Library alongside the Pettingell Collection and the Charles Dickens Theatre Collection, both of which are held at the University of Kent.

Comparative analysis of the primary texts is supplemented by close readings of contemporary reviews, both of the adaptations and the novels, which enable me to unpick responses to Dickens’s ethical vision and explore how his reputation was shaped in nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals. Critics who championed Dickens’s hearthside angels or vilified characters that undermined his outward endorsement of domestic ideology were adaptors in their own right; their comments suggest that, like the dramatists, reviewers selectively reimagined Dickens’s texts as touchstones of hearth and home values.

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Meer, ‘Adaptation, Originality and Law: Dion Boucicault and Charles Reade’, *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 42 (2015), 22–38, (p. 27).

<sup>5</sup> Humpherys, p. 41.

Throughout this thesis, I use the term ‘domesticity’ in its broadest sense, to refer to those portions of Dickens’s narratives that relate to familial life and the literal, or metaphorical, space of home. Adopting relatively flexible terminology was necessary, for my analysis does not focus on one particular aspect of domesticity on the basis that this would have given me a limited understanding of the adaptors’ approaches to a complex issue. I have instead aimed to provide a more rounded picture of the cumulative impact of their modifications. My case studies thus explore a range of domestic themes and the discrepancy between their treatment in the novels and on the stage, from familial and quasi-familial relationships (marriages, parent-child relations, surrogate bonds) to depictions of the physical space of home and the ideological gendering of domestic roles.

Wider links between theatricality and domesticity in the nineteenth century have been fruitfully explored by Karen Chase and Michael Levenson in their compelling book, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family*. Chase and Levenson argue that, in many ways, nineteenth-century homes were akin to theatres, for ‘domestic life was impelled toward acts of exposure and display’.<sup>6</sup> To be more specific, in the Victorian social world,

The pervasive cultural compulsion to publicize the virtues of the family [...] to determine standards for private expenditure, for relations with servants and for the design of houses, meant that [...] the minutiae of daily life were swept into the public theater.<sup>7</sup>

Chase and Levenson point out that even allegedly private household decisions were performative in the nineteenth century, and highlight the connections between literary depictions of domesticity and real-life controversies that turned Victorian family life into a public spectacle. Their study may be broadly situated within a larger body of scholarly work that challenges assumptions about the strict division of public and private life in the nineteenth century. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall’s highly influential work, *Family Fortunes*, remains a valuable contribution to social history and explores illuminating links between the growth of capitalism, the gendered division of labour, and middle-class identity in the period 1780–1850.<sup>8</sup> However, Hall and Davidoff’s insistence on the dominance of the separate spheres ideology, and the rigid function it performed in

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<sup>6</sup> Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850*, Revised edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).



constructing hegemonic gender roles, has since been challenged. Elizabeth Langland, for example, has examined nineteenth-century fiction alongside etiquette and domestic management manuals to highlight the political and economic implications of women's domestic duties.<sup>9</sup> Nancy Armstrong links the rise of the novel in Britain to the shift towards middle-class cultural hegemony. Like Langland, she explores the formative role that the 'dissemination of a new female ideal' played in middle-class culture and the political dimensions of women's domestic authority.<sup>10</sup> Monica Cohen has coined the term 'professional domesticity' to describe the ways in which middle-class Victorian women worked to expand the reach of their influence beyond the private sphere.<sup>11</sup>

Scholars have tended, then, to dissect Victorian domesticity through feminist and historicist perspectives, focusing on the cultural influence of the nineteenth-century novel and the role it played in the formation of middle-class identity. This thesis offers a profitable new angle from which to explore mid-Victorian domestic culture by examining the ways in which it was represented, and scrutinised, on the stage. Few would dispute that the Victorian novel played a crucial role in debating and defining the boundaries of familial life. However, this is well-trodden ground, and privileging the novel's influence over the impact of other artistic forms is surely unjustified if we consider the theatre's immense popularity and cross-class appeal in the nineteenth century. The drama was the most widely enjoyed and pervasive form of popular entertainment in the period, and playwrights consistently placed domestic life under the microscope. While advice literature, periodicals, novels, and scientific writing have long been credited with shaping, and disseminating, Victorian domestic ideology, the relationship between popular theatre and the cult of domesticity is largely uncharted territory.

Dickens's lifelong interest in atomising domestic matters in his fiction, and the energy he devoted to cultivating a reputation as a paternal guardian of the hearth, did not go unnoticed by his contemporaries. Reviewers frequently referred to his respect for the household sanctities: in 1855, Margaret Oliphant declared, 'nowhere does the [...] hearth burn brighter – nowhere is the family love so warm – the natural bonds so strong; and

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca, New York, and London: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Monica Cohen, *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel: Women, Work and Home* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 186.

this is the ground which Mr Dickens occupies *par excellence*'.<sup>12</sup> Others viewed his influence in quasi-religious terms. An anonymous reviewer writing in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1850 described him as a 'prophet' whose 'doctrine' had met with 'unrivalled devotion' since the beginning of his literary career.<sup>13</sup> According to Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, Dickens made it his mission to portray himself as the 'high priest' of domesticity, and there is ample evidence to support this claim.<sup>14</sup> Lingering descriptions of particularly snug homes in his fiction, prefaces that sought to facilitate his entrance into the homes and hearts of his readers, and the careful reconstruction of a fireside atmosphere in the Public Readings all helped Dickens to maintain this image, even after the breakdown of his own marriage. This is not to say that Dickens's enthusiasm for all things domestic was merely for show, but rather that it was a crucial element of his popular appeal and laid the foundations for his peculiarly affectionate relationship with the public. Dickens himself was acutely aware of this, and wrote to John Forster in 1845—prior to the launch of *Household Words*—expressing his desire to launch a periodical named *The Cricket*, whose guiding principle would be 'a vein of glowing, hearty, generous, mirthful, beaming reference in everything to Home, and Fireside'.<sup>15</sup> Although this project never reached fruition, Dickens's enthusiasm for his idea is evident: playfully piling up his adjectives until the sentence can barely contain them, he revels in adopting the demeanour of a jolly paterfamilias who, much like the Ghost of Christmas Present, inspires liberality and kindness in his fellow men. By 1850, Dickens was still developing plans for his periodical, and came up with a plethora of suggestions for the title, many of which had a domestic theme. *The Household Voice*, *The Household Guest*, *The Household Face*, *The Hearth*, and *Home* were all considered before he finally settled on *Household Words*.<sup>16</sup>

It need hardly be said that Dickens scholars today have proved considerably more reluctant than Dickens's contemporaries to take his paternal, Father Christmas image at

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<sup>12</sup> Margaret Oliphant, 'Charles Dickens', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 77 (April 1855), pp. 451–66, (pp. 452–53).

<sup>13</sup> [Anon.], 'Charles Dickens and David Copperfield', *Fraser's Magazine*, 42 (December 1850), in *Charles Dickens: Critical Assessments*, ed. by Michael Hollington, 4 Vols (Robertsbridge: Helm Information, 1995), Vol. 1, p. 331.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 242–43.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Dickens, Letter to John Forster, quoted in John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens: The Illustrated Edition*, ed. by Holly Furneaux (New York: Sterling Signature, 2011), p. 227.

<sup>16</sup> John Drew, Hazel Mackenzie, and Ben Winyard, 'Background', in *Household Words* (October 2011), <<http://www.djo.org.uk/indexes/volumes/1850-volume-i.html>> [accessed 8 October 2018].

face value. Few biographical readings neglect to point out the ironic disparity between Dickens's apparent ideological investment in the domestic ideal and his own familial troubles. Michael Slater emphasises Dickens's growing disillusionment with the cult of domesticity following the collapse of his own marriage, and maintains that this pessimism spilled over into his fiction, with hearthside happiness proving increasingly difficult to attain in the later novels.<sup>17</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst similarly focuses on Dickens's awareness of the precariousness of household harmony, arguing that although idyllic moments of domestic bliss (such as the Cratchits' Christmas dinner) have taken on a mythic status in the popular imagination and cemented Dickens's enduring association with the hearth, these are merely 'narrative snapshots' within a wider landscape of broken and dysfunctional families.<sup>18</sup> Catherine Waters has examined Dickens's representations of the family with a focus on the discursive function they performed in shaping, and testing, middle-class Victorian cultural authority.<sup>19</sup> Others have drawn attention to the double-edged ambivalence of Dickens's depictions of domestic life and the ideological contradictions they grapple with. Brenda Ayres, for example, explores Dickens's inconsistent approach to gender, arguing that his texts ostensibly endorse conventional ideals of womanhood whilst covertly modifying and subverting these ideals.<sup>20</sup> Kate Flint similarly contends that marginal or subversive women in Dickens's fiction remind us of the 'unstable grounds on which Dickens' desired home is founded', for his domestic ideal 'defines itself [...] as the elimination of all those forces which threaten to disrupt it'.<sup>21</sup> More recently, Holly Furneaux has taken a different approach, challenging critics' tendency to overemphasise the dominance of a 'monolithic Victorian family model' and thus overlook the unconventional models of domesticity Dickens depicts.<sup>22</sup> Sally Ledger notes that Dickens frequently contrasts the dysfunctional relationships within biological families with the happiness that may be found in 'alternative domestic units'.<sup>23</sup> Exploring the ways in which the novels espouse unconventional familial arrangements, expose the

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Slater, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Dickens* (London: Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 1999), p. 132.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 247.

<sup>19</sup> See Waters, *Politics of the Family*.

<sup>20</sup> Brenda Ayres, *Dissenting Women in Dickens' Novels: The Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Kate Flint, *Dickens* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), p. 133.

<sup>22</sup> Holly Furneaux, *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Sally Ledger, 'Domesticity', in *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, ed. by Paul Schlicke (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 189–92 (p. 191).

internal contradictions of domestic ideology, and show cherished ideals chafing against the messy realities of household life have all proved fertile approaches to the Dickensian domestic.

In various ways, then, Dickens scholars have laboured hard to show that his depictions of domesticity are neither ideologically stable nor socially and morally conservative. What has not been considered, however, is that Dickens's contemporaries were not merely wilfully misreading his texts when they applauded his enthusiasm for hearthside virtues. Victorians who had read some, or all, of Dickens's novels, alongside those with second-hand knowledge of particular stories or characters, were regularly exposed to theatrical adaptations that offered an alternative version of Dickensian domesticity, one that frequently smoothed over the more disruptive elements in the novels. As Thomas Leitch avers, the cultural afterlife of *A Christmas Carol* gives us valuable insights into what it means to define Dickens for a mass audience.<sup>24</sup> In his view, the numerous adaptations the novella has spawned 'are likely to substitute for Dickens', or even to 'become Dickens', in the minds of many viewers.<sup>25</sup> This thesis applies Leitch's assertion to adaptations of Dickens's novels in his own lifetime. I argue that these dramas played a significant role in colouring Victorian audiences' and readers' understanding of the texts and of Dickens as a novelist. The case studies that comprise this thesis show how the adaptors' adjustments to Dickens's characters and plots (some of which were relatively subtle, and others, more radical) fundamentally altered his depictions of hearth and home.

The majority of the plays that I examine are melodramas whose shared characteristics shed light on how and why particular adaptive strategies persisted in successive eras, and it is for this reason that my work attaches considerable importance to the operations of genre. Domestic matters feature prominently in Victorian stage melodrama and Dickens's adaptors consistently foregrounded the emotional, symbolic, and ideological importance of the hearth in their dramas, even when this entailed overlooking, or marginalising, other themes that appeared in the novels. It was particularly common for adaptors to mute the more strident aspects of Dickens's social criticism. However, this was not tantamount to depoliticising his texts; it is more accurate to say that the

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone With the Wind to The Passion of the Christ* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

dramatists were shifting the ideological focus of their source material. After all, providing models of familial behaviour and domestic ideals to which audiences were implicitly encouraged to aspire was still a political act. It is worth noting, too, that in some of the plays that I examine, domestic crises gesture towards broader concerns, although the adaptors tended to soften the satirical bite of Dickens's social criticism with pathos.

Recent scholarship on nineteenth-century melodrama<sup>26</sup> has foregrounded its ideological ambiguities and the ways in which its domestic subject matter both reinforced, and covertly challenged, the status quo. Carolyn Williams points out, for example, that the saintly heroines typical of the genre may be read in two ways:

feminine virtue becomes an intensely conventional representation of domestic virtue in general, in both senses of the word 'domestic', both familial and national. The plight of 'the common man' is thus often represented by a woman, gender standing in for class.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, melodrama's tendency to venerate virtuous women, while on one level morally conservative, had the potential to be provocative when playwrights linked feminine martyrdom with working-class suffering. Kristen Leaver has drawn attention to the early radicalism of the genre, noting that melodrama of the 1830s and 40s 'equated poverty with moral integrity' and 'allowed the lower classes to engage in a veiled critique of mainstream attempts to define the poor as inherently subordinate'.<sup>28</sup> Katherine Newey, on the other hand, describes melodrama as a 'dialectical movement [...] between the conservative forces of personal and social reconciliation, and the radical impulse towards documentary realism'.<sup>29</sup> Newey's recognition of the contradictory impulses that define melodrama raises difficult questions regarding the extent to which endings that restore the existing social order undermine the unflinching depictions of poverty that precede them. This thesis grapples with similar issues: the plays that I examine contain unruly elements but almost always strive for domestic closure in one form or another, celebrating the formation of marital bonds, reuniting or rebuilding families following domestic strife, or providing homes and protectors for vulnerable characters. These

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<sup>26</sup> For a useful critical overview of how the rise of cultural studies has shaped scholarly approaches to melodrama, see Michael Gilmour, 'Victorian Melodrama', *Literature Compass*, 12 (2015), 344–57.

<sup>27</sup> Carolyn Williams, 'Melodrama', in *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. by Kate Flint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 193–219, (pp. 201–2).

<sup>28</sup> Kristen Leaver, 'Victorian Melodrama and the Performance of Poverty', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27 (1999), 443–56, (p. 444).

<sup>29</sup> Katherine Newey, 'Climbing Boys and Factory Girls: Popular Melodramas of Working Life', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 5 (2000), 28–44, (p. 28).

morally gratifying resolutions were a prerequisite of melodrama and, as Maryanne Ward notes, of popular Victorian novels, albeit to a lesser extent:

nineteenth-century novelists wished for critical acclaim for both aesthetic reassurance and sales promotion, but pleasing the wider public was also a determining factor. That public demanded a good ending, which frequently translated into a "feel good" ending [...] nineteenth-century writers [...] adapted their endings to provide the illusion of on-going happiness, even as they signaled the continuation of the social strife depicted in their novels.<sup>30</sup>

Ward notes that Victorian novelists provided the public with comforting resolutions partly for pragmatic reasons: readers expected them, and drastic departures from long-established novelistic conventions could jeopardise sales figures. Nevertheless, her assertion that these endings provided merely ‘the *illusion* of on-going happiness’ (italics mine) suggests that the sense of closure they afforded was only partial: allotting happy fates to virtuous protagonists did not resolve the pressing social problems these tales depicted.

In some of the Dickens adaptations, we find a similar story. Like the popular novelists Ward describes, dramatists frequently ‘adapted their endings’ in order to bring Dickens’s narratives in line with melodramatic convention. The compulsion to replace Dickens’s morally ambiguous endings with resolutions offering just rewards for virtue and, conversely, punishment for wrongdoing, was persistent and strong. It is also worth noting that some of the Dickens adaptations were staged before the novels’ serial runs were complete, compelling the playwrights to invent endings before Dickens had written them. In the majority of the adaptations I discuss, the adaptors attempted to shut down the more interrogative and open-ended elements that, in the novels, preclude the possibility of complete narrative closure. However, at times, inconsistencies in the representation of character, or the adaptors’ perfunctory efforts to tie up loose ends, undermined the domestic tranquillity that dominated their closing scenes.

The melodramatic conventions that shape the content of the adaptations (stark moral conflict, emotional legibility, a strong sense of poetic justice) are also in evidence in Dickens’s novels. However, in the texts, these conventions are framed by Dickens’s narrative voice, a voice whose ‘doubleness’ is used to ironise, question, and comically

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<sup>30</sup> Maryanne C. Ward, ‘Romancing the Ending: Adaptations in Nineteenth-Century Closure’, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 29 (Spring, 1996), 15–31, (p. 15).

undermine the structures and sentiments that characterise the genre.<sup>31</sup> Sally Ledger has convincingly argued that Dickens's enthusiasm for melodrama was tempered by a degree of scepticism, particularly in the later fiction. In her view, 'Dickens frequently challenges the melodramatic mode even as he embraces it' and his 'dialogue with this popular cultural mode became politically more complex as he headed into the 1850s'.<sup>32</sup> Using *Bleak House* as a case study, Ledger explores how Dickens employs stock female characters from stage melodrama (the fallen woman, the French maid, the victim of domestic violence) only to problematise the discrete categories of feminine identity they represent.<sup>33</sup> Ledger suggests that while in theatrical melodrama character types tend to be fairly static, in *Bleak House*, these roles fluctuate and blur, allowing Dickens to offer a 'cross-class account of women's oppression'.<sup>34</sup> Juliet John's persuasive book, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture*, also foregrounds the complexities of Dickens's melodramatic approach to characterisation. John analyses a variety of Dickensian rogues (Byronic villains, dandies, deviant women) and argues that Dickens externalises character because his 'belief in [...] communality and cultural inclusivity made the notion of a psyche-centred approach to people and society seem individualistic, divisive, and potentially elitist'.<sup>35</sup> In John's view, Dickens's 'refusal to valorize interiority', far from indicating a lack of sophistication, suggests that he privileged emotion over reason, valued 'social and cultural cohesion' and was 'epistemologically radical in [...] questioning [...] how we know what we think we know about life beneath or beyond surfaces'.<sup>36</sup> Both Ledger and John rightly challenge the critical tendency to denigrate Dickens's melodramatic aesthetics and instead foreground their cultural and ideological significance.

Unlike the work of previous critics, this thesis does not focus on Dickens's engagement with the melodramatic mode in his novels. Instead, I explore what happened when these melodramatic narratives were filtered through the language of performance

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<sup>31</sup> George J. Worth, *Dickensian Melodrama: A Reading of the Novels* (Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press, 1978), p. 64.

<sup>32</sup> Sally Ledger, "'Don't be so melodramatic!'" Dickens and the Affective Mode', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 4 (2007), 1–14, (p. 10).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* Ledger has also drawn attention to the political implications of Dickens's engagement with popular cultural forms and melodramatic tropes in *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16; p. 7; p. 121.

and returned to the stage. Although few critics would deny the formative influence of theatrical melodrama on Dickens's fiction and journalism, the dominant role it played in shaping Victorian adaptations of his works has hitherto been overlooked. My focus is largely on the cultural purpose melodrama served in reinforcing some of the most dominant principles of domestic ideology and exploring how its conventions (aesthetic, ideological, structural) were used to distil, and simplify, the content and subject matter of Dickens's texts. Fewer storylines and a reduced cast of characters were a pragmatic necessity when adapting Dickens for performance, but giving domestic plots centre stage was also an ideological choice, determined, in part, by the ethical function the hearth performed in the melodramatic moral universe.

This thesis does not aim, then, to revise existing definitions of melodrama or theorise its formal characteristics; neither does it offer a substantial contribution to current theoretical debates in adaptation studies. It does, however, explore the practice of adapting Dickens in Dickens's own lifetime and makes visible the creative contributions of little-known playwrights who played an important role in Victorian social and cultural formation. Since Sergei Eisenstein's pioneering essay on the similarities between Dickens's highly visual, parallel storylines and filmmaker D. W. Griffith's employment of montage, considerable attention has been devoted to exploring Dickens's impact on cinema, and the cultural legacy he has left us in a proliferation of adaptations on the small and big screen.<sup>37</sup> Grahame Smith has suggested that Dickens's fascination with the metropolis, and the technologies of his day (panoramas, dioramas, railway travel) helped to shape his proto-cinematic narrative strategies.<sup>38</sup> The mythic heights to which *A Christmas Carol* has risen in the popular imagination has inspired two book-length studies of its adaptations. Paul Davis has explored British and American reworkings in a variety of media (stage, film, radio, television, prose, cartoons, and comic books) and argues that the *Carol* is a continually evolving 'culture-text' that reflects the values of the eras in which it has been (re)produced.<sup>39</sup> Fred Guida tackles a similarly diverse range

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<sup>37</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, 'Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today', in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. by Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1949). For more recent studies of Dickens and film see David Paroissien, 'Dickens and the Cinema', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 7 (1980), 68–80; *Dickens on Screen*, ed. by John Glavin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), or Joss Marsh, 'Dickens and Film', in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 204–23.

<sup>38</sup> Grahame Smith, *Dickens and the Dream of Cinema* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003).

<sup>39</sup> Paul Davis, *The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 4.



of adaptations (magic lantern shows, stage, silent film, television, film) and compares the *Carol* to Dickens's lesser-known Christmas Books.<sup>40</sup>

Yet nineteenth-century reworkings of Dickens's novels remain underexplored, surely a critical oversight considering the porous boundaries between different art forms in the period and their important role in shaping Dickens's reception and cultural legacy. Scholarly interest in Victorian adaptation is slowly growing: Patsy Stoneman's edition of eight nineteenth-century dramatisations of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* features notes that situate the plays firmly in 'the social and ideological context in which they were performed'.<sup>41</sup> Karen Laird's historicised close readings of dramatisations of *Jane Eyre*, *The Woman in White*, and *David Copperfield* have similarly highlighted the importance of piecing together 'a cultural history of adaptation in the long nineteenth century'.<sup>42</sup> Tribute must also be paid to H. Philip Bolton for his remarkable sourcebook *Dickens Dramatized*, which provides bibliographic details pertaining to over 3,000 adaptations of Dickens's works, across multiple media, from 1834–1984.<sup>43</sup> More recently, Jacky Bratton and Jim Davis have made a substantial contribution to extant scholarly work on Victorian adaptation in their two-volume collection of nineteenth-century Dickens dramas for Oxford University Press. As Bratton points out, Dickens's tendency to portray his adaptors as unscrupulous pirates has fuelled subsequent dismissals of the role they played in shaping his own creativity. Bratton and Davis's attempt to 'restore [...] some visibility' to these hitherto shadowy figures by making fully edited versions of their plays available for the first time indicates that, happily, this is beginning to change.<sup>44</sup>

Robert Stam's seminal essay 'Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation' challenged the 'fidelity criticism' that formerly dominated scholarly work on adaptation and encouraged critics to interrogate post-Romantic reverence for authorial authority.<sup>45</sup> While Dickens's nineteenth-century adaptors undeniably ironed out some of his textual

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<sup>40</sup> Fred Guida, *A Christmas Carol and its Adaptations: A Critical Examination of Dickens's Story and Its Productions on Screen and Television* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2000).

<sup>41</sup> Patsy Stoneman, *Jane Eyre on Stage, 1848–1898* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Karen Laird, *The Art of Adapting Victorian Literature, 1848–1920: Dramatizing Jane Eyre, David Copperfield, and The Woman in White* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2015), p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> H. Philip Bolton, *Dickens Dramatized* (London: Mansell Publishing Ltd, 1987), Vol. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Jacky Bratton, 'Introduction', in *Dickensian Dramas: Plays from Charles Dickens*, ed. by Jacky Bratton and Jim Davis, 2 Vols (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), Vol. 1, xvi.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation', in *Film Adaptation*, ed. by James Naremore (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), pp. 54–76 (p. 58).

nuances, this thesis aims to offer a balanced, historicised account of the modifications made. Although my analysis is rooted in comparing and contrasting the adaptations with their source texts, I have endeavoured to eschew hierarchical judgements regarding the relative aesthetic merits of drama and prose.<sup>46</sup> Throughout, my close readings move beyond a linear juxtaposition of adaptation and source by comparing adaptations derived from the same text, and highlighting the adaptors' allusions to Dickens's wider oeuvre. As Christine Geraghty notes, adaptations often reference other adaptations and must therefore be examined within a broad context of cultural memory, associations, and assumptions.<sup>47</sup> Having said this, placing too much emphasis on the intertextual nature of all adaptations can make it tricky to pin down meaningful connections.<sup>48</sup> Highlighting what unites the dramatists' depictions of domesticity, and the generic traits their adaptations share, lends necessary focus to my analysis.

As I have already indicated, I also consider the impact of the change in medium from prose to drama. Some adaptation scholars have advocated searching for what Linda Hutcheon terms 'equivalences in different sign systems', but this thesis does not, in general, separate the adaptations' form from their content.<sup>49</sup> To do so would involve overlooking the ways in which the material resources of the nineteenth-century theatre, its aesthetic and ideological conventions, and audience expectations shaped the content that was performed on stage. Nora Nachumi has discussed the difficulties of retaining Austen's distinctive narrative irony in film.<sup>50</sup> Nineteenth-century adaptors had to contend with similar issues: in her useful overview of Victorian theatrical adaptations of Dickens's works, Anne Humpherys points out that removing some of the irony present in the novels was necessary in order to make the plays fit the melodramatic or comedic mould more neatly, an issue that crops up frequently in this thesis.<sup>51</sup> Replacing Dickens's prose commentary with dialogue and visual images was also an important part of the

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<sup>46</sup> This approach is advocated by Leitch, pp. 4–5.

<sup>47</sup> Christine Geraghty, *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama* (Lanham, Maryland and Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 10.

<sup>50</sup> Nora Nachumi, "'As if!': Translating Austen's Ironic Narrator to Film", in *Jane Austen in Hollywood*, ed. by Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield, 2nd edn (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 130–39.

<sup>51</sup> Humpherys, p. 42.

process of filtering the novels through the theatre's dominant modes of storytelling.<sup>52</sup> Kamilla Elliott's work on the 'aesthetically fecund' exchanges between words and images, while persuasive, downplays medium and genre-specific conventions and runs the risk of divorcing adaptations from their historical contexts, something I have been keen to avoid.<sup>53</sup>

Suzanne R. Pucci and James Thompson have explored the social and ideological circumstances that have inspired reworkings of Austen, and Hila Shachar adopts a similar approach in her 'text-specific cultural analysis' of film and television adaptations of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* from the 1930s to the present day.<sup>54</sup> Shachar makes the important point that 'historical context and cultural critique' is 'an area which is sorely lacking in Adaptation Studies'.<sup>55</sup> This thesis seeks to expand our understanding of the ways in which historical contexts, cultural trends, and ideological debates shaped the Dickens adaptations and Dickens's cultural legacy within his own lifetime.

Throughout this thesis, I use the term 'adaptation' to denote an altered version of Dickens's text for production on the stage, although this label inevitably encompasses a number of variations. Linda Hutcheon has argued that an 'adaptation' can be defined in three ways: a 'transposition', which usually involves a shift in genre, medium, or perspective, an act of 'creation' which 'always involves both (re-)interpretation) and then (re-)creation', or, finally, 'a form of intertextuality' in which the adaptation engages directly with its source.<sup>56</sup> She has also coined the term 'transcoding' to denote the act of translating the content of the source text 'into a new set of conventions as well as signs'.<sup>57</sup> Although Hutcheon's divisions are undoubtedly useful as a means of distinguishing between different approaches to adaptation, most of the dramas that I examine straddle several of these categories. For this reason, I do not, on the whole, make distinctions of this kind, although I recognise the singularity of partial adaptations (dramatised episodes

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<sup>52</sup> Robert Stam describes this practice as a form of 'aesthetic mainstreaming'. See 'Introduction', in *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, ed. by Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), pp. 1–52 (p. 43).

<sup>53</sup> Kamilla Elliot, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 76.

<sup>54</sup> *Jane Austen and Co.: Remaking the Past in Contemporary Culture*, ed. by Suzanne R. Pucci and James Thompson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); Hila Shachar, *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature: Wuthering Heights and Company* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Shachar, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> Hutcheon, p. 8.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

from the novel featuring a limited cast of characters) and appropriations, which, according to Julie Sanders, tend to depart from their sources more strongly than adaptations.<sup>58</sup> Some of the adaptations that I examine appeared decades after the serial publication of the novels, so the adaptors were speaking to new audiences whose preoccupations differed from Dickens's original readers; in some cases, theatrical conventions had changed too. Humpherys has highlighted the ways in which Victorian adaptors who produced novel appropriations of Dickens's works used his plots and characters to target different cross-sections of society and mount social and political critiques.<sup>59</sup> This thesis similarly foregrounds the cultural and ideological implications of the theatrical adaptors' attempts to shift the focus of Dickens's texts.

Considerable energy has been devoted to examining Dickens's lifelong obsession with dramatic entertainment. Early attempts to explore these connections noted Dickens's indebtedness to theatrical modes of representation and the performative nature of his narrative style. Robert Garis, for example, draws attention to the 'insistent and strenuous verbal artifice' of Dickens's prose, while William Axton similarly highlights his 'direct addresses, soliloquies, and authorial "asides", and the theatrical way he handles scenes, defines character, and manipulates speech and dialogue'.<sup>60</sup> In his seminal work, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*, Paul Schlicke moved beyond a discussion of Dickens's theatrical writing style to argue that his cultural and ideological commitment to popular entertainment was 'central to his role as an artist' and 'rooted in his deepest values'.<sup>61</sup> Insisting on the 'structural and thematic importance' of popular amusement in Dickens's novels, Schlicke maintains that the shared pleasure, communality, and fellow-feeling Dickens associated with these forms of entertainment was integral to his moral and social vision.<sup>62</sup> More recently, John Glavin has challenged critical assumptions that the theatre was a source of delight to Dickens and a well-spring of imaginative energy for his fiction. His provocative, psychoanalytic account of Dickens's peculiar attitude to the theatre stresses the author's contradictory desire for concealment and exposure, his dual impulse to hide from the public and reveal his presence in acts of display. Glavin paints Dickens

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<sup>58</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 26.

<sup>59</sup> Humpherys, p. 43.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Garis, *The Dickens Theatre: A Reassessment of the Novels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 13; William Axton, *Circle of Fire: Dickens' Vision and Style and the Popular Victorian Theater* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), p. 220.

<sup>61</sup> Paul Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (London, Boston, Sydney, and Wellington: Unwin Hyman, 1985), p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

as a masterful and self-absorbed puppeteer, the all-powerful force behind characters that performed at his command.<sup>63</sup> Nina Auerbach's account of Dickens's conservatively moralistic and even derogatory treatment of actors, theatres, and theatricality in his fiction also problematises a large body of Dickens scholarship that stresses Dickens's insatiable enthusiasm for the theatre in all its forms.<sup>64</sup>

However, although numerous attempts have been made to dissect Dickens's engagement with the Victorian theatrical world, the relationship between Dickens's novels and the nineteenth-century dramatisations they inspired remains underexplored. Where they exist, references to Victorian plays derived from Dickens's fiction are brief and generally dismissive. George Rowell pronounces these adaptations 'crude', 'sensational' and, we might infer, unworthy of serious academic study.<sup>65</sup> Robert A. Colby goes so far as to claim that 'The trivialisation of Dickens on the stage may well have delayed his due recognition as a major and serious novelist'.<sup>66</sup> Although Martin Meisel's magisterial study of the relationship between narrative, pictorial, and dramatic arts in the nineteenth century devotes some attention to Victorian dramatists' attempts to reproduce Dickens's illustrations as tableaux on the stage, his assertion that these plays were merely 'dramatizations of the pictures' is surely a reductive generalisation.<sup>67</sup> Weighing up the representational possibilities of drama and prose, Meisel concludes that the adaptations lacked the novels' 'flexibility' and that 'The result in translation was frequently a coarser but more concentrated effect'.<sup>68</sup> Like Meisel, Deborah Vlock has drawn attention to the fluid exchange between novels and the drama in the nineteenth century, arguing that Victorian reading habits were cultivated in the theatre and that novels were thus always filtered 'through the lens of popular performance'.<sup>69</sup> She also identifies the stock theatrical types on which many of Dickens's characters are based. Yet she, too, stresses Dickens's adaptors' lack of sophistication, maintaining that while the novels abound with

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<sup>63</sup> John Glavin, *After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>64</sup> Nina Auerbach, 'Before the Curtain', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. by Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 3–14.

<sup>65</sup> George Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre 1792–1914: A Survey*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 51.

<sup>66</sup> Robert A. Colby, 'Thackeray and Dickens on the Boards', in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. by Carol Hanbery MacKay (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 139–51, (p. 148)

<sup>67</sup> Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 53.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>69</sup> Deborah Vlock, *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 3.

stock melodramatic figures ‘more complex than their sources’, on the Victorian stage, these characters were invariably ‘returned to their origins’.<sup>70</sup> Humpherys offers a more balanced view, noting that the truncated structure common to many Dickens adaptations was partially due to audiences being ‘less interested in the plots, which were frequently chopped and changed to a series of episodes, than in dramatic characters as performed by popular actors’.<sup>71</sup> George Taylor goes further, arguing that Victorian actors successfully embodied Dickens’s characters and indeed fleshed out unconvincing scenes.<sup>72</sup>

While this thesis argues that dramatists moulded Dickens’s characters and plots to fit pre-existing melodramatic models, this is not to assert that the adaptive process was always one of simplification. I consider plays by several adaptors who expanded the role of minor characters, embroidered or reinterpreted existing material, and created entirely new scenes. In discussing instances of expansion alongside the adaptors’ omissions, I hope to offer a more three-dimensional picture of their creative efforts than has previously been attempted. Too many critics have emphasised the reductive nature of these plays without examining them in any detail; my in-depth close readings seek to remedy this oversight.

Scholars have also neglected to explore the relationship between these adaptations and the Public Readings that dominated the final years of Dickens’s life. For pragmatic reasons of scope, my thesis does not explore this relationship in any detail, but it is worth drawing attention to some interesting parallels here. The Readings were, in effect, Dickens’s adaptations of his own works. Although they were performed by only one man rather than an ensemble cast and were not theatrical performances as such, they were meticulously planned, stage-managed, and dramatically delivered. Dickens never succeeded in preventing theatrical adaptations of his works from being staged, but the Readings gave him the opportunity to offer his own (and, in the eyes of some, authoritative) histrionic interpretations of his novels. In his compelling account of the Readings, Malcolm Andrews persuasively argues that they may be seen as ‘quasi-

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

<sup>71</sup> Humpherys, p. 41.

<sup>72</sup> George Taylor, *Players and Performances in the Victorian Theatre* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 143.

theatrical binges legitimating [Dickens's] trespasses from drawing-room entertainment into a world of passionate extraversion, multivocal role-playing and vagabondage'.<sup>73</sup>

Yet the Readings are not merely important for deepening our understanding of Dickens's increasingly obsessive desire to embody his own creations before the public; they are also peculiarly relevant to this thesis because they signify an attempt to marry theatricality and domesticity. As Andrews avers, they 'represented a [...] flight from the domestic hearth, and yet they were occasions when Dickens tried to reconstitute domestic hearth in his emphasis on the audience's feeling itself to be a friendly community around a fireside'.<sup>74</sup> In other words, the Readings allowed Dickens to unite apparently contradictory impulses. On the one hand, the first official Readings coincided with Dickens's separation from his wife Catherine in 1858, allowing him the freedom to become an itinerant showman of sorts who exchanged the responsibilities of familial life for the thrill of travelling up and down the country to perform before immense crowds. Yet there is no question that Dickens laboured hard to create an intimate, homely atmosphere on the Reading tours, even in the most cavernous of venues. This was not simply an attempt to bestow an air of genteel respectability on public entertainment, but a vital opportunity for Dickens to cement his emotional bond with the public and physically bring together a community that had hitherto depended on readers' imaginative empathy to conjure it into existence. Interestingly, Dickens's early adaptors used similar tactics, encouraging spectators to forge an affectionate relationship with his characters and cultivate kinship with one another. In both cases, then, audiences were asked to think of themselves as an extended family. It was not enough for spectators to attentively watch the performances: engaging with Dickens in a meaningful manner (either first-hand, as the man himself brought his novels to life, or through actors' impersonations of his characters) demanded spontaneous affection, warmth, and emotional involvement.

Further parallels may be drawn: like the theatrical adaptations I discuss, Dickens's Readings tended to play down those portions of his texts that explicitly agitated for political or social change, while amplifying the importance of scenes with a familial focus. To take one of the most striking examples, Andrews has documented the ways in

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<sup>73</sup> Malcolm Andrews, *Charles Dickens and his Performing Selves: Dickens and the Public Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 40.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

which Dickens's altered version of the *Carol* (always one of his most popular Readings) 'is both more benign and less oriented towards topical social problems [than the original novella] [...] The Cratchit Christmas dinner [...] was hardly touched, whereas the episode involving [...] Want and Ignorance, disappears'.<sup>75</sup> Dickens's decision to tone down the social criticism of his text while playing up its celebration of domesticity was a strategy frequently adopted by his theatrical adaptors. Some dramatists, for example, excised Dotheboys Hall from *Nickleby*, and cut the famous workhouse opening from *Oliver Twist*, while dwelling on scenes of familial reconciliation. Both Dickens and his nineteenth-century adaptors, then, were preoccupied with creating a fantasy of domesticity on the stage.

This thesis is divided into three Parts, each of which focuses on a selection of novels from a different decade of Dickens's career; I discuss a range of dramatisations based on Dickens's fictional output in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s. Plays which were not staged until years after the novels were published are discussed alongside adaptations that appeared contemporaneously with the texts. I have approached my primary materials in this way because a parallel examination of adaptations of the same novel has yielded illuminating points of comparison in terms of structure, theme, subject matter, and ideological focus. Interestingly, large gaps in time between performances did not always significantly alter the content of the adaptations but, where appropriate, I have highlighted the ideological and theatrical developments of successive decades.

Part I, which explores adaptations based on Dickens's 1830s novels, is divided into sections on *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Nicholas Nickleby*. In the *Pickwick* section, I consider the impact of removing the narrative voice that frames Dickens's representations of domestic life. Marriage is a key theme here, and a striking pattern emerges whereby the adaptors diluted, or ignored, the scepticism lurking beneath Dickens's outward enthusiasm for the domestic ideal. The necessity of replacing the narrator's satirical observations with economical dialogue persisted in adaptations of *Twist* and *Nickleby*. However, it was the adaptors' reluctance to deviate from the tried and tested formulas of melodrama that had the biggest impact on their representations of the domestic in these plays. A strong emphasis on the spontaneous expression of emotion, and the power of the 'natural affections', all but eradicated Dickens's wariness of the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p. 82.



performative aspects of domesticity. Modified, or entirely new, endings are another recurring theme in Part I, as the adaptors' adherence to the structural and ideological patterns of melodrama produced tidy resolutions with fewer ambiguities than the novels.

In Part II, I shift my attention to the 1840s, with individual sections on *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *A Christmas Carol*, and *Dombey and Son*. Once again, melodramatic conventions distilled the muddled waters of Dickens's morally ambiguous world, and intensely domestic endings served the purpose of ideologically foregrounding, and celebrating, the curative properties of the hearth. As with the 1830s novels, the change in medium prompted significant shifts in narrative focus, shifts most conspicuous in the *Dombey* adaptations. The 1840s adaptations did something new, however, in offering allusions to Dickens's wider oeuvre: several of these plays feature situations or characters that exploit audiences' knowledge of *Twist* and their increasing familiarity with the Dickens universe.

Part III focuses on the 1850s, and is divided into two sections on *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*. The adaptors who tackled these novels employed many of the adaptive strategies (cutting material, replacing narrative commentary with striking visuals or sparse dialogue, foregrounding minor characters, reworking endings) favoured by their predecessors. However, they were innovative in merging melodramatic conventions with tropes from sensation fiction, and putting sexually transgressive women in the spotlight. I argue that adaptations of *Copperfield* and *Bleak House* were deeply embedded in topical debates surrounding marriage laws and women's sexual freedoms in the 1850s and 1860s. These dramatists structured their plays around fallen women who desecrate the hearths they are supposed to protect, but their sympathetic depictions of female suffering covertly challenged the social and moral function assigned to women in domestic culture.

The central argument of this thesis is that Dickens's Victorian adaptors made an important, and distinctive, contribution to his enduring association with the hearth. Although Dicken undoubtedly laboured hard to forge this connection, he channelled his efforts into using his journalism, fictional Prefaces, and the Public Readings to cultivate an illusory friendship with his readers. For Dickens, readers' investment in his fireside image hinged on their readiness to regard him as an honorary inmate of their homes. The adaptors, on the other hand, were not particularly concerned with projecting a specific authorial image of Dickens. Instead, they amplified the domestic themes within his

fiction; their adaptations provided commentary on the texts rather than their author. While Dickens devoted himself to cultivating bonds of kinship with his readers, the adaptors reinforced his association with the hearth in a different way, by reimagining the content of the works he had authored and intensifying their familial focus. Their dramas laid the foundations for perceptions of Dickens and his work that continue to have considerable cultural and emotional power today.

In order to fully understand this legacy, we must return to the beginning, when *Pickwick* took the nation and the Victorian stage by storm. The 1830s were the formative decade of Dickens's literary career and, as Part I of this thesis shows, his first adaptors helped to define the Dickensian domestic for the Victorian public, establishing a myriad of associations that remain firmly lodged in our collective cultural memory.

## Part I: The 1830s

### Introduction

Nineteenth-century playwrights dramatised Dickens's 1830s novels with an enthusiasm rivalled only by the zeal with which they would tackle the enormously popular Christmas Books a few years later. Dickens's first three novels, *The Pickwick Papers* (April 1836–November 1837), *Oliver Twist* (February 1837–April 1839), and *Nicholas Nickleby* (March 1838–September 1839) were amongst the most frequently adapted works in his oeuvre and spawned an eclectic range of plays that reflect the heterogeneous nature of early Victorian theatre. Dickens's popularity with adaptors at this formative stage in his career suggests their eagerness to make the most of his mounting fame and cross-class appeal. Yet it also points to the lively theatricality that runs through the early fiction. *Pickwick*, *Twist*, and *Nickleby* are positively bursting with material that borrowed from, and fed back into, the Victorian stage. Alongside depictions of strolling actors and theatrical performers, these novels contain a playful mixture of melodrama and farce, entertaining and sensational incidents, common stage devices such as eavesdropping and confrontation scenes, and exuberant characterisation.<sup>1</sup> However, my primary focus is the adaptors' treatment of the domestic. Although the reputation Dickens gained as an enthusiastic supporter of hearthside virtues was cemented by the publication of the Christmas Books in the 1840s, the seeds were sown some years before and early reviewers frequently identified home and family as the emotional core of his work. Dickens's early novels appeared amidst the growth of a national cult of domesticity: the young queen Victoria, happily married in 1840, was a glowing advert for the connubial bliss to which ordinary families should aspire. Rhetoric surrounding the separate spheres and wariness of urbanisation also heightened cultural investment in the notion of the home as a refuge from social ills.<sup>2</sup>

Part I traces the alterations made to Dickens's depictions of domesticity in the 1830s adaptations and situates these changes within a broader theatrical and cultural context.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Schlicke, 'Introduction', in Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, Oxford World's Classics edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xxi.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 65.

Playwrights' adherence to (and departures from) the aesthetic and ideological conventions of particular genres, and the theatrical trends of successive decades, receive considerable attention in my analysis. I aim to show how these factors shaped dramatists' approaches to the adaptation process as they embarked on the task of cutting, embellishing, and reworking Dickens's domestic vignettes for the Victorian stage.

Many, but not all, of the plays I have chosen were staged around the time the novels were published. The ephemeral nature of theatrical performance inevitably means that, although countless reviews and advertisements of the period refer to Dickens adaptations, many scripts were never published. Choosing which adaptations to discuss has thus been, in part, determined by the accessibility of my primary materials. The plays that I have chosen all showcase domestic plots, often at the expense of other storylines that feature prominently in the texts. These dramas also shed light on issues arising from the adaptation process, ranging from the necessity of condensing material to changes that radically transfigured the source texts. Some of the adaptors reproduced much of Dickens's original content; others embroidered particular scenes in order to take advantage of public interest in topical social issues. In his version of *Twist*, for example, George Almar extended Dickens's critique of the paltry system of outdoor relief available to the poor. However, it was more common for dramatists to omit large chunks of the novels and, in all three sets of adaptations, these pragmatic cuts altered the ideological thrust of the narratives. Removing much of Dickens's satirical commentary ironed out key aspects of his social criticism.

Yet the adaptors did not always condense, or inadvertently censor, their source material. A few of the plays featured in Part I were staged before the novels' serial runs were complete, which compelled the playwrights to invent endings before Dickens had written them. Conversely, others appeared significantly later than their source texts: Frank Emson's adaptations of *Pickwick* and *Twist* were staged in the 1870s, forty years after the publication of the novels and several years after Dickens's death. Emson's preference for farcical, physical comedy may indicate an attempt to capitalise on nostalgia for the rambunctious good humour of Dickens's early works: literary reviews of the late novels, and obituaries written for Dickens after his death, often expressed a wistful longing for the cheerfulness of the early fiction. It is worth noting, too, that the intensely detailed set descriptions in Emson's *Twist* reflect increasing enthusiasm for convincing representations of domesticity on the stage in the latter decades of the

nineteenth century. Harry Simms's adaptation of *Nickleby* was also staged in the 1870s but, if we compare his play with Edward Stirling's 1838 version, it is difficult to identify any discernible change in the melodramatic conventions on which both playwrights rely. This is, perhaps, because the naturalistic, and deeply provocative, works of Ibsen, and the demand for greater realism on the stage, did not have a tangible impact on the shape of British melodrama until the late 1880s and 1890s.

The adaptations I examine belong to a variety of theatrical genres; some of them straddle several at once. Two of the *Pickwick* plays are burlettas, an odd hybrid form of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which featured elements of comedy, farce, and melodrama. The burletta's inclusion of songs allowed playwrights to sidestep the restrictive terms of the Licensing Act of 1737, which limited spoken drama to Drury Lane and Covent Garden: use of the term died out after the Theatres Act of 1843 abolished the patent theatres' monopoly on legitimate drama. In some ways, the protean nature of the burletta rendered it an appropriate generic fit for Dickens's first novel; *Pickwick*'s episodic structure, interpolated tales, and meandering narrative resist rigid categorisation. When dramatists undertook to adapt *Twist* and *Nickleby*, they overwhelmingly chose to produce melodramas, which is unsurprising given the increasing popularity of the genre at the end of the 1830s and the melodramatic bent of the texts. While most of the plays examined in Part I aimed to be (more or less) complete dramatisations of the novels, Emson's adaptations of *Pickwick* and *Twist* focused on the escapades of minor comic characters and were billed as one-act, dramatised episodes. Alongside one melodramatic adaptation of *Twist* described as a 'Sketch', Emson's productions are thus distinct from the other plays I discuss and must be defined as partial adaptations.

Alongside tracking the significance of shifts in medium and genre, Part I also explores early Victorian attitudes to the practice of adapting Dickens. In the 1830s, the issue of authenticity, and the novelist's authorial authority over his texts, was highlighted both by Dickens himself and his reviewers. It is crucial to remember that, at this early stage in his career, Dickens was in the process of making the transition from journalist to serious novelist and found himself poised ambiguously between two identities: Boz, an entertainer whose humorous sketches contributed to the public amusement, and Charles Dickens, a thoughtful writer whose work engaged with some of the weightiest and most contentious social issues of the day. In the late 1830s, reviewers expressed sundry misgivings about his ability to straddle both camps, and Dickens's desire to distance

himself from his adaptors was surely, in part, an attempt to more firmly establish his own identity as a respectable man of letters. However, it is important to note that while the young Dickens and many of his supporters denounced the adaptors as unscrupulous pirates, some critics were more forgiving and did not consider faithfulness to the original texts a criterion of value.

As I have already made clear, the primary aim of this thesis is to explore the significance of Victorian adaptors' alterations to Dickens's treatment of domesticity, and the various factors—shifts in medium and genre, practical excisions, ideological leanings, theatrical trends—that necessitated these changes. In adaptations of the 1830s novels, the absence of Dickens's distinctive narrative voice is particularly conspicuous. In the first section of Part I, I argue that *Pickwick*'s adaptors made little attempt to retain the melancholy and sardonic elements that serve to undercut the apparent cosiness of the novel's domestic portraits. The loss of Dickens's narratorial commentary is also an issue in adaptations of *Twist* and *Nickleby*. While Dickens's knowing narrator systematically exposes the performative nature of domesticity, in the plays, the emotional authenticity that characterises melodrama works to naturalise its doctrines. The impact of altered, or entirely new, endings is another major theme throughout Part I. Emson's two comic adaptations of *Pickwick* and *Twist* blunted the edges of Dickens's satire with tranquil domestic resolutions, while melodramatic dramatisations of *Twist* and *Nickleby* used Brownlow and Cheeryble as narrator-figures to assure audiences that a morally satisfactory outcome had been reached. This was in keeping with melodrama's drive for poetic justice but removed some of the ambiguities present in the texts. *Twist* and *Nickleby* both contain threshold figures who are excluded from domestic circles but melodrama's push for a happy ending led Edward Stirling to rectify this problem by securing Smike's place in the Nickleby family.

The chronological structure that underpins my analysis replicates the order in which the novels were published, and thus it is Dickens's first work of fiction, *The Pickwick Papers*, to which I now turn.

## **I – *The Pickwick Papers*: Marriage and the ‘Happy ever after’**

*The Pickwick Papers* is largely acknowledged to be the most loosely arranged and episodic work in Dickens’s oeuvre; neither does it possess the ideological commitment or thematic coherence of his later fiction. Social critique is by no means absent—Dickens lampoons exploitative legal practices and makes it clear that bribery, rather than lofty democratic principles, swings the outcome of the Eatanswill election—but these satirical elements are largely comic and exist within a meandering, farcical narrative. The Pickwickians’ misadventures run alongside notoriously baffling interpolated tales that are by turn (or on occasion all at once) melodramatic, comic, and disturbing. Hearth, home, and familial relationships do not take centre stage, with the notable exception of the Christmas celebrations at Dingley Dell, until Pickwick renounces his travels and embraces his comfortable new life in Dulwich. Dickens makes it clear that such contentment is not available to all, however: hen-pecked husbands like Tony Weller and Mr Pott cherish dreams of domestic harmony which are gleefully destroyed by their tyrannical wives.

Yet although *Pickwick* does include humorous portraits of households which are far from idyllic, Christmas at Dingley Dell is ostensibly one of Dickens’s snuggest depictions of domesticity. The cross-class, intergenerational mingling of family members with friends and servants in these scenes points to the spirit of fellowship that unites Wardle’s community. One contemporary critic implied that the Pickwickians’ conviviality filled Dickens’s readers with good cheer: ‘Boz is still going strong [...] Christmas at Dingley Dell made us merry’.<sup>3</sup> This reviewer implicitly likens Dickens’s community of readers to an extended family, all of whom can share the Pickwickians’ delight in the seasonal festivities. Thomas Henry Lister’s assertion that ‘the tendency of [Dickens’s] writings is to make us [...] benevolent’ suggests that he, too, viewed Dickens as a genial provider, not unlike the Ghost of Christmas Present, of gaiety and goodwill.<sup>4</sup> Other reviewers launched the enduring association of Dickens with hearth and home by framing their discussions of *Pickwick* with domestic imagery. One critic described the novel as a delicious ‘relish’ that ‘carries down the breakfast, or the part of a tea,

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<sup>3</sup> [Anon.], unsigned review of *Pickwick Papers*, *Metropolitan Magazine*, 18 (February 1837), in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Philip Collins (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Henry Lister, from a review of *Sketches* (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> series), *Pickwick, Nickleby, and Oliver Twist*, *Edinburgh Review*, 68 (October 1838), in *Heritage*, p. 73.

inimitably'.<sup>5</sup> Dickens would later employ a similar image in his Preface to *The Old Curiosity Shop* when he compared the book to a hearty dinner that 'smokes upon the board' ready to be shared between friends.<sup>6</sup> The festive celebrations in which the Pickwickians participate are brimful of merriment and provide a snugly domestic interlude in *Pickwick's* sprawling and restless picaresque narrative. Dickens always valorises kinship and human connections, but the yuletide festivities at Manor Farm are also overflowing with the homely qualities he most prizes: 'warmth' 'cordiality', 'merry voices and light-hearted laughter', and that cornerstone of Victorian domesticity, a cheerful fire, which 'crackle[s] on the hearth'.<sup>7</sup> Generous quantities of good food are also in endless supply, and Dickens whets his readers' appetites with a mouthwatering description of 'a mighty bowl of wassail [...] in which the hot apples were [...] bubbling with a rich look, and a jolly sound, that were perfectly irresistible'.<sup>8</sup> Wardle's plentiful provision of food points to the generous hospitality he offers his guests and is related with evident relish; the 'jolly' sound issuing from the apples reflects the affability of the host that serves them.

Yet despite the undeniable gaiety of these scenes, *Pickwick* is set in the pre-Victorian period, and Dickens frequently associates the jolly revelries at Manor Farm with a mythic, benevolently feudal England of yore. The Wardles live in pastoral surroundings, and Dickens asserts that 'if any of the old English yeomen had turned into fairies when they died', Manor Farm 'was just the place in which they would have held their revels'.<sup>9</sup> This jocular nostalgia for a merry old England is tempered by melancholy passages which communicate the narrator's desire to relive earlier periods of his life:

We write these words now, many miles distant from the spot at which, year after year, we met on that day, a merry and joyous circle. Many of the hearts that throbbed so gaily then, have ceased to beat; many of the looks that shone so brightly then, have ceased to glow [...] Happy, happy Christmas, that can win us back to the delusions of our childish days [...] and transport [...] the traveller, thousands of miles away, back to his [...] quiet home!<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [Anon.], from an unsigned review of *Pickwick Papers* Nos. I–IX, *Athenaeum*, (3 December 1836), in *Heritage*, p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Dickens, 'Preface' (1841), *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Oxford World's Classics edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, Oxford World's Classics edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 341; p. 347.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 351.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.



Dickens opens with a deliberately inclusive ‘We’ and affirms that Christmas time fosters the domestic virtues—openness, fellow-feeling, friendship—that he holds most dear, but he also situates them firmly in a bygone era. Retrospective narration draws an impermeable boundary between the present (‘now’) and the past (‘then’). The narrator is ‘many miles distant’ from the merry scenes he recalls, and these halcyon days can never be reclaimed. The rhetorical repetition of ‘many’ suggests that he is forcing himself to acknowledge that most of the friends who once belonged to his ‘joyous circle’ are no longer living. Even the determined insistence that Christmas is a ‘Happy, happy’ time cannot subdue the narrator’s fears that his youth was a fiction, founded on what he now recognises as ‘delusions’. The weary traveller mentioned is ‘thousands of miles away’ from home and must, like the narrator, find comfort in cherishing memories of his loved ones.

Even Isabella Wardle’s marriage to Trundle, supposedly the focal point of the domestic festivities at Dingley Dell, is tinged with sadness and the bride’s fears about her new life:

Mixed up with the [...] joy of the occasion, are the many regrets at quitting home, the tears of parting between parent and child, the consciousness of leaving the dearest and kindest friends [...] to encounter [...] cares and troubles with others still untried, and little known—natural feelings which we would not render this chapter mournful by describing.<sup>11</sup>

Surprisingly, Dickens depicts the young couple’s marriage as an ending rather than a beginning, an occasion that prompts mourning for what has been lost, rather than one that stimulates hopes for the future. Dickens highlights Isabella’s ‘regrets’, fears about ‘parting’ from her parents, and anxieties about exchanging the security of her childhood home for the ‘cares and troubles’ of life with her new husband. Dickens’s professed reluctance to render his chapter ‘mournful’ by describing the bittersweet emotions of the bride only serves to draw attention to her doubts. We receive no assurances that the home comforts Isabella cherishes will be carried over into her married life: the young bride anxiously contemplates a future with a man who, as yet, is ‘still untried’.

Edward Stirling’s adaptation of *Pickwick*, titled *The Pickwick Club: or The Age We Live In!*, was first performed on 27 March 1837 at the City of London Theatre. Stirling subsequently became one of Dickens’s most prolific adaptors in the first decade of his

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 343.

career, producing all of his early novels, and the *Christmas Books*, until *The Battle of Life* in 1847.<sup>12</sup> His production of *Pickwick* moves the Christmas wedding to the end of the play and does not unite Isabella and Trundle, but Emily and Snodgrass. Although Dickens's novel does end with Emily and Snodgrass's marriage, their wedding does not take place at Christmas or at Wardle's, but at springtime in Pickwick's new home in Dulwich. However, this resolution had not yet been written when the play was performed, so Stirling was compelled to create his own ending. Presumably he moved the Christmas episode to the end of the play in order to give his production a celebratory resolution. Stirling exploits visually arresting set design, which includes 'Tables spread for supper', festive 'lights', and 'A large Mistletoe [sic] bough hanging in the C', to realise the snug atmosphere the novel evokes.<sup>13</sup> Yet as we have seen, the fact that Dickens's narrator dwells on the bittersweet feelings the festivities arouse adds an undercurrent of sadness to the celebrations. These melancholy digressions are missing from Stirling's adaptation; no attempt is made to translate the narrator's pensive reflections into a contemplative speech. The absence of these discordant notes makes for a joyful scene devoid of Dickens's hints that idyllic moments of domestic bliss are elusive and fragile.

This is largely due to the change in medium, for Dickens's narrator has the ability to reflect on the action and thus convey a split perspective, something tricky to achieve in the theatre. Dickens can enter Isabella's psyche to give us insights into her anxieties about married life, but in Stirling's play, Pickwick's toast to the newly married Emily and Snodgrass gives the audience the comforting assurance of a happy-ever-after:

My friend young Snodgrass, is a very excellent, manly fellow; and his wife I know to be a very amiable and lovely girl, well qualified to make a reasonable man happy [...] So let us drink the health of the young couple, and with them prolonged life, and every blessing.<sup>14</sup>

Although in the novel Pickwick makes a very similar speech at Isabella and Trundle's wedding, the fact that Dickens also dwells on Isabella's fears about leaving her parental home emphasises the fragility of her hopes for domestic happiness. In Stirling's play,

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<sup>12</sup> See Anne Humpherys, 'Victorian Stage Adaptations and Novel Appropriations', in *Charles Dickens in Context*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 39–44, (p. 41).

<sup>13</sup> Edward Stirling, *The Pickwick Club: or, The Age We Live In! A Burletta, in Three Acts* (London: J. Duncombe and Co., 1837), p. 50. Accessed via *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (Proquest Literature Online).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Pickwick speaks in lieu of Dickens's narrator, and his jubilant toast instils confidence that Emily and Snodgrass will enjoy connubial bliss. In one sense, Stirling's audience are more privileged than Dickens's readers: they can *see* the characters, *hear* them speak, and witness the homely scene Dickens can only describe come to life as a tangible, material 'reality'. However, Stirling's need to communicate scenes clearly through visual means and dialogue arguably leaves little room for ambiguity. Pickwick's speech is met with 'Immense cheering' from the company, after which the servants clear the tables and 'musicians enter' to provide accompaniment for the 'cushion dance'. The medley of songs with which the play concludes is clearly designed to stimulate audience involvement and cheerful applause.<sup>15</sup> Stirling's play replaces the ambivalence of Dickens's narrative voice with celebratory stage business. Although outwardly enthusiastic about the virtues of marital life, Dickens simultaneously raises doubts about the happy future his young couple can hope for.

It is important to remember, however, that Stirling's adaptation was shaped by audience expectations of semiotic clarity and domestic closure. His play is a burletta and contains songs and spoken dialogue alongside elements of farce, comedy, and melodrama. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the importance of overcoming temporary threats to the domestic harmony of the imaginary world on stage loomed large in all three genres. As Michael Booth notes, 'romantic love and the happy ending' were dominant stage conventions which 'severely but cosily limit[ed] thematic freedom and boldness of approach'.<sup>16</sup> Guaranteeing Emily and Snodgrass a happy future indicates Stirling's unwillingness to deviate from the tendency (ubiquitous in early Victorian melodrama and comedy alike) to hasten romantic plots to reassuringly idyllic conclusions. Furthermore, the City of London Theatre in which the play was performed regularly staged domestic melodrama, a theatrical genre which addressed social ills but frequently idealised familial bonds and left marital difficulties safely resolved.<sup>17</sup> Stirling's decision to iron out some of the unsettling ambiguities of Dickens's portrait of marriage, then, may indicate reluctance to risk alienating his audience.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 183.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Allingham and Jacqueline Banerjee, 'Theatres in Victorian London', *The Victorian Web*, <<http://www.victorianweb.org/mt/theaters/pva234.html>> [accessed 23 November 2018].

Having said this, Stirling's triumphant ending does sit uneasily with earlier scenes in his play in which he allows Emily to express misgivings about her impending marriage. When Emily's father urges her to name her wedding day, she is unenthusiastic about being forced to 'retire from the scene of action, and follow Mr Snodgrass to the parish church, grow a dutiful wife, study Mrs Glass's Cookery Book, family receipts, winter coughs, and home-made wines'.<sup>18</sup> This lengthy list emphasises the endless cycle of responsibilities with which a 'dutiful wife' is entrusted. Emily clearly regards domestic duties, such as studying 'family receipts' to make herself judicious in the art of household economy, or soothing the 'winter coughs' of the children she will be expected to have, with distaste. Her reluctance to 'follow' Snodgrass to the church implies that she believes marriage will remove her agency and force her into a state of passive obedience. She is also cynical about the notion of the separate spheres and realises that men, being permitted to engage in the 'scene of action' from which women are excluded, have greater freedom and independence.

Yet despite the fact that Stirling permits Emily to interrogate what matrimony will mean for her here, in the final scene her doubts do not resurface, and Stirling reinforces and naturalises the notion (central to domestic ideology's construction of gender roles) that men and women possess complementary qualities that equip them for separate spheres. Thus, Pickwick praises Snodgrass for being 'excellent' and 'manly', while Emily secures herself the more feminine commendations of being 'amiable' and 'lovely'. Dickens attempts to give the reader an awareness of the mixed feelings of Isabella on her wedding day, but Stirling does not allow Emily to voice hers in this final scene. Pickwick does assert that Emily is 'well qualified' to make Snodgrass happy but makes no mention of Snodgrass's ability to do the same for her. However, whether this is because Stirling intends his audience to understand that Emily's love of Snodgrass has eclipsed her doubts about matrimony, or because the melodramatic structure that underpins his burletta does not allow for any notes of scepticism that might darken his glowing portrait, remains unclear.

William Leman Rede's *The Peregrinations of Pickwick* was first performed on 3 April 1837 at London's Adelphi theatre. Alongside its standard repertoire of melodramas and comedies, the Adelphi staged productions of all of Dickens's early works. Like Stirling's

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<sup>18</sup> Stirling, *Pickwick*, p. 42.

play, Rede's adaptation is a burletta that ends with Christmas celebrations at Wardle's and it, too, was staged before the novel's serial run was complete. One reviewer praised the 'judicious curtailments' made to Dickens's plot and the talents of the actors and concluded that the play was 'one of the most amusing pieces which has been produced at this favorite place of amusement'.<sup>19</sup> However, another critic lamented the loss of Dickens's commanding prose and the negative impact this had on characterisation: 'Dickens's power of description is of little use when his dialogue is brought upon the stage. The conversation of his personages is in general dependent for force and effect on the accompanying description'.<sup>20</sup> For this reviewer, losing the narrative voice that enveloped Pickwick's characters rendered them disappointingly flat creations devoid of the 'power' and 'force' they possess in the novel.

Although no marriage takes place in Rede's final scene, the close of his play is as jovial as Stirling's. The Adelphi had a strong reputation for producing comedy and Rede's cheerful ending is certainly an audience-pleaser.<sup>21</sup> Pickwick helps Sam to decorate the house, 'Come, Sam [...] mind how you fix that mistletoe!', before everybody comes together in a 'Country Dance'.<sup>22</sup> Rede even allows Jingle to join in the fun. Dickens ultimately punishes the metamorphic trickster Jingle by incarcerating him in the Fleet prison until he is magnanimously rescued by Pickwick. Although he does secure Pickwick's forgiveness, Jingle is packed off, along with his servant Job Trotter, to embark on a new life in the West Indies, and we are informed that both men have never returned 'to the scenes of their old [...] temptations'.<sup>23</sup> Rede's play, however, ends with what feels like a homecoming for all of the characters, *including* Jingle, who is allowed to participate in the celebrations. When Sam threatens to throw Jingle out, Wardle generously declares, 'It's a day of festivities, we must forget and forgive. Mr Jingle is welcome'.<sup>24</sup> Rede's Wardle openly forgives Jingle for running away with his sister

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<sup>19</sup> [Anon.], untitled article, *The Theatrical Observer*, (5 April 1837), p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> [Anon.], 'The Play-Goer', *The London Dispatch and People's Political and Social Reformer*, 30 (9 April 1837), p. 237.

<sup>21</sup> See Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840–1880* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001), p. 186.

<sup>22</sup> William Leman Rede, *The Peregrinations of Pickwick, A Drama, In Three Acts* (London: W. Strange, 1837) p. 31; p. 32. Accessed via *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (Proquest Literature Online).

<sup>23</sup> Dickens, *Pickwick*, p. 719.

<sup>24</sup> Rede, p. 31.

Rachel (something he does not do in Dickens's text). His benevolence and goodwill make Rede's seasonal festivities even more warmly inclusive than they appear in the novel.

Throughout Dickens's text, Jingle's selfish actions threaten the values of friendship and community upheld by the Pickwickians. This is most evident when Jingle hatches plans for a sham marriage that will give him access to Aunt Rachel's fortune. He succeeds in duping her into eloping with him and, when the two runaways are caught, Wardle's lawyer Perkins is forced to offer Jingle a financial reward in order to induce him to release Aunt Rachel:

"Well, my dear Sir, well," said the little man, still detaining him; "just tell me what *will* do."

"Expensive affair," said Mr. Jingle. "Money out of pocket—posting, nine pounds; licence, three—that's twelve—compensation, a hundred—hundred and twelve—Breach of honour—and loss of the lady—" <sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, Dickens neither expects us to feel too concerned about the stain this incident will leave on Aunt Rachel's virtue nor indignant that she is being treated as a commercial object of exchange. Instead, we are simply invited to laugh at Jingle's rascally antics. However, although this episode is presented in a comical manner, Dickens leaves us in no doubt that Jingle poses a very real threat to familial bonds. Wardle's rage is evidently genuine when he calls Jingle a 'scoundrel' and furiously asks him, 'How dare you drag my sister from my house?' His melodramatic language makes it clear that he is outraged that Jingle has undermined his patriarchal authority over his sister. He is also livid with his sister for 'disgracing [her] family' and exposing their relations to ridicule.<sup>26</sup> Jingle comes perilously close to triggering a permanent estrangement between the two siblings. Although Rede's adaptation retains the elopement episode, in the closing scene of the play, Jingle is transformed into a figure who serves to restore, rather than to erode, family. He relates how he made his fortune by returning a vulnerable child he originally engaged to work for him to a noble family who rewarded him for his trouble. He explains how he 'ask'd its name—examined its marks [...] gypsy gang—see it all—find out the mother—smiles and tears—noble family—happy!'<sup>27</sup> Jingle's little anecdote adds to the mood of domestic contentment in Rede's final scene and reinforces the importance of family. Although Dickens's Jingle is

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<sup>25</sup> Dickens, *Pickwick*, p. 119.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 116.

<sup>27</sup> Rede, p. 31.

made penitent for all of the ruses he pulls on the Pickwickians and is forgiven by Pickwick himself, he remains outside of their circle and is ultimately exiled from them, and England, altogether. Perhaps Rede felt that if he was to justify his decision to welcome Jingle back into the fold, then Jingle needed to prove himself worthy of the privilege. Although Jingle's account of his good deed retains his characteristic insouciance, Rede permits him to atone for the threat he posed to Wardle's family by making him the (albeit inadvertent) healer of another household.

We have seen, then, that the *Pickwick* adaptors made subtle adjustments to Dickens's depictions of familial life, but their productions also omitted some of the characters whose existence serves to comically undermine the middle-class domestic ideal in the novel. Although many of the adaptations retain Dickens's satire of the underhand tactics used in the Eatanswill election, the majority of them opt to discard his equally sardonic portrait of the Potts' marriage. In the novel, Pickwick befriends Mr Pott, the editor of the *Eatanswill Gazette*, at the election and is invited to stay in his home. It is evident that Pott endures a daily struggle to overcome the humiliation of having a formidable wife who rules the roost with an iron fist:

Mr. Pott's domestic circle was limited to himself and his wife. All men whom mighty genius has raised to a proud eminence [...] have usually some little weakness [...] If Mr. Pott had a weakness, it was, perhaps, that he was *rather* too submissive to the somewhat contemptuous control and sway of his wife.<sup>28</sup>

Dickens's sly use of the modifiers 'If' and 'perhaps' leave us in little doubt that Pott is under his wife's thumb, although Pott himself clearly does his best to pretend otherwise. The cheeky allusions to Pott's 'mighty genius' and 'proud eminence' mock his attempts to portray himself as an important and well-respected figure of authority. This delusion is a coping mechanism which allows him to avoid facing up to the unpalatable reality of life as a hen-pecked husband. A similar situation may be found in *Bleak House*, where Mr Bagnet's continual refrain 'Discipline must be maintained' is soon revealed to be his means of maintaining the fiction that he is the patriarchal head of the household. Dickens delights in exposing this as a farce, as Mr Bagnet quickly returns to the comforting prospect of allowing his wife to take charge: 'Old girl [...] Tell him my opinion'.<sup>29</sup> Although cutting characters perceived as superfluous to the plot must have been

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<sup>28</sup> Dickens, *Pickwick*, p. 148.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, Oxford World's Classics edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 502; p. 699.

necessary when adapting a novel with such a large cast, omitting the Potts removes Dickens's attempts to debunk the idealistic vision of the domestic sphere as an idyll of love and harmony.

Tony Weller is another of Dickens's submissive husbands who is browbeaten by his overbearing wife. The chief source of Weller's misery is his wife's constant criticism of him and her misdirected idolisation of the canting hypocrite Mr Stiggins. The 'reverend' Stiggins borrows substantial sums of money from Mrs Weller and directs self-righteous sermons on the evils of drink at the innocent Weller, before helping himself to liberal quantities of rum. Weller continually warns his son to be wary of devious widows who may seek to entrap him in a marriage as miserable as his own, and when Sam asks him why he puts up with his ill treatment he says glumly, 'Cause I'm a married man. Ven you're a married man, Samivel, you'll understand a good many things as you don't understand now'.<sup>30</sup> Dickens eventually makes Mrs Weller repent her unruly behaviour, but only on her deathbed, and we hear her words second-hand as reported by her husband: 'I might ha' made your home more comfortabler [...] if a married 'ooman vishes to be religious she should begin vith dischargin' her dooties at home, and makin' them as is about her cheerful and happy'.<sup>31</sup> On a first reading, Mrs Weller's fate seems to indicate that Dickens is espousing morally conservative attitudes about women's need to submit to being ruled by their husbands; Mrs Weller is forced to atone for her deviance through death. However, Tony Weller's account of his wife's pious contrition for her failure to carry out her wifely 'dooties' doesn't quite ring true, for two reasons. Firstly, Mrs Weller's regrets are related to us in a slyly comical manner through her husband's idiosyncratic cockney vernacular. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, we never actually hear Mrs Weller express her penitence directly. It is possible that Weller's desire to forgive his wife colours his remembrance of what she said to him, or, alternatively, that ventriloquising (and perhaps embroidering) his wife's final words allows him to take his long-awaited revenge.

Frank E. Emson's comedy *The Weller Family* was performed forty years after the publication of Dickens's novel, and eight years after his death, in July 1878 in Aberdeen. Although licensed to London's Gaiety theatre (which more commonly staged operas,

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<sup>30</sup> Dickens, *Pickwick*, p. 333.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 657.



burlesques, and extravaganzas) in August 1878, there is no record of its performance there that month. As its title suggests, this is a partial adaptation that resurrected some of Dickens's most enduringly popular comic characters for a public still mourning the loss of their beloved author. Emson's choice of subject matter indicates that he sought to make the most of the unique place the Wellers had secured in the public imagination. His play focuses on the domestic disasters of Tony Weller's household and retains Dickens's decision to make Mrs Weller contrite for her misconduct. However, unlike Dickens, Emson allows us to hear her apology directly: 'my eyes are opened now [...] I've been very wrong, and ain't been the kind, attentive, dutiful wife I ought to have been, but I'll try and make amends for it'.<sup>32</sup> Mrs Weller emphasises her determination to 'make amends' for failing to provide her husband with a domestic refuge. Dickens does not give the Wellers the opportunity to mend their differences; Emson, by contrast, allows the couple to reform their marriage. In earlier scenes, Emson emphasises the Wellers' confrontational relationship, albeit more to provoke laughs than alarm in the audience. The couple fit the stereotypes of hen-pecked husband and domineering wife respectively, and Weller evidently opts not to hear his wife's insults: at one point she calls him a 'wretch', and he replies cheerfully, 'thank you, my love'.<sup>33</sup> However, in this final triumphant scene all appears forgotten. As Michael Booth notes, many problems in Victorian comedy revolve around 'the disaffection of the wife' who ultimately 'sees the error of her ways', and Emson's play certainly fits this pattern, swiftly resolving the marital discord and transforming Mrs Weller into a submissive wife.<sup>34</sup> Sam and his sweetheart Mary are also happily paired off, and the reassuring surname Emson gives Mary (Hearthstone) attests her suitability as a wife. Tony Weller cements the tranquil mood by assuring the audience that the newly peaceable Weller family can 'copy them fairy sort of books, and live happy ever arter'.<sup>35</sup> Emson's hasty resolution of the Wellers' marital problems moves his play inexorably towards a formulaic restoration of order that rectifies Dickens's avoidance of a clichéd happy ending for the bickering couple.

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<sup>32</sup> Frank E. Emson, *The Weller Family, A Comedy, in One Act, Adapted from the 'Pickwick Papers'* (Saffron Walden: Arthur Boardman, 1878), p. 27. Accessed via *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (Proquest Literature Online).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Booth, 'Comedy and Farce', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. by Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 129–44 (p. 131).

<sup>35</sup> Emson, *The Weller Family*, p. 31.

An examination of the theatrical afterlives of *Pickwick* reveals that dramatists made ideological changes to Dickens's text partially through their faithfulness to the generic conventions of Victorian melodrama and comedy. The pragmatic excision of minor characters like the Potts negated Dickens's attempts to deflate unrealistic fantasies of domestic bliss, while replacing prose description with dialogue quashed the ambivalence of his narrative voice. The semiotic clarity so crucial to melodrama necessitated subtle alterations to Dickens's depictions of hearth and home which erased the reservations lurking beneath his outward enthusiasm for the middle-class domestic ideal. Thus, Stirling presented his audience with a happy wedding free from the doubts that, in the novel, undermine the narrator's apparent enthusiasm for marriage. Stirling and Rede's decision to end their plays with the Christmas celebrations, Rede's choice to portray Jingle as a significantly diminished threat to familial bonds, and Emson's reformation of the Wellers' marriage, in a manner typical to Victorian comedy, all ensured that audiences left the theatre buoyed up by portraits of domestic bliss. These alterations, whilst in themselves not radical, reconfigured Dickens's text as a more open endorsement of domestic virtues.

## **II – *Oliver Twist*: Melodrama and Emotional Authenticity**

Hearth and home values are ostensibly central to the moral vision of Dickens's second novel, *Oliver Twist*. Oliver's wanderings come to an end when he finally gains the home and the family whose conspicuous absence have blighted his early childhood. The disinterested protectiveness of the kindly Brownlow rescues him from a life of poverty and crime and places him securely within the confines of middle-class domesticity. Brownlow's instinctive compassion for a vulnerable child is an antidote both to the grim institutionalism of the workhouse and the grubby self-interest of Fagin. Yet this is not a simple matter of rescue, for Dickens's narrative hinges on a notoriously complex, and fundamentally melodramatic, inheritance plot. Uncovering Oliver's genteel credentials and securing his rightful inheritance restores him to the bourgeois world to which he rightfully belongs. The idyllic rural retreat in which he finds safety, security, and love suggests that Dickens is making a quintessential Victorian gesture, offering the interiorised space of home as a panacea for the alienating and dangerous social world outside its reassuring bounds.

Early reviewers frequently made reference to Oliver's attainment of domestic happiness, and tended to read the novel as a simple tale of good versus evil with a morally gratifying conclusion: 'Oliver, Rose and her husband, Mrs Maylie, Mr Brownlow and his friend Mr Grimwig & c. & c. are all, of course, made superlatively happy; the subordinate characters are also satisfactorily disposed of'.<sup>36</sup> This critic's decision not to bother listing all of the characters who belong to Brownlow's circle indicates a degree of contempt for clichéd happy endings. The vaguely derisive aside ('of course') and allusion to the way in which unfavourable characters are 'satisfactorily disposed of' suggests that Dickens uses well-worn plot devices to reach a tidy conclusion. Contemporary reviewer Richard Ford made a similar observation: 'the bad characters are duly made examples of, while Oliver, with the [...] old ladies and gentlemen, young bride and bridegroom, footmen, apothecary, and so on, all settle down in a country village in one lot.'<sup>37</sup> Ford implies that Dickens eschews ethical complexities in favour of finger-wagging didacticism. In his view, Dickens's decision to reward the virtue of his middle-class characters (and mete out suitable punishments to his criminal villains) makes his tale, in essence, a moral parable. His assertion that Brownlow's community 'all settle down [...] in one lot' also suggests that Dickens offers Oliver domestic closure within one big happy family.

There are, of course, grounds to justify these conclusions: *Twist* has an undeniably melodramatic structure and morally polarised characters designed, in Dickens's own words, to show 'the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last'.<sup>38</sup> At first glance, it seems that Oliver's incorruptible virtue secures him lifelong refuge in a comfortable, middle-class haven of love and harmony. However, Dickens takes pains to demonstrate that no domestic sanctuary, however cosy and secluded, is entirely secure. Dickens's later fiction features characters who go to elaborate lengths to protect themselves from society's evils. In *Great Expectations*, Wemmick chooses to take the old adage 'an Englishman's home is his castle' literally; constructing himself a miniature fortress allows him to maintain the fiction that, once inside, he is safe from the sordid realities of the outer world. However, Oliver does not have the luxury of a moat or drawbridge, and Dickens implies that he can be certain of

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<sup>36</sup> [Anon.], review of *Oliver Twist*, *Dublin University Magazine*, 12 (December 1838), pp. 699–724, (p. 721).

<sup>37</sup> [Richard Ford], from an unsigned review, *Quarterly Review*, 64 (June 1839), pp. 83–102, (p. 99).

<sup>38</sup> Charles Dickens, 'Preface to the Third Edition' (1841), *Oliver Twist*, Oxford World Classics edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), liii.

his own safety only when he remains sequestered within the walls of Brownlow's Pentonville home. He is, after all, kidnapped by Nancy and Sikes almost as soon as he crosses the threshold and, within a matter of minutes, finds himself being 'dragged into a labyrinth of dark narrow courts' and marched back to Fagin's den.<sup>39</sup> Even the Maylies' comfortable 'cottage-room' is worryingly vulnerable to intrusion, as Oliver discovers to his horror:

Good heaven! What was that, which sent the blood tingling to his heart, and deprived him of his voice, and of power to move! There—there—at the window; close before him; so close that he could have almost touched him [...] with his eyes peering into the room [...] there stood the Jew! And beside him [...] were the scowling features of the very man who had accosted him in the inn-yard [...] their look was as firmly impressed upon his memory, as if it had been deeply carved in stone.<sup>40</sup>

In this unashamedly melodramatic incident, Oliver apparently wakes from a doze to find Fagin and Monks leering at him through the window of the Maylies' cottage. Dickens uses a series of hyperbolic exclamations to ramp up the tension to fever pitch before unveiling the source of the child's horror. This delay also emphasises the way in which Oliver's initial struggle to comprehend what he is seeing gives way to a start of horrified recognition. The sinister vigil of Fagin and Monks is disturbing, in one sense, because they materialise out of nowhere and have a spectral, hallucinatory quality. As John Sutherland points out, Oliver's ambiguous state (halfway between sleeping and waking) and the miraculous nature of Fagin and Monks's appearance, has led to critical controversy regarding the child's sensory perceptions and the implausibility of the incident he describes.<sup>41</sup> Yet Dickens suggests that the two men are not merely the product of an overactive imagination. The repetition of 'close [...] so close', stresses both their physical proximity to Oliver and their sinister and predatory nature. Their features appear to have been 'deeply carved in stone', an image that, rather ominously, brings to mind gargoyles, effigies, and the frozen hideousness of a death mask. The bodily sensations Oliver experiences (unpleasant 'tingling', an inability to speak, paralysed limbs) are the psychosomatic manifestation of his mental anguish. This scene's peculiarly vivid,

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<sup>39</sup> Dickens, *Twist*, p. 118.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>41</sup> See John Sutherland, *Is Heathcliff a Murderer? Great Puzzles in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Fiction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 35–45. Sutherland provides a useful overview of critical responses to the ambiguities present in this scene.

nightmarish quality anticipates sensation fiction of the 1860s and reminds readers of how easily a domestic sanctum can be invaded and boundaries of privacy transgressed.

It is important to remember, however, that Oliver is not the only character in the novel who struggles to find a safe refuge. Oliver's gentle, almost saintly friend Dick, an early prototype in a long line of Dickensian child martyrs, eventually wastes away due to the malnourishment and neglect he suffers at the hands of baby farm matron Mrs Mann. Dick's premature death warns us to resist allowing our hero's good fortune to lull us into a state of complacency for, without Brownlow's intervention, Oliver could easily have met a similar fate. Nancy, too, possesses innate moral goodness which cannot save her from the brutal world in which she lives. Unlike Oliver, Dick and Nancy are destined to remain threshold figures. All three are victims of an alienating social world but Dick and Nancy cannot be absorbed into domestic culture. Nancy's hopes of accepting Brownlow's offer to give her 'a home in some foreign country where I could end my days in [...] peace' are battered out of her by Sikes.<sup>42</sup> She receives no reward for her courageous decision to thwart Fagin and Monks's scheme to cheat Oliver out of his inheritance. Her heroic sacrifice secures Oliver a domestic sanctuary but, in the end, the only refuge Dickens can offer Nancy is an early grave.

The fates that meet Dick and Nancy are a poignant reminder, then, that the majority of those unlucky enough to be born into poverty do not chance upon a magnanimous benefactor with the means to alleviate their suffering. However, the novel also includes more explicit social critique which works to undercut Dickens's apparent enthusiasm for hearth and home values. As Catherine Waters notes, Dickens is decidedly wary of the way in which the 'rhetoric' of domestic ideology can be perverted to mask or actively facilitate 'institutional abuse'.<sup>43</sup> Before he enters the workhouse at the age of nine, Oliver is brought up on a baby farm 'under the parental superintendence of an elderly female'.<sup>44</sup> The stiff, formal language used here may appear to imply that Mrs Mann takes her 'parental' duties seriously, but it quickly becomes clear that there are two elements of irony at work here. Firstly, Dickens adopts the language of officialdom only to expose the fact that Mrs Mann is shamefully neglectful of her responsibilities; children in her

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<sup>42</sup> Dickens, *Twist*, p. 383.

<sup>43</sup> Catherine Waters, *Dickens and the Politics of the Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 33.

<sup>44</sup> Dickens, *Twist*, p. 4.

care have frequently ‘sickened from want and cold [...] or got half-smothered by accident’.<sup>45</sup> Secondly, the phrase ‘parental superintendence’ is, quite deliberately, an oxymoron, for parental qualities must include empathy, warmth, and spontaneous affection and Mrs Mann’s ‘superintendence’ reeks of the punitive grimness of institutionalism. Like the avaricious, brutal schoolmaster Squeers in *Nickleby*, Mrs Mann exploits vulnerable children for profit and ‘appropriate[s] the greater part of the weekly stipend’ she receives for their upkeep ‘to her own use’.<sup>46</sup> When Bumble makes enquiries about Oliver, she rapturously exclaims, ‘Bless him!’ while simultaneously ‘inflaming her left eye with the corner of her apron’.<sup>47</sup> Dickens leaves us in no doubt that her benign and motherly demeanour is a performance. Unsurprisingly, Bumble does not see through this charade, probably because he, too, pretends that the vulnerable children in his care have benevolent surrogate parents. When the malicious chimney sweep Gamfield visits the workhouse with the intention of enlisting Oliver as his apprentice, Bumble pompously tells the terrified child:

The kind and blessed gentlemen which is so many parents to you, Oliver [...] are a-going to ’prentice you: and to set you up in life [...] although the expense to the parish is three pound ten! —three pound ten, Oliver! [...] and all for a naughty orphan which nobody can’t love.<sup>48</sup>

While Mrs Mann’s crocodile tears allow her successfully to mimic maternal affection, Bumble’s bombastic speech portrays the workhouse as a benevolently paternal institution. Bumble’s assertion that the board are ‘so many’ parents to Oliver implies that orphans are lucky enough to have multiple benefactors looking out for their welfare. He pretends that Oliver’s surrogate parents will ‘set [him] up’ in a profitable profession, when in reality they plan to condemn him to a bleak future as the brutal Gamfield’s miserable drudge. He also tells Oliver in no uncertain terms that he is nothing more than a burden on the parish and leads him to believe that he is undeserving of love. It is this final thrust of cruelty that makes Bumble’s sham parenting particularly galling.

We have seen, then, that Dickens uses the early chapters of *Twist* to attack the way in which institutions responsible for the welfare of vulnerable children pervert domestic ideology for their own ends. However, much of this satirical bite is absent from Victorian

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

theatrical adaptations of Dickens's tale, perhaps in part because playwrights tended to erase significant chunks of the novel's opening. Although it was typical, and indeed necessary, for dramatic adaptors to prune complex plots, some playwrights made radical cuts which transformed both the structure and the ethical thrust of Dickens's narrative. One anonymously authored adaptation of *Twist* was described as 'A Sketch in Five Scenes', which suggests that the dramatist made a conscious decision to create a partial adaptation of the novel. At the opening of this unpublished play, Oliver has already been taken in by Brownlow and Brownlow is puzzling over a letter he has received from Nancy offering 'information that may be the means of saving [Oliver] from further trouble'.<sup>49</sup> This incident prompts Oliver's kindly benefactor to ask him about his past, but although the boy gives a brief account of his time in the workhouse, and his apprenticeship to Sowerberry, his speech does not so much highlight institutional failings as affirm the redemptive power of love: 'I was born in the workhouse [...] Who my mother was I don't know – but I pictured her in my mind as an Angel because my heart teaches me to love her so'.<sup>50</sup> This play bears few traces of Dickens's scathing attack on the New Poor Law and the devious means by which Oliver's surrogate families mask their brutality. In the novel, Mrs Mann's histrionic display of motherly feeling and Bumble's show of benevolence suggest that it is not always possible to distinguish between genuine warmth and simulated emotions; affection can be dangerous when feigned, a convenient smokescreen for cruelty and abuse. This dramatist reduces Oliver's miserable childhood to a memory and reassures the audience that the boy's sense of filial duty has not been destroyed by his loveless upbringing. Oliver's instinctive need to sanctify his mother's image suggests that familial love is both natural and inevitable.

Harwood Cooper's *Oliver Twist; Or, The Parish Boy's Progress* also cuts Oliver's early years on Mrs Mann's baby farm and dispenses with the workhouse scenes, opening the action with Oliver's long trudge to London.<sup>51</sup> Oliver's forlorn lament, 'Ah me! I am

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<sup>49</sup> [Anon.], *Oliver Twist, A Sketch in Five Scenes* (unpublished, 18??), p. 2. Item no. 059830300, PETT MSS.O.41, Pettingell Collection, Special Collections and Archives, University of Kent. The theatre in which the play was first performed, and the performance dates, are unknown, but the inclusion of Nancy's murder indicates that it was staged after Dickens's tale was published as a three-decker novel in November 1838.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Harwood Cooper, *Oliver Twist; Or, The Parish Boy's Progress, A Domestic Drama, In Three Acts. Dramatised from 'Boz's' Celebrated Work of that Name* (London: H. Beale, n.d.). Item no. 059082200, PETT BND.126 (3), Pettingell Collection, Special Collections and Archives, University of Kent. Cooper's play was first performed in the City of London theatre. The performance dates are unknown,

so tired, I think I could lay down and die', is clearly designed to elicit the audience's sympathy, but prioritising pathos de-politicises his suffering.<sup>52</sup> Although Dickens also seeks to secure our compassion for his orphan protagonist, he uses Oliver's fate to demonstrate that Bumble's callous pomposity, the languid inertia of the workhouse Board, and the negligence of Mrs Mann form the rotten core of an entire system predicated on the assumption that poverty is a crime. The simple expression of grief which Cooper gives Oliver seems calculated to inspire pity rather than anger. Having said this, Cooper's play is not wholly devoid of social critique: as Oliver wanders towards London, he expresses fears that asking for charity will secure him a cell in jail. Cooper may not replicate Dickens's sustained attack on institutional failings, but he does highlight the brutality of a society which draws a stark boundary between the deserving and the undeserving poor and regards a vulnerable child's plea for help as proof of his delinquency.

George Almar's *Oliver Twist* made its debut on 19 November 1838 at the Royal Surrey Theatre, and quickly became one of the most popular and enduring adaptations of Dickens's novel. Despite being described as a 'Serio-Comic Burletta', it has a strongly melodramatic flavour. Its success was, no doubt, partially due to the fact that it was one of the first dramatisations to appear after the novel had been published in three volumes; unlike earlier adaptors, Almar had a complete story from which to draw material. One reviewer commented on the exhilarating experience of seeing Dickens's characters 'in the flesh':

We no more doubt of their existence than if we had [...] conversed with them [...] This was made curiously manifest on the appearance of the characters at the Adelphi and Surrey theatres. All classes instantly recognised them; and boxes, pit, and gallery exclaimed "That's such a one, and that's such another", through the whole of the *dramatis personae* of *Oliver Twist* [...] This is true fame.<sup>53</sup>

This critic suggests that Almar's adaptation brings Dickens's imaginary world to life; the actors' performances are so convincing that spectators believe the characters have a real 'existence' outside the story they inhabit. The reviewer's account of the excited reaction

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but again, the fact that Nancy's murder is included suggests that it was staged after the novel was published in three volumes.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> [Anon.], from an unsigned review of *Oliver Twist*, *Literary Gazette*, (24 November 1838), in *Heritage*, p. 79.



that unites people throughout the auditorium indicates a belief in the theatre's power to dissolve boundaries between social classes, a conviction shared by Dickens. The animated response the critic describes may have been generated, in part, by the production's stalwart cast of actors. The comedian W. Smith played Bumble, and E. F. Saville, who appeared as Sikes, was accustomed to performing in melodramas. Just a year after acting in Almar's play, Saville took the title role in the Surrey's 1839 adaptation of William Harrison Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard*, the Newgate novel to which *Twist* was frequently anxiously compared. It is also worth noting that Almar made the relatively unusual decision to cast a boy (identified in the cast list as Master Owen) as Oliver. The part was commonly taken by an actress, a convention which irked Dickens. In a letter to actor-manager Frederick Yates, he grumbled that if a female *was* chosen to play Oliver, she 'should be a very sharp girl of thirteen or fourteen – not more, or the character would be an absurdity'.<sup>54</sup> Despite never having seen Mrs Honnor—who was at that time playing Oliver in a production at Sadler's Wells—Dickens complained that 'from the mere circumstance of her being a Mrs, I should say at once that she was "a many sizes too large" for Oliver Twist'.<sup>55</sup> The urge to take back creative control of his own story and 'knock any other attempts [...] out of the field' even prompted Dickens to propose dramatising *Twist* himself (in collaboration with William Charles Macready and then with Yates) but this project never got off the ground.<sup>56</sup>

Almar's play was wholly appropriate fare for the stage on which it appeared. A phenomenally successful run of Douglas Jerrold's *Black-Eyed Susan* (1829) at the Surrey points to the theatre's emphasis on nautical melodrama, but domestic melodrama also featured regularly in its repertoire.<sup>57</sup> Some years after *Twist*, the theatre staged another Dickens adaptation: C. Z. Barnett's *A Christmas Carol: or, The Miser's Warning* (1844). Almar, too, would make another attempt at dramatising Dickens, for in 1850 he produced a theatrical adaptation of *David Copperfield* under the slightly eccentric title *Born With a Caul: Or; the Personal Adventures of David Copperfield*. It seems Dickens actually attended Almar's production of *Twist*, although if we accept Forster's account of the event he did not see very much of it, as 'in the middle of the first scene he laid himself

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<sup>54</sup> Charles Dickens, Letter to Frederick Yates, [?Mid-March 1838], in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Madeline House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson, 12 Vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965–2002), Vol. 1, p. 388.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Davis and Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience*, p. 23.

down upon the floor in the corner of the box and never rose from it until the drop-scene fell'.<sup>58</sup> The idea that Dickens was so traumatised by the performance that he was forced to stop watching to avoid further distress is both irresistibly comic and ironic, for lying prostrate on the ground was surely an eccentric manner in which to express disapproval, a highly theatrical response to the melodramatic action being played out on the stage. Even if Forster does exaggerate Dickens's anguish, it seems safe to assume that he was unenthusiastic about the play, perhaps because of the substantial cuts needed to make production feasible. Like Cooper, Almar opts not to depict Oliver's early childhood with Mrs Mann or his time in the workhouse. However, he does attack the inadequacy of outdoor relief by extending the scene in which Sowerberry and Oliver visit the home of a poor family in order to measure a woman's corpse for a coffin. The scene includes instructions for the visual appearance of the set and the positioning of the actors, and Almar reproduces Dickens's prose description almost verbatim:

[...] the grate is without a fire, but a man sits mechanically crouching over the empty stove [...] there are some ragged children in another corner, and in a small recess opposite the door there lies upon the ground something covered with an old blanket.<sup>59</sup>

Paradoxically, these details evoke the absence, rather than the presence, of household things. The miserable room in which the family live not only lacks the cosy home comforts Dickens always prizes, but basic necessities: the stove is 'empty' because the family have nothing to eat, the hearth is grimly devoid of the cheerful flames that should crackle merrily therein, and the children are 'ragged', a term that evokes both their tattered clothes and their emaciated bodies. Both Dickens and Almar depict the husband of the dead woman angrily attempting to prevent Sowerberry from getting close to her body before bursting into tears and revealing that his wife starved to death. Dickens goes on to inform us that the man 'roll[s] grovelling upon the floor: his eyes fixed: and the foam gushing from his lips'.<sup>60</sup> This visceral, bodily description suggests that the man is physically overpowered by his own grief and fury. He is unable to articulate his feelings through speech; his mental torment can be expressed only through the writhing movements of his ravaged body. Yet in Almar's play, internalised rage becomes

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<sup>58</sup> John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1872–4), ed. by A. J. Hoppé, 2 vols (London: J. M. Dent, 1966), Vol 1., p. 100.

<sup>59</sup> George Almar, *Oliver Twist, A Serio-Comic Burletta, in Three Acts* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1839), p. 13. Accessed via *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (Proquest Literature Online).

<sup>60</sup> Dickens, *Twist*, p. 39.

explosive violence, as the man ‘snatches a poker’ and ‘raises it to strike Sowerberry’ when the undertaker callously refuses his pleas for food.<sup>61</sup> Fortunately for Sowerberry, the man is distracted by the long-awaited appearance of a ‘Relieving Officer’, with a meagre portion of bread for his family. His desperation is evident as he ‘pounces upon the contents of the basket’ and ‘tears a loaf into several pieces’.<sup>62</sup> This incident does not occur in the novel. Dickens suggests that the man’s wrath is self-consuming, but in Almar’s play, his anger is directed outwards, an instinctive and violent response to Sowerberry’s complacent indifference. Almar’s stage directions indicate that the children are growing equally frenzied with hunger, as they ‘eagerly pick [the pieces of bread] up [...] kneeling and bursting into an hysterical laugh’.<sup>63</sup> The fact that the next scene opens with Sowerberry casually remarking to Oliver that ‘I think this must be about dinner time’ suggests that he is unabashed by the contrast between the poor family’s slow starvation and his own ample meals.<sup>64</sup> Almar clearly intends his audience to recognise and condemn the injustice at work here.

In Dickens’s novel, the family are also portrayed as the victims of a woefully inadequate welfare system. The man gives us a distraught account of his wife’s death that emphasises his own helplessness: ‘I begged for her in the streets: and they sent me to prison. When I came back, she was dying; and all the blood in my heart has dried up, for they starved her to death!’<sup>65</sup> The fact that the man is incarcerated for begging makes it clear that he is trapped within a brutal system that equates poverty with criminality, while the image of his bloodless heart suggests that, like his wife, he is inexorably destined for death. At his wife’s funeral, he accepts his fate with quiet resignation, waiting ‘patiently’ for the clergyman to arrive. Dickens informs us that he had ‘never once moved, since he had taken his station by the grave side’, and when he does finally get up he almost immediately ‘f[alls] down in a swoon’ in a manner that recalls his earlier collapse and highlights his physical frailty.<sup>66</sup> In Almar’s play, the man is a notably more threatening figure. Although he does not actually strike Sowerberry with the poker, the attack is only narrowly avoided and the way in which he subsequently ‘tears’ at the bread suggests that his violence has merely been displaced. Almar’s children, too, are both pitiful and

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<sup>61</sup> Almar, p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Dickens, *Twist*, p. 39.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, pp. 40–41.

frightening, and anticipate the emblematic figures of Ignorance and Want that Dickens would later include in *A Christmas Carol*. Like the ‘meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish children’ that lurk under the robe of the Ghost of Christmas Present, Almar’s children are ferocious with famine, subject to a system of ‘relief’ which ignores their most primal bodily needs.<sup>67</sup> Conversely, Dickens’s children are ‘terrified’ rather than terrifying, ultimately unable to do anything but ‘cr[y] bitterly’ over their plight.<sup>68</sup>

It might be said that developing the confrontation between the poor man and Sowerberry is merely a means of stimulating audience excitement. However, the changes Almar makes also arguably intensify the political radicalism of this portion of the novel. In Julie Sanders’s view, appropriations differ from adaptations in the extent to which they deviate from their sources. This section of Almar’s play meets Sanders’s criteria, for it extends and embellishes Dickens’s scene as well as translating it into the signifying systems of a different medium and genre.<sup>69</sup> The material Almar adds works to re-frame our thinking about Dickens’s text, transforming a spectacle of suffering (in which the poor man is essentially a martyr figure) into a more pressing threat to the social order. Drawing attention to the injustices endured by the poor was highly topical. The radical demands of the People’s Charter (launched in May 1838, just months before the play was staged) ignited fears about working-class rebellion that this scene tacitly addresses, although Almar stops short of depicting an explicit overthrow of the status quo. Nevertheless, he undermines middle-class insistence on the protective function of the domestic sphere by confronting his audience with the unpalatable truth that poverty, misery, and death have no respect for boundaries. For this man’s family, the problems rife on London’s streets live within the walls of his home.

Dickens’s novel also probes, and threatens to unravel, some of the principal doctrines of domestic ideology. In *Twist*, it is not only characters in official positions of power who perform familial roles: Fagin, whose criminality clearly places him outside the law, is remarkably adept at performing domestic offices that give his den an air of grimy cosiness. The very first time he meets Oliver he is intent on ‘dividing his attention between the clothes horse and the frying pan’ and assumes the bonhomie of a jolly uncle

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<sup>67</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘A Christmas Carol’, in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*, Oxford World Classics edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 61.

<sup>68</sup> Dickens, *Twist*, p. 39.

<sup>69</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 28.

as he tells stories and toasts sausages by the fire.<sup>70</sup> When Oliver is kidnapped by Nancy and Sikes and forcibly returned to Fagin's clutches, the old man pretends to offer Oliver a generous welcome:

Delighted to see you looking so well, my dear [...] The Artful shall give you another suit [...] for fear you should spoil that Sunday one. Why didn't you write, my dear, and say you were coming? We'd have got something warm for supper.<sup>71</sup>

The good-natured pleasantries Fagin bestows on the terrified Oliver suggests that he is deliberately parroting the social mores of the bourgeois domain in which his charge found temporary respite from the criminal underworld. Fagin is fully capable of imitating the cordial hospitality of a generous host but he also emulates, with consummate skill, the kindly and paternal demeanour of Oliver's gentlemanly benefactor Brownlow. The wily old man clearly derives pleasure from appropriating, and gleefully mocking, the conventions of a middle-class Christian social world whose inhabitants believe it is necessary to change into 'Sunday' suits and attend church.

It is also worth noting that Bill Sikes pretends to be Oliver's father to avoid arousing suspicion when they make the journey to Chertsey to rob the Maylies. Even Nancy's kidnap of Oliver is achieved through an elaborately staged performance of familial affection, as she convincingly steps into the role of a distraught and morally upright sister attempting to reunite a prodigal son with his parents.<sup>72</sup> Nancy affects to be overwhelmed with relief when she sees Oliver and chastises him for making her 'suffer sich distress [...]!'<sup>73</sup> She goes on to tell a rapt crowd of onlookers that Oliver 'ran away, near a month ago, from his parents, who are hard-working and respectable people' and urges them to 'Make him come home [...] or he'll kill his dear mother and father and break my heart!'<sup>74</sup> Yet Nancy not only successfully mimics sisterly love for Oliver, for in putting on 'a clean white apron' and 'straw bonnet', she also dons the decorous femininity which is ostensibly the sole preserve of women of stainless virtue. To complete the effect, Fagin gives her a 'little covered basket', and a door key, which Sikes pronounces 'real and genivine like'.<sup>75</sup> In Dickens's fiction, the door key is generally a peculiarly sacred object

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<sup>70</sup> Dickens, *Twist*, p. 63.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 123.

<sup>72</sup> See Waters, *Politics*, pp. 33–35.

<sup>73</sup> Dickens, *Twist*, p. 114.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p. 117.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p. 98.

with which only the most domestic women can be entrusted (most notably Esther Summerson and Agnes Wickfield). The fact that Nancy steps easily into her role suggests that demure womanliness and sisterly affection are not innate, but merely an external veneer that, like a costume, can be put on and cast off as the situation demands.

Almar's adaptation includes this incident but makes an important modification to Nancy's behaviour in the aftermath of Oliver's return to Fagin's den. In both the novel and the play, Nancy assumes an air of indifference when Fagin and Sikes discuss using Oliver to assist with the Chertsey robbery. Dickens allows Nancy to express her anguish once she is alone with Oliver, as she fretfully 'rock[s] herself to and fro' and 'beat[s] her hands upon her knees'. Yet although these melodramatic bodily gestures seem to suggest cathartic emotional release, Nancy refuses to tell Oliver what has distressed her. She simply says 'I don't know what comes over me sometimes [...] it's this damp, dirty room I think', before taking him to Sikes as she has been instructed.<sup>76</sup> Although Dickens makes it clear that Nancy's fears for her own safety give her little choice but to comply with Sikes's request, in Almar's play, she is arguably less culpable, as Sikes collects Oliver from Fagin himself while the boy is sleeping. Nancy requests to be allowed to look at him:

*Nan:* Stop, Bill, before he goes, let me see him.  
(*Sikes stops for a moment---she gazes in the face of Oliver then bursts into tears.*)  
*Fag:* Eh! why do you cry my tear [sic].  
*Nan:* I had a brother about his age that look'd like him in his coffin.<sup>77</sup>

Dickens gives us little information about Nancy's upbringing. We learn nothing of her parents, or siblings (if she ever had any). The only thing we know for certain is that she 'thieved' for Fagin when she was half as old as Oliver, which suggests that she was orphaned in her infancy and that Fagin has been her guardian from the age of five.<sup>78</sup> Nancy's anguished declaration that 'the cold, wet, dirty streets are my home' indicates that she has never known a family.<sup>79</sup> Almar, however, gives her a brother, and suggests that looking at Oliver's innocent face reignites in Nancy the love she once felt for her own sibling. Dickens's Nancy does not explain why she reacts so violently to the prospect

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 158.

<sup>77</sup> Almar, p. 39.

<sup>78</sup> Dickens, *Twist*, p. 127.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p. 128.

of Oliver becoming a thief, but in Almar's play her emotional response is made legible for the audience. This is entirely in keeping with melodrama's persistent drive towards clarification and the communication of mental states through speech or bodily gesture. However, Nancy's brief but heartfelt expression of grief for her brother also highlights what Michael Booth describes as melodrama's 'idealistic dramatization of the family bond deemed so important in Victorian domestic life'.<sup>80</sup> On one level Almar offers his audience the 'authentic' feelings required to satisfy the *aesthetic* conventions of stage melodrama, but he simultaneously embraces his genre's *ideological* insistence on the importance of familial love. He also taps into the ideology of emotion central to Victorian middle-class domestic rhetoric. The notion of womanly tenderness is key here, for Almar implies that, despite her fallen status, Nancy has retained her feminine capacity for love. The way in which Nancy instinctively transfers this love to Oliver reinforces the idea that woman's impulse to nurture can never be quashed. However, it also suggests that Almar is allowing Nancy to make amends for her false display of familial feeling and reassuring his audience that the sisterly affection she feigned in order to capture Oliver has developed into something completely genuine. In affirming the authenticity and incorruptibility of the 'natural' affections Dickens regarded with profound suspicion, Almar erases the doubts that, in the text, problematise the possibility of 'real' familial love.

In Dickens's novel, sham domestic affections are the norm. As we have already seen, Fagin, Nancy, and Mrs Mann are all adept at performing familial roles. Bumble puts on a show of paternal benevolence in his dealings with Oliver, but he also pretends to worship Mrs Corney to dupe her into agreeing to marry him. Mrs Corney may be fooled by his behaviour, but the reader is left in no doubt that he wishes to wed her only because he believes that she can provide him with the home comforts he craves:

"The board allow you coals, don't they Mrs Corney?" inquired the beadle, affectionately pressing her hand.  
 "And candles," replied Mrs Corney, slightly returning the pressure.  
 "Coals, candles, and house-rent free," said Mr Bumble. "Oh, Mrs Corney, what a Angel you are!"<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Booth, *Victorian Age*, p. 155.

<sup>81</sup> Dickens, *Twist*, p. 210.

As this little exchange makes clear, Bumble uses the conventional behaviour of a lover to disguise his blatant attempts to ascertain if Mrs Corney's worldly circumstances are tempting enough to induce him to make a proposal. The relationship between Bumble and Mrs Corney was chosen as the subject for Frank Emson's play, *Bumble's Courtship*, which was published in 1874. This piece has a similar flavour to Emson's *Pickwick* adaptation: both dramas are one-act, domestic comedies from the 1870s that focus on marriage. The set details Emson provides in *Bumble's Courtship* reflect growing demand for increasingly intricate representations of domesticity on the stage:

[...] small kettle, tea tray, table cloth, small round table, toast for two, sugar basin, two cups and saucers [...] two plates [...] tea caddy, with tea inside, two or three spoons [...] slop basin, milk jug, sugar, teapot, sugar tongs [...] four chairs, one an easy one; sham or real cat; chest of drawers to open; a cupboard to open [...] fire-place with fire, and kettle on hob (steaming) [...] one or two small pictures on walls.<sup>82</sup>

The extraordinary level of detail given here (right down to the steam emitting from the kettle) indicates that Emson was attempting to emulate the naturalism of the 'cup-and-saucer' dramas made popular by dramatist and stage director Tom Robertson in the 1860s. An accumulation of household objects gives Emson's set a snugly domestic feel and seems designed to capture the verisimilitude of daily life. Interestingly, Dickens's depiction of Mrs Corney's home comforts is remarkably restrained by comparison, as he mentions only 'a small round table [...] furnished with all necessary materials for the most grateful meal' and a 'fire-place, where the smallest of all possible kettles was singing a small song'.<sup>83</sup>

Emson retains Dickens's satirical exposure of the selfish and thoroughly unromantic economic considerations that prompt Bumble to propose, including the memorable moment he uses Mrs Corney's temporary absence from the room as an opportunity to take an 'exact inventory' of her possessions.<sup>84</sup> Despite this, his play ends before the couple get married, which means that we never witness how quickly Bumble's dreams of a contented old age with the comfortably off, and apparently pliant, Mrs Corney collapse. Dickens gives us a gleeful account of Bumble's humiliation as it dawns on him

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<sup>82</sup> Frank E. Emson, *Bumble's Courtship, From Dickens's Oliver Twist. A Comic Interlude, In One Act* (London: Samuel French & Son, 1874), p. 2. The theatre in which the play was performed, and the performance dates, are unknown. Accessed via *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (Proquest Literature Online).

<sup>83</sup> Dickens, *Twist*, p. 177.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, p. 185.



that the affectionate demeanour his wife displayed in their courtship was never any more real than his own; Mrs Corney's matronly charm quickly morphs into contempt for her husband once they are married, and when Bumble makes a feeble attempt to tell her that it is her duty to obey him, she resorts to physical force to show him who is in charge:

the expert lady, clasping him tightly round the throat with one hand, inflicted a shower of blows [...] with the other. This done, she created a little variety by scratching his face, and tearing his hair off; and [...] pushed him over a chair.<sup>85</sup>

This passage is punctuated by visceral bursts of violence ('clasping', 'scratching', 'tearing', pushing) as the beadle thoroughly accustomed to bullying paupers gets a taste of his own medicine. Yet this is only a hint of the misfortune that is to fall upon the hapless Bumble. At the novel's close, we are mischievously informed that the couple 'became paupers in the very same workhouse in which they had once lorded it over others' and that Bumble 'has not even spirits to be thankful for being separated from his wife'.<sup>86</sup> It is not difficult to detect a gleam of triumph in Dickens's account of the couple's downfall: this is a cruel but satisfying moment of justice. By contrast, Emson's play ends with a cheerful Bumble singing the praises of connubial bliss:

If there happens to be any bashful gentleman present this evening, who is thinking of making an offer of matrimony to some fair lady, and doesn't quite know the way to set about it, I hope the manner in which my future partner here (looking lovingly at Mrs Corney) [...] and myself have settled our affairs will have given him a practical lesson.<sup>87</sup>

Ostensibly the actor playing Bumble remains in his role here, but in directly addressing the audience he also steps out of character, good-naturedly entreating his fellow men to renounce their bachelor ways. This parting speech may be light-hearted in tone, but Bumble expresses hopes that his own decision to embrace matrimony will have given the spectators of the play a 'practical lesson'. This phrase has pedagogical undertones and unconsciously points to the fact that the play's tranquil ending works to promote heterosexual marriage as the natural and desirable route to happiness. The blurring between the fictional world on the stage and 'real' life continues as Bumble announces that he and Mrs Corney

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 286–87.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 438.

<sup>87</sup> Emson, *Bumble's Courtship*, p.11.

hope to be married this day fortnight at eleven o'clock at -- (name some church close at hand) Church, and if any lady or gentleman would like to attend the ceremony and afterwards honour us with coming to breakfast, we shall be very happy to see them.<sup>88</sup>

Clearly, Emson sought to give each performance a local flavour and affirm the transitory bond between the actors and their audience. Presumably no such bogus ceremony ever took place, but the warm invitation extended was designed to make spectators feel part of an extended family. Dickens allows us to witness the Bumbles' downward spiral, as a happy courtship gives way to petty squabbling and, finally, to pauperism and misery. Emson does initially suggest that Bumble's affection is insincere. Yet, like Almar, he ultimately converts false affection into genuine feelings. His play ends with a jubilant and celebratory farewell from a happy couple frozen in a state of contentment for posterity.

It might be said, of course, that this resolution is inevitable: Emson's adaptation is intended as a one-act, comic episode that depicts the Bumbles' courtship rather than their marriage. Nevertheless, in full-length adaptations of *Twist* we find a similar story, with endings that work hard to enforce the idea of domestic closure. C. Z. Barnett's three-act melodrama, *Oliver Twist; Or, The Parish Boy's Progress*, was first performed at the Pavilion Theatre, London, on 21 May 1838. Nautical melodrama dominated the Pavilion's theatrical repertoire in the 1820s and 1830s, although Shakespeare, pantomime, and plays with a local flavour were also popular.<sup>89</sup> The first performance of Barnett's play took place before *Twist*'s serial run was complete. However, T. H. Lacy's published edition of the play includes Nancy's murder and the accidental death of Sikes, which suggests that it must have been modified after Dickens revealed his ending. In this version, Barnett lets the curtain fall almost immediately after Sikes's death. The plot is anxiously hastened to a conclusion as Brownlow insists that a satisfactory outcome has been achieved: 'The murderer has met his death, hung by his own bloodthirsty hands, and poor Nancy is avenged. Oliver [...] your trials are over; your enemies vanquished, and a happy life is opening before you'.<sup>90</sup> This triumphant speech suggests that Barnett's play is straining for closure in a manner characteristic of melodrama. The hyperbolic language used—'bloodthirsty', 'avenged', 'enemies', 'vanquished'—is also typical of

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Davis and Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience*, pp. 67–68.

<sup>90</sup> C. Z. Barnett, *Oliver Twist; Or, The Parish Boy's Progress, A Drama, In Three Acts* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1857?), p. 47.

the genre's intense emotional fervour. Although Brownlow makes no such pronouncement in the novel, Barnett arguably follows Dickens's lead in making him an agent of justice, for the novel supplants official forms of law enforcement with the instinctive decency of Brownlow, Grimwig, Losberne, and the Maylies. It is Brownlow who organises and carries out the interrogation of Monks. He also takes part in the pursuit of Sikes and makes it his business to ensure that the Bumbles are dismissed from their posts. As Waters points out, this affirms the 'sanctity of the middle-class family' and Dickens's 'distrust of state institutions'; in the end it is middle-class morality that brings the novel's villains to justice.<sup>91</sup> However, Barnett goes one step further than Dickens in imposing stock roles on his characters and splitting them unambiguously into heroes and villains. The speech Barnett gives Brownlow suggests that he is being used as a substitute for the novel's narrator. Brownlow not only sums up events but assigns them meaning: the implication is that the evil Sikes gets what he deserves, while our hero's moral virtue earns him the right to a bright future. His 'trials' are safely 'over', leaving him free to enjoy the prospect of a 'happy life'.

Barnett was not the only playwright to give Brownlow the honour of assuring the audience that a morally gratifying conclusion had been reached. Another adaptation of *Twist* (which was never published and which today exists only in a series of character parts) features a strikingly similar speech: 'We have seen the end of all our troubles. Heaven has punished the guilty—we will go home together—where is he? We only want—Oliver Twist if you please'.<sup>92</sup> Again, the emphasis is on domestic closure, as Brownlow rejoices in exchanging worldly 'troubles' for the more comforting prospect of going 'home together'. Like Barnett, this playwright assures the audience that Dickens's criminal villains have been punished; the only difference is that, in this instance, punishment is portrayed as a form of divine retribution. The phrase 'We only want—Oliver Twist if you please' suggests that Oliver is being summoned into the frame of a domestic tableau; Brownlow seems to be calling out instructions for a family portrait.

Nevertheless, not all of the plays concluded with a mood of domestic contentment. The other anonymously authored version of *Twist* which I have already discussed seeks

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<sup>91</sup> Waters, *Politics*, p. 36.

<sup>92</sup> [Anon.], *Oliver Twist*, (unpublished, n.d.). A collection of character parts. From *Brownlow*, p. 7. Item no. 059890900, PETT PAR.32, Pettingell Collection, Special Collections and Archives, University of Kent. The theatre in which the play was first produced, and the performance dates, are unknown.

to elicit tears, rather than smiles, from the audience, for it ends with Oliver discovering Nancy's dead body, reverently kissing her hand, and commenting sadly that 'she was one of the best friends of poor Oliver Twist'.<sup>93</sup> This is clearly intended to be a moment of pathos, but positioning Oliver and Nancy side by side on the stage also draws attention to the fact that Oliver's happy-ever-after has been gained at a high price, for Nancy has paid for it with her life. The close of Almar's play strikes a similarly melancholy note. Brownlow asks Oliver a question which seems to require no response: 'And what is now wanted to complete the happiness of Oliver Twist?'<sup>94</sup> However, interestingly, the question is not simply left hanging, for Oliver asks Brownlow to erect a tablet with his mother's name on it. George Cruikshank's final plate of Oliver and Rose gazing solemnly at this tablet is the image that lingers in the reader's memory at the novel's close. The fact that Almar found a way to include this image in his play suggests that he was harnessing the discordant notes of grief and loss which, in the novel, work to undercut the narrator's outward avowals of Oliver's happiness.

Dickens's hopes for Oliver's future are tentative; his narrator remains wary of embracing the certainty and closure apparently afforded by the novel's rags-to-riches fairy-tale ending. Instead, we are cautiously told that Brownlow 'linked together a little society, whose condition approached as nearly to one of perfect happiness as can ever be known in this changing world'.<sup>95</sup> The modifier 'nearly' leaves this statement divided between hopefulness and resignation. Dickens's narrator appears torn between two impulses: the desire to assure readers of Oliver's happy-ever-after and the need to acknowledge the precariousness of domestic bliss. The narrator's melancholy conviction that a state of 'perfect happiness' can never truly 'be known' suggests that Oliver has merely found a fragile asylum in a hostile and 'changing world'. The terminology used to describe Oliver's circle of carers is also significant: opting not to use the word 'family', Dickens instead refers to them as a 'little society', an idiosyncratic term which acknowledges the non-nuclear structure of Brownlow's community. It transpires, of course, that Rose Maylie is Oliver's aunt but, rather surprisingly, Oliver remains with his original benefactor Brownlow, to whom he is unrelated (although they are tenuously connected on the grounds that Brownlow was Oliver's father's oldest friend). As Holly

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<sup>93</sup> [Anon.], *Oliver Twist, A Sketch*, p. 13.

<sup>94</sup> Almar, p. 60.

<sup>95</sup> Dickens, *Twist*, p. 437.

Furneaux notes, Brownlow's 'bachelor desire to parent offers a decided departure from melodramatic and picaresque conventions': his household is held together by affective bonds rather than blood ties.<sup>96</sup> However, Oliver's proximity to the Maylies—Brownlow's home is situated 'within a mile of the parsonage house'—seems to suggest that he divides his time between the two households. The unusual circle to which Oliver belongs also includes Doctor Losberne, who takes on a 'bachelor's cottage' outside the village of which Harry Maylie is pastor, and Grimwig, who forms a 'strong friendship' with Losberne and visits him 'a great many times in the course of the year'.<sup>97</sup> It is clear that Oliver is lovingly welcomed into a generously inclusive, quasi-familial community, but he remains a curiously liminal figure. This is, perhaps, because he is in danger of being swamped by surplus guardians; the expansiveness of Brownlow's (not so) 'little society' makes it difficult to be certain of Oliver's place within it.

Even if we choose to overlook these ambiguities, Dickens's novel probes at the concepts of 'home' and 'family' until they cease to function as indexes for the reassuring comforts of middle-class domesticity. The impressive histrionics of Bumble, Mrs Mann, Fagin, and Nancy demonstrate that familial rhetoric can be deadly when it falls into the wrong hands. However, while Dickens is dubious about the 'natural' affections, his theatrical adaptors are notably less cynical. One playwright summons forth Oliver's unwavering devotion to his mother's memory as proof of the strength of familial love, while Almar allows Nancy to atone for her sham display of sisterly feeling by transforming it into heartfelt concern for Oliver. Nevertheless, Almar's decision to extend Oliver and Sowerberry's visit to the poor family actually intensifies the novel's attack on the contemptible meagreness of outdoor relief.

Although Oliver nominally finds a domestic asylum at the novel's close, Dickens uses earlier chapters to suggest that no sanctuary is safe from invasion. Almost as soon as Oliver is bundled into the protective embrace of Brownlow, he is snatched back into Fagin's den, and when he is rescued for a second time by the Maylies, he is menaced by the faces of his old companions at the window. The narrator's vagueness regarding Oliver's multiple guardians and unusual domestic arrangements underlines his cautious optimism for the boy's future. Almar makes an effort to hold onto the sombre notes

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<sup>96</sup> Holly Furneaux, *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 43.

<sup>97</sup> Dickens, *Twist*, pp. 437–38.

woven into Dickens's ostensibly happy ending, and *Oliver Twist: A Sketch* concludes with a poignant image of martyrdom which reminds us that Oliver's happiness has been paid for with Nancy's life. Conversely, Barnett and the anonymous author of the *Twist* character parts eschew these ambiguities, enlisting Brownlow to affirm the formulaic restoration of order Dickens's novel ultimately evades.

### **III – *Nicholas Nickleby*: Parental Penitence and the Problem of Smike**

*Nicholas Nickleby* is not, as its title would seem to suggest, an archetypal Bildungsroman. Although the plot revolves around the adventures of the eponymous hero, he changes very little, if at all, throughout the text, and Dickens's novel evades the orderly focus commonly imposed on a narrative of self-development. *Nickleby*'s theatricality, expansiveness, and episodic structure underline its aesthetic exuberance: the early chapters evoke the picaresque spirit of *Pickwick*, while the scenes at Dotheboys Hall are both harrowing and grotesquely comic and recall the blackly humorous social criticism of *Twist*. Yet Dickens's third novel is also one of the most domestically-focused works in his oeuvre. Although the plot weaves together multiple storylines, the principal action hinges on the fluctuating fortunes of the Nickleby family. The death of Nicholas's father imperils the financial and emotional stability of the household he leaves behind, and Nicholas's attempts to make his way in the world are inseparable from his desire to rebuild the mythic domestic utopia of his childhood. The fact that Nicholas moves back into his father's old house with his new wife Madeline in the novel's final chapter suggests that Dickens is endorsing a return to origins in a pastoral, asocial idyll.

Home, then, is where Dickens's narrative ultimately comes to rest, but domestic virtues are also the epicentre of *Nickleby*'s profoundly melodramatic moral universe, synonymous with integrity and purity of heart. In an unsigned review of the novel, John Forster praised Nicholas's love of hearth and home: 'when we are with him in his lonely thoughts of sister and home, all other vagaries are forgotten, and nothing is visible to the moistening eye save the simplicity and sweetness of his nature'.<sup>98</sup> Forster views Nicholas's unwavering love for his family as an index of his moral virtue. His reference

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<sup>98</sup> John Forster, unsigned review of *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Examiner*, (27 October 1839), in *Charles Dickens: Critical Assessments*, ed. by Michael Hollington, 4 Vols (Robertsbridge: Helm Information, 1995), Vol. 1, p. 281.

to the ‘moistening eye’ indicates that he anticipates other readers being as moved as himself by this particular aspect of Nicholas’s character. Forster identifies the hearth as an emotional domain and, more specifically, as a site and source of fellow-feeling. His assertion that every time Nicholas thinks of home, ‘we are with him’ suggests that Dickens encourages readers to form affective bonds with his characters. Contemporary reviewer Hannah Lawrance made similar observations. According to Lawrance, *Nickleby*’s characters are ‘kindly, loveable people; with whom you would like to be next door neighbour, and to sit down at their fireside, almost mistaking it for your own’.<sup>99</sup> Expressing a desire to settle down beside Dickens’s characters at the hearth does not simply evoke a snugly domestic reading experience. Lawrance views Dickens as the facilitator of a cosy communion of warmth and friendship; his ‘loveable’ creations are characters with whom one can feel both literally and figuratively ‘at home’.

The fact that Forster and Lawrance express enthusiasm for *Nickleby*’s representations of domesticity points to growing cultural investment in Dickens’s burgeoning public image as a paternal guardian of the hearth. Although they choose to overlook Dickens’s more disruptive depictions of familial life, it is true that one does not need to work hard to find evidence of enthusiasm for the middle-class domestic ideal in the pages of *Nickleby*. Nicholas, Kate, Madeline, Tim Linkinwater, Miss La Creevy, and the Cheerybles all hold home and family in high esteem; *Nickleby*’s chief villain, Ralph Nickleby, is a worldly capitalist and cynically violates his familial duties. Yet Dickens does not merely reject the grubby ruthlessness of Ralph’s world and advocate a retreat into domesticity. The economic worries that plague the Mantalins, the Crummleses, and the Kenwigses serve to undermine the notion of the separate spheres, while their emotional histrionics suggest that Dickens remains suspicious of the authenticity of the ‘natural’ affections. Mrs Nickleby paradoxically combines genuine affection for her children with a lamentable failure to carry out her motherly duties. The presence of Smike, too, complicates Dickens’s apparent faith in the redemptive powers of domesticity, for although he is rescued from Squeers’s clutches and taken into the Nickleby household, the damage incurred during his blighted childhood proves irreparable and his hopeless love for Kate makes him a pariah until his death. The

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<sup>99</sup> Hannah Lawrance, ‘The Collected Works of Charles Dickens’, *The British Quarterly Review*, 35 (January 1862), pp. 135–59, (p. 138).

Nicklebys' community is generous, but in the end its boundaries are not quite wide enough to admit Smike fully into the family fold.

Like its predecessors, Dickens's third novel proved fertile ground for adaptors, and was staged numerous times both before and after its serial run was complete, something reviewer Richard Ford commented on as he attempted to tease out the connections between Dickens's adaptability, popularity, and originality:

Boz [...] has his imitators: since the increasing demand for the *Nickleby* article, Boz, not being protected by patent like Mackintosh, has been pirated: cuckoos lay their eggs in his nest [...] Whatever may be the merit of these imitations, for which we are not now looking, the strength of Boz consists in his originality.<sup>100</sup>

On one level, these remarks suggest that Dickens's adaptors pose no real threat to his popularity: they are merely parasitical 'imitators' and Ford dismisses the idea that he should go 'looking' for the paltry 'merits' they may have to offer. Yet his insistence on Dickens's 'originality' is undermined by his acknowledgement that the author is not 'protected' by copyright laws. Depicting the adaptors as cuckoos suggests that Dickens is vulnerable, at risk of being pushed out of the literary marketplace as his rivals compete with and jostle him for public favour.

We can only assume that Dickens regarded the prolific output of these playwrights as a pressing concern when he was writing *Nickleby*, as he took the opportunity to address the issue of adaptation within the novel itself. When Nicholas joins Vincent Crummles's acting troupe, Crummles asks him to write some material for their repertoire and grows incredulous when his young charge expresses concerns about his ability to produce a play within a couple of days:

"But really I can't," returned Nicholas; "my invention is not accustomed to these demands [...]"  
"Invention! what the devil's that got to do with it!" cried the manager, hastily.  
"Everything, my dear sir."  
"Nothing, my dear sir," retorted the manager, with evident impatience. "Do you understand French?"  
"Perfectly well."

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<sup>100</sup> [Ford], *Quarterly Review*, p. 90.



“Very good,” said the manager, opening the table-drawer, and giving a roll of paper from it to Nicholas. “There! Just turn that into English, and put your name on the title-page [...] and save all this trouble and expense”.<sup>101</sup>

Dickens mocks the way in which Victorian theatres thrived, and were indeed dependent on, translating, modifying, and appropriating existing dramas. As Richard Pearson deftly sums up, in this period,

Work was continually ‘adapted’, transforming a French story into a French play, translating this into a literal English, reworking and changing elements of the story, developing alternative versions to replicate the success at other theatres, and pirating these in the provinces and overseas.<sup>102</sup>

Pearson makes the important point that the term ‘adaptation’ was particularly fluid in the nineteenth century. Aside from being used to describe literary dramatisations like the ones discussed in this thesis, it denoted translations of French texts into English, as well as the practice of borrowing and reworking material from rival playhouses closer to home. The fact that Crummles unhesitatingly instructs Nicholas to add his name to the title-page of a drama authored by another playwright suggests that, although today we make a clear distinction between adaptation and plagiarism, in Dickens’s day these lines were decidedly blurry. Pragmatic considerations or, as Crummles puts it, the ‘trouble and expense’ of producing entirely new plays, forced theatres to modify an extant body of work to meet public demand.

*Nickleby*’s depictions of nineteenth-century adaptation practices also include a gleefully savage portrait of Dickens adaptor William Moncrieff. Dickens belittles Moncrieff’s creative output by portraying him as an opportunistic hack who makes his living by appropriating the works of other authors; evidently, he had not forgiven him for producing an unauthorised, and extremely popular, version of *Pickwick*. In a scene incidental to the plot but highly memorable for its satire, Dickens relates Nicholas’s encounter with an adaptor who ‘had dramatised [...] two hundred and forty-seven novels as fast as they had come out—some of them faster than they had come out—and who *was* a literary gentleman in consequence’.<sup>103</sup> The intellectual snub Dickens levels at his fictional dramatist is clear. His use of italicised emphasis (*‘was’*) makes it clear that,

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<sup>101</sup> Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, Oxford World’s Classics edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 295–96.

<sup>102</sup> Richard Pearson, *Victorian Writers and the Stage: The Plays of Dickens, Browning, Collins, and Tennyson* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 10.

<sup>103</sup> Dickens, *Nickleby*, p. 632.

unlike the novelist, the playwright has no right to cherish ‘literary’ pretensions. Dickens uses the term ‘gentleman’ ironically: in his view, the adaptor has stolen the imaginative property of other authors and is woefully lacking in artistic and moral integrity. All of this is somewhat surprising given Dickens’s lifelong enthusiasm for popular culture, but the barb is unmistakeable. Dickens’s irritable aside (‘some of them faster than they had come out’) indicates that he was particularly aggravated by adaptors who, like Moncrieff, were brazen enough to invent endings for his texts. However, as Jacky Bratton has recently argued, these misgivings should not blind us to the fact that Moncrieff was a skilful and versatile adaptor: alongside producing literary dramatisations, he successfully reworked popular songs for the stage. There is little doubt that his adaptations increased the popularity of the novels on which they were based, even if Dickens couldn’t bring himself to acknowledge it.<sup>104</sup>

In a letter to Frederick Yates part way through *Nickleby*’s serial run, Dickens lamented his own inability to prevent playwrights taking liberties with his unfinished works. His comments reflect crucial anxieties—concerning the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, authorial authority, public image, and reception—that were shared by many of his contemporaries in the rapidly changing literary marketplace of the late 1830s:

My general objection to the adaptation of any unfinished work of mine simply is, that being badly done and worse acted, it tends to vulgarize the characters, to destroy or weaken in the minds of those who see them the impressions I have endeavoured to create, and consequently to lessen the after-interest in their progress.<sup>105</sup>

The fact that Dickens begins by cautiously alluding to a ‘general objection’ suggests that he wishes to avoid condemning the creative efforts of particular adaptors. Nevertheless, he dismisses their plays as ‘badly done’ and ‘worse acted’ by performers who, in his view, do not possess the talent to convincingly embody his characters. His assertion that the adaptors ‘vulgarize’ his characters clearly has class inflections and suggests that he is attempting to reassert a hierarchical distinction between the noble art of literature and the tawdry world of footlights and face paint to which the adaptors belong. This is, in some ways, surprising. As Juliet John notes, Dickens was not only a committed champion of popular theatre but ‘highly aware of himself as a brand’. From an early stage in his

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<sup>104</sup> Jacky Bratton, ‘William Thomas Moncrieff’, *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 42 (2015), 9–21, (p. 10).

<sup>105</sup> Charles Dickens, From a letter to Frederick Yates, [29 November 1838], in *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 463.

career he was cannily attentive to the ‘various ways in which [his] writings were delivered to the public’ and shrewdly sought to secure himself ‘maximum exposure’.<sup>106</sup> It is inconceivable that Dickens failed to recognise that theatrical adaptations of his works increased his own fame, introduced wider audiences to his stories, and kept him in the public eye. However, his desire to personally oversee and manage every aspect of his relationship with the public was more important, and the adaptors took this power out of his hands. Dickens worries that spectators might prove incapable of making a distinction between the ‘real’ Dickens and the Dickens delivered to them through the adaptations. Reading between the lines, we can detect the novelist’s fears that his own creations may become irrelevant once an audience has seen their larger-than-life counterparts on the stage. Dickens responds to this threat by arguing that drama offers less subtle storytelling than prose: the implication is that the adaptors sacrifice the subtlety of his characterisation and flatten out his creations into caricatures that will entertain an indiscriminating mass audience. His assertion that the adaptations might ‘weaken [...] the impressions I have endeavoured to create’ suggests that exposure to the plays may impair readers’ ability to engage with his texts in a meaningful manner. Yet he is also anxious that imagining endings for storylines which he has not yet carried through to completion will ‘lessen the after-interest in their progress’. In other words, seeing his characters’ fates being played out on the stage will make the public less likely to follow his tale to the end of its serial run. For Dickens, then, the output of his adaptors represented both a challenge to the favour he had found with the public and potential damage to his sales figures.

With all of this in mind, it was surely no accident that when Edward Stirling made the decision to stage *Nickleby* just over halfway through the novel’s serial run, his dedication was suitably deferential to its creator:

Dear Sir,

Allow me to dedicate to you your own Nicholas Nickleby in his dramatic garb. The exceeding popularity that you have already invested him with must plead my apology for the attempt. Your sincere admirer,

Edward Stirling.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 50.

<sup>107</sup> Edward Stirling, *Nicholas Nickleby, A Farce, In Two Acts* (London: National Acting Drama Office, 1838), p. 5. Accessed via *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (Proquest Literature Online).

This dedication indicates that Stirling was aware of Dickens's attitude to dramatisations of his works and was making a determined effort to win him over. Stirling's diplomatic reference to Dickens's 'own' *Nicholas Nickleby* could simply indicate the existence of more than one version of the text but also suggests that Dickens's characters remain his creative property. It is interesting, too, that Stirling seems anxious to reassure Dickens that he has kept the essential components of his novel intact. The text has not undergone a radical transformation but has merely been dressed in 'dramatic garb', a phrase which suggests the transposition of fundamental qualities into a different medium. Stirling also pays homage to the 'popularity' Dickens's text has 'already' achieved, although this comment might be interpreted in two ways. Stirling may be acknowledging his indebtedness to Dickens and suggesting that, if his production finds favour with its audience, this is due to the success of the original work and Dickens's own fame. However, it is also possible to read this as an expression of hope that the play will increase, or perhaps surpass, the popularity the novel has achieved thus far. The final part of the dedication is more explicitly self-effacing, with the language used ('plead', 'apology') suggesting tentativeness and a desire to conciliate. Just to make sure that Dickens hasn't missed the point, Stirling signs off as his 'sincere admirer'.

It would seem that Stirling's humility did the trick, as Dickens was largely enthusiastic about his play, which made its debut at the Adelphi Theatre on 19 November 1838. Dickens is believed to have attended the production with Forster on 21 November and praised 'the skilful management and dressing of the boys, the capital manner and speech of Fanny, the dramatic representation of the card party in Squeers's parlour and the careful making-up of all the people'. He was equally enthusiastic about Mrs Keeley's 'excellent' representation of Smike.<sup>108</sup> Dickens's praise for Mrs Keeley's acting is hardly surprising—her performance skills and ability to generate pathos met with universal admiration and critical acclaim—but it is important to note that Stirling deviated radically from Dickens in imagining a happy ending for the downtrodden and deeply damaged Smike. The revelation that Ralph is Smike's father had not yet appeared in Dickens's text when the play was being written: in Stirling's version of events, Ralph has unlawfully squirrelled away Smike's father's will in order to secure himself a tidy sum, rob Smike of his inheritance, and punish Nicholas for having unwittingly overthrown his scheme. In the penultimate scene of the drama, Ralph accidentally drops a pocketbook (containing

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<sup>108</sup> Charles Dickens, Letter to John Forster [?23<sup>rd</sup> November 1838], in *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 459.

the will) in his office, which prompts Newman Noggs to make the startling discovery. This sets the wheels in motion for him to expose Ralph's villainous plan:

(opens will and reads) [...] "I give and bequeath all my personal estates, land, houses, funded property, to my executor, Mr Ralph Nickleby [...] in the event of the death of my only child, Thomas Smike." [...] Oh I shall choke! "£20,000 [...] three and a half per cents [...] landed estates in Surrey [...] houses in Portland place." Oh! oh! I see it all now [...] Ralph Nickleby you old rascal.<sup>109</sup>

Although Stirling described his adaptation as a farce, all of the requisite ingredients of stage melodrama are also present here: a suppressed will, a chance discovery, and the revelation that an honourable character's victimhood has masked their genteel origins. These are classic plot devices that crop up repeatedly in the genre, both on the stage and in the novel. In Dickens's text, it is Madeline's inheritance that is in question, but we do not doubt that things will be put to rights eventually, and they are. In Stirling's play, Ralph's attempts to cheat Smike out of *his* rightful legacy prove similarly futile. Noggs's assertion 'I see it all now' implies that Ralph's dark secret will not remain hidden for long, and from this moment we are confident that he will obtain justice for the defenceless Smike. It is significant that the will mentions 'estates', 'funded property', and 'houses in Portland Place': Smike has never known a home, but his father's legacy makes him the rightful owner of an unspecified number of luxurious domestic spaces. Noggs chuckles to himself as he arranges to gate-crash Ralph's dinner party and, once he has laid bare the dastardly scheme, the plot is speedily resolved. Nicholas is overjoyed for his friend and tells Smike that his father's will 'place[s] [him] for ever far beyond the reach of poverty'.<sup>110</sup> The declaration that Smike is safe 'for ever' makes it clear that he will never be forced to return to the state of drudgery and misery in which Nicholas found him. Smike's response to his newfound prosperity is generously self-effacing:

For you, not for me [...] I only want to live and die with you, my kind, my only friend [...] I hope that we have been fortunate enough to secure the good wishes and approbation of a numerous circle of kind friends, (pointing to audience) who by their generous sympathy and support, will ensure the future career of Smike and Nicholas Nickleby.<sup>111</sup>

Smike's new riches make him a wealthy young man with a considerable amount of property, but he remains unassuming. The fact that he unthinkingly relinquishes his

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<sup>109</sup> Stirling, *Nickleby*, p. 32.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

fortune to the ‘kind [...] friend’ who rescued him from Squeers suggests that he instinctively recognises that true worth cannot be quantified in economic terms. In his eyes, the moral integrity that prompted Nicholas to protect him is far more valuable than his inheritance. Smike’s hope that he will never leave Nicholas’s side places emphasis squarely on the importance of friendship and makes it clear that he will be absorbed into the Nickleby household. His address to the ‘numerous circle of kind friends’ who have watched his story unfold acknowledges that the audience are patrons whose ‘approbation’ must be secured to guarantee future performances. Yet Smike’s expression of gratitude for their interest in his fate does not simply indicate an attempt to garner rapturous applause. In this closing speech, a group of disparate spectators are conceptualised as a community brought together by empathy and fellowship. The phrase ‘kind [...] friend’ is first used to describe Nicholas and then echoed (and pluralised) in Smike’s address to the audience. Smike’s closing remarks attempt to create a mirroring effect wherein the spirit of kinship that unites the characters on the stage is embraced by the audience who have invested in them over the course of the evening. Both Paul Schlicke<sup>112</sup> and Juliet John have convincingly argued that the shared pleasure and fellow-feeling Dickens associated with popular culture, and dramatic entertainment in particular—sentiments most famously articulated in ‘The Amusements of the People’ (1850)—was central to his moral and social vision. Stirling’s emphasis on the importance of human connections and friendship is very much in keeping with Dickens’s belief that theatrical entertainment ‘could [...] help to submerge class differences beneath a sense of community’ and facilitate social cohesion.<sup>113</sup>

Stirling’s ending, then, implies that Smike has gained admission into the Nickleby household and will, in time, become an integrated member of the family. By contrast, Dickens’s Smike cannot, finally, find a place within any of the domestic circles presented to us at the novel’s close. Our hero Nicholas is happily paired with Madeline, and the young couple go on to have ‘a group of lovely children’. Kate and Frank live in ‘another retreat’ only a ‘stone’s-throw’ away.<sup>114</sup> Dickens also invites us into the snug domestic haven of Tim Linkinwater and Miss La Creevy for a gratifying glimpse of Tim ‘smiling in his elbow-chair on one side of the fire’ while his ‘brisk little wife’ busies herself with

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<sup>112</sup> See Paul Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (London, Boston, Sydney, and Wellington: Unwin Hyman, 1985).

<sup>113</sup> John, *Mass Culture*, p. 40.

<sup>114</sup> Dickens, *Nickleby*, pp. 830–31.

‘chatting’, ‘laughing’ and ‘bustling’ around him. Even Tim’s blackbird Dick is removed from Ralph’s bleakly austere counting house and ‘promoted to a warm corner in the common sitting-room’.<sup>115</sup> Every detail of this cosy domestic vignette is lovingly related with the gusto Dickens reserves for his snuggest family portraits. We might be forgiven for overlooking the fact that he also covertly draws attention to the artificiality of the scene and hints that the blissfully happy Tim and Miss La Creevy inhabit what amounts to a carefully crafted doll’s house.<sup>116</sup> Their beaming faces have been immortalised in miniature portraits by Miss La Creevy herself and sit ‘smiling very hard at all beholders’, as if daring the more cynically-minded reader to cast a shadow of doubt on the idyllic picture Dickens has created.<sup>117</sup> There is something unsettling about the uncanny doubling at work here: as we gaze at the ‘real’ Tim and Miss La Creevy, we must also meet the penetrating eyes of their doppelgangers on the wall. The fact that the portraits are smiling ‘very hard’ suggests that their grins are somewhat fixed and that a degree of effort is required to maintain their cheer. Less complicated is Dickens’s brief account of the manner in which the Cheeryble twins live out the remainder of their days in contented bachelordom. Newman Noggs, too, has a comfortable old age, as he takes up residence in ‘a little cottage hard by Nicholas’s house’ and becomes a firm favourite with all of the children, ‘with whom he [i]s a child himself’ and ‘master of the revels’.<sup>118</sup>

Smikey is the one character in the novel who cannot be given a place within the Nicklebys’ loving community. Although he does live for a brief time with Nicholas, Kate, and their mother in the cottage given to them by the Cheerybles, he remains an isolated figure, partially because he is painfully aware that he must conceal his unrequited love for Kate, but also because he is haunted by his traumatic childhood. In the early stages of his friendship with Nicholas at Dotheboys Hall, Smikey recalls the final moments of a former pupil who died imagining he saw ‘faces round his bed that came from home’, and asks Nicholas: ‘What faces will smile on me when I die! [...] They cannot come from home; they would frighten me, if they did, for I don’t know what it is’.<sup>119</sup> This troubling comment illustrates the extent to which Smikey’s cognitive and emotional development

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p. 829.

<sup>116</sup> See Sally Ledger, ‘From Queen Caroline to Lady Dedlock: Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32 (2004), 575–600, (p. 594). Ledger makes a similar point about *Bleak House*, arguing that the duplicate Bleak House Jarndyce presents to Esther resembles a stage-set.

<sup>117</sup> Dickens, *Nickleby*, p. 829.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p. 831.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p. 97.

have been stunted by the abuse he has suffered in his early years. Dickens draws our attention to the gap between the *idea* of home as an ideological construct and its material failure to live up to this ideal. Smike is unable to anchor the concept to a physical reality he has never experienced. For him, the word is not a signifier for the reassuring comforts of middle-class domesticity, but an alien and indefinable source of terror.

As the novel progresses, Dickens continues to use Smike's melancholy musings to prod at the concept of home. Even before he falls dangerously ill, Smike appears to know that he is destined for death and tells Nicholas: 'I could not part from you to go to any home [...] except one [...] and if your hand placed me in the grave [...] I could go to that home almost without a tear'.<sup>120</sup> Here, the notion of the home as a healing sanctuary is turned on its head as 'death [...] and domesticity [become] inextricably bound together, synonyms almost'.<sup>121</sup> In his final illness, Smike envisages the Eden he is preparing to enter, where 'figures of men, women, and many children, all with light upon their faces' wait to welcome him.<sup>122</sup> This is a divine community, if not exactly a family, and Smike understands that he will find peace in an eternal home. Sadly, his prediction is realised:

The grass was green above the dead boy's grave, and trodden by feet so small and light, that not a daisy drooped its head beneath their pressure [...] garlands of fresh flowers, wreathed by infant hands, rested on the stone; and, when the children came there to change them lest they should wither and be pleasant to him no longer, their eyes filled with tears, and they spoke low and softly of their poor dead cousin.<sup>123</sup>

In this passage, Dickens softens the painful reality of Smike's death with the comforting thought that his memory is very much alive: the grass is 'green' and the 'fresh' flowers are diligently replaced 'lest they should wither'. However, the word 'dead', which appears in the first sentence and is echoed at the end of the paragraph, reminds us that Smike can never really come back, while the 'tears' that fill the eyes of Nicholas's children strike a similarly melancholy note of grief and loss. As in the case of Nancy, Dickens suggests, rather cruelly, that it is only through death that Smike can secure a peaceful refuge: both his unrequited love for Kate and his inability to fully comprehend homely virtues condemn him to remain an outsider looking in. By contrast, in Stirling's

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p. 443.

<sup>121</sup> John Bowen, *Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 31.

<sup>122</sup> Dickens, *Nickleby*, p. 763.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p. 831.



play, recovering Smike's genteel origins and rightful legacy facilitates his integration into the family. It is tempting to conclude, rather cynically, that Smike's fortune allows him to purchase a place in the Nickleby household, but it is not as simple as this. Smike's instinctive decision to offer his money to Nicholas is indicative of the strong bond they share and it is this generous spirit that, ultimately, earns him the right to become a fully-fledged member of the family.

It is important to note, however, that Stirling staged another version of Dickens's novel once it had been completed. *The Fortunes of Smike; or a Sequel to Nicholas Nickleby* was first performed on 2 March 1840. Like its predecessor, it was staged at London's Adelphi Theatre, although adapting *Nickleby* a second time afforded Stirling the opportunity to dramatise key elements of the plot which had not yet been taken through to completion during his first production, most obviously Smike's illness and eventual death. Interestingly, reviewers weighed up the merits of both plays and some found the second production wanting. One critic writing in *The Age* commented that *The Fortunes of Smike* was 'very inferior to that part which preceded it', while a review which appeared in *The Satirist; or, the Censor of the Times* predicted that the play 'will probably fail to have the run which attended the former piece'.<sup>124</sup> Dickens's decision not to allow Smike the happy ending he was given in Stirling's first adaptation was a particular source of disappointment:

The writer of the novel thought fit to give a different turn to the 'fortunes' of that ill-used individual than was generally contemplated, and his adapter has of course "followed his leader" to the dismal close of *Smike's* career, with laudable fidelity.<sup>125</sup>

This reviewer prefers the contented future Stirling originally envisioned for Smike to the crueller fate he meets in Dickens's novel. Interestingly, this suggests that there may have been some grounds for Dickens's fears that 'after interest' in his characters' progress would be directly affected by the adaptations. The critic's dissatisfied reference to the 'dismal close of Smike's career' points to considerable emotional investment in his sorrows. The assertion that *The Fortunes of Smike* 'follow[s]' the plot of its source text with 'laudable fidelity' suggests that Stirling is faithful to Dickens's representation of Smike's sufferings. Yet, interestingly, there is nothing complimentary about this

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<sup>124</sup> [Anon.], 'Theatricals', *The Age*, (8 March 1840), p. 77; [Anon.], 'Theatres', *The Satirist; or, the Censor of the Times*, 412 (8 March 1840), p. 78.

<sup>125</sup> [Anon.], *The Satirist*, p. 78.

comment. While Dickens makes hierarchical distinctions between his own works and the adaptors' counterfeit productions, this reviewer does not make faithfulness to the source text a criterion of value. For this critic, fidelity to Dickens's novel is not only unnecessary, it is undesirable, for it indicates that Stirling has passively recreated *Nickleby*'s plot and failed to consider that audiences long for a happy ending for the novel's most powerless and oppressed character.

Yet Stirling *does* make an important departure from Dickens in opting to completely omit all of the scenes at Dotheboys Hall. This spares the audience the need to directly witness Smike's abuse at the hands of Squeers and, in so doing, removes the most polemical aspects of the novel. When Nicholas asks Smike if he grasps the concept of having an enemy, Smike shudders and, clearly thinking of Squeers, replies 'Oh! Yes, I understand that'.<sup>126</sup> As in adaptations of *Twist*, the child victim's traumatic past is referred to only obliquely and thus relegated to a painful memory. Although Stirling follows Dickens's lead in allowing Squeers briefly to recapture Smike, he is quickly rescued. Stirling does not expose his audience to the disturbing scenes in which Smike is subjected to emotional torment and physical violence with harrowing regularity. He also made one other significant modification to Dickens's text: Ralph's response to the loss of his son. In the novel, our tentative hope that Ralph may possess a hidden reserve of fatherly love is neither confirmed nor rejected outright by Dickens. The only information we are given is that 'one tender thought, or one of natural regret' fleetingly experienced by him is eclipsed by 'a stormy maddened sea' of fury. Ralph is incensed by the notion that Nicholas was Smike's 'protector and faithful friend' when 'he would have had them mortal enemies and hating each another to the last'.<sup>127</sup> Disturbingly, what really tortures him is not the knowledge that his son was forced to endure a painful illness and years of misery at Squeers's school, but simply the thought that Nicholas has in some way triumphed over him.

In Stirling's play, Ralph's reaction to the revelation that Smike is his son is notably less troubling. When Ralph's former clerk Brooker informs him of his paternity, stage directions indicate that he is 'Greatly agitated'. The dialogue that follows confirms that

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<sup>126</sup> Edward Stirling, *The Fortunes of Smike, or A Sequel to Nicholas Nickleby, A Drama, in Two Acts* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper, 1840), p. 12. Accessed via *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (Proquest Literature Online).

<sup>127</sup> Dickens, *Nickleby*, p. 804.

Ralph has lost his customary self-possession and is fixated on seeing his only child: 'Where [...] where is he? my son [...] let me see him [...] where is he?' When he learns of Smike's death Ralph 'stands a moment, then falls powerless into Noggs's arms'. A moment later, Noggs clarifies the nature of his affliction for the audience: 'His heart is broke---he'll never speak again'.<sup>128</sup> Although earlier scenes of the play make Ralph's lack of familial feeling abundantly clear, Stirling seems to feel compelled to give his audience the moral consolation of witnessing his steely façade being stripped away to reveal 'natural' fatherly affection for his only son. The implication is that his feelings have been dormant for years but are reawakened by the painful news of Smike's death.

Interestingly, similar changes were made to Dickens's characterisation of Ralph by playwright Harry Simms thirty-five years later. Despite a considerable gap in time between the two productions, the melodramatic conventions upon which Stirling relies (semiotic clarity in particular) are still very much in evidence in Simms's play, which made its debut on 22 November 1875 at Brighton's Theatre Royal. Like Stirling, Simms rejects Dickens's ambivalent portrait of Ralph, but while Stirling's Ralph has a bodily reaction to the news of Smike's death and is unable to give verbal expression to his grief, Simms's Ralph makes an emotional speech:

That boy was the only joy left me for my old age, and him they stole away and sent to a den of infamy, where the brightness of youth has been blasted for ever! Oh, the agony that he has endured in his boyhood! [...] My boy! [...] my boy! [...] my poor, poor boy! (kneels overcome with grief to Smike, who is on sofa).<sup>129</sup>

Ralph alludes here to the fact that his former clerk Brooker secretly removed Smike from the household and abandoned him at Squeers's school. Ralph's remorseful reference to the 'den of infamy' in which Smike has grown up is, rather strangely, reminiscent of Nicholas's passionate denunciation of Squeers's school in the novel, that notorious 'den where sordid cruelty [...] runs wanton, and [...] the lightness of childhood shrinks into the heaviness of age'.<sup>130</sup> In Dickens's text, when Ralph learns that Smike is his son, the dominant emotion he experiences is humiliation, as he fixates on the notion that Smike's affection for Nicholas is tantamount to his own defeat. Simms's play offers the audience

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<sup>128</sup> Stirling, *Smike*, pp. 40–41.

<sup>129</sup> Harry Simms, *Nicholas Nickleby, A Drama, in Four Acts, from Charles Dickens's Great Work* (London: John Dicks, 1883), p. 28. Accessed via *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (Proquest Literature Online).

<sup>130</sup> Dickens, *Nickleby*, p. 251.

a much more reassuring portrait of a father deeply remorseful for his parental failings. Ralph is clearly desperate to reconnect with his son and even kneels down in a physical gesture of penitence. The intense language Simms uses ('blasted', 'agony') suggests a desire to offer emotional consolation for the abuse Smike has suffered. Like Almar's depiction of Nancy's feelings towards Oliver, Simms's play makes Ralph's state of mind clearly legible for the audience in a manner typical of melodrama. In Dickens's text, Ralph's 'true' feelings remain a mystery. Following Brooker's confession that he left Smike at Squeers's school in his infancy, a lamp is 'thrown to the ground' and leaves the room 'in darkness'. We subsequently learn that 'There was some trifling confusion in obtaining another light [...] but when the light appeared, Ralph Nickleby was gone'.<sup>131</sup> Unlike Simms, Dickens resolutely refuses to illuminate Ralph's internal thoughts: he disappears without a trace and evades our scrutiny. Moreover, Dickens does not offer his audience the possibility of a reconciliation between father and son for, in his version of events, Ralph is informed of his paternity only after Smike's death.

If we return to Stirling's play, it is worth noting that the dramatist makes a rather awkward attempt to lighten the mood after Smike's demise by using Charles Cheeryble to reassure the audience that Nicholas and Kate have many blissfully happy years before them:

And now we'll talk of something more pleasant---Nicholas's future happiness---Madeline's heart is occupied, and most worthily, you shall have her and her fortune---my nephew, Frank, also chooses as we would have him---my children be happy (Joins Nicholas and Madeline's hands). Receive the reward of virtuous endurance---you shall all have a share in the firm.<sup>132</sup>

Dickens also allows the Cheerybles to act as romantic mediators—their final act of generosity is to arrange a dinner party that brings the young lovers together—but the transition from pathos to domestic contentment takes place over a much lengthier period. Nicholas gives multiple accounts of Smike's death, not only to his mother and Kate, but to the Cheerybles, Tim Linkinwater, and Miss La Creevy. All are devastated at the news and given time to recover from their grief before Dickens secures them happy endings. Nicholas and Kate's marital bliss, in particular, is not so easily won as it is in Stirling's play. Indeed, for a time it seems that the two siblings will sacrifice their own happiness for moral scruples, as both fear that their feelings, for Madeline and Frank respectively,

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid, pp. 789–90.

<sup>132</sup> Stirling, *Smike*, p. 41.

might be misconstrued as social ambition. Although both couples eventually marry and Dickens assures us that they live out the remainder of their lives in tranquil domestic security, he also refuses to allow us to forget Smike's exclusion from the happy group. In Stirling's play, the need to draw the action to a satisfactory close necessitates a more abrupt shift in mood. Cheeryble's disconcerting assertion, 'And now we'll talk of something more pleasant', suggests that Smike is an unsavoury subject to be disposed of, and politely but firmly puts an end to any further discussion of his suffering. Stirling follows the *Twist* adaptors in offering his audience the reassurance of melodramatic poetic justice, where 'virtuous endurance' reaps just rewards. His emphasis on self-discipline also exploits middle-class rhetoric surrounding the importance of hard work and principled perseverance. Nevertheless, Cheeryble's attempt to avoid dwelling on Smike's pitiable end simultaneously highlights Stirling's failure to explain why *his* moral goodness has not earned him a bright future.

It is difficult to deny that, on one level, the tranquil domestic vignettes at the close of *Nickleby* stand as a towering monument to the middle-class family and the security of home. However, Smike is a nexus for unresolved issues relating to the darker side of familial life and the problem of finding a refuge. His childhood trauma casts a shadow over his future which cannot be dispelled and which, ultimately, dooms him to alienation and death. He lives on in the Nicklebys' memories but, paradoxically, only his bodily absence can secure his continued presence in the family. By contrast, Stirling's first play not only makes Smike the heir to a fortune but facilitates his assimilation into the Nickleby household. Although his second production, together with Simms's play, stole back Smike's happy ending, both playwrights offered audiences an alternative form of solace, stripping away Ralph's iron mask to reveal penitence and a well-spring of parental love. Stirling uses Cheeryble to assure the audience that a morally just outcome has been reached, but this justice is, in fact, only partial: his conspicuous attempt to sweep away the problem of Smike arguably draws attention to the very issues he is endeavouring to erase.

## Conclusion

Dickens's ideological and emotional investment in the healing power of hearth and home is clearly apparent in his early fiction. *Twist* and *Nickleby* both highlight the moral influence a secure home and loving family can provide and all three novels, to a degree at least, achieve narrative closure by withdrawing their protagonists from an alienating social world. Yet, as I have shown, rogue elements of scepticism, irony, and anarchic humour threaten to undermine Dickens's outward enthusiasm for the middle-class domestic ideal, and these disruptive undercurrents are largely absent from the plays. Dickens's early adaptors cut characters, sub-plots, and narrative commentary from their source material and reshaped it within the tropes and traditions of their preferred theatrical genres. This is not to say that they were conservative censors of Dickens's work. Their ability to convincingly extend existing scenes, and to devise endings that had not yet been written by Dickens, surely earns them the right to be recognised as inventors who made creative contributions to the Dickens world. Although in Dickens's eyes the adaptors simply plundered his intellectual property, in truth they were his collaborators, for the new material they added brought substance and new meanings to his texts. Almar fleshed out Oliver's visit to the poor family. His provocative portrayal of the poor man's rage warned audiences that middle-class complacency would ultimately lead to violence. In this way, he revised, and radicalised, Dickens's sympathetic but unthreatening depiction of working-class suffering. Stirling was inventive in a different way, for he tapped into widespread sympathy for Smike's suffering and provided audiences with a satisfying conclusion, and the moral gratification, they were denied by Dickens.

Nevertheless, Part I has argued that Dickens's first adaptors tended to smooth over ethical ambiguities in his texts, for a variety of reasons. The change in medium, and the absence of Dickens's distinctive narrative voice, had a conspicuous impact on the ideological thrust of the plays. Adaptations of *Pickwick* swept aside the melancholy reflections that problematise and threaten domestic happiness in the text. In productions of *Twist* and *Nickleby*, playwrights' melodramatic emphasis on the indissoluble link between familial feeling and emotional authenticity negated Dickens's attempts to explore the rhetorical and performative aspects of domesticity. Although Dickens's early works are unquestionably melodramatic in nature, the adaptors heightened these elements to enable them to fit the conventions of stage melodrama more neatly. Comedies

were also required to fulfil certain expectations, which prompted the playwrights to refashion Dickens's texts within a specific set of theatrical traditions.

These aesthetic and structural changes do not simply reflect shifts in genre, however: they also highlight the adaptors' tendency to tone down the social commentary present in the texts. Productions of *Twist* and *Nickleby* omitted the novels' early chapters, both of which critique institutions that thrive on the abuse of vulnerable children. While pruning source material was surely a necessity for any dramatist of Victorian fiction, these cuts removed almost all trace of Dickens's polemical attacks on the Yorkshire schools and the New Poor Law. The exception here is Almar's adaptation of *Twist* which, as I have argued, actually sharpened Dickens's critique of the inadequacy of outdoor relief. Finally, virtually all of these adaptations have endings that aimed to convey a sense of domestic closure in a manner more explicit than Dickens. In the case of *Twist* and *Nickleby*, playwrights enlisted Brownlow and Cheeryble to act as narrators and affirm the moral fairness of the plays' endings. In his adaptation of *Pickwick*, Emson healed the domestic troubles that Dickens left unresolved, while one of Stirling's plays granted Smike a place in the Nickleby family. These changes emphasised the restorative power of domesticity and lent the 1830s narratives a sense of finality that Dickens's texts ultimately evade.

## Part II: The 1840s

### Introduction

Adaptations of Dickens's fiction remained a staple of Victorian theatres in the 1840s but, excepting a burst of enthusiasm for the Christmas Books, the Dickens dramatising industry 'expand[ed] at a slower rate than before.'<sup>1</sup> One possible reason for this is that increasingly intricate plots and greater ideological ambiguity in Dickens's prose made the adaptation process more challenging. The prospect of arduous pruning and reworking may well have proved discouraging, even for experienced adaptors. It is likely, too, that the disappointing reception of *Barnaby Rudge* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* led some playwrights to conclude that Dickens's popularity was waning, making his works a less lucrative prospect commercially. Finally, it is worth noting that Dickens's writing style was, on the whole, less overtly theatrical than in his earlier works, although he remained indebted to the tropes of melodrama. He also retained an interest in Victorian popular entertainment: Nell's experiences with the itinerant showmen in *The Old Curiosity Shop* recall Nicholas's sojourn with Crummles's acting troupe. However, it was the pantomimic, fairy-tale elements and domestic melodrama of the Christmas Books that offered would-be adaptors material readymade for the stage. *The Cricket on the Hearth* and *The Battle of Life* were even helpfully divided into three parts that could easily be converted into three acts, while *A Christmas Carol* was structured equally neatly in five staves.

Some of the playwrights and actor-managers who had adapted Dickens's novels in the 1830s continued to do so in the 1840s. Stirling was persistent in dramatising Dickens's fictional output in the first two decades of his career and Mary Ann Keeley, who had played Smike in Stirling's *Nickleby*, stepped into Nell's shoes in his version of the *Curiosity Shop*. She also played Barnaby in his production of *Barnaby Rudge* in August 1841, at the New Strand Theatre.<sup>2</sup> When she took on management of the Lyceum with her husband, Robert Keeley, she appeared in Stirling's *Martin Chuzzlewit*, although this time the play had been produced with Dickens's permission; he even attended a rehearsal

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<sup>1</sup> H. Philip Bolton, *Dickens Dramatized* (London: Mansell Publishing Ltd, 1987), Vol. 1, p. 306.

<sup>2</sup> Jacky Bratton, 'Introduction', in *Dickensian Dramas: Plays from Charles Dickens*, ed. by Jacky Bratton and Jim Davis, 2 Vols (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), Vol. 1, xxv.



to offer his creative input.<sup>3</sup> Both Stirling and the Keeleys were to liaise with Dickens again. Stirling produced an official dramatisation of the *Carol*, which was staged at the Adelphi in February 1844, and Dickens sold the Keeleys the rights to dramatise *The Cricket on the Hearth* and *The Battle of Life* at the Lyceum.<sup>4</sup> These collaborative ventures are important because they indicate that Dickens's attitude to the adaptors was mellowing, probably because his own reputation was now more secure and he recognised that getting involved with the productions would allow him to take back some creative control. They also serve as a useful reminder that Dickens's novels and their adaptations could, and did, coexist in a symbiotic (rather than a parasitic) relationship.

In Part II, I analyse the treatment of domesticity in adaptations of three of Dickens's 1840s texts: *The Old Curiosity Shop* (April 1840–December 1841), *A Christmas Carol* (December 1843), and *Dombey and Son* (October 1846–April 1848). As in Part I, my rationale for selecting particular plays has been shaped by the availability of my primary materials: the majority of the adaptations I discuss are accessible through online databases. However, I have also focused on finding dramas which reworked the Dickensian domestic in interesting and surprising ways. A noteworthy tendency to evoke situations or characters from *Twist*, for example, suggests that playwrights were endeavouring to capitalise on its successful afterlife on the stage. Yet they were surely also tapping into audiences' familiarity with Dickens's wider oeuvre and attempting to forge a connection with spectators through their shared knowledge of the Dickens world. The second, and more important, characteristic these plays share is their generic status as melodramas. Edward Stirling's *Curiosity Shop* was described as a burletta, but his extensive use of the structures, conventions, and stock characters of melodrama suggest that this label existed principally to allow him to circumvent the laws regarding legitimate drama. I have already shown how adaptors of *Twist* and *Nickleby* exploited the melodramatic elements present in Dickens's texts while simultaneously making tweaks that would satisfy generic conventions and audience expectations. Playwrights following in the footsteps of these first adaptors took a similar approach. The melodramatic drive for moral clarification, virtually ubiquitous in the 1830s adaptations, did not diminish in the 1840s. When C. Z. Barnett adapted the *Carol*, he chose to heighten the moral

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, xxvii.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, xxix–xxxii. Bratton provides a useful overview of Dickens's working relationship with the Keeleys and Albert Smith.

didacticism of the original tale by giving Dickens's characters allegorical appellations. Adaptors of the *Curiosity Shop* made Nell's selfish relatives explicitly repentant for their ill treatment of her, in a move that paralleled their compulsion to make Ralph Nickleby remorseful for his neglect of Smike.

The reassuring and intensely domestic happy ending that characterised the 1830s plays continued to have a powerful appeal for adaptors in the 1840s. Stirling had already granted Smike a peaceful refuge in his first dramatisation of *Nickleby*, and subsequently did the same for Nell. John Brougham opted to end his *Dombey* adaptation with three joyful homecomings, while the anonymous author of *Dombey and Son; Or Good Mrs Brown the Child Stealer* allowed Edith to enter domestic life at the close of the play. Melodrama's insistence on the restorative function of the hearth compelled the adaptors to modify Dickens's pessimistic portraits of familial life.

The capabilities of different mediums, and attendant shifts in narrative emphasis, that shaped the 1830s adaptations are equally important here. Brougham's version of *Dombey* excises little Paul from the action entirely while heightening the central moral conflict between virtue and vice. In *Good Mrs Brown the Child Stealer*, the dramatist expands Mrs Brown's minor role in the narrative and adds a sensational kidnapping sequence, while Lander's *Curiosity Shop* transforms the scene in which Nell's grandfather steals from her by shifting focus from the child's psychosomatic horror to the thrill of a melodramatic confrontation.

As with the 1830s adaptations, some of the 1840s plays were staged contemporaneously with the novels; others were performed years later. Barnett's *Carol* appeared just after the original novella, while Stirling staged his *Curiosity Shop* before the serial run of Dickens's text was complete, thus continuing the pattern he had established with *Pickwick* and *Nickleby*. Brougham's adaptation of *Dombey* has a more complicated performance history: although it was staged in New York relatively soon after Dickens's novel was published, it did not make its way to Britain until the 1860s. Lander's *Curiosity Shop* was even longer in the making and did not take to the boards until the 1870s. Staging the play after Dickens's death was a canny move on Lander's part. Like Emson's play about the Wellers, Lander's adaptation resurrected one of Dickens's best loved characters for a public hungry for all things Dickensian. At the same time, Lander gave spectators the opportunity to come together to mourn Dickens's child

heroine alongside her beloved creator. The following section explores how Lander and Stirling altered, reworked and, in different ways, completed Nell's story.

### **I – *The Old Curiosity Shop*: Moral Transformations and Securing Nell a Refuge**

Like its predecessor *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens's fourth novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, is deeply concerned with anatomising familial relationships. In *Nickleby*, the biggest obstacles to Nicholas and Kate's domestic contentment are worryingly close to home and in the *Curiosity Shop* we find a similar story. Nell is treated as a passive object of exchange when her heartless brother devises a scheme to force her into marriage with his friend Dick Swiveller so that the two men can pocket her (non-existent) fortune. More disturbing still is the physical and psychological torment Nell suffers as a direct consequence of her grandfather's gambling addiction. Her tragic death is the emotional climax of the novel's melancholy ending. At the close of *Pickwick*, *Twist*, and *Nickleby*, Dickens assumes the air of a fond parent, bidding his creations a hearty farewell as he allows them to fade contentedly from view. The *Curiosity Shop* deviates from this pattern, for although Nell is taken into several domestic sanctuaries after fleeing from London, her grandfather finds himself unable to resist the lure of the gaming table and, time and again, she is forced to leave these fragile havens in the vain hope of leading him onwards to a place of safety.

Tranquil homes are worryingly elusive in this novel, and not only for Dickens's ill-fated heroine. At times, Dickens does not take household issues too seriously, as when he mischievously informs us that Dick Swiveller, who lives in a cramped apartment above a tobacconist's shop, is 'enabled to procure a refreshing sneeze [...] by merely stepping out upon the staircase'.<sup>5</sup> For other characters, domestic problems are far more debilitating. The Brasses' emaciated drudge, affectionately christened the Marchioness by Swiveller, is routinely locked in the cellar and subjected to violent beatings at the hands of Sally Brass. Dickens's proofs for the *Curiosity Shop* revealed Sally to be the child's mother, but the relevant passage was omitted from the final manuscript. The Marchioness's ability to indulge in flights of fancy enables her to survive her brutal treatment, but the timid Mrs Quilp and her mother Mrs Jiniwin are less resilient and

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Oxford World's Classics edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 58.

regularly find themselves in a state of terror in their own home as they struggle to endure Quilp's unrelenting abuse. Even the world outside London is not the pastoral idyll Nell initially imagines it to be. In much the same way that Fagin and Monks dog Oliver's footsteps to the Maylies' bucolic bolthole, a host of dangers hound Nell through the picturesque English countryside. In the end she can hope only for safety and repose in death.

Nell's virtue was widely praised by Dickens's contemporaries, and readers' emotional investment in her fate was considerable. On 24 November 1840 Dickens wrote excitedly to his publishers Chapman and Hall: 'I am inundated with imploring letters recommending poor little Nell to mercy. Six yesterday, and four today (it's not 12 o'clock yet) already!'<sup>6</sup> Clearly, Dickens was gratified to learn that interest in Nell's sorrows was so high; such interest was testament to his powers as a novelist. Although it was Forster's suggestion that the child should die, Dickens was wracked with guilt over his decision: 'I am slowly murdering that poor child, and grow wretched over it. It wrings my heart. Yet it must be.'<sup>7</sup> Dickens's mournful assertion that Nell's death 'must be' indicates his conviction that he is making the only appropriate aesthetic choice available to him, but he evidently remains distressed by his decision. As has been well documented, condemning Nell to her tragic fate revived the grief that had overwhelmed him a few years earlier following the premature loss of another young woman he idealised all his life: his seventeen-year-old sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth.<sup>8</sup>

However, some contemporary critics bewailed the fact that Dickens had not offered the long-suffering Nell a happy ending: 'little Nelly [...] deserves a better fate than to die so prematurely. The author should always bear in mind the vast extent of the number of his readers [...] mere moral justice would have awarded a happier fate to the poor girl.'<sup>9</sup> This reviewer insists that Nell's moral goodness earns her the right to a contented future. Interestingly, the critic also suggests that the public should have a say in the fates meted out to Dickens's characters. Indeed, the implication is that the opinion of a 'vast [...]

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Dickens, Letter to Chapman and Hall, [24 November 1840], in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Madeline House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson, 12 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965–2002), Vol. 2, p. 153.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Dickens, Letter to W. C. Macready, [?6 January 1841], in *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 180.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 161.

<sup>9</sup> [Anon.], from an unsigned review, *Metropolitan Magazine*, 30 (March 1841), in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Philip Collins (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 94.

number' of readers must ultimately outweigh even the judgement of the author. However, others were comforted by the notion that Nell's virtue allowed her to transcend her pitiable fate. Thomas Hood described the *Curiosity Shop* in the following terms:

an Allegory of the peace and innocence of Childhood in the midst of Violence, Superstition, and all the [...] hurtful passions of the world [...] How soothing the moral, that Gentleness, Purity, and Truth [...] have survived, and will outlive, Fraud and Force.<sup>10</sup>

Hood viewed Nell as 'soothing' proof that incorruptible goodness could survive amidst worldly wickedness. Like generations of readers after him, he saw her as less of a 'real' child than a compound of abstract qualities. Another contemporary critic praised Dickens's portrayal of 'purity which nothing impure can soil' and extolled the novel as 'high art [...] which will never be read by anyone without doing them good'.<sup>11</sup> Nell was frequently depicted, then, as the emotional and spiritual centre of a moral parable and, as John Bowen has shown in his useful overview of allegorical readings of her role, more recent criticism has sustained this tradition.<sup>12</sup>

Dickens revelled in the knowledge that Nell had brought him closer than ever to his readers, and wrote to the American editor and publisher of *The Knickerbocker* magazine Lewis Gaylord Clark:

Some simple and honest hearts in the remote wilds of America, have written me letters on the loss of their children; so numbering my little book, or rather heroine, with their household gods, and so pouring out their trials and sources of comfort in them, before me as a friend, that I have been inexpressibly moved.<sup>13</sup>

As this letter makes clear, Dickens was deeply touched to learn that his work was a source of consolation to a number of grieving parents. Although most of these individuals were 'remote' from him geographically, in Dickens's eyes, their emotional letters were reassuring proof that fellow-feeling and human empathy could cross oceans, even continents. Yet this letter also suggests that, for Dickens, closeness to his readers was not only rooted in the affective bond he shared with them but bound up in his ability to enter

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Hood, from an unsigned review of *Master Humphrey's Clock*, *The Athenaeum*, (7 November 1840), in *Heritage*, pp. 96–97.

<sup>11</sup> [Anon.], 'The Literary Examiner', *The Examiner*, (4 December 1841), p. 772.

<sup>12</sup> John Bowen, 'Spirit and the Allegorical Child: Little Nell's Mortal Aesthetic', in *Dickens and the Children of Empire*, ed. by Wendy S. Jacobson (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 13–28.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Dickens, Letter to Lewis Gaylord Clark, [28 September 1841], in *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 394.

their homes, to be counted amongst their ‘household gods’. To win their hearts, Dickens must also secure himself a place on their hearths.

The *Curiosity Shop* did not appear on the boards as frequently as Dickens’s first three works, which is surprising, for it contains many of the elements that made *Pickwick*, *Twist*, and *Nickleby* a success on the Victorian stage: picaresque ramblings, an episodic and overtly theatrical narrative, morally polarised characters, and melodrama cheek by jowl with pathos and comedy. Such an exuberant mix of genres is typical of Dickens’s early work, and there is much in his fourth novel with the potential to move or entertain an audience, from Nell and her grandfather’s pathetic wanderings to the repellent but captivating hideousness of the demoniacal Quilp. However, although the *Curiosity Shop* inspired fewer adaptations than its predecessors, one reviewer of the novel lamented the fact that ‘the fertility that Mr Dickens had discovered, immediately fostered into existence a whole forest of noxious weeds and base nettles’.<sup>14</sup> The imagery used here suggests that this critic regarded Dickens’s adaptors as a threat to his own ability for growth, partially because of the sheer scale of the challenge they presented: a few rogue ‘weeds’ might be tackled without too much trouble, but in this case a ‘whole forest’ had taken root. The word ‘base’ insults the adaptors on two levels, implying an indissoluble link between class and immorality. Like some of the 1830s critics, this reviewer draws a rigid and hierarchical distinction between unprincipled, and ungentlemanly, imitators and the distinguished and admired novelist exploited by them.

Despite these qualms, one of the first adaptations of the novel, Edward Stirling’s *The Old Curiosity Shop, or One Hour From Master Humphrey’s Clock!* was, on the whole, a success with audiences and reviewers alike. Stirling’s play was first performed at London’s Adelphi Theatre on Monday 9 November 1840 and was directed by the theatre’s actor-manager, Frederick Yates. As we have seen, Stirling was no stranger to adapting Dickens; he had already dramatised *Pickwick*, *Twist*, and *Nickleby*. Yates had purchased the Adelphi with Daniel Terry in March 1825 and, after Terry’s death, managed it alongside the actor Charles Mathews. Mathews died on 28 June 1835 and, in October 1836, Yates became the theatre’s sole manager. During his time at the Adelphi, Yates was involved in staging and acting in several Dickens adaptations, playing *Pickwick* (1836–37), *Fagin* (1839), *Mantolini* in Stirling’s first adaptation of *Nickleby*

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<sup>14</sup> [Anon.], unsigned review, *Metropolitan Magazine*, 28 (June 1840), in *Heritage*, p. 93.

(1838), and Sir John Chester and Miss Miggs in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841–42). These roles, with the exception of Pickwick, suggest that Yates had a talent for playing comically extravagant rogues and devious villains. It was, therefore, fitting that he took the part of Quilp in Stirling's adaptation. Mary Ann Keeley, an actress admired for her ability to generate pathos and move an audience, took the role of Nell. One critic writing for *The Morning Chronicle* commented that 'Mrs Keeley was, as she ever is, most natural and affecting as the unfortunate Nell', while a review featured in *The Morning Post* suggested that the success of her performance was a foregone conclusion: 'we need hardly say that Mrs Keeley's little Nelly was an admirable picture touched off most naturally'.<sup>15</sup> Both critics may well have been recalling the widespread acclaim the actress had achieved a couple of years earlier as another of Dickens's child victims, the ill-fated Smike, in Stirling's adaptations of *Nickleby*.

The *Morning Post* critic bluntly dismissed the possibility that Stirling's version of the *Curiosity Shop* possessed artistic value—'Its dramatic construction, in a literary sense, is nothing'—but also begrudgingly praised his 'arrangement and selection of the [...] incidents, and [...] the production of a number of effective tableaux'.<sup>16</sup> The *Morning Chronicle* reviewer was more generous, reporting that 'the burletta was well received throughout [...] and is sure of a long run [...] it will not fail to bring many fresh inquirers for the good stories in *Master Humphrey's Clock*.'<sup>17</sup> This critic clearly believed that Dickens's text and Stirling's adaptation could coexist in a mutually advantageous relationship, but Dickens seems to have held the opposite view. On 6 November 1840, he wrote to his friend, the actor-manager W. C. Macready, to declare his intention of 'going down to Yates and preventing his making a greater atrocity than can be helped of my poor Curiosity Shop, which is 'done' there on Monday night'.<sup>18</sup> At this stage in his career, Dickens evidently remained convinced that adaptations of his novels would fail to do justice to their merits. His reference to '*my poor Curiosity Shop*' (italics mine) indicates an attempt to reassert his ownership of the tale but also implies that the novel is under attack, a casualty of poor aesthetic judgement. Dickens may have expressed himself in histrionic terms because his friend was firmly rooted in the theatrical world

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<sup>15</sup> [Anon.], 'Theatre Royal, Adelphi', *The Morning Chronicle*, (10 November 1840), p. 3; [Anon.], 'Adelphi Theatre', *The Morning Post*, (10 November 1840), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> [Anon.], *Morning Post*, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> [Anon.], *Morning Chronicle*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Dickens, Letter to W. C. Macready, [6 November 1840], in *Heritage*, p. 147.

and well versed in its language. Macready was also notorious for his exacting standards and would no doubt have sympathised with Dickens's fears that his name and reputation would be linked to an uninspiring production.

When Stirling's adaptation premiered on 9 November 1840, Dickens once again expressed his concerns, this time in a letter to his solicitor, and firm friend, Thomas Mitton:

I am *not* going to the Adelphi tonight—I haven't the heart [...] I was at the Theatre all day on Saturday and made a great many improvements—especially in furnishing Bedford with divers pieces of bye-play, in the invention of which, he seemed woefully at sea. Yates will be *good*. The thing may be better than I expect, but I have no faith in it at all.<sup>19</sup>

This letter opens with a martyred sigh of resignation; Dickens implies that he cannot bear to witness his beloved creation being transformed into worthless trash. However, again, there is more than a hint of hyperbole at work here. Dickens is milking his victimhood for all it is worth. He may groan over the ineptitude of the performers, but he is more than willing to spend a day at the theatre offering his advice before the play is unveiled for public consumption. While he does not provide precise details about the adjustments made, his allusion to Paul Bedford, who appeared in the role of Punch-and-Judy showman Codlin, suggests that he offered the actor ideas for stage business. He also admits that Yates will be a convincing Quilp. Although he appears to have had 'little faith' in Stirling's adaptation, it was clearly important enough to command his attention.

Stirling's decision to stage his play several months before the publication of the novel's final instalment meant that he was compelled to imagine a satisfactory ending, and it is this portion of his production which deviates most radically from its source. In Dickens's text, Nell's brother Fred is a dishonest and selfish figure whose jealousy of his sibling and contempt for his grandfather has estranged him from both. Convinced that his grandfather is a wealthy miser determined to cut him off without a penny so that he can save all of his riches for Nell, Fred comes to the curiosity shop to rile him under the pretence of fulfilling his brotherly duty:

I will come into and go out of this place as often as I like, so long as he keeps Nell here [...] He'll tell you that I have no natural affection; and that I care no more for Nell, for her own sake, than I do for him [...] I care for the whim, then, of coming to and fro and reminding her of my existence. I *will* see her

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Dickens, Letter to Thomas Mitton, [9 November 1840], in *Heritage*, p. 148.



when I please. That's my point [...] I said I would stop till I had gained it [...] now my visit's ended.<sup>20</sup>

As this passage makes abundantly clear, Fred possesses little 'natural affection' for his sister. He visits her solely to prove a 'point' to his grandfather and, once he has done so, he has no interest in lingering. It comes as no surprise to the reader that he disappears from the action once he loses hopes of obtaining Nell's fortune, and Dickens gives him a suitably sticky end:

It was not long before his body was recognised by a stranger, who chanced to visit that hospital in Paris where the drowned are laid out to be owned; despite the bruises and disfigurements which were said to have been occasioned by some previous scuffle. But the stranger kept his own counsel until he returned home, and it was never claimed or cared for.<sup>21</sup>

There is undoubtedly an element of poetic justice at work here: Fred, ruthlessly selfish in life and indifferent to his closest relatives, has died utterly alone. His ravaged body bears the marks of his dissipation and is presumably relegated to a pauper's grave. The detached manner in which his death is described contrasts markedly with Dickens's protracted account of Nell's apotheosis, and the melodrama of Quilp's accidental drowning.

In Stirling's play, Fred undergoes a moral transformation that spares him from such a fate. In both the novel and the play, Swiveller is a convenient stooge in Fred's scheme to coerce Nell into marriage, but Stirling also makes *Fred* an unwitting dupe taken in by Quilp's empty promises of fortune and friendship. Quilp convinces Fred and Swiveller that he is helping them to obtain Nell's riches, when in reality his only desire is to make Fred 'pay dearly for having once made eyes at pretty Mrs Quilp'.<sup>22</sup> Dickens makes no reference to a flirtation between Fred and Mrs Quilp: this is an embellishment introduced by Stirling, presumably to emphasise Quilp's thirst for revenge. This is not to say that Fred and Swiveller are entirely innocent, but the Manichaeian conventions of melodrama demand a clear villain, and this role is unambiguously claimed by Quilp. Fred and Swiveller are nothing more than instruments in his hands.

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<sup>20</sup> Dickens, *Curiosity Shop*, pp. 28–29.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 552.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Stirling, *The Old Curiosity Shop, Or, One Hour from Humphrey's Clock!* (London: T. H. Lacy, n.d.), p. 27. Accessed via *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (Proquest Literature Online).

At the play's climax, Nell and her Grandfather miraculously stumble upon the home of Kit's kindly employers and are generously invited by Mr Garland to avail themselves of 'all my house affords'.<sup>23</sup> They seem, at long last, to have secured themselves a safe refuge, but little do they know that Quilp lurks just outside, biding his time for an opportunity to kidnap Nell. In a deeply melodramatic moment, he '(runs to the door and looks through keyhole in flat)' before triumphantly exclaiming, 'There she is, and the old man, too [...] all snug and comfortable. I'll soon have her out. What a pity it rains so hard [...] she'll get wet, poor dear'.<sup>24</sup> Quilp is determined to destroy the Trents' hard-won domestic tranquillity. He delights in leering at Nell through the keyhole and thus violating the privacy and seclusion Abel Cottage apparently affords its weary travellers. Its walls offer Nell only superficial safety and comfort, and Quilp is confident that it will be all too easy to 'have her out'.

Both the threat Quilp poses to our virtuous heroine and his lack of remorse would seem to make him a conventional melodramatic villain. Yet Quilp shares specific affinities with another antihero who regularly made an appearance on the Victorian stage: Richard III. Yates played the titular role in *Richard III* at the beginning of his career in March 1818 and may well have drawn on this experience to produce a convincing impersonation of Quilp. Audiences, too, would have brought their knowledge of Richard III to bear on their perceptions of Quilp. Both men have physical disabilities, and both are domestic tyrants. The two men also share a fiendish, perverse sense of humour and glory in their own foul deeds. A virtual embodiment of the dramatic character of 'Vice' from medieval morality plays, Richard III commits countless sins, but simultaneously entertains and captivates the audience. Quilp is similarly compelling: John Carey has convincingly argued that his grotesque version of 'Dickensian cheeriness' and manic energy invariably prove irresistible to readers.<sup>25</sup> Both Dickens and Shakespeare present physical disability as an index of moral depravity; Dickens imbues Quilp with an 'aura of pathology'.<sup>26</sup> The *Morning Chronicle* reviewer praised Yates's ability to convey Quilp's evil through bodily gestures, noting that, 'his very rubbing of his hands had

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> Martha Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 15.

electric effect upon the house'.<sup>27</sup> Another critic similarly focused on how closely Yates's physical presence, his 'voice, gait, look, and whole appearance', captured the maliciousness 'of the notorious Daniel Quilp'.<sup>28</sup> This reviewer applauded Yates's faithfulness to Dickens's creation, claiming that he was 'so exactly and precisely the Quilp of Master Humphrey's Clock that [...] we almost believe that when the play is over he is packed up in Mr Dickens's writing desk, and sent home to that gentleman's private residence'.<sup>29</sup> The idea that Quilp was able to move freely between the novel and the stage reminds us that, for Dickens's contemporaries, his characters were not static creations but constantly in flux, invented and reinvented afresh with each performance. At the same time, they were indisputably solid, a physical presence in theatres across the country.

While Stirling is faithful to, and even magnifies, Quilp's villainy, Trent and Swiveller are merely portrayed as ne'er-do-wells who have foolishly become involved in his plot. As they watch Nell kiss her grandfather goodnight before the two of them 'kneel in prayer', they begin to experience an attack of conscience.<sup>30</sup> If we recall, in Stirling's version of *Nickleby*, Ralph becomes 'greatly agitated' when confronted with Smike's suffering. In his *Curiosity Shop*, we have a strikingly similar situation, as Trent 'appears much agitated' when he is forced to recognise Nell's vulnerability, while Swiveller 'wipes his eyes'.<sup>31</sup> Quilp remains unaffected by the display of affection and revels in his power over the child: 'Now ain't the bird caught and caged, gentlemen, eh? ha, ha!' Fred's response to this comment ('Villain!') as well as Swiveller's assertion that kidnapping Nell 'ain't the thing, and I begin not to admire it' makes it clear that both men are honourable at heart.<sup>32</sup> From this moment, there is little doubt that they will extricate themselves from Quilp's scheme.

The attempted kidnap itself is expertly designed to thrill the audience. Initially it appears that Nell's first evening at Abel Cottage will draw to a serene close: the reassuring domestic tasks with which she busies herself suggest that she is settling comfortably into her new home, as she 'draws the curtains of bed, then arranges the

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<sup>27</sup> [Anon.], *Morning Chronicle*, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> [Anon.], 'Theatrical Examiner', *The Examiner*, (15 November 1840), p. 726.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Stirling, *Curiosity Shop*, p. 36.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

clothes on the sofa [...] puts out the light and lays down on [the] sofa and sleeps'.<sup>33</sup> However, it isn't long before her tranquillity is disturbed, in spectacular fashion. Stage directions indicate that 'music' strikes up before 'Quilp's head is seen slowly rising at the window---he looks round, then gently raises [the] window'.<sup>34</sup> This terrifying moment bears more than a passing resemblance to the scene in *Twist* in which Fagin and Monks glower threateningly at Oliver through the window of the Maylies' cottage. Dickens's readers would have been familiar with this scene, and it is certainly possible that Stirling was referencing it. He creates an arresting visual image that exploits both Quilp's physical proximity to Nell and her failure to notice his presence to emphasise the dangerous situation in which she is entrapped. However, although Stirling places Nell in grave peril, he also offers reassuring signals that she will be saved, for Fred and Swiveller are clearly no longer comfortable participating in the kidnapping. When Nell sighs in her sleep, Swiveller 'starts and trembles' and Fred sheepishly admits that, 'I'm almost ashamed of this midnight entrapping'.<sup>35</sup> In a manner entirely characteristic of melodrama, Stirling's audience can be emotionally invested in the fate of the imperilled heroine whilst covertly relishing the excitement of the kidnap, secure in the knowledge that all will be well.

Nevertheless, Stirling's play delivers a hefty slice of sensation, as Quilp throws the bedclothes off the sleeping Nell and seizes her. The fact that Nell was played by an adult woman surely added a sexual dimension to this scene, implying an assault on her virtue and thereby providing a greater thrill for the audience. Stage directions state that Nell 'starts up and screams' and calls out desperately, 'Help! Grandfather! mercy! pray---pray, have mercy!'.<sup>36</sup> This virtuous plea hits home for Swiveller and Fred and becomes the catalyst of their redemption: Swiveller 'falls on his knees' in a gesture of contrition, while Fred 'appears overpowered with confusion'. When Quilp commands, 'Seize her Fred---we may still carry off our prize', Fred cries 'Never!'.<sup>37</sup> Nell is clearly a damsel in distress, and Fred responds as a melodramatic hero should, taking a stand against her tormentor and refusing to endorse his wickedness. He is humbly repentant for his involvement in Quilp's scheme, and meekly describes himself as 'an ungrateful,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

unprincipled grandson---the brother of that suffering child, and one who thoroughly repents his former misdeeds'.<sup>38</sup> Fred's moral transformation is thus complete. His regrets at having wronged his grandfather, and the awakening of his brotherly feelings, heals the rift that has estranged him from his relatives and achieves domestic closure for the entire Trent family. Interestingly, Stirling does allow a note of scepticism to creep into this blissful moment, as Quilp remarks sarcastically: 'Sorry to leave such a pleasant family party---you're all so loving! I should like to have a picture painted of you all, with myself in the corner.'<sup>39</sup> Quilp's words may be a knowing reference to the prevalence of theatrical tableaux in adaptations of Dickens's novels, which were frequently modelled on familiar illustrations from the text. His speech ironises this convention by highlighting the fact that Stirling's idyllic resolution is too good to be true. Unlike Fred and Swiveller, Quilp remains unabashed by his actions and longs to blot the Trents' glowing family portrait. However, this anarchic desire is well and truly squashed by Stirling, who allows Kit the pleasure of expelling Quilp from the property: 'you comed in through the window and you shall go out through it, or I'll throw you out!' The fact that Kit 'throws [Quilp's] hat after him [...] then shuts window down' suggests that every last part of Quilp has been expunged from the domestic space.<sup>40</sup> He is a demon that has been excised from the Trents' lives and when Kit shuts the window we know that he will never return. Mr Garland assures Nell that

You shall no more be exposed to the brutal attacks of that Quilp, or any other person. This house shall for the future be your home---here, your Grandfather shall live happy and undisturbed---secure in your society. I have enough for all.<sup>41</sup>

Garland offers his home as the permanent refuge Nell has been searching for. His comforting assurance that her grandfather will also be cared for puts Dickens's inverted parent-child relationship to rights by removing the burden of responsibility that has been thrust on Nell in her role as the old man's protector.

Thus, while Dickens suggests that domesticity is destroyed from within (by the actions of Fred and Grandfather Trent), Stirling follows melodramatic convention in portraying evil as an external threat embodied in a villainous individual (Quilp). Giving Fred the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, pp. 38–39.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, pp. 38–39.

capacity to change, and healing the familial bonds rent asunder by his traitorous behaviour, makes Quilp the only obstacle to the Trents' happy future, an obstacle easily surmounted by transforming Fred and Swiveller into melodramatic heroes. Interestingly, morally reforming the men in Nell's life was a strategy adopted by another adaptor, George Lander, years later, although this time, even rewriting Dickens's male characters was not enough to save his heroine.

Lander's *The Old Curiosity Shop* premiered more than thirty years after the publication of the novel, and seven years after Dickens's death, on Monday 14 May 1877 at the Theatre Royal, York. A contemporary advertisement featured in *The York Herald* enthusiastically plugged 'the Talented Juvenile Actress Miss Katie Logan', who took the role of Nell.<sup>42</sup> Logan was just twelve years old when she acted in Lander's adaptation but had been performing on the stage for years. Lander's play also featured Whit Rogerson, a distinguished comic performer, who stepped into Quilp's shoes. It was relatively unusual for a Dickens adaptation to debut outside the metropolis and, despite the draw of well-known actors, there is no record of Lander's play being performed outside York. We can assume that Lander was accustomed to dramatising popular fiction, for he also penned *Little Gerty*, an adaptation of Maria S. Cummins's bestselling sentimental novel *The Lamplighter*, a theatrical reworking of Eugène Sue's romance *The Wandering Jew*, and another Dickens dramatisation: *Bleak House; or Poor Jo* (all published c.1883). The Theatre Royal seems to have had a fairly conventional nineteenth-century repertoire, staging a successful run of Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* in the 1840s alongside comedies, farces, and melodrama. Lander's play was not the first Dickens adaptation to have been staged there: John Langford Pritchard's dramatisation of *The Battle of Life* had made its debut at the playhouse thirty years earlier, on 12 April 1847. In the late 1870s, the Royal was experiencing managerial difficulties and endeavouring to reinvent itself from a stock company theatre into a touring theatre.

While Stirling gives Quilp a dominant role in his play and amplifies his wickedness, Lander diminishes the threat he poses to Dickens's child heroine. In the opening scene of his adaptation, Quilp does attempt to catch hold of Nell and kiss her, but the mood is predominantly comic as Kit commands, 'Paws off, humpty dumpty', then 'knocks him

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<sup>42</sup> [Anon.], 'Entertainments', *The York Herald*, (22 May 1877), p. 1.

down' and 'protects Nell'.<sup>43</sup> In the novel, help is not forthcoming when Nell finds herself exposed to Quilp's lecherous advances, and Dickens's depiction of the vulnerable child's anguish makes the tone of these incidents much darker. The fact that Lander's Quilp is floored by a child makes it clear that he is not particularly dangerous. Making Quilp a comic figure was probably an attempt to play to the strengths of the actor impersonating him; Rogerson was accustomed to providing light relief.

There are further differences between the two adaptations: while Stirling reforms Fred's character, Lander makes alterations to Dick Swiveller. In Dickens's text, Swiveller ultimately emerges as an upright figure: he exposes the Brasses' conspiracy to frame innocent Kit for robbery, and treats their neglected little drudge, the Marchioness, with compassion, feeding her malnourished body with meat and beer and her imagination with escapist fantasies. He also gives her a name, and thus an identity, she has hitherto been denied, and instils her with the confidence she needs to escape from her abusive guardians. By the time Dickens's novel draws to a close, the Marchioness has blossomed into a happy and well-adjusted young woman and a suitable match for Swiveller, who marries her. It is tempting to forget that when we first encounter Swiveller, he is willing to participate in Fred's plan to coerce another vulnerable child (Nell) into wedlock so that he can get his hands on her money. In Lander's play, Fred is cut from the action entirely, which is important, for his absence allows Swiveller to be honourable from the outset. When Quilp informs Swiveller that he has taken possession of the curiosity shop and invites him to 'come and see the fun', Swiveller replies sanctimoniously: 'I've not the heart to assist at anything of the kind. You must excuse me'.<sup>44</sup> Once Quilp has departed, Swiveller delivers a solemn soliloquy on the importance of community and friendship:

Oh! what a cursed hard world this is! Every man's hand seems to be against his neighbour. Poor little Nell! I am sorry for her, and the old man too. If I'd only got money I'd go and buy the villain out.<sup>45</sup>

This emotional speech is entirely absent from Dickens's text. Although in the novel Swiveller is prone to indulging in histrionics, he does so with insouciance and humour; Lander's Swiveller, on the other hand, is entirely in earnest. Dickens's Swiveller is only

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<sup>43</sup> George Lander, *The Old Curiosity Shop, A Drama, In Four Acts* (London: John Dicks, 1885), p. 4. Accessed via *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (Proquest Literature Online).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

too happy to exploit Nell for his own ends. Lander's Swiveller has none of this moral ambivalence but is, instead, a melodramatic hero solicitous for Nell's welfare. Yet Lander does deviate from the romantic conventions of his genre. In the majority of melodramas, the moral goodness of the young male protagonist wins him the hand of an equally virtuous heroine, but a romantic union between Nell and Swiveller is impossible: Nell is not of marriageable age and her life is cut short by illness. Despite this, Swiveller is rewarded for his chivalrous instincts: like Dickens, Lander allows him to secure the love of another vulnerable young woman in his charge, the Marchioness, and enjoy a happy marriage.

If Lander transforms Swiveller into a noble protector, he appears equally keen to furnish Nell's grandfather with an opportunity to redeem himself for his ill treatment of her. In Lander's play, Quilp's callous assertion that he intends to sell the curiosity shop prompts Nell's grandfather to consider gambling again in order to avoid being turned out of his home. Nell protests that the two of them will starve if he depletes their meagre supply of money, and he appears to relent. However, once she has fallen asleep, he commits a gross betrayal of trust, creeping into her bedroom to steal from her. In Dickens's novel, this scene takes place at a much later stage of the action, and Nell lies awake, paralysed with fear as she watches a shadowy figure slip stealthily into her room and skulk past her bed to rifle through her belongings. Dickens vividly describes how the intruder 'grop[es] its way with noiseless hands', while Nell shrinks into her pillow 'lest those wandering hands should light upon her face'.<sup>46</sup> The boundaries crossed here, both literally and figuratively, are clearly 'akin in the child's consciousness to an illicit sexual threat' and recall Act 2, scene 2 of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*.<sup>47</sup> In this scene, Iachimo hides furtively in Imogen's bedchamber until she falls asleep and then emerges sinisterly from a trunk to leer over her slumbering form. Like Nell, Imogen is a victim of theft, for Iachimo steals her bracelet with the intention of presenting it to her lover Posthumus as false proof of her adultery. Both Nell and Imogen are also, more disturbingly, innocent young girls who find themselves subjected to a predatory invasion.

Although sheer terror initially prevents Nell from recognising that the sinister intruder is her own grandfather, she is forced to confront the truth when she flies to his room for

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<sup>46</sup> Dickens, *Curiosity Shop*, p. 233.

<sup>47</sup> John Bowen, *Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 139.



comfort and sees him ‘counting the money of which his hands had robbed her’.<sup>48</sup> In Lander’s play, the scene unfolds differently, as Nell sleepwalks right up to her grandfather while he is raiding her possessions: ‘the door of Nell’s chamber opens and she enters in a state of somnambulism, with her eyes closed, her hands outstretched. She slowly crosses to where he is, and stands behind him, apparently watching’.<sup>49</sup> This almost unbearably tense moment is punctured when Nell’s grandfather ‘Turns with money in his hand’ and ‘cries out loudly on seeing her’.<sup>50</sup> In Dickens’s novel, Nell lies breathless and terrified, with ‘no voice to cry for help, no power to move’.<sup>51</sup> Lander’s Nell is less passive, rising eerily from her bed and materialising at precisely the right moment, as though to condemn her grandfather for the treacherous act he has committed. In a sense, Lander has allowed the Trents to swap roles: in his version of events, Nell’s grandfather is less of an uncanny and sinister figure than Nell herself. Lander’s Nell is ‘apparently watching’ her grandfather, and the fact that her eyes are unseeing only makes her noiseless vigil more unnerving. Dickens’s Nell, by contrast, is the passive object of her grandfather’s gaze. Her inability to see through the darkness intensifies her fear, and her other senses go into overdrive; despite struggling to discern him clearly, she ‘felt and knew how the eyes looked and the ears listened’.<sup>52</sup> As Lander’s Nell stands, wraith-like and disconcertingly silent, she is a liminal figure suspended between states, simultaneously herself and not herself, present in body but not in mind, and poised ambiguously between sleep and wakefulness. Dickens vividly describes Nell’s terror, but in Lander’s play the old man’s horror greatly exceeds Nell’s, for she is initially unconscious, and thus never directly witnesses him robbing her. She wakes only once he has already taken the money, jerked out of her stupor by his screams.

Lander’s decision to stage a direct confrontation between Nell and her grandfather may indicate an attempt to sidestep the problem of conveying the child’s intense psychosomatic horror to an audience. Perhaps Stirling wished to avoid this challenge altogether, for although the stealing scene had already been written and published in serial form before he staged his play, it is entirely absent from his production. As narrator of the *Curiosity Shop*, Dickens has insider access to Nell’s inner thoughts and the ability

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<sup>48</sup> Dickens, *Curiosity Shop*, p. 234.

<sup>49</sup> Lander, *Curiosity Shop*, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Dickens, *Curiosity Shop*, p. 233.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

to relate them, in elaborate detail, to his readers. Lander may not have this advantage but opts instead to capitalise on the visual possibilities of his own medium. The image of Nell materialising out of nowhere to witness her grandfather's crime carries an impressive aura of divine punishment and would have been visually striking on the stage. The possibility that she might wake at any moment ramps up the tension; this is an enjoyably overwrought scene, and the audience can be thrilled by the knowledge that the old man does not share their awareness of Nell's presence. Although the play was produced in 1877, when the appetite for sensational scenes was beginning to be tempered by a demand for naturalism, this is an unapologetically melodramatic moment.

Lander makes significant alterations, then, to the stealing scene itself, but he also opts to modify the aftermath of the robbery. Dickens's Nell mentions the loss of her money to her grandfather the day after the theft takes place, but when he pretends to have no knowledge of the incident, she does not press the matter, and he never offers a confession. In Lander's play, when Nell wakes and cries out 'Ha! This was my dream! What have you there grandfather?' he 'Bursts into tears' and pleads, 'O Nell, my child, forgive me! I am a wretch to rob thee!' Stage directions indicate that the actor playing the old man should be 'on [his] knees' while delivering this confession and speak 'passionately'.<sup>53</sup> In a manner typical of melodrama, Lander's play makes Nell's grandfather's inner torment emotionally legible for the audience. Both his immediate willingness to confess to the crime and his fervent expressions of remorse make it clear that he has retained some moral integrity. In the novel, we are not given a window into the old man's soul, although Dickens does tell us that when Nell questions her grandfather about the robbery, he is 'trembling' and speaks 'in a hurried manner'.<sup>54</sup> While this implicitly suggests that he feels guilty about wronging her, he is nevertheless willing to lie outright and pretends to be shocked at the news: 'And so they took it out of thy room, when thou wert asleep! [...] Poor Nell, poor little Nell!' Nell's grandfather's tone may be 'compassionate' here, but both the reader and Nell are aware that his sympathy is not genuine.<sup>55</sup> The fact that Dickens reminds us that the kindly, paternal manner he assumes is 'very different from

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<sup>53</sup> Lander, *Curiosity Shop*, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> Dickens, *Curiosity Shop*, p. 236.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

the secret, cunning way in which he had spoken until now' makes it clear that his primary concern is to avoid arousing Nell's suspicion.<sup>56</sup>

Both Stirling and Lander offer Nell's relatives the chance of moral redemption. Stirling allows wayward Fred to mend his selfish ways; Lander makes Nell's grandfather openly penitent for his ill treatment of her. However, while in Stirling's play Fred's transformation works to bring about a reassuringly blissful ending, Lander opts to follow the novel's melancholy resolution and dramatises the deathbed scene conspicuously absent from the text. Dickens does not permit us to witness Nell's final moments first hand: the narrator's calm, retrospective account of her death emphasises her 'tranquil beauty' and 'profound repose' rather than her earthly sorrows.<sup>57</sup> Dickens insists that Nell is no common mortal 'who ha[s] lived and suffered death'; she has always had a place amongst the angels and we can thus be sure of her apotheosis.<sup>58</sup> Lander's play, on the other hand, takes place in 'real' time and allows us to witness the child's pathetic struggle:

*Nell:* I would not leave you if I could help it, dear; but I feel my strength is going from me. I feel as if I were about to die. We have passed through much, but it has shown us how much we loved each other. We shall not wander any more on earth together [...] Grandfather, dear! Where are you? There is a mist before my eyes, and all my strength seems gone.

*Grandfather:* Come home, my sweet!

*Nell:* When I am dead---put---near me---something ---that---has---loved---the light---and had the sky above it always. (After a pause, in a faint murmur). Kiss me, dear grandfather!<sup>59</sup>

This final exchange between Nell and her grandfather lifts some phrases verbatim from Dickens's text. Nell's request that her couch be strewn with flowers has been taken, word for word, from the novel; the only difference is that Dickens reports her appeal second-hand. However, unlike Dickens, Lander allows the audience to witness Nell's fear and uncertainty about passing into the next world. Dickens gives us access to Nell's chamber only once she is lying at peace, but Lander's Nell exhibits clear signs of distress in her final moments and craves physical contact—a kiss—that will make her feel less alone. Her grandfather's plea for her to 'Come home' has a double meaning: he wants her to leave the gloomy church and return with him to the house, but he is also entreating her

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 538.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 537.

<sup>59</sup> Lander, *Curiosity Shop*, p. 19.

to come back to the land of the living. It must have been daunting to dramatise Nell's death—by the time Lander's play was staged, Dickens's child heroine had long since risen to mythic status in the popular imagination—but, by the same token, the public's fondness for Nell surely meant that Lander's stirring finale was more or less guaranteed to move the audience to tears. The playwright was evidently aware of the importance of hooking his audience, and securing their emotional investment, with this iconic scene. The dying child's protracted speech (delivered in a pitiable murmur and full of pauses) is expertly crafted to ensure maximum emotional impact. The affection that Nell has for her grandfather is a towering monument to unconditional familial love but, like Dickens, Lander questions whether the old man is worthy of this love, for he has failed utterly in his role as Nell's carer and protector. The old man's guilt does not prevent the two of them from being driven out of their home. His gambling has ruined them both, and Nell's refuge is secured too late to allow her to recover.

Dickens's fourth novel offers a troubling and pessimistic picture of familial life. In the early chapters, Nell is neglected, exploited, and abandoned by her ruthless brother, but she is forced to bear an even heavier burden as moral and spiritual guide to her grandfather, a labour of love which eventually kills her. Stirling's play puts an end to Nell's sufferings, not only granting her callous brother the chance to redeem himself but allowing Garland to offer his home as a permanent refuge from worldly terrors. Garland's selfless generosity recalls the kindness of Brownlow and the Cheerybles, who labour hard to bestow domestic happiness on their young charges. Indeed, it is possible that Stirling anticipated the *Curiosity Shop* ending in a similar manner to *Twist* and *Nickleby*, with Dickens ushering his youthful protagonist into the protective, quasi-familial embrace of a kindly benefactor. Having said this, his decision to grant Nell an idyllic ending was surely also dictated by the melodramatic thrust of his burletta. His resolution is in keeping both with melodrama's tendency to satisfactorily resolve familial problems before the curtain falls and its insistence on poetic justice. It is also worth noting that the letters Dickens received begging him to spare little Nell were written the same month, November 1840, that Stirling's adaptation made its debut performance. Although hints at Nell's mortality are present from an early stage in the novel, Stirling would certainly have been aware that Dickens's child heroine had captured the hearts of the public, and responded by giving her a promising future, and his audience the wish-fulfilment, they craved. As we have seen, he had already made a similar decision when he was forced to

imagine a resolution to *Nickleby*, granting another of Dickens's downtrodden victims, Smike, the peaceful life readers felt he deserved. Having said this, Stirling's happy ending does not entirely negate the suffering Nell has endured in earlier scenes, and although he triumphantly defenestrates his villain, Quilp's mocking speech highlights the fragility of the final family portrait.

Like Stirling, Lander opted to reform the men in Nell's life, heightening Swiveller's chivalrous qualities and making her grandfather openly contrite for his betrayal of her trust. However, the stealing scene remains disturbing, not only because the old man deceives the child who devotes her life to protecting him, but because Grandfather Trent and Nell temporarily become uncanny versions of themselves: the parental figure morphs into a predatory thief while the innocent child becomes an all-seeing, all-knowing spirit from another world. The ending of Lander's play is strikingly different from Stirling's, in part because Lander had access to a complete source and attempted to be faithful to its melancholy resolution. At the same time, he filled in gaps, dramatising the deathbed scene missing from the narrative and allowing Nell to voice her fears about being relegated to an eternal, rather than an earthly, home, fears that Dickens's soothing account of her death ultimately elides.

## **II – A *Christmas Carol*: Melodrama, Moral Didacticism, and Safeguarding the Hearth**

Dickens's five Christmas Books—*A Christmas Carol* (1843), *The Chimes* (1844), *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845), *The Battle of Life* (1846), and *The Haunted Man* (1848)—have long since been regarded as the most enthusiastic celebrations of domesticity in his oeuvre. Catherine Waters contends that Dickens's association with 'the great domestic festival of the nineteenth century is a major source for [his] reputation as the prophet of the hearth'.<sup>60</sup> Michael Slater similarly maintains that the 'intense insistence on the [...] rewards of domesticity' in the Christmas Books 'confirmed Dickens in the eyes of his vast and devoted readership as [...] the grand exponent of English fireside happiness'.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Catherine Waters, 'Gender, Family, and Domestic Ideology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 120–35 (p. 121).

<sup>61</sup> Michael Slater, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Dickens* (London: Duckworth & Co Ltd., 1999), p. 89; p. 90.

All five *Christmas Books* certainly venerate the pleasures of home, and locate hearthside virtues in the humble dwellings of lower middle- and working-class families. The *Carol's* Cratchits are the most famous example of this idealised prototype: their overcrowded home may be somewhat lacking in material comforts but is enviably rich in warmth, affection, and love. Although the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come confronts Scrooge with a bleak vision of a future which, due to his own lack of intervention, Tiny Tim has not lived to see, this harrowing scenario is never realised.

The *Carol* was very successful on its original publication, although Dickens's insistence on producing a high-quality product at an affordable price meant that, ironically, profits were disappointing. Nevertheless, the undeniably appealing tale of an old miser successfully converted in time for Christmas seized hold of the public imagination and brought Dickens closer than ever to his dedicated readership. References to Dickens's benevolence and altruism abound in contemporary assessments of all his major works, but the irresistible goodwill of the *Carol* seemed to render discussion of its aesthetic value all but redundant. It was almost instantly hailed as a boon to mankind and treated accordingly as a form of secular scripture. Dickens was no longer merely an author but a Father Christmas figure entrusted with the sacred task of spreading compassion and generosity far and wide. Lord Jeffrey wrote Dickens an effusive letter in praise of the *Carol*: 'you may be sure you have done more good, and not only fastened more kindly feelings, but prompted more positive acts of beneficence, by this little publication, than can be traced to all the pulpits and confessionals in Christendom'.<sup>62</sup> Lord Jeffrey depicts Dickens as the revered preacher of a gospel of charity and love, and suggests that his text will prove to be an instrument of social change: 'more' is repeated three times, as though Jeffrey's own writing is unconsciously mirroring the liberality he is confident Dickens's text will inspire. Having said this, there is a vagueness about the phrase 'positive acts of beneficence' which suggests that although reading the *Carol* might prompt individuals to behave more generously, it is unlikely to radically alter the political landscape.

Like Lord Jeffrey, Thackeray expressed earnest admiration for Dickens's first Christmas Book:

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<sup>62</sup> Lord Jeffrey, Letter to Dickens, [26 December 1843], in Collins, *Heritage*, p. 148.

Who can listen to objections regarding such a book as this? It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness [...] Many men were known to sit down after perusing it, and write off letters to their friends, not about business but out of their fullness of heart, and to wish old acquaintances a happy Christmas.<sup>63</sup>

Thackeray suggests that changing the moral outlook of individual readers ‘perusing’ the *Carol* in their own homes will generate ‘national benefit[s]’. Depicting the domestic space as a microcosm for the nation at large is a quintessentially Victorian gesture, and the implication is that the redemption of one ‘man or woman’ will lead to ‘many’ others. Like Lord Jeffrey, Thackeray applauds Dickens’s ability to stimulate generosity: in his view, ‘fullness of heart’ lays the foundations for meaningful human connections and kindly feelings towards one’s fellow men.

Having said this, it would be a mistake to claim that Dickens’s text was universally admired, for some critics were sceptical about the paternalistic bent of the *Carol*. An 1844 review of R. H. Horne’s volume of critical essays, *A New Spirit of the Age*, argued that while Dickens had highlighted a host of social ills rife in the Hungry Forties, his text shied away from radical critique: ‘The process whereby poor men are to be enabled to buy turkeys for themselves, does not enter into the account; indeed, it would quite spoil the *dénouement* and all the generosity.’<sup>64</sup> This critic laments Dickens’s romanticised and palliative solution to crippling social problems. The implication is that Dickens fails to challenge the status quo, for he venerates magnanimous paternalism rather than addressing fundamental disparities in wealth and quality of life. The reviewer seems to fear that, instead of being roused to action on the behalf of those less fortunate than themselves, Dickens’s middle-class readers will be lulled into complacency and neglect their social duty.

Such hostility is, in some ways, unsurprising given that the review appeared in the *Westminster Review*, a quarterly journal which featured provocative articles by John Stuart Mill and promulgated philosophical radical ideals. The *Review*’s readers and contributors may well have viewed the *Carol*’s reassuring resolution as a paltry substitute for more drastic social reform. Like *Pickwick*’s Christmas scenes at Dingley Dell, the *Carol* is brimful of wistful nostalgia for the quasi-feudal benevolence Dickens associates

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<sup>63</sup> W. M. Thackeray, from ‘A Box of Novels’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 29 (February 1844), in *Heritage*, p. 149.

<sup>64</sup> [Anon.], from a review of R. H. Horne’s *A New Spirit of the Age*, *Westminster Review*, 44 (June 1844), in *Heritage*, p. 152.

with the pre-industrial period. The idealised notion of servants and masters mingling joyfully at the festive Boar's Head Feast is entirely in keeping with Dickens's lifelong belief in the importance of forging human bonds that transcend superficial disparities in social status. The ball attended by the young Scrooge, over which the perennially jolly Fezziwig presides, is painted in these terms. The older Scrooge learns from observing Fezziwig's generosity and subsequently becomes a liberal employer himself, raising Bob Cratchit's salary and purchasing an enormous turkey to feed his entire family. By the end of the novella he has become, quite literally, the founder of the feast. Evidently, the reviewer yearns for a more socially progressive solution to poverty, but the *Carol's* success suggests that many of Dickens's contemporaries did not share this view and were attracted to its amalgamation of contemporaneity—an urban Christmas firmly rooted in the 1840s—and affectionate nostalgia for eighteenth-century tradition.

The *Carol* was particularly appealing to Victorian dramatists for it is, at its core, a profoundly melodramatic tale whose unambiguous moral message and joyful resolution seem ideally designed to secure cheers of delight from an audience. Yet, as Philip Allingham points out, Dickens's novella also shares aesthetic and ideological parallels with the pantomimes which would have been running during the *Carol's* first month on the stage in February 1844:

The Christmas Books terminate in each case with the sort of wondrous denouement common to Shakespeare's romantic comedies, the kind of ending always appealing to the sentimental Victorian public, but never more so than at the Yuletide season. Pantomime features [...] include the pattern of moral confrontation, the gripping opening, the scenic splendour, and the transformation scene.<sup>65</sup>

Although the pantomime features Allingham mentions were common to popular plays throughout the nineteenth century, he usefully notes that Dickens's text was effectively readymade theatrical entertainment. Scrooge's encounters with the three Ghosts provide the 'moral confrontation', while the memorable 'transformation scene' takes place in Scrooge's bedroom, as the crotchety old misanthrope becomes a giddy schoolboy before our very eyes. Finally, Scrooge's moral redemption certainly makes for a 'wondrous

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<sup>65</sup> Philip Allingham, 'The Roots of Dickens's Christmas Books and Plays in Early Nineteenth-Century Melodrama and Pantomime', *The Victorian Web*,  
<<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/pva/pva.56.html#cricket>> [accessed 1 September 2016].



denouement', although the supernatural machinery used to effect the change in his outlook is introduced at an early stage of the action.

The first theatrical adaptation of the *Carol* was produced by veteran Dickens adaptor Edward Stirling and staged at the end of the festive season, on 4 February 1844 at the Adelphi Theatre. According to Allingham, at least seven different productions were running just over a week later.<sup>66</sup> Dickens, perhaps tempted by the prospect of financial emolument, gave Stirling exclusive permission to adapt his novella and offered advice at rehearsals. As Bratton points out, this suggests that he was developing a more tolerant attitude to the adaptors and was willing to join forces with them, even if it was for his own benefit.<sup>67</sup> Dickens attended the production and gave a candid report to Forster on 21 February 1844:

Better than usual, and Wright seems to enjoy Bob Cratchit, but *heart-breaking* to me. Oh Heaven! if any forecast of *this* was ever in my mind! Yet O. Smith was dreadfully better than I expected. It is a great comfort to have that kind of meat underdone; and his face is quite perfect.<sup>68</sup>

The hyperbolic oath, 'Oh Heaven!', and italicised emphasis here suggest that Dickens remained distressed by what he perceived as the dramatist taking liberties with his material. He implied that O. Smith's turn as Scrooge was lacklustre but that the actor nonetheless captured the miser's grim lack of enthusiasm for life. The idea that it is better to have an 'underdone' actor than an overdone one suggests that Dickens feared his characters would become exaggerated caricatures on the stage. The phrase, 'if any forecast of *this* was ever in my mind' is left unfinished, but Dickens may have been hinting that, had he been able to predict how the performance would turn out, he would not have given it his seal of approval.

C. Z. Barnett's *A Christmas Carol; or, The Miser's Warning!* was staged only the day after Stirling's play, on 5 February 1844 at the Surrey Theatre. Barnett produced his version of *Twist* six years before he tackled the *Carol*, and additional titles attributed to him, such as *The skeleton hand, or the demon statue* (c.1834) and *Midnight, the thirteenth chime, or, Old Saint Paul's* (1845) suggest that his dramatic output consisted largely of melodrama. He also wrote two operas, *Fair Rosamund* (1837) and *Farinelli* (1839), in

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Bratton, 'Introduction', in *Dickensian Dramas*, xxix.

<sup>68</sup> Charles Dickens, Letter to John Forster, [21 February 1844], in *Letters*, Vol. 4, p. 50.

collaboration with his brother, the composer John Barnett. Barnett's *Carol* was performed alongside a melodrama entitled *Stella Rittersdorf*, and confidently advertised in *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper* as 'a decided hit' with 'splendid appointments'.<sup>69</sup> Enthusiastically plugging Barnett's play was a necessity, for rivalry between the various adaptations of Dickens's tale was fierce. Indeed, *Lloyd's* contained advertisements for several productions, all competing for the chance to secure public patronage: Barnett's at the Surrey, and two more, at the Royal Victoria Theatre and Sadlers Wells.<sup>70</sup> Barnett's adaptation had a solid cast of actors: Robert Honner, who managed the Surrey from 1842–1846, took the part of Scrooge, and Samuel Vale, who built his reputation on the London stage in the 1830s and 1840s for appearances in a wide range of farces, popular burlettas, and melodramas, played Bob Cratchit.<sup>71</sup> Tiny Tim was commonly played by a girl, but in Barnett's play the role was taken by a boy, identified in the cast list as Master Brady.<sup>72</sup>

Interestingly, Barnett bestows new names on some of the characters in order to underline their allegorical function in Dickens's tale. Scrooge's generous and good-humoured nephew Fred becomes Frank Freeheart, both names evidently serving as a clear index of his candid, open-hearted nature. The two charity men unceremoniously turned away by Scrooge when they come knocking at his door to collect money for the poor are left unnamed by Dickens, but Barnett christens them Cheerly and Heartly, names explicitly indicative of their goodwill and benevolence. Although their good deeds are not depicted in any detail, their emblematic names make it clear that they embody the kindness Scrooge disdains. Flagging up the generosity of these men may seem unnecessary; there is little doubt that they are paradigms of compassion on which Scrooge should model himself. Indeed, the *Carol's* characters divide neatly into two camps—those who possess moral goodness and those lacking it—but Barnett takes this polarisation one step further. His embellishments suggest that, like many of the other adaptors, he was attempting to bring Dickens's text in line with the conventions of his genre. Melodrama does not allow for a division between outward appearances and inner

<sup>69</sup> [Anon.], 'Public Amusements', *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, (11 February 1844), p. 6.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> G. C. Boase, rev. Nilanjana Banerji, 'Honner, Robert William (1809–1852)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13663>> [accessed 28 September 2016]; Nilanjana Banerji, 'Vale, Samuel (1797–1848)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/38085>> [accessed 28 September 2016].

<sup>72</sup> [Anon.], *Lloyds*, p. 6.

emotional lives, and Barnett seems to feel compelled to ensure that his audience will instantly recognise which characters possess a moral compass, and which do not. Stark contrasts ensure that the play's moral universe is clearly intelligible to the audience.

Barnett also makes significant modifications to the character of Bob Cratchit, enlisting him to deliver some of the narrator's witty observations as humorous asides. When Scrooge reprimands his clerk for being extravagant with coals, Cratchit ventriloquises the narrator's sardonic comment: 'I've been trying to warm myself by the candle for the last half hour, but not being a man of strong imagination, failed.'<sup>73</sup> Later, Scrooge's grumbling, 'Bah! What's Christmas eve to me?', is met with Cratchit parroting another of the narrator's jokes: 'Old covetous! He's worse than the rain and snow. They often come down, and handsomely too, but Scrooge never does.'<sup>74</sup> Barnett's decision to translate Dickens's sparkling prose into dialogue allows him to retain some of the humorous puns and sly jokes that make the *Carol* such an entertaining read. Nevertheless, putting these lines into Cratchit's mouth also transforms the deferential clerk of Dickens's novella into a playful employee, not unlike Sam Weller, who runs verbal rings around his master. Barnett's Cratchit shares certain affinities with the stock character of which Weller is an idiosyncratic variant: the witty servant. The playwright casts Cratchit in an easily recognisable role that would appeal to, and entertain, his audience.

Yet although Barnett heightens Cratchit's verbal prowess and humour, he also crystallises his moral virtue. When the despondent charity collectors go to take their leave, Cratchit drops his cheeky chappie persona and makes a spontaneous and undeniably generous gesture:

Beg pardon, gentlemen, I've got an eighteen pence here that I was going to buy a new pair of gloves with in honour of Christmas day, but my heart would feel warmer though my hands were colder, if it helped to put a dinner and a garment on a poor creature who might need. There, take it.<sup>75</sup>

Cratchit does not offer the charity men money in Dickens's text. This embellishment prompts the audience to draw explicit comparisons between Scrooge's stinginess and the clerk's liberality and encourages them to be generous when they leave the theatre and

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<sup>73</sup> C. Z. Barnett, *A Christmas Carol; or, The Miser's Warning!, A Drama, In Two Acts* (London: John Duncombe, 1844), p. 5. Accessed via *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (Proquest Literature Online).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

return to their own lives. The small amount of money Cratchit offers is immaterial, for he is not a wealthy man. It is his willingness to go without a rare treat in order that some ‘poor creature’ might be furnished with common necessities that makes this little act of generosity so important. Michael Slater points out that although Dickens venerates the snug atmosphere that permeates every inch of the Cratchits’ home, he also urges ‘the need to carry the Christmas spirit out of the happy family circle into the world of the poor’.<sup>76</sup> Dickens uses the emblematic children Ignorance and Want to suggest that providing the most vulnerable members of society with homes, safety, and love is a collective responsibility. When Scrooge asks the Ghost of Christmas Present if the children are his, he receives an admonitory response: ‘They are Man’s.’<sup>77</sup> These children may have no home and no parents, but the real issue is that the society in which they live all but denies their very existence. Barnett politicises the domestic in a similar way: Cratchit’s desire to offer a hearty meal and warm clothes to those in need suggests that he recognises the importance of making creature comforts available to all. Heartly goes so far as to invoke divine judgement and assures Cratchit that, ‘Such acts as these from such men as you, sooner or later, will be rewarded’.<sup>78</sup> The idea of poetic justice is certainly present in Dickens’s text, but Barnett makes this element more explicit. Heartly’s response to Cratchit’s spontaneous act of kindness offers the audience the comforting reassurance that virtue reaps its own rewards.

While Barnett venerates Cratchit’s generous desire to bestow home comforts on those who lack them most, he also makes it clear, in manner more overt than Dickens, that Scrooge has little respect for hearthside virtues. One of the most famous lines from the novel, and Scrooge’s most damning dismissal of domesticity—‘every idiot who goes about with merry Christmas on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart’—is uttered verbatim in the opening scene of Barnett’s play.<sup>79</sup> Scrooge’s meanness not only imperils simple pleasures like good cheer and Christmas pudding; it also threatens to extinguish the spirit of fellowship and generosity they represent. On Christmas Eve, Dickens’s Scrooge returns to his spartan

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<sup>76</sup> Michael Slater, ‘Introduction’, in Charles Dickens, *The Christmas Books, Volume 1: A Christmas Carol/The Chimes*, Penguin Classics edn (London: Penguin Books, 1971), x.

<sup>77</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘A Christmas Carol’, in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*, Oxford World’s Classics edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 62. Subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>78</sup> Barnett, *Carol*, p. 8.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

lodgings to huddle over a ‘dull petrification of a hearth’ with an unappetising basin of gruel.<sup>80</sup> However, Barnett’s Scrooge goes one step further, for he never actually leaves his office and makes only a few rudimentary preparations before settling down to sleep. This may simply indicate Barnett’s eagerness to avoid a set change, but it is also an appropriate way of showing that Scrooge holds domestic pleasures in low esteem. In *Great Expectations*, Wemmick recognises the importance of keeping his public and private identities distinct and, at the end of his working day, casts off his stern persona to become an attentive and loving carer to his father. However, Scrooge’s tight-fisted grimness is not merely a façade, for he is coolly dismissive of the only relatives he possesses and has no friends to speak of. The Ghost of Christmas Past flags up the importance of domestic feeling when it compels Scrooge to acknowledge that he renounced his sweetheart in order to devote himself to a different idol:

She whom you resigned for gold [...] for gain [...] for solid ore [...] she you shall now behold as the tender wife of a good and upright man--as the happy mother of smiling children. You shall see them in their joyous home. Come, thou lonely man of gold---come!<sup>81</sup>

In Dickens’s text, the Ghost does force Scrooge to look upon a vision of his former fiancée in her blissfully happy marriage but stops short of making an admonitory speech. In Barnett’s play, the tone of this incident is more didactic, as the Ghost uses melodramatic and moralistic language to condemn the manner in which the youthful Scrooge ‘resigned’ his sweetheart to pursue his obsession with money. Three different phrases are fired out to denounce the same weakness (‘gold [...] gain [...] solid ore’) and hammer home the folly of chasing riches at the expense of neglecting human relationships. Although unworldly, the young Ellen (Belle in Dickens’s text) understands that domestic affections are more valuable than money and has been rewarded with a ‘joyous home’. Scrooge, by contrast, brushes aside matters of the heart in his youth and pays dearly for it, for he becomes a ‘lonely man of gold’. He may have amassed material wealth but he has no family to enrich his existence. Ellen, conversely, derives fulfilment from her devotion to a ‘good and upright man’ and a host of ‘smiling children’.

We have seen, then, that Barnett enlists the first of the three spirits to champion the rewards of domesticity. Yet he also emphasises the importance of home by placing the

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<sup>80</sup> Dickens, ‘Carol’, p. 43.

<sup>81</sup> Barnett, *Carol*, pp. 11–12.

domestic happiness of two of his principal characters in peril. The first of these is Cratchit, who finds himself an unfortunate victim of circumstance when he is pickpocketed on his way home on Christmas Eve. Barnett inserts a new character into Dickens's story to carry out the theft: a shady figure who goes by the name of Dark Sam. Although Dark Sam is entirely absent from Dickens's text, he is a recognisably Dickensian figure. He wouldn't be out of place in *Twist*, for he is evidently cut from the same cloth as Fagin's boys:

I an't nimmed nothing to-night. Christmas eve, too---when people's got sich lots of tin! But they takes precious good care of it [...] I s'pose they thinks if they loses it, they shan't be able to get no Christmas dinner [...] Unless this trade mends soon, I must turn undertaker's man again.<sup>82</sup>

This little speech makes it clear that Sam is an unrepentant Cockney rogue who frequents London's backstreets and survives by his wits. Like the Artful Dodger, he is unsentimental about his victims and evades moral censure by euphemistically describing robbery as a 'trade'. It is fascinating that he even makes reference to having been an undertaker's assistant, surely no coincidence when we consider that Oliver is forced to become an apprentice to the undertaker Sowerberry on leaving the workhouse. A moment later, Cratchit enters and muses happily on the prospect of returning to his family to enjoy the yuletide festivities:

I shall soon be home! Won't my Martha be glad to see me---and what a pleasant happy Christmas Day we shall spend! What a dinner we shall have! [...] Won't we have a prime goose, and a magnificent pudding! [...] Oh there will be quite enough money, and some to spare.<sup>83</sup>

The emphasis here lies squarely on familial affection. Cratchit is determined to make the very most of the celebrations and plans to bring together the entire family for one blissful day of fun, food, and merriment. However, Sam sneaks up to him, unnoticed, while he is making this speech and picks his pocket and, a moment later, Cratchit's dreams of a merry Christmas are crumbling around him:

My weeks' salary---my fifteen shillings---it's gone! I'm ruined!---lost---undone! My pocket has been picked! I've lost my Christmas dinner before I've got it! Oh, how can I face Mrs C, and Bob, and Martha, and Tiny Tim! Oh, what can I do!<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

Cratchit employs classic melodramatic language ('ruined', 'lost', 'undone') to elicit the audience's sympathy and emphasise the gravity of his situation. Notably, it is not the loss of the money itself which torments him, but the prospect of disappointing his family. Thankfully Frank comes to the rescue by giving Cratchit a sovereign and declaring generously that, 'Tiny Tim shall not go without his Christmas dinner [...] nor you either [...] At such a time as this, no one should be unhappy'.<sup>85</sup> As we have seen, Cratchit offers the charity men money that he hopes will bring some relief to the poor; Frank extends a spontaneous gift to Cratchit in the same spirit. Both men make interventions, not only because they are compassionate and generous, but because they are champions of hearth and home and want to safeguard the joys of domesticity.

However, despite Frank's gift, the Cratchits' modest circumstances compel them to make certain economies over the festive period. After Mrs Cratchit has unveiled the Christmas pudding, she confesses that she had 'doubts about it', but nevertheless insists that it is not 'at all a small pudding for so large a family'. Bob echoes his wife's sentiments: 'A Cratchit would blush to hint at such a thing!'<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, alluding to the pudding's size in the first place draws attention to the fact that it is *not* sufficient to satisfy the entire family. In the novel, the Cratchits' words are given to the narrator:

Mrs Cratchit said that now the weight was off her mind, she would confess she had had her doubts about the quantity of flour [...] nobody said [...] it was at all a small pudding for a large family [...] Any Cratchit would have blushed to hint at such a thing.<sup>87</sup>

On first glance, Barnett has simply translated Dickens's prose into dialogue, but there is a crucial difference here: in the novella, the notion that the Christmas pudding may be too small is *not* verbalised, by any member of the family. In the play, both husband and wife allude to this possibility: Emily's emphatic denial that the pudding will produce meagre portions and Bob's insistence on remaining silent highlights the harmless white lies they use to keep discontentment at bay. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst has convincingly argued that hearthside happiness in Dickens is frequently dependent on characters' ability to imaginatively reconstruct their domestic spaces.<sup>88</sup> In *The Cricket on the Hearth*, this fictionalising is made explicit, as Caleb Plummer reimagines his 'little cracked nutshell

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>87</sup> Dickens, 'Carol', p. 51.

<sup>88</sup> Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 247.

of a wooden house' as 'an enchanted home [...] where scarcity and shabbiness were not, and trouble never entered', in order to shield his blind daughter from painful truths. Dickens's approval of this act of paternal love is clear, and he venerates the transformative power of Fancy, that 'magic art that still remains' to those who lack worldly wealth.<sup>89</sup> However, as Douglas Fairhurst avers, Dickens also 'see[s] through the fictions his characters have created' and thus casts 'skeptical glances at everything he enthusiastically celebrates.'<sup>90</sup> The same is true of Barnett, for he makes it clear that without the family's collective determination to remain cheerful, their fragile domestic haven could not hope to survive.

A couple of scenes later, Frank finds *his* domestic happiness in jeopardy when he discovers that he has lost virtually all of his savings. We witness a servant delivering a letter which he reads aloud, thus revealing to the audience that the ship which 'bore [his] entire wealth within her' is lost.<sup>91</sup> His reaction to this devastating news makes it clear, however, that, unlike Scrooge, he recognises the importance of valuing family and friends more than material wealth: 'Why should I damp the enjoyment of those around me by such ill tidings? No, it is Christmas time [...] I will not broach such bad news now [...] All shall be happy [...] Come, friends, let's have a merry dance'.<sup>92</sup> Frank's ability to put aside his own financial ruin in order to avoid destroying the seasonal festivities is a powerful testament to his readiness to put others before himself. Nevertheless, Barnett strikes a poignant note by suggesting that Frank's new circumstances make this elusive moment of happiness particularly precious.

Barnett warns his audience, then, that even ostensibly stable homes do not have rock-solid foundations, but he also implies that domestic joys can all too easily become warped. Towards the end of Dickens's novella, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows Scrooge a vision of a group of men callously discussing his funeral in order to force him to acknowledge that he must renounce his misanthropic ways if he is to earn the friendship and respect of his fellow men. Barnett retains this conversation, but makes

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<sup>89</sup> Charles Dickens, 'The Cricket on the Hearth', in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*, p. 188.

<sup>90</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 247.

<sup>91</sup> Barnett, *Carol*, p. 15.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*



one alteration to the scene: in his play, the men are not random strangers but none other than the two charity collectors, Cheerly and Heartly:

*Heart:* He's dead, you say? When did he die?

*Cheer:* Last night, I believe.

*Heart:* What has he done with his money?

*Cheer:* I haven't heard. He hasn't left it to me. It's likely to be a very cheap funeral, for I don't know of any one to go to it.

*Heart:* Well, I don't mind going to it if lunch is provided.<sup>93</sup>

This scene is unpleasant enough in the text, but the fact that Barnett allows the kindly charity men to participate in the cruel banter is profoundly unsettling. Cheerly's comment that Scrooge has failed to leave him any money in his will reveals him to be susceptible to the very avarice he despises in Scrooge. Heartly, on the other hand, appears less concerned about paying his respects than securing a satisfying meal. In the *Curiosity Shop*, Quilp and his crony Sampson Brass eat, drink, and 'ma[ke] merry' over the frail and helpless body of Nell's grandfather in his illness, hovering like vultures as they wait for their chance to seize his assets.<sup>94</sup> *Martin Chuzzlewit* features similar scenes following the death of Anthony Chuzzlewit: Dickens sardonically informs us that Pecksniff, Jonas, and Mrs Gamp 'kept quite a dainty table during this melancholy season', and that 'every one [...] who came within the shadow of Anthony Chuzzlewit's grave, feasted like a Ghoul'.<sup>95</sup> In Barnett's play, too, the ritual of eating and drinking morphs into a ghoulish act that precludes the possibility of human sympathy.

At the end of Barnett's play, Scrooge proves that he has learned his lesson, tripling Cratchit's salary, bestowing an enormous turkey on his family, and reconciling himself with Frank. All of this takes place in Dickens's novella, with one small difference: Barnett's subplot regarding Frank's financial difficulties allows Scrooge to cement his magnanimous credentials by presenting his nephew with a cheque that will cover his losses. Scrooge even provides for Frank's future by promising him that 'at my death you shall inherit all my wealth.'<sup>96</sup> Although by this stage in the action his newfound generosity has already been made clear, his willingness to save Frank from ruin echoes Cratchit and Frank's acts of kindness and suggests an apparently endless cycle of giving.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

<sup>94</sup> Dickens, *Curiosity Shop*, p. 90.

<sup>95</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Oxford World's Classics edn (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 275.

<sup>96</sup> Barnett, *Carol*, p. 25.

Barnett made a number of aesthetic and ideological changes to Dickens's text, ranging from subtle alterations to characterisation to the addition of entirely new characters and plotlines. He was, to some extent at least, working within the capabilities of his medium: employing Cratchit to do some of the narrator's work was an adroit way of retaining much of the textual content of Dickens's novella. Yet this also allowed Cratchit to fit snugly into the role of the witty servant, a stock figure in the drama whose entertaining repartee could amuse and entertain the audience.

Aside from shaping the *Carol*'s characters within the tropes and traditions of his medium and genre, Barnett also enthusiastically embraced one of its central themes: the restorative powers of domesticity. Cratchit's generosity flags up the necessity of bringing home comforts to the poor, and the Ghost of Christmas Past teaches Scrooge that shutting affection out of his life has given him a lonely and hollow existence. Yet Barnett also highlights the precariousness of domestic harmony and uses his *Carol* to protect, rather than simply to celebrate, the hearth. In his play, Sam's theft of Cratchit's money and Frank's financial ruin threaten the stability of two families who, unlike Scrooge, recognise the value of fellowship and love. Placing these idylls in peril emphasises their fragility but thereby makes their virtues burn brighter than ever. On both occasions Barnett intervenes to safeguard domestic happiness.

Barnett also intensifies Dickens's emphasis on the interconnectedness of human relationships. His Cratchit donates money to the poor and is subsequently assisted by Frank when he finds himself in need. Frank doesn't think twice about extending aid to Cratchit when his wages are stolen and is duly saved by Scrooge when *he* needs help to pull himself out of a tight spot. Surprisingly, these compassionate exchanges take place exclusively between men, an unusual move considering that fictional Victorian representations of domestic virtue almost always suggested that safeguarding the hearth was a womanly duty.

The cyclical mirroring in Barnett's play also suggests that domestic affections, or something closely akin to them, can be extended outside the home to one's friend, neighbour, or even a stranger. In the closing lines of the play, Scrooge directly addresses the audience as 'my friends', and entreats them: 'forgive but my past, you will make happy my present, and inspire me with hope for the future!'<sup>97</sup> In a final piece of mirroring,

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

Barnett asks playgoers to embrace the spirit of generosity Scrooge has learned to extend to his fellow men. His play ends, as Dickens's prefaces so often begin, by ushering his audience into an imaginary community. There is a crucial difference, however. Unlike prose, dramatic storytelling brings spectators together physically, something vitally important to Dickens when he embarked on the Public Readings. While readers of the novels were required to make an imaginative leap in order to connect with their author (and other readers) Barnett's adaptation spoke to a more tangible community enclosed within the walls of the auditorium.

### **III – 'Home to our very hearts!': Homecomings and Reconstructing the Family in *Dombey and Son***

As its title suggests, familial relationships are the beating heart of Dickens's seventh novel, *Dombey and Son*. Dombey's obsessive desire to secure the future of his mercantile firm leads him to devote his entire existence to his delicate son. However, when little Paul takes his place amongst Dickens's child martyrs and Dombey's second marriage ends in disaster, only the unceasing sympathy and devotion of his daughter Florence can pull him back from the brink of ruin. In time, he becomes a devoted grandfather and, as his ministering angel, Florence offers him the chance of redemption, but the emotional trauma of Paul's death, the wreckage of Dombey's second marriage, and the long years of suffering that Florence has endured, cannot easily be dismissed.

Resolutely unhomely homes abound in this novel, from the filthy hovel to which the defiant Alice Marwood returns after serving out her transportation sentence, to the soulless hotels into which Mrs Skewton drags her widowed daughter Edith, in the hopes of selling her in marriage to the highest bidder. The formidable widow Mrs Mac Stinger presides over a more comically unhappy household. Her long-suffering lodger, Captain Cuttle, miserably submits to regular doses of intimidation and lives in terror of the boisterous affection of her children. Even Mrs Mac Stinger's domestic orderliness is disconcerting: Cuttle is forced to sit marooned forlornly on a pile of furniture on washing days, while his redoubtable landlady scrubs aggressively around him. Affectionate and well-adjusted families do exist: the cheerful Toodles are essentially a reincarnation of the *Carol's* Cratchits. Walter Gay and his uncle Solomon Gills make an unconventional domestic haven out of Gills's topsy-turvy wooden Midshipman shop, which anticipates

the homely Peggotty boat house in *David Copperfield*. Dickens happily observes that it is a ‘snug, sea-going, ship-shape concern, wanting only good sea-room [...] to work its way securely, to any desert island in the world’<sup>98</sup>. This rather surreal imaginary scenario suggests that even displacing Gills’s secure bolthole to the farthest corners of the globe would not shake the foundations of safety, comfort, and love on which it rests.

After the disappointing reception of *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *The Cricket on the Hearth*, *Dombey and Son* was a resounding success. By June 1848, it was selling 34,000 copies a month, triumphantly eclipsing *Chuzzlewit*’s sales of only 20,000 copies and restoring Dickens to public favour.<sup>99</sup> One critic writing for the *Westminster Review* breathed a sigh of relief that ‘Hobgoblins ha[d] been excised’ from Dickens’s prose, suggesting that *Dombey* marked a shift towards realism, and a new focus on ‘every-day men and women, with their every-day faults and virtues’.<sup>100</sup> However, the artist, poet, and translator John Eagles took the opposite view, declaring Edith’s ‘whole conduct [...] out of nature’, Dombey’s repentance ‘impossible’, and Florence’s unceasing affection for her neglectful father ‘extraordinary’.<sup>101</sup> Lord Jeffrey wrote to Dickens on a number of occasions throughout the novel’s serial run, and praised the instalment that contained Paul’s death:

I have so cried and sobbed over it last night, and again this morning, and felt my heart purified by those tears, and blessed and loved you for making me shed them; and I never can bless and thank you enough. Since that divine Nelly was found dead on her humble couch, beneath the snow and ivy, there has been nothing like the actual dying of that sweet Paul.<sup>102</sup>

Victorian reviewers frequently made comparisons between Paul and little Nell: for many of Dickens’s contemporaries, these child martyrs performed a similar emblematic function. The *Westminster Review* critic enthused that ‘The [...] most perfect of Dickens’s sketches is that of “Little Nell” [...] and we have its counterpart in the death of “Little Dombey”’.<sup>103</sup> A year later in April 1848, Charles Kent, the editor of the *Sun* from 1845–71, pronounced Paul’s death scene ‘an exquisite chapter’ which ‘surpassed

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<sup>98</sup> Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, Oxford World’s Classics edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 37.

<sup>99</sup> Paul Schlicke, ‘Dombey and Son’, in *Oxford Reader’s Companion to Dickens*, ed. by Paul Schlicke (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 183–88, (p. 187).

<sup>100</sup> From a review signed ‘H’, possibly by William E. Hickson (editor of the *Westminster Review* from 1840–52), *Westminster Review*, 47 (April 1847), in *Heritage*, p. 225.

<sup>101</sup> [John Eagles], from ‘A Few Words about Novels—a Dialogue’, *Blackwoods Magazine*, 64 (October 1848), in *Heritage*, p. 231.

<sup>102</sup> Lord Jeffrey, Letter to Dickens, [31 January 1847], in *Heritage*, p. 217.

<sup>103</sup> [Hickson?], *Westminster Review*, p. 225

[...] even that most beautiful, and, as we had once imagined, inimitable, incident in the *Old Curiosity Shop*—the death of Little Nell'.<sup>104</sup> Dickens wrote to Kent personally to thank him for his review, which laid the foundations for an enduring friendship between the two men: Kent later contributed to Dickens's weeklies, published a work of criticism, with Dickens's consent, entitled *Charles Dickens as a Reader* (1872), and compiled an anthology, *The Humour and Pathos of Charles Dickens: with Illustrations of his Mastery of the Terrible and the Picturesque* (1884).<sup>105</sup>

For both Jeffrey and Kent, Nell and Paul were shining symbols of innocence and purity, reassuring proof that incorruptible virtue could transcend the venality and corruption of the adult world. Yet Jeffrey made a subtle distinction between the apotheosis of the 'divine Nelly' and the 'actual dying' of Paul. The phrase 'actual dying' suggests that, like the *Westminster Review* critic, Jeffrey felt that Dickens was attempting a new sort of realism. Yet he also insisted that reading about the fate of Paul 'purified' him. It was not unusual for Victorian reviewers to portray Dickens as a moral guide and Jeffrey certainly strays into this territory. His grief over Paul's fictional death may appear excessive, but the relief that tears bring him suggests that Dickens's text provided a cathartic outlet for emotions that paradigmatic models of Victorian masculinity sought to repress.

Yet this is by no means to assert that Paul's death threw the nation into mourning, for others were less enamoured of what they perceived as sentimental trash. A satirical article entitled 'Inquest on the late Master Paul Dombey', which featured in the popular serial publication *The Man in the Moon*, mocked both the readers silly enough to be devastated by Paul's death and Dickens's overblown prose:

MISS JANE DICKYBIRD: Fell in love with the deceased. Everybody must have. Was quite shocked at his death. Received the news by the last number. Did not quite understand that he was dead at first, the intimation was in such terribly fine writing [...] Thought the author [...] very cruel [...] for killing such a sweet poppet [...] Fie for shame upon him. How could he be so wicked? <sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> [Charles Kent], from a review, *Sun* (13 April 1848), in *Heritage*, p. 229.

<sup>105</sup> Collins, *Heritage*, p. 227.

<sup>106</sup> [Anon.], 'Inquest on the late Master Paul Dombey', *The Man in the Moon*, 1 (March 1847), in *Heritage*, p. 221.

The ludicrous name chosen for this imaginary witness makes it plain that she is not a discerning reader, while the sardonic reference to ‘terribly fine writing’ implies that Dickens’s lurid prose appeals to a debased popular appetite for sentiment. The author of the article goes on to imagine Dickens struggling to defend himself against Jane Dickybird’s damning accusations:

At the suggestion of one of the jury, the parent of the child, Mr Charles Dickens, was here put into the witness box [...] Had been instrumental in bringing [Paul] into the world. Never had any definite notion of what to do with him. The child was very precocious. Thought precocity a very good thing for getting an effective chapter or two out of [...] If he was asked to name the disease of which Paul had expired, thought it an attack of acute ‘Don’t-know-what-to-do-with-him-phobia.’<sup>107</sup>

This acerbic passage suggests that Dickens is an unscrupulous author eager to profit from an indiscriminating mass readership. The idea that he ‘Never had any definite notion of what to do with [Paul]’ implies that the child has no real significance in the narrative. The author accuses Dickens of wishing only to get ‘an effective chapter or two’ out of him, which suggests that the aesthetic integrity of his work is immaterial to him; his characters are created solely with a cynical eye on potential profits in mind. This comment is also a veiled critique of the serial format in which *Dombey* appeared for public consumption: disparaging remarks that the serial was a lowly and fragmentary form of publication had dogged Dickens since the beginning of his literary career.

The author of this piece even went so far as to compose a mock ‘REQUIEM FOR PAUL DOMBEY’ which contained scathing observations about Dickens’s embeddedness in commercial culture:

[...] Thou hast fallen, brief mounter,  
Like stick of rocket.  
New numbers appearing,  
Fresh interest may borrow;  
But we go on ‘Oh dearing’,  
For Paul there’s no morrow.  
Sure point in a chapter,  
Best pupil of Blimber,  
Safe card for adapter,  
How sound is thy slumber.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, pp. 221–22.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 224.

Interestingly, the phrase ‘Thou hast fallen, brief mounter/ Like stick of rocket’ has striking parallels with a comment made by Abraham Hayward eleven years earlier in his assessment of *Pickwick*. In his review, Hayward noted that Dickens had ‘risen like a rocket’ but predicted, with more than a hint of satisfaction, that he would ‘come down like the stick’<sup>109</sup>. The satirist writing for *The Man in the Moon* seems to suggest that Hayward’s prophecy has been fulfilled. Dickens’s mass-market appeal is a double-edged sword because it secures him only ephemeral success. A steady stream of ‘New numbers’ and ‘fresh interest’ clearly signify novelty value, and the satirist scornfully points out that Dickens’s texts are a ‘Safe card for adapter’. In other words, Dickens’s popularity with the public makes adapting his works commercially profitable, but the covert implication is that these productions are unimaginative and cater to the lowest common denominator.

Only one adaptation of *Dombey* was staged in Britain during the novel’s serial run, and no more than a handful of productions appeared in the years immediately after the novel’s publication. As H. Philip Bolton notes, this reflects the ‘downward trend in the growth of the Dickens dramatizing industry’ in Britain: both *The Battle of Life* and *The Haunted Man* spawned far fewer plays than their predecessors.<sup>110</sup> Having said this, there was greater interest in dramatising *Dombey* across the Atlantic. Relatively few *Dombey* adaptations have survived and one of the plays that I discuss migrated to the British stage after an initial run in the United States. It is for these reasons that, although this thesis focuses almost exclusively on British plays, I have chosen to include an adaptation that was initially performed in America. The overwhelming reception that Dickens had received during his first trip to America in 1842 confirmed that the nation was eager to embrace the superstar author. The success of the American *Dombey* adaptations suggests that Dickens’s ill-timed attempts to campaign for International Copyright law during his travels, and his unflattering sketches of the country in *American Notes* (1842) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843), had done little to destroy his popular appeal. John Brougham’s *Dombey and Son*, and his one-act comic piece, *Captain Cuttle*, were revived numerous times in America in the second half of the nineteenth century. Both plays were first performed in Burton’s Theatre in New York: *Dombey and Son* on 24 July 1848 and

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<sup>109</sup> Abraham Hayward, from an unsigned review of *The Pickwick Papers*, Nos. I–XVII, and *Sketches by Boz*, *The Quarterly Review*, 59 (October 1837), in *Heritage*, p. 62.

<sup>110</sup> Bolton, p. 306.

*Captain Cuttle* on 14 January 1850. They made their way to Britain in the 1860s and continued to be performed until the 1880s.<sup>111</sup>

Like Emson's adaptations of *Pickwick* and *Twist*, *Captain Cuttle* depicts only select comic episodes from the novel; as a full-length, three-act melodrama, *Dombey and Son* is more ambitious in scope. The novel's protagonists take centre stage, with one notable exception: Paul Dombey, the 'Son' of the play's title, is entirely missing from the production. While we might expect Brougham to cut some of the early childhood scenes between Paul and Florence, it is surprising that the child does not receive so much as a passing mention in the play. However, Paul is conspicuous by his absence, for the hole he leaves in Brougham's narrative means that Dombey's rejection of his daughter's love goes unexplained. In the novel, Florence is a disappointment because Dombey longs for an heir to take over his business. When Paul is born, Dombey's devotion to his son seems to cement his aversion to his daughter. However, Dombey is also plagued by a stubborn recollection: witnessing Florence embracing her mother in her final moments seems an enduring 'reproach to him' for his wife's death.<sup>112</sup> In Brougham's play, Dombey's lack of love for his daughter is mentioned in passing by Carker, but the disturbing implications of this brief aside—'The same repulsive start! What can cause this intense dislike?'—are never addressed.<sup>113</sup>

Yet while Brougham downplays Dombey's antipathy to his daughter in her early years and her unpalatably miserable childhood, he retains Dickens's excruciating depiction of the dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship between Mrs Skewton and Edith. When Edith realises that her scheming, vacuous mother is plotting to marry her off to Dombey, the mask of composure she adopts as a defence mechanism falls away and she vehemently denounces the life to which she has been condemned:

When was I a child? [...] I was a woman, artful, designing, mercenary, laying snares for men, before I knew myself or you, or even understood the base and wretched aim of every new display I learnt [...] There is no slave in the market, no horse in the fair, so shown, and offered, and examined, and paraded, as I have been for ten long, shameful years!<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Dickens, *Dombey*, p. 31.

<sup>113</sup> John Brougham, *Dombey and Son, in Three Acts, Dramatized from Dickens' Novel* (London: John Dicks, 1885), p. 6. Accessed via *American Drama Full-text Database* (Proquest Literature Online).

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, p. 9.



This passionate speech has been lifted almost verbatim from the novel. It is evidently an outpouring of the humiliation and resentment Edith is frequently forced to suppress, and points to decidedly sinister problems. Edith has been deprived of a childhood because her mother has tutored her in the art of ‘display’ from her infancy. Attaining only those ornamental accomplishments required to make her attractive to men has propelled Edith inexorably towards a ‘base and wretched aim’ all her life: marriage. Edith’s provocative alignment of marriage with slavery and, more implicitly, with prostitution, irresistibly recalls the strident female voice of the novel which caused such a stir on its publication just the year before Brougham’s play was staged: Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). It is difficult to believe that Brougham would not have recognised certain parallels between the two women, particularly because he produced a dramatisation of *Jane Eyre* only eight months after the debut of *Dombey*. This adaptation premiered in March 1849 at the Bowery Theatre in New York and transformed Jane’s narratorial meditations into passionate speeches befitting the melodramatic genre to which Brougham’s play belonged.<sup>115</sup> The child Jane of Brontë’s novel views John Reed as a tyrannical master and herself as a rebel slave, but she finds herself trapped in a different version of this narrative once she is engaged to Rochester. When her husband-to-be takes her to Milcote to purchase pre-nuptial clothes and jewellery, Jane refuses to accept his gifts because ‘his smile was such as a sultan might [...] bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched’.<sup>116</sup> Brontë equates possessions with power here but, crucially, Jane is not the one doing the purchasing, and she recognises that this gives Rochester the upper hand. Her refusal to be reduced to a decorative ornament allows her to retain her subjectivity. Both Jane and Edith are acutely aware that women become economic units of exchange once they enter the marriage market, but while Jane manages to sidestep this fate, Edith finds herself powerless to avoid it.

Brougham does not shy away from depicting Edith’s misery in her marriage, retaining the confrontation scene from the novel in which Dombey attempts to quash her disobedience:

*Dombey*: I have authority, madam, as your husband, to speak to you where, when, and before whom I please!

*Edith*: Go on sir!---I would not stop you now, nor save you the utterance of one word, if the room were burning!

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<sup>115</sup> Patsy Stoneman, *Jane Eyre on Stage, 1848–1898* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2007), p. 67.

<sup>116</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Penguin Classics edn, (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 310.

*Dombey*: There is a rebellious principle within you, which you cannot curb too soon, which you *must* curb, Mrs Dombey.

*Edith*: [...] do you think, with the loathing which I must have for you within my breast, that you can bend or break me into submission and obedience?--- Never!<sup>117</sup>

This antagonistic clash of wills furnishes Brougham with the perfect opportunity to capitalise on some of the most melodramatic aspects of the novel. The hostility that exists between Dombey and Edith is apparent even at the level of their language, as Brougham contrasts Dombey's barbed civilities with Edith's more direct and emotionally-charged retorts. When Dombey refers with frigid politesse to Edith's 'rebellious principle', his wife responds by furiously declaring her 'loathing' for him. Like Dickens, Brougham makes it clear that Edith is both openly fighting against, and doomed to remain imprisoned within, the patriarchal structures that contain her. She confidently declares that Dombey will never 'bend or break [her] into submission and obedience', but Dombey recognises that the laws work conclusively in his favour; reminding Edith of the promises she made when she uttered her wedding vows, he triumphantly tells her that, 'as [her] husband', he has the 'authority' to treat her however he sees fit. Nevertheless, Edith refuses to silently endure his ill treatment. Brougham makes it clear that Dombey's conduct renders him entirely unworthy of her love and suggests that wifely obedience is morally questionable when it entails submitting to cruelty.

The dramatic tension reaches its peak when Florence, who has witnessed the whole scene, attempts to intervene on Edith's behalf: 'Dear father! Oh, let me intercede for her!' Unfortunately, Dombey remains unmoved by his daughter's plea and commands, 'Away! and quit my sight!' and 'Strikes her'.<sup>118</sup> Dickens's Florence is spared the agony of witnessing the entire exchange between Dombey and Edith, and it is in the aftermath of Edith's departure, rather than immediately after the confrontation, that Dombey's suppressed rage finally spills over into violence. Brougham conflates the two incidents in order to propel the narrative towards its resolution.

In both the novel and the play, this troubling episode compels Florence to flee from her home and take refuge with the kindly and protective Cuttle in Solomon Gills's shop. Brougham follows Dickens's lead in portraying him as a sympathetic, paternal figure.

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<sup>117</sup> Brougham, *Dombey*, p. 12.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

When Florence begs to be allowed to stay with him, he responds warmly, ‘My lady lass, you’re here as safe as if you were a top of St. Paul’s with the ladder cast off [...] Come, lean on me---there’s a sofia in the next room, sleep it is that you want’.<sup>119</sup> Despite having no children of his own, Cuttle understands instinctively that it is his duty to provide the ‘safe’ haven Florence has been seeking. His awareness of her physical frailty and solicitousness for her welfare clearly indicates that he possesses the warmth of heart her own father lacks. In both the novel and the play, Cuttle’s loving care allows Florence to make a good recovery. One day, having received news of Walter Gay’s return from Barbados (the young man has long been presumed dead), an elated Cuttle breaks the news to Florence by means of an elaborate ruse. After repeating at regular intervals that Walter must be ‘drowned’, he tells her the story of a young man who, against all odds, survives a devastating shipwreck.<sup>120</sup> At the end of the tale, the young man is revealed to be none other than Walter himself, who appears at just the right moment to claim Florence as his own:

*Cuttle:* [...] he found his old friend a breaking of the intelligence to his young sweetheart, and before she could say another word he was down on his bended knees before her, and the first word she heard was --- (Walter kneeling at Florence’s side)

*Florence:* (With a cry of joy) Walter, dear, dear, Walter!

*Walter:* Beloved Florence!<sup>121</sup>

Walter’s long awaited and emotional homecoming is clearly designed to elicit both tears and smiles from the audience. Cuttle’s delight in prolonging the suspense and staging a ‘big reveal’ anticipates the final scene from Tom Robertson’s *Caste* (1867), a domestic comedy drama which explores a marriage threatened by class divisions. Like Walter, one of Robertson’s protagonists, George Eccles, makes a miraculous return from the dead, and his sister-in-law conducts an elaborate performance, complete with piano playing for dramatic effect, to reveal the joyful news. Both of these plays contain an element of self-consciousness, then, but this meta-theatricality is contained within classic melodramatic devices. Brougham and Robertson remain reliant on emotional investment in their virtuous characters and the audience must suspend their disbelief in order to accept the moral justice of these improbable reunions.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

Florence is also reunited with her fiercely loyal servant Susan Nipper, and the third and final homecoming is that of Solomon Gills, who has been absent for many months searching for Walter. Like his nephew, Gills appears at exactly the right moment, as though summoned by magic. Walter has just remarked sadly to Cuttle, 'But my poor uncle [...] Is there no hope?' when, right on cue, Gills materialises out of nowhere:

*Sol Gills:* Home! --- What! --- Ned --- Ned Cuttle---

*Cuttle:* It's his voice, his hidetical voice!

*Sol Gills:* Walter and Florence, too!—home, did you say!

*Florence:* Yes, home, dear uncle --- home to our very hearts!<sup>122</sup>

In this heartfelt exchange, the word 'home' is repeated like a litany or magic spell: Gills says it first, in disbelief, and then again, as if to underline the miraculous nature of his own return. When Florence echoes Gills's astonished utterance, the wish has become a reality. Yet although this blissfully happy moment appears to propel Brougham's play towards domestic closure, other questions remain unanswered. While Walter and Florence's impending marriage heralds the creation of a new family, none of the characters allude to *Dombey*, perhaps because Brougham sought to avoid allowing this unresolved issue to darken the close of the play. The last time we see *Dombey* and Florence together on stage is when *Dombey* strikes his daughter, and they are never reunited. As Michael Booth notes, nineteenth-century melodramas frequently featured fathers and daughters falling out over misunderstandings, but convention dictated that they tended to be 'tearfully reconciled at the end; the reconciliation being emotionally protracted and sometimes including a ritualistic blessing'.<sup>123</sup> In neglecting to include a scene of this kind in his play, Brougham leaves the discord unresolved and deviates from the idealisation of familial bonds so central to Victorian domestic ideology. Brougham's Florence finds domestic contentment in the formation of affective bonds with Walter, Solomon Gills, and Cuttle. Although she is unrelated to Gills, she does not hesitate to call him 'dear uncle' in the speech above, and her reliance on Cuttle as a substitute paternal figure has already been established. Both Dickens and Brougham make it clear that these kindly men have become Florence's protectors. However, while Dickens's narrative comes to rest only once Florence has been reconciled with *Dombey*, Brougham seems to suggest that the reassuring presence of both Gills and Cuttle negates her need for the man

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>123</sup> Booth, *Victorian Age*, p. 155.

who has never been a real father to her. Holly Furneaux has convincingly shown that Dickens's writings pay tribute to the creation of 'elective, affective formations', but although *Dombey* celebrates Cuttle and Gills's paternal kindness towards Florence, it is Dombey's moral reformation and reconciliation with his daughter that forms the emotional core of the novel. Brougham, by contrast, allows Florence's surrogate parents to displace her 'real' one and thus undermines 'the assumed moral superiority of the biological family unit'.<sup>124</sup>

The anonymously authored *Dombey and Son; or Good Mrs Brown the Child Stealer*<sup>125</sup> is a melodrama in two acts which, as its slightly odd title suggests, inflates the importance of one of the novel's more minor characters.<sup>126</sup> As in Brougham's play, we do not witness Dombey's dismissive treatment of Florence in her early years at first hand. Brougham uses Carker to highlight their dysfunctional relationship; here, this responsibility falls on Walter, who informs the audience that Dombey has 'taken a dislike' to his daughter, and that 'she's left unnoticed'.<sup>127</sup> This is a brief comment, and something of an understatement, but a couple of scenes later, Dombey makes his own feelings clear when he exclaims contemptuously, 'what's a girl to Dombey and Son!'<sup>128</sup>

As in the novel, the young Florence is not only neglected by her own father but forced to endure the distressing experience of being accidentally separated from her servant Susan Nipper, and sweet-natured nurse Polly Toodle. She is kidnapped by the rag dealer, Mrs Brown, who views her as a golden opportunity to steal some valuable clothes. In Dickens's text, Florence's trauma ends when she is voluntarily released by Mrs Brown, and she anxiously wanders the streets until she has the good fortune to chance upon Walter Gay, who takes her home with him to the wooden Midshipman. However, in the play, the incident is much more melodramatic, as Walter directly witnesses Florence being threatened. He 'rushes in' to save her when she 'screams' and Mrs Brown 'raises

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<sup>124</sup> Holly Furneaux, *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 28; p. 25.

<sup>125</sup> [Anon.], *Dombey and Son, or Good Mrs Brown the Child Stealer*, (London: James Henderson, n.d.). Accessed via *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (Proquest Literature Online). The script states that the play was first staged at the Royal Strand Theatre but neglects to mention performance dates.

<sup>126</sup> See Bolton, p. 306. Bolton records a play with an identical title, also performed at the Strand. However, while it seems likely that his note refers to the drama which I am discussing here, Bolton names Tom Taylor as the dramatist and lists a slightly different cast and scenes, so no definitive conclusions can be drawn.

<sup>127</sup> [Anon.], *Good Mrs Brown*, p. 2.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

her scissors to strike him' before a 'mob enter' shouting 'A child stealer! Away with her!' The old woman is then 'seized and forced upon her knees, grinning savagely'.<sup>129</sup> At this point the action freezes into a tableau, with Mrs Brown's vulnerable pose clearly signifying her defeat. However, as it transpires, the threat which she poses to unsuspecting children has not, in fact, been excised: later in the play, Dombey reveals that he has lost his son:

I've advertised in vain. I feel assured that the boy has been stolen [...] on Wednesday, my servant [...] took the children into the park [...] The boy had on some very expensive clothing---it must have been his clothes that attracted the attention of the thief.<sup>130</sup>

Dombey's fear that his son has been taken for his clothes is evidently a pretty heavy hint, and our suspicions are confirmed when we are taken inside the 'wretched cellar in Smithfield' where Paul is being held captive by Mrs Brown. The only furnishings are 'some straw, an old sack, and broken tables and chairs' and the terrified child responds to this unfamiliar and frightening environment by sitting 'trembling in a corner'.<sup>131</sup> When he begs to be allowed to leave, Mrs Brown coolly tells him that she will keep him until a reward is offered for his release. Her gleeful threat—'leave off making that noise, or I will clap you in my coal-hole, where your friend, Old Bogey, will have you'—brings to mind the menacing behaviour of a wicked witch from a fairy tale.<sup>132</sup>

From this point onwards, the scene has unambiguous parallels with Oliver's initiation into life in Fagin's den. As the innocent child whose safety and wellbeing is under threat, Paul steps into Oliver's role and, as his jailor, Mrs Brown becomes a female reincarnation of Fagin. Like Fagin, Mrs Brown gives her charge gin to send him to sleep and gloats over a pile of stolen goods which she keeps squirrelled away from prying eyes. When the child wakes, she panics and, 'laying her hand on a knife, starts furiously up', exclaiming 'What's that! Why do you watch me? Why are you awake? Speak out, boy---quick, for your life!'<sup>133</sup> Fagin threatens Oliver in exactly the same manner, 'laying his hand on a bread knife [...] and 'start[ing] furiously up': 'What do you watch me for? Why are you awake? What have you seen? Speak out, boy! Quick ---quick, for your life!'<sup>134</sup> The

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>134</sup> Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, Oxford World Classics edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 65.

parallels do not stop there, for Mrs Brown goes on to ask Paul if he saw ‘any of these pretty things’ and tells him, ‘Ah, they’re mine---all my little property, all I have to live upon in my old age’. This dialogue is lifted almost verbatim from *Twist*, and Mrs Brown even addresses Paul as ‘my dear’, one of Fagin’s most recognisable verbal tics.<sup>135</sup> Paul waits until she falls asleep, and then makes an attempt to escape. When Mrs Brown pursues him, she finds herself face to face with a police inspector, but ‘knocks him down--bolts the door within, opens the trap and descends---’. Just a few moments later, however, Mrs Brown’s flight is all but forgotten when a second policeman enters with some devastating news. He reveals that ‘in his anxiety to escape’, Paul ‘ran upstairs and gained the roof---his foot slipped---and he was dashed to pieces’.<sup>136</sup> In Dickens’s novel, little Paul wastes away due to an unspecified illness. Here, although his death occurs offstage, it bears the tell-tale marks of melodrama, and becomes another knowing reference to an element of *Twist*’s plot. Although Bill Sikes is a villain attempting to evade justice and Paul an innocent child endeavouring to free himself from Mrs Brown’s clutches, both flee from danger by climbing onto the roof, and both meet their deaths in the attempt. The phrase ‘dashed to pieces’ even echoes Dickens’s description of Bullseye’s final act of loyalty to his master. The dog sees Sikes’s body dangling on the rope with which he accidentally hanged himself, and leaps towards it, falling into a ditch and ‘dash[ing] out its brains’ on a stone.<sup>137</sup>

Dombey reacts to the news of his son’s accident with an outpouring of grief: ‘Death to my ambitious hopes; —my poor boy is dead!’ and the first act closes at this moment, with a tableau.<sup>138</sup> The numerous similarities between this portion of the play and *Twist* are too striking to be ignored. The playwright may simply have been attempting to replicate *Twist*’s success by recycling elements of its plot. Yet the aim was surely also to build a rapport with the audience by making sly references to another work in Dickens’s oeuvre; those playgoers who had read or seen *Twist* could not have been unaware of the parallels and would surely have enjoyed making comparisons. Finally, it is worth noting that Mrs Brown was played by Harwood Cooper, an actor and playwright who, as we have seen, adapted *Twist* for the stage himself. It is possible that Cooper had a hand in

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<sup>135</sup> [Anon.], *Good Mrs Brown*, p. 5.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Dickens, *Twist*, p. 415.

<sup>138</sup> [Anon.], *Good Mrs Brown*, p. 5.

some of the production decisions and that his attachment to *Twist*'s narrative and characters shaped the *Dombey* dramatisation.

Act 2 abandons references to *Twist*, focusing instead on Dombey's disastrous marriage to Edith and Carker's attempt to frame Walter for robbery. Although in Dickens's novel Carker's constant scheming, cruelty to his brother, false loyalty to Dombey, and attempt to elope with Edith all mark him out as a crook, in the play he also pits himself against Walter as a love rival. We witness Carker reading aloud a letter from Walter informing him that he has survived 'the perils of shipwreck' and that he seeks advice regarding his future prospects in Dombey's firm. Carker's response is deliciously villainous:

The devil himself has thrown this boy again in my path: the stepping stone to my ambition is Florence; and back he comes to mar it [...] You have escaped the vengeance of the sea, but not mine [...] Ha, ha! (He places one of the papers against the window pane, and against it the bottom of Walter's note). The papers are ready---the bird is caged [...] Now for the third signature (tracing it). This ensures my triumph, and destroys him. And as I place this seal, so do I seal his destruction.<sup>139</sup>

Carker clearly poses a sexual threat to the 'caged' and vulnerable Florence, and his desire to settle scores with the unsuspecting Walter, not to mention his demoniacal laugh, explicitly identify him as the play's chief villain. When the two men meet, Carker affects to be Walter's friend and warns him that if he persists in pursuing Florence, he is sure to incur Dombey's wrath and destroy his prospects. Walter responds as a young hero should: 'I will not, cannot, resign her; I can lose all but her love. Her image is here, and nothing can efface it'.<sup>140</sup> Carker then offers Walter some 'trifling assistance' in the form of a packet of money, which he gratefully accepts. When the young man leaves, Carker reveals his intention to 'put the police upon his track' and melodramatic special effects ('thunder and lightning') are used to underline his wickedness. However, as 'A face is seen [...] glowing through the window, unobserved by Carker', the audience can rest assured that the crime has not gone unnoticed.<sup>141</sup>

In the final scene, Carker tells Dombey that Walter has been conspiring to marry Florence and that he has stolen from the company 'a packet containing [...] railway

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.



shares [...] to the value of five thousand pounds'.<sup>142</sup> Dombey is initially taken in by these false claims and Walter's situation appears hopeless, until help arrives from an unexpected quarter:

*Walter:* Villain! Oh, well laid plan---plan of a demon [...] the accusation is as false as the heart that coined it; and this is my return---this my welcome home. Oh, I am very poor and friendless! oh curse of poverty! Where shall I turn now for one kind look---where shall I find a friend!

[...]

*Mrs Brown:* [...] I overheard [Carker] read that young man's letter---he placed those papers in the packet himself, first tracing a name on the window. Look! look! how he shakes. Ha, ha! Do you recollect seeing a face through that window?<sup>143</sup>

In Brougham's play, Walter is quickly reunited with Florence upon his return, and Dombey's absence makes obtaining his consent for the marriage unnecessary. Here, the playwright draws out the suspense, which gives the long-anticipated happy ending greater impact. Walter laments his 'friendless' state, but the helping hand of which he stands so sorely in need is extended just in time to spare him from jail. Mrs Brown reveals that she witnessed Carker's wrongdoing and, in so doing, transforms herself from a criminal fleeing the law into an agent of justice. She makes no declaration of repentance for her past actions, but she does uncover Carker's villainy and thus secures Walter his happy-ever-after.

Edith also intervenes on Walter's behalf and defiantly declares her intention to protect him: 'I stand here as his defender, against all the world'.<sup>144</sup> A moment later, she dramatically reveals that Walter is not an orphan as he has always supposed but her own child, long thought drowned: 'You wanted friends, Walter; you have them now---loving friends [...] Walter, no more---stranger no longer---long, long parted, never to part again. Come to your mother's heart'.<sup>145</sup> In Dickens's novel, our final glimpse of Edith is far less comforting. When Florence returns from abroad with her husband and son, the two women have a sombre conversation about the past, and Edith refuses to ask for Dombey's forgiveness or to express repentance for marrying him. When Florence asks if she will see her step-mother again, Edith replies sadly, 'Never again! When you leave me in this

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

dark room, think that you have left me in the grave'.<sup>146</sup> Dickens's final harrowing portrait of Edith's isolation and despair suggests that the suffering which she has endured has irreparably damaged her ability to love and to be loved. This playwright, by contrast, gives her a son and suggests that they will enjoy a happy future together. The fact that Dombey proposes a toast to his daughter and joins her hands with Walter's clearly signals that he has come to recognise her worth, and that he will give his consent to her marriage.

Nineteenth-century dramatists adapting *Dombey* for the Victorian stage made significant cuts and alterations to Dickens's portraits of familial life. In Brougham's *Dombey and Son*, Paul Dombey's absence allows Brougham to avoid tackling Dickens's troubling depiction of Dombey's attempts to mould his son in his own image, but it also means that his aversion to Florence seems entirely arbitrary. Like Dickens, Brougham uses Edith's unhappy marriage to highlight the restrictions that blight the lives of middle-class women and stages the shocking incident from the novel in which Dombey's suppressed rage finally leads him to lash out at his innocent daughter. Yet these unsettling aspects of domestic life are elided at the play's close. The end of Brougham's drama features three joyful homecomings in quick succession and sidesteps the unresolved issue of Dombey's estrangement from his daughter. In Dickens's text, Florence's flight from home is only temporary, but in Brougham's play, no reference is made to the possibility of a reconciliation. Encircled by the paternal arms of Cuttle and Gills, and with the prospect of marrying the man she loves, Florence leaves her miserable youth behind her to enter the loving home she has always longed for. *Dombey and Son; or Good Mrs Brown the Child Stealer* is a more sensational adaptation that includes an entirely new storyline inspired by *Twist*. The drama's ending, too, deviates significantly from the close of the novel. Pitting Carker against Walter provides the requisite conflict between virtue and vice upon which all melodrama hinges and enables the playwright to maintain the dramatic tension even after Walter has returned home safely. Interestingly, Mrs Brown is given the opportunity to redeem herself for causing Paul's death: in exposing Carker's fraud she brings a villain to justice, but also becomes a fairy godmother of sorts who secures Walter's future happiness with Florence. The virtuous young protagonists are reunited both with their surviving parents and with one another, crystallising the mood of domestic serenity at the play's close.

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<sup>146</sup> Dickens, *Dombey*, p. 919.

## Conclusion

Disruptive undercurrents of satire and cynicism in the 1830s novels did not quash Dickens's impulse to usher his protagonists into the safe confines of middle-class domesticity and thus endorse the curative properties of the hearth. In the 1840s, this was beginning to change, although domesticity remains a morally transformative force for good in the *Carol*. Barnett's adaptation pigeonholed Dickens's characters into the stock roles that dominated nineteenth-century theatre and heightened the didactic aspects of the novella, but this is not to say that his treatment of its themes was reductive. He echoed Dickens's plea for the middle classes to carry hearthside comforts to the streets of the poor. At the same time, he used new subplots to suggest, in a manner more explicit than Dickens, that domesticity's power was limited. In his play, even apparently secure havens (like those inhabited by the Cratchits and Frank) have no defence against the venality of the outer world.

Dickens was also sceptical about the home's ability to function as a protective fortress, although he suggested that it was the damaging behaviour of individuals within the walls, rather than outside forces, that posed the biggest threat to the family. The struggles of Nell and Florence, in the *Curiosity Shop* and *Dombey* respectively, indicate that securing a sanctuary is impossible when parental inadequacy threatens to destroy the hearth from within. Nell may be terrorised by Quilp, but it is her grandfather's gambling addiction that, ultimately, drains the life out of her, and Florence's frightening experience with Mrs Brown is notably less distressing than her father's cruelty. However, as with the 1830s novels, the generic and ideological conventions of melodrama (moral clarification, happy endings, the idealisation of the family unit) prompted adaptors to selectively reimagine the most disruptive aspects of Dickensian domesticity. Both adaptations of the *Curiosity Shop* reformed the unruly relatives whose morally lax behaviour undermined the sanctity of familial bonds in the novel. Making Fred repentant for neglecting Nell was a shrewd move on Stirling's part, for it was an obvious pathway to a happy ending, enabling him to heal the rifts in the Trent family and rescue Nell from Quilp's clutches in one fell swoop. Tying up loose ends and allowing persecuted characters to triumph was a prerequisite of melodrama, but Stirling was also recognising, and responding to, readers' desire to see Dickens's valiant child heroine attain the happiness that was her moral due. Unlike Stirling, Lander did not grant Nell her refuge but his penitent portrait of Grandfather Trent provided an alternative form of comfort. Both playwrights reassured

audiences that selfishness and deceit could be cured with a ministering angel to lead the way; in Dickens's novel, Nell's incorruptible goodness fails to alter the behaviour of others.

While the *Curiosity Shop* adaptors reformed those members of the Trent family who failed to fulfil their proper duties, the author of *Good Mrs Brown the Child Stealer* allowed the titular character to make amends for causing little Paul's death. Mrs Brown's actions secure punishment for the villainous Carker, and domestic happiness for Walter and Florence. Their impending marriage heals the divide between Florence and her father, and the revelation that Walter is Edith's son performs a similar function, reuniting an estranged parent with her long-lost child. In Dickens's novel, Edith is a threshold figure excluded from domestic life but, like Smike, she was granted a loving family in her afterlife on the stage.

Brougham's *Dombey* dramatisation faithfully depicted Dombey's brutal treatment of his wife and daughter and, in so doing, highlighted women's powerlessness within the family unit. However, Brougham swept aside these issues in order to reach a satisfactory point of closure and excluded Dickens's cruel patriarch from the final scenes of his play. This is not to suggest that his adaptation was formulaic: failing to provide a reunion scene was a brave deviation from melodramatic convention, and the text. Offering the affective bonds Florence forms with Walter, Gills, and Cuttle as a positive alternative to blood ties covertly undermined the importance attributed to biological relationships in domestic rhetoric.

Dickens's adaptors thus continued to be inventive with their source material, albeit largely within generic and medium-specific boundaries. Part II has discussed a number of new sub-plots and sensational incidents, such as the electrifying kidnapping scenes in dramatisations of the *Curiosity Shop* and *Dombey*. Shifts in narrative emphasis, such as heightening the melodramatic impact of the stealing scene in the *Curiosity Shop*, or giving Mrs Brown a more important role in *Dombey*, were also markers of the adaptors' creativity. Although serving largely to exploit the resources of the Victorian theatre and entertain audiences, bringing minor characters centre stage was a significant innovation that playfully reoriented the focus of Dickens's texts. As we shall see, adaptors of the 1850s novels opted for more radical shifts in narratorial perspective. Amplifying the importance of particular characters and storylines allowed them to engage with mid-

nineteenth-century social debates, particularly those that explored the links between women's sexual transgressions and their desertion of the hearth.

## Part III: The 1850s

### Introduction

Although the Dickens dramatising industry had been declining since the 1840s, with the publication of *David Copperfield*, ‘British theatrical interest in Dickens’s latest story [...] revived’.<sup>1</sup> By 1860, there had been at least twenty-five adaptations of the novel. However, it was not until Andrew Halliday staged his version, entitled *Little Em’ly*, in 1869 that ‘a true rage [...] developed’, with countless adaptors keen to replicate his success.<sup>2</sup> *Bleak House* was not particularly popular with dramatists on its initial publication: by 1870, only around nine adaptations had been staged. This was to change, however, and the 1870s proved a prolific decade for *Bleak House* adaptations, with a particular vogue for plays that focused on Jo’s story. This continued into the 1880s, with Lady Dedlock and Hortense also exciting interest.<sup>3</sup> The upsurge in enthusiasm for *Bleak House* dramas was part of a broader trend, as Dickens’s death rekindled playwrights’ interest in putting his novels on the stage. *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*, did not, in general, inspire many adaptations, although Dickens was involved in producing an official version of *A Tale of Two Cities* at the Lyceum, which indicates that he remained willing to collaborate with the adaptors as he had done in the 1840s.<sup>4</sup>

Part III of this thesis comprises close readings of the domestic in adaptations of two of Dickens’s 1850s novels, *David Copperfield* (May 1849–November 1850) and *Bleak House* (March 1852–September 1853). Like their forerunners, the adaptors who dramatised these novels reimagined the texts in interesting and surprising ways. George Lander’s version of *Bleak House* centres on the pathetic struggles of homeless crossing-sweeper Jo, while John Palgrave Simpson used the child to provide comedy, rather than pathos, in his drama. At the core of the *Bleak House* and *Copperfield* adaptations, however, is the issue of women’s abandonment and desecration of the hearth. The adaptors’ approaches, and fictional solutions to, this problem sheds light on their

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<sup>1</sup> H. Philip Bolton, *Dickens Dramatized* (London: Mansell Publishing Ltd, 1987), Vol. 1, p. 321.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 395.

engagement with mid-nineteenth-century debates regarding women's social and familial roles, debates the Victorians broadly defined as 'the woman question'.

Most of the plays I examine are accessible through online databases, although I have also explored some primary materials (an adaptation of *Copperfield* in the form of an anonymous prompter's manuscript, Halliday's play, divided into character parts, and some theatrical advertisements) from the Pettingell Collection and the Charles Dickens Theatre Collection at the University of Kent. Unlike Parts I and II of my thesis, Part III does not include any adaptations contemporaneous with the novels, largely because, as Dickens's career progressed, it was common for several years, or even decades, to pass before the dramatists began their task. Bolton speculates that this was because Dickens's writing 'grew ever more independent of theatrical techniques and mannerisms', and that it therefore took longer 'to find the best way to dramatize' his stories.<sup>5</sup> It is certainly true that, in his mature fiction, Dickens modified the melodramatic techniques that underpinned his early writing style. However, Bolton does the adaptors a disservice in suggesting that they struggled to formulate creative solutions to the problems the adaptation process presented. After all, they were more than capable of imaginatively reworking his texts and had been doing so since the 1830s. As I have already suggested, another likely explanation for the lull in the Dickens dramatising industry, and its resurgence in the 1870s and 1880s, is that the adaptors recognised an opportunity to capitalise on the public's renewed affection for Dickens's stories following his unexpected death.

The impact of genre on the adaptation process has been a dominant theme throughout this thesis and remains central to my argument here. All of the adaptations discussed in Part III are, once again, melodramas, but they differ from the other plays I have examined thus far in bringing sexually transgressive women centre stage. The *Copperfield* adaptors opted to give precedence to Emily's story over David's: the seduction of an innocent working-class girl (Emily) by an aristocratic rake (Steerforth) was an immensely popular scenario that was recycled throughout the nineteenth century, one which Dickens had, somewhat ironically, plucked from the stage. Dramatisers of *Bleak House* utilised tropes from sensation fiction which, like the seduction plot, were transposed from the stage to the novel and back again. Lady Dedlock had clear affinities with female characters from

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

sensation novels, women whose dubious pasts threatened to destroy domestic harmony and the family name. As Sos Eltis explains, the fallen woman play was a distinctive sub-genre of melodrama,

Whereas novelists like Gaskell, Braddon, and Hardy were concerned with the psychology of the sexually delinquent woman, melodrama's forte was exterior action not internal motivation, so the fallen woman on stage was predominantly a convenient plot-mechanism rather than the focus of sympathetic analysis. The discarded mistress, seduced maiden, and unmarried mother crop up again and again as the motivation behind untold acts of villainy and familial disruption.<sup>6</sup>

Eltis is wise not to overlook the moral didacticism that underpinned Victorian theatrical representations of the fallen woman. However, we must seek to avoid reinforcing hierarchical distinctions regarding the comparative complexities of drama and prose and, despite conventional endings, the gender politics of the adaptations I discuss are more intricate than they initially appear. The second point I wish to pick up on here is that focusing on what Eltis terms 'exterior action' led the adaptors to push Dickens's narrators to the margins of their plays, a significant decision considering that *Copperfield* is narrated entirely by David. *Bleak House* is slightly different as an experiment in double narration, wherein Esther shares the storytelling with an omniscient narrator. In the *Copperfield* adaptations, David's psychological development is less important than Emily's downfall, probably because of the difficulties of retaining subjective, split-time narration on the stage. Embracing the clear narrative arc that the fallen woman plot provided was a pragmatic alternative. A similar thing happened in the *Bleak House* dramatisations, with George Lander and John Palgrave Simpson eschewing Esther's point of view and focusing instead on the mystery surrounding Lady Dedlock's past.

In short, like their predecessors, these playwrights favoured plot-driven storytelling characterised by explicit visual cues and economical dialogue that was essentially melodramatic in nature. This made the fallen woman plot particularly appealing, but it also shaped the modifications they made to Dickensian domesticity in other ways. In *Copperfield*, Dickens exposes the internally contradictory nature of domesticity and the failings of individuals within the home but, in the adaptations, trouble arises only when an invader crosses its hallowed threshold. The adaptors' tendency to cut characters that

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<sup>6</sup> Sos Eltis, 'The Fallen Woman on Stage: Maidens, Magdalens, and the Emancipated Female', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. by Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 222–36, (p. 223).



complicated or undermined domestic rhetoric is another issue that merits consideration. All three *Copperfield* adaptors excise Dora from the narrative, replacing Dickens's sympathetic portrayal of her domestic failures with a simple melodramatic marriage plot that unites David and Agnes. The drive for closure which characterised adaptations of the 1830s and 1840s novels remained strong. In *Bleak House*, Dickens draws attention to the artifice of Esther's happy-ever-after; Simpson's adaptation strives to tie up the loose ends of the plot more neatly, although troubling questions regarding Esther's future linger at the play's close. Adaptors of *Copperfield* portray David and Agnes's marriage as the satisfactory endpoint of the narrative but, in the novel, the trials of connubial life are apparent in a proliferation of unhappy marriages. Clara Copperfield's misery with Murdstone, Emily's aborted marriage to Ham, and David and Dora's disastrous union may be played out by the time David is united with Agnes, but Dickens has already undermined the notion that marriage is the gateway to a life of contentment and security, an issue discussed in greater detail in the following section.

### **I – *David Copperfield***

Dickens's eighth novel, *David Copperfield*, is, in many ways, a quintessential *Bildungsroman* that charts the journey of its eponymous hero from early childhood through to psychological and emotional maturity. It was published in three volumes the same year, 1850, as Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, both of which were similarly concerned with the workings of memory.<sup>7</sup> David passes through an extraordinary number of homes in the course of the narrative, even by Dickensian standards, and his search for domestic happiness is integral to his trajectory of individual development. Monthly sales of *Copperfield* hovered at around 20,000 rather than the 32,000 *Dombey* had achieved and reviews were by no means wholly positive, but Dickens's reputation remained secure. One reviewer attributed his enduring popularity to the intimacy he shared with his readers: 'There is not a fireside in the kingdom where the cunning fellow has not contrived to secure a corner for himself as one of the dearest, and [...] oldest [...] friends of the family'.<sup>8</sup> For this critic, it was Dickens's ability to

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Schlicke, 'David Copperfield', in *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, ed. by Paul Schlicke (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 144–48, (p. 146).

<sup>8</sup> [Anon.], 'Charles Dickens and David Copperfield', *Fraser's Magazine*, 42 (December 1850), in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Philip Collins (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 244.

portray himself as a benevolent paterfamilias that secured him readers' loyalty; indeed, he was virtually a member of their households, and 'most men would as soon think of dissecting a first cousin as of criticizing Charles Dickens'.<sup>9</sup> Other reviewers discussed specific characters and plotlines in *Copperfield*. Agnes Wickfield, Dickens's serene and idealised embodiment of decorous femininity, was something of a favourite: 'Agnes is the finishing grace of Copperfield [...] an abiding light [...] a[n] [...] enduring woman, whose very silence is eloquent'.<sup>10</sup> Like many of Dickens's contemporaries, this critic praised Agnes as a paradigm of quiet femininity but asserted that although her moral authority over David initially 'places her above him', David's 'range of power' (his success as an author) ultimately 'carries him to flights beyond her'.<sup>11</sup> In other words, sequestering Agnes within the domestic sphere ensures that she poses no challenge to David's masculine superiority. Hannah Lawrance greatly admired Agnes, describing her as 'the finest female character Dickens has yet given us' and maintaining that, 'we lay down the book well-pleased to find Agnes the light of Copperfield's happy home'.<sup>12</sup> In Lawrance's view, the domestic tranquillity Agnes offers David gives Dickens's narrative a gratifying sense of closure. Her review appeared in the early 1860s, and her decision to stress Dickens's enthusiasm for hearthside virtues may well have been an anxious response to recent changes in law widely regarded as undermining the sanctity of the marriage bond. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 simplified divorce procedures and allowed all new cases to be handled by a civil court in London rather than by the Church. Many feared that the increase in newspaper coverage of divorce scandals would have a morally damaging impact on the fabric of society.<sup>13</sup> Lawrance's sentimental focus on the idyllic life that David and Agnes share does not acknowledge the possibility of discontent in marriage and suggests that a woman's role is to be the crowning ornament of her husband's 'happy home'. However, another critic took Dickens to task for his enthusiasm for feminine selflessness, and scathingly dismissed his depictions of suffering women as 'gratuitous martyrdom'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> [Anon.], review of *David Copperfield*, *The Examiner*, (14 December 1850) pp. 798–99, (p. 798).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Hannah Lawrance, 'The Collected Works of Charles Dickens', *The British Quarterly Review*, 35 (January 1862), pp. 135–59, (pp. 146–47).

<sup>13</sup> Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago Press, 1989), p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> [Anon.], 'David Copperfield and Pendennis', *Prospective Review*, 7 (July 1851), in *Heritage*, p. 265.

Nevertheless, it is safe to say that *Copperfield*'s other female characters were decidedly less popular; the vengeful Rosa Dartle, in particular, was condemned for her cruel, and unwomanly, demeanour. Samuel Philips scoffed that, 'It is very unlikely that she should seek [Emily] out [...] and gloat over her misery with the fiendish violence ascribed to her'.<sup>15</sup> Philips was clearly troubled by Rosa's lack of feminine compassion: his use of the word 'fiendish' indicates that, like David, he feels compelled to pathologise her behaviour. The *Fraser's Magazine* critic similarly described Rosa's character as 'unnatural' and lamented her 'melodramatic' conduct: 'Such a character is as incongruous and out of place as one of the tragedy queens from a minor theatre would be parading the Strand in full costume in common daylight'.<sup>16</sup> The rather snobbish reference to 'minor' theatres here points to the reviewer's disapproval of Dickens's degrading alliance with popular entertainment. The critic implies that Rosa's very existence in the pages of *Copperfield* cheapens Dickens's novel and is incompatible with the *Bildungsroman*'s contemplative narrative of psychic development. The reviewer who had criticised Agnes's martyrdom was equally disparaging about Rosa and even went so far as to assert that she was 'the chief failure in the work'.<sup>17</sup> Although this comment is somewhat vague, the critic may have been implying that Rosa is both an aesthetic anomaly and an ethical one. She is a 'failure' because she is an inappropriately melodramatic figure for a realist novel, but she is also an unbecoming representative of womanhood.

Dora, too, met with antagonism from critics. Philips argued that, like Rosa, Dora was 'not a fact', and summarily dismissed her as 'an infliction'.<sup>18</sup> Margaret Oliphant was not quite as cutting, but briskly pronounced it 'very wise of our author that he attempts to make nothing further of her than a [...] remembrance'.<sup>19</sup> Lawrance was more generous, stating that 'although we had rather she had been left out', Dora 'is drawn with such tender grace, that we feel willing to forgive her sad deficiencies in housekeeping'.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that Lawrance and Oliphant were summarising Dickens's career to date. For both critics, Dora stood out as an unwelcome anomaly amongst Dickens's other

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<sup>15</sup> Samuel Philips, 'David Copperfield and Pendennis', *The Times*, (11 June 1851), p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> [Anon.], *Fraser's*, p. 247.

<sup>17</sup> [Anon.], *Prospective Review*, p. 266.

<sup>18</sup> Philips, *Times*, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Oliphant, 'Charles Dickens', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 77 (April 1855), pp. 451–66, (p. 461).

<sup>20</sup> Lawrance, *Quarterly Review*, p. 147.

female characters. These comments are, in some ways, unsurprising. Dora is, after all, Agnes's rival for David's affections, and a discomfiting reminder that marriage can result from a grave error of judgement. Moreover, her 'deficiencies' expose David's own domestic failings. David's blundering efforts to improve Dora not only disturbingly recall Murdstone's tyranny over his mother but are mercilessly mocked by Dickens: 'What [...] course was left to take! To "form her mind!" This was a common phrase of words which had a [...] promising sound, and I resolved to form Dora's mind'.<sup>21</sup> The inverted commas here suggest that David is quoting words, perhaps from a conduct manual. Crucially, this has the effect of denaturalising the phrase, and draws attention to the inadequacies of this system of wifely instruction. Dickens makes it clear that Dora's ineptitude is inevitable, for she has attained only those rudiments of an education required to make her a suitable candidate for marriage, not those befitting a competent housewife.

Interestingly, both Rosa and Dora were excised from one of the first theatrical adaptations of Dickens's novel. John Brougham's *David Copperfield* was first performed on Monday 6 January 1851 at Brougham's Lyceum in New York and dispensed with David's childhood as well as cutting Dora and Rosa from the action. Once again, I wish to briefly note that I have elected to include this adaptation because although, like Brougham's version of *Dombey*, it was initially performed in New York, it was transposed to the British stage when Brougham returned to Britain in the early 1860s after nearly twenty years of managing theatres in the United States. One review even referred to the impact of travel on his performance:

The pieces chosen were "The Irish Ambassador" and "David Copperfield", but as he was evidently suffering from the effects of travelling, it would be unfair at this time to criticise too severely his performances of *Sir Patrick Plenipo* and *Wilkins Micawber*.<sup>22</sup>

This critic felt that Brougham's exhaustion led to a lacklustre performance, but was happy to admit that he was 'favourably received by a numerous and respectable audience'.<sup>23</sup> A review in the *Liverpool Mercury* from 21 June 1862 suggests that the drama was staged as part of a benefit performance, and was both well-acted and well received:

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, Oxford World's Classics edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 675.

<sup>22</sup> [Anon.], 'Theatre Royal', *Glasgow Herald*, (8 April 1862), p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Mr John Brougham took his benefit last evening [...] He appeared as *Wilkins Macawber* [sic] in a dramatised episode in Dickens's work "David Copperfield," written by himself [...] Mr Brougham was called before the curtain at the close of each piece and warmly applauded.<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, this reviewer suggests that Brougham did not stage his play in its entirety on this occasion. Although the phrase 'dramatised episode' is somewhat vague, we can surmise that the reviewer is probably referring to an excerpt from the full-length performance. Essentially, then, this performance may be categorised as an extract of an adaptation, a comic piece which furnished Brougham with the opportunity to showcase his talent for portraying eccentric characters.

Yet although Brougham's play was certainly successful, Andrew Halliday's *Little Em'ly* took the Victorian stage by storm and, despite appearing almost twenty years after the publication of the novel, ultimately became the definitive adaptation of *Copperfield*. It was first performed at the Olympic Theatre in London in 1869 alongside two farces, *Jeanette's Wedding* and *Old Gooseberry*, and had a phenomenally successful run of over 200 performances. Even Dion Boucicault's smash hit, *The Colleen Bawn*, had managed only 165 shows, so Halliday's play was exceptionally popular.<sup>25</sup> Halliday was also unusual amongst his fellow adaptors in securing Dickens's approval of his finished play. Prior to dramatising *Copperfield*, he had already had considerable contact with Dickens, having been a regular contributor to *All The Year Round* since 1861.<sup>26</sup> Halliday wrote to Dickens about his adaptation, and on 2 January 1869, Dickens responded with characteristically detailed advice:

I have gone over your notes for a dramatized Copperfield, and although I notice the usual difficulties in the way of endeavour to put so long a story into so short a space, I have no other fault to find: —except that I do not think you can "change" after the Storm, without an anti-climax. I would assuredly end upon the Beach, and get in what you want of Miss Dartle and Emily, before that scene. It is very important to Mr. Peggotty's character—this is another point—that he should be merciful with, and sorry for, Martha; and that he should never bully her.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> [Anon.], 'Prince of Wales Theatre', *Liverpool Mercury*, (21 June 1862), p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Karen Laird, *The Art of Adapting Victorian Literature, 1848-1920: Dramatizing Jane Eyre, David Copperfield, and The Woman in White* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2015), p. 100.

<sup>26</sup> G. C. Boase, rev. Nilanjana Banerji, 'Halliday, Andrew (1830–1877)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12014>> [accessed 5 April 2017].

<sup>27</sup> Charles Dickens, Letter to Andrew Halliday, [2 January 1869], in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Madeline House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson, 12 Vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965–2002), Vol. 12, pp. 265–66.

Dickens does imply that some of the subtleties of his novel have been lost in translation but acknowledges that cuts are a necessity when ‘so long a story’ has to be squeezed into ‘so short a space’. He also suggests that Halliday has ‘endeavour[ed]’ to do justice to his source material. His main concerns were as follows: securing a convincing transition after the climactic storm, the placement of Emily and Rosa Dartle’s confrontation scene, and the necessity of remaining faithful to his own depiction of Daniel Peggotty’s character. Nevertheless, Dickens does not, as he had done on previous occasions, accuse the adaptor of making a travesty of his work: he merely flags up a few minor issues which he seems confident can be resolved prior to performance.

Reviews of Halliday’s adaptation were largely positive. One critic writing in *The Standard* drew attention to the impressive renovations which had taken place in the Olympic Theatre: ‘the seating accommodation has [...] been remodelled upon the most luxurious principles, the interior generally presenting a most brilliant appearance’.<sup>28</sup> This reviewer also praised S. Emery’s Daniel Peggotty as ‘amongst his highest triumphs’, E. F. Rowe’s Micawber as ‘amusing both in make-up and acting’ and Joseph Irving’s Uriah Heep as ‘quite the ideal of the original’.<sup>29</sup> The fact that the reviewer stressed Irving’s fidelity to Dickens’s creation is important: nearly twenty years after the publication of the novel, memories of the ‘original’ characters remained strong. However, Patti Josephs was pronounced merely ‘acceptable’ as Emily, and the critic complained that Charles Warner’s Steerforth was uncharismatic and ‘lacked boldness’. Although the scenery was ‘in general good’, the reviewer was underwhelmed by the pivotal storm scene, which ‘did not come up to expectation’.<sup>30</sup>

A theatre programme advertising *Little Em’ly* contained a section entitled ‘OPINIONS OF THE PRESS’ with snippets from various reviews. *The Times* focused on the impressive scenery, which secured ‘continuous rounds of applause’, while *The Globe*’s reviewer praised the entire production: ‘The version of Mr Dickens’s story, ‘David Copperfield’, executed with great tact by Andrew Halliday, magnificently mounted, capitally acted, and played to an accompaniment of applause’.<sup>31</sup> The use of the word

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<sup>28</sup> [Anon.], ‘Olympic Theatre’, *The Standard*, (11 October 1869), p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Theatre programme advertising three plays produced at the Olympic Theatre entitled *Jeanette’s Wedding*, *Little Em’ly!*, and *The Gooseberry*. DICK/PRG/GRT OLY: F174795, Charles Dickens Theatre Collection, Special Collections and Archives, University of Kent.

‘tact’ here is interesting, for it implies a certain reverence for authorial authority. The reviewer may also be suggesting that Halliday approached the more troubling elements of the story (Emily and Martha’s sexual misdemeanours) with delicacy.

The play *Lost Emily*, which may have been authored by Murray Wood, was evidently modelled on Halliday’s production.<sup>32</sup> Several notes in the prompter’s manuscript state that it was the property of C. H. Duval, from the Theatre Royal, Birkenhead. The anonymously authored explanatory catalogue which accompanies the manuscript provides the only bibliographic information I have been able to glean relating to the play’s production.<sup>33</sup> Duval was the lessee and manager of the Theatre Royal, Birkenhead from 1876–77, as well as a writer, singer, mimic, composer, and monologist, and must have purchased the play’s rights from the dramatist.<sup>34</sup> The author of the catalogue speculates that Murray Wood penned the play, and that it was performed at London’s Surrey Theatre in 1873; both inferences were made originally by Allardyce Nicoll. A review which appeared in *The Era* on 9 October 1870 discussed a play entitled *Lost Emily* (performed at the Theatre Royal, South Shields) so we can assume that the 1873 run was not the play’s debut performance. The reviewer described Virginia Blackwood’s personation of Emily as ‘very creditable’, while Mr Appleby, who took the role of Uriah Heep, was pronounced ‘capital throughout’. Ham, as played by G. Murray, ‘was [...] well performed’.<sup>35</sup> *The Era* also contained an advertisement for the play, which confidently asserted that it had been ‘represented with enormous success’ and that ‘All dates [were] filled till Christmas except October 31<sup>st</sup>’.<sup>36</sup>

### **Sex, Seduction, and the Fallen Woman**

It is surely no coincidence that all three dramatists chose to relegate David to the wings in order to give Emily, and the fallen woman plot, centre stage. Interestingly, Brougham was the only adaptor to signpost the relationship between his adaptation and its source

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<sup>32</sup> [Murray Wood?], *Lost Emily, Adapted from Charles Dickens’s Celebrated Work ‘David Copperfield’; in Four Acts* (unpublished, 1876). This is a prompter’s manuscript, and the pages have not been numbered; thus, subsequent references mention only the act and scene in which the quotations appear. Item no. 059810600, PETT MSS.L.86, Pettingell Collection, Special Collections and Archives, University of Kent.

<sup>33</sup> [Anon.], *Catalogue 20/81*, (Romsey: Motley Books Ltd, n.d.). Item no. 059810600, Pettingell Collection, Special Collections and Archives, University of Kent.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> [Anon.], ‘South Shields’, *The Era*, (9 October 1870), p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> [Anon.], ‘Lost Emily’, *The Era*, (9 October 1870), p. 1.

text. While he named his play *David Copperfield*, the authors of *Little Em'ly* and *Lost Emily* scrapped Dickens's title, clearly signalling to their audiences that a significant change in focus had taken place. Surprisingly, the reader's investment in the intellectual and emotional development of Dickens's protagonist, so crucial to the power of the text, is largely irrelevant in the adaptations. Instead, all three adaptors use Emily's story as a vehicle to enter mid-nineteenth-century debates relating to women's roles, and to explore the connection between sexual purity and hearthside virtue. The radical decision to sideline David's story in favour of Emily's was partly due to the fact that none of the plays were staged contemporaneously with the novel. By the time the second half of the nineteenth century had got underway, 'the woman question' had become one of the most pressing social issues of the day.

The plays cannot be divorced from their cultural contexts; they were the products of a climate anxious to delineate the norms of middle-class domestic life.<sup>37</sup> The uneasy debates of 1847–50 about The Deceased Wife's Sister Bill, which proposed making it legal for a husband to marry his sister-in-law in the event of his wife's death, sparked discussion about the extent to which families had the right to regulate themselves and enjoy 'domestic self-enclosure'.<sup>38</sup> The Bill's supporters stressed the importance of saving households in which the death of the wife/mother had led to chaos and misery.<sup>39</sup> Preventing such households from languishing without a moral lynchpin was crucial. However, while replacing one domestic angel with her uncanny mirror image was put forward as a solution, that angel herself, whose idealised qualities were immortalised in Coventry Patmore's poem 'The Angel in the House' (1854), was changing shape. When Brougham wrote his play at the beginning of the 1850s, the Bloomerism phenomenon was in full swing, and caused quite a stir. These audacious garments (loose trousers that gathered at the knee or ankle) were named after the American social reformer Amelia Bloomer. They quickly became a symbol of physical and metaphorical freedom for women, and raised questions about the dangerous impact of unorthodox clothing on feminine behaviour. Contemporary cartoons and caricatured images frequently portrayed a mob of brazen, masculine women worryingly eager to abandon their homely duties and

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<sup>37</sup> Karen Chase and Michael H. Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 109.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.



rampage, unchecked, into the public sphere.<sup>40</sup> By the time Brougham's adaptation was staged in Britain in the early 1860s, the potentially disastrous consequences of women's desertion of the hearth, whether through death or deliberate abandonment, had been the subject of heated discussion for some time, and the perceived necessity to police female bodies had been brought to the attention of an anxious public.

When Brougham's play opens, David has already been living with his aunt for some years, and the two of them are discussing his plans for the future. Pruning Dickens's lengthy novel was a pragmatic necessity, particularly as Brougham probably assumed that the majority of his audience would be coming to the theatre with prior knowledge of David's childhood. However, removing these scenes makes the opening portion of the narrative a significantly less troubling portrait of familial life. In Brougham's version of events, we never witness the sadistic treatment David endures at the hands of Murdstone and his mother's powerlessness to escape from her unhappy marriage. In Dickens's novel, David is forced to watch his once cheerful home crumble around him, and the childish misery he experiences as he resigns himself to these new domestic arrangements is intensely evoked. When David's terror of his stepfather makes it impossible for him to learn his lessons, Murdstone beats him 'as if he would have beaten me to death', before imprisoning him in a room for five days, a deeply distressing experience which, even as an adult, David is unable to forget.<sup>41</sup>

The play does not depict this traumatic experience, but Brougham does establish the fragility of domestic happiness from an early stage in the action. In the very first scene, Brougham hints that Steerforth will destroy the haven that is the Peggotty boathouse and prepares the audience for Emily's seduction at his hands. When David remarks to his aunt that he has been in town admiring the 'beauties of the scenery', Steerforth adds cheekily, 'And investigating the loveliness of the female population'.<sup>42</sup> This roguish comment immediately marks Steerforth out as a dishonourable figure, and our suspicions are confirmed when David and Daniel Peggotty discuss Emily's beauty and accomplishments, and Steerforth responds, 'I've a great mind to see this Yarmouth Venus!' His next remark, 'Methinks I scent an adventure!' makes it abundantly clear that

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<sup>40</sup> Kate Flint, *Dickens* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1986), p. 123.

<sup>41</sup> Dickens, *Copperfield*, p. 55.

<sup>42</sup> John Brougham, *David Copperfield, A Drama, in Three Acts, Adapted from Dickens' Popular Work of the Same Name* (London: John Dicks, 1885), p. 3. Accessed via *American Drama Full-Text Database* (Proquest Literature Online).

he plans to exploit his insider access to Peggotty's home to pursue the unsuspecting Emily.<sup>43</sup>

A few scenes later, Emily's imminent seduction continues to be foreshadowed for the audience in melodramatic dialogue and the positioning of the actors on stage. Having temporarily lost sight of Steerforth, Peggotty innocently asks David, 'But where's your friend Steerforth? Why there he is, a talking to Emily, with Ham on t'other side of him'.<sup>44</sup> Peggotty acts as an ingenuous commentator on the events unfolding here. His inability to perceive Steerforth's intentions creates a heavy sense of dramatic irony, as he notes, entirely without suspicion, that Steerforth is conversing with Emily, while Emily's fiancé Ham stands separated from his bride-to-be. Peggotty has faith in Emily's virtue and proudly tells the company that she 'has been, what no one but such a bright-eyed creeter can be in a house'.<sup>45</sup> This speech is lifted from the novel and makes it clear that Peggotty regards Emily as a 'bright-eyed' domestic angel, and a surrogate daughter, of whom he can be justly proud.

However, even Peggotty's overwhelming love for his niece is not enough to protect her from the attentions of a practised seducer. After Peggotty has happily announced that Emily is to be married to Ham, Steerforth gets a villainous aside: 'What! Not if I can prevent so disgraceful a sacrifice'.<sup>46</sup> In Dickens's text, our knowledge of Steerforth is filtered through David's hero-worship of his friend. In order to see his inherent worthlessness, we must reject the seductive image David creates and judge Steerforth on his actions rather than his rakish charm. Brougham, on the other hand, explicitly warns the audience of the catastrophe to come. When Ham asserts that he can never hope to be good enough for Emily, she replies: 'No, no, Ham---no! Not good enough! Pray, let me go---I am faint'.<sup>47</sup> Emily's desire to escape from her fiancé indicates that she is uncomfortable with his scrutiny, while her physical weakness is the somatic manifestation of her guilt. In an aside a moment later, she laments her own foolishness in a manner which suggests that the situation has already spiralled outwith her control: 'Ah! I have been rash and hasty---too hasty. What is to become of me I know not!'<sup>48</sup> The

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, pp. 6–7.

irony of Emily's apparent inability to foresee 'What is to become of' her is that the audience can prophesy only too clearly what lies ahead. In the novel, Dickens's fictional world is depicted from a subjective narratorial perspective; readers share the younger David's inability to anticipate events before they happen. The theatre audience, by contrast, gain almost immediate comprehension through explicit visual cues and dialogue. Unlike Dickens, Brougham allows spectators to derive pleasure from watching the events unfold with prior knowledge of how everything will turn out.

When Emily's flight from Yarmouth has been discovered, both Ham and Peggotty respond to the domestic crisis in emotionally charged language. Ham cries that he 'would rather see her dead, here at my feet' than face the distressing truth that she has forfeited her virtue, while Peggotty pronounces Steerforth a 'damn'd, black-hearted villain'.<sup>49</sup> Both comments are clearly meant to indicate that these honest men possess the moral credentials Steerforth lacks: Ham mourns the loss of his fiancée's innocence and purity, while Peggotty directs righteous rage at the man who has manipulated and exploited his beloved niece. Peggotty has been searching for Emily unsuccessfully for a year when David pays him a visit and reveals that he has some important news. When Peggotty says, 'I'm sure she is near me now!', David instructs him, 'Bear it like a man, Daniel---she is' before he 'goes to the door [...] and brings on Emily'.<sup>50</sup> As Karen Laird has pointed out, in this extraordinary moment, David is given the important role of 'physically ushering Emily back into her home'.<sup>51</sup> His oddly detached manner resembles that of a director: he stages Emily's long-awaited return as though he has been tasked with producing a miraculous piece of theatre, and distances himself emotionally from Peggotty's distress. Allowing David to direct the action here is an interesting move, one which, perhaps unconsciously, mirrors the meta elements in the novel and his role as the author of the story. In the play, the fact that David actively restores Emily to her uncle makes him the healer of the household shattered by her disappearance. His rigid adherence to masculine stoicism, and the way in which he 'falls back on a [...] code of honour', is juxtaposed with Peggotty's more emotional response to Emily's return, and emphasises David's self-possession.<sup>52</sup> In the novel, by contrast, Dickens suggests that David wilfully overlooks Steerforth's flaws and absolves him of responsibility: 'In the keen distress of the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>51</sup> Laird, p. 93.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

discovery of his unworthiness [...] I thought more of all that was brilliant in him [...] than ever I had done in the height of my devotion to him'.<sup>53</sup> As Juliet John points out, David's split subjectivity and retrospective narration here—a technique tricky to reproduce on the stage—highlights the problems he encounters due to his 'emotional need for heroes and villains'.<sup>54</sup> Melodrama's drive for transparent characterisation (which John terms 'externalization') eradicates boundaries between the inner and outer self.<sup>55</sup> However, Dickens suggests that viewing the world melodramatically can be dangerous: David mistakenly regards his friend's prepossessing appearance as concrete evidence of his heroic qualities and, later, guiltily reflects on 'my own unconscious part in his pollution of an honest home'.<sup>56</sup> Brougham, by contrast, uses Emily's predicament as 'a platform to test David's heroic potential', and absolves David from blame by allowing him to rescue the fallen woman and return her to the Edenic innocence of her childhood home.<sup>57</sup>

In the novel, Peggotty makes the decision to move his little community to Australia to give his niece a fresh start; Dickens shuts down the possibility of restoring Emily to the hearth which she has desecrated. In Brougham's play, the consequences of Emily's sexual sin are less drastic: the Peggottys remain in Yarmouth, and there is no mention of emigration. Brougham allows Emily to be welcomed back permanently into a reassuring haven where, as Peggotty assures her, 'all hearts are open to you'.<sup>58</sup> This largely happy ending constitutes a significant departure from the conventions of the fallen woman play. As Sos Eltis wryly notes, nineteenth-century theatre was remarkably consistent in compelling the fallen woman to 'fulfil her inevitable doom, repent and die an untimely death—or, in occasional more fortunate cases, ha[ve] her sentence commuted to incarceration in a nunnery'.<sup>59</sup> Emily's self-loathing and despair may be entirely characteristic of Victorian theatrical depictions of fallen maidens, but she is spared the unfortunate fate (suicide, madness, fatal illness) meted out to the majority of her sinful sisters. Brougham does make it clear that she has internalised societal strictures and must bear the burden of her sexual guilt, but the fact that she is returned to the bosom of the

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<sup>53</sup> Dickens, *Copperfield*, p. 443.

<sup>54</sup> Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 178.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

<sup>56</sup> Dickens, *Copperfield*, p. 443.

<sup>57</sup> Laird, p. 92.

<sup>58</sup> Brougham, *Copperfield*, p. 12.

<sup>59</sup> Eltis, 'The Fallen Woman', p. 225.

family surely also suggests that he is encouraging his audience to extend forgiveness to women who have violated social and sexual norms. Having said this, Brougham's sentimental depiction of Emily's reunion with Peggotty is entirely typical of 'the tableau of reconciliation and paternal blessing' that was a hallmark of the fallen woman play. As Eltis points out, the seduced maiden tended to 'choose her lover without her father's sanction', undermining paternal authority and rejecting her 'role as a unit of social exchange within a kinship system'.<sup>60</sup> Emily's transgression certainly fits this pattern. Peggotty gives his blessing to her engagement to Ham, and when she rebels against his wishes and runs away with Steerforth, the household begins to disintegrate. Reinstating Emily within the bounds of her childhood home may thus also be seen as an ideologically conservative resolution that reaffirms the paternal, familial, and moral authority her flight from the hearth threatens to destroy.<sup>61</sup>

Like Brougham, Halliday avoided depicting David's childhood, and made Emily's seduction, flight from home, and eventual return the emotional core of his play. Halliday's drama was staged at the end of the 1860s, a decade in which debates surrounding women's sexual virtue intensified and provoked heated public discussion. As pamphlets about the evils of prostitution proliferated, the perceived necessity to curb the spread of sexual vice led to earnest deliberations and, ultimately, to demand for action. The Contagious Diseases Acts, passed in 1864 and amended in 1868 and 1869, gave policemen the authority to subject women suspected of prostitution to compulsory medical checks for venereal disease in garrison towns and ports.<sup>62</sup> Those declared to be infected were sequestered in lock hospitals until cured. This suggests a desire to draw inviolable boundaries between the fallen woman and her virtuous counterpart, an issue Halliday grapples with in his depiction of the prostitute Martha. Although melodrama is frequently regarded as a morally binary world of virtue and vice, Halliday avoids simplistic punitive logic: Martha is neither explicitly condemned for her sexual transgressions nor purely an object of our pity. Halliday expands her role in Dickens's narrative and covertly challenges cultural assumptions about the prostitute's lack of moral fibre, agency, and capacity for rehabilitation.

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<sup>60</sup> Sos Eltis, *Acts of Desire: Women and Sex on Stage, 1800–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Eltis, 'The Fallen Woman', pp. 224–25.

Having said this, Halliday portrays his errant protagonist Emily in a more conventional manner and foreshadows the misfortune that befalls her in a very similar manner to Brougham. Although ostensibly unworldly, Emily asserts that an emotional attachment cannot bridge the class divide between her and Steerforth: ‘But your father was a gentleman—and your mother is a lady; and my father was a fisherman, and my mother was a fisherman’s daughter’.<sup>63</sup> On the surface, this speech simply indicates Emily’s efforts to conquer her feelings for Steerforth, but her pragmatism has conservative implications, for she affirms the impossibility of upward mobility and does not question the notion that her parentage is proof of her inferiority. However, when she later sighs, ‘Ham is above me in affection, however hard I try to love’, it becomes clear that she is trapped in an unsatisfying relationship and hence a ripe target for seduction.<sup>64</sup> Emily’s lament, ‘I am not half so good a girl as I wish to be’, is taken almost verbatim from the novel, and recalls the moment in Brougham’s play when she feels overwhelmed by a sense of her own unworthiness.<sup>65</sup> This is the crucial point of no return, as Emily has revealed the innate moral weakness that will precipitate her fall; Halliday remains conservative in portraying her as an individual tempted into sin rather than a victim of social circumstance.<sup>66</sup> He also warns his audience of Emily’s impending seduction by sinisterly foreshadowing, in visual terms, the woman she is to become. Steerforth and David are discussing Emily’s imminent marriage to Ham when Steerforth spots ‘Martha following Emily’ and asks, ‘What’s that? That [...] black shadow following the girl?’ Although David is not unduly concerned, and carelessly dismisses the mysterious figure as ‘Some beggar’, the audience would surely have recognised Martha’s appearance as an ill omen.<sup>67</sup>

Like Dickens, Halliday helps Martha to reclaim some of her virtue by entrusting her to find her friend and restore her to her home. In Brougham’s play, this role is given to David, but Halliday allows Martha to act as Emily’s rescuer. David and Peggotty entreat her to help them to locate Emily, and Martha solemnly accepts:

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<sup>63</sup> Andrew Halliday, *Little Em’ly* (unpublished, 1869). A collection of character parts. From *Em’ly*, p. 1. Item no. 059890800, PETT PAR.31, Pettingell Collection, Special Collections and Archives, University of Kent.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> See Eltis, *Acts of Desire*, p. 16, for a broader discussion of this issue and how it relates to theatrical portrayals of fallen women.

<sup>67</sup> Halliday, *Steerforth*, p. 4.

I will devote myself to this task, fervently and faithfully, I will never waver in it, while there is any chance of hope! If I am not true to it [...] then may all help, human and divine, renounce me for ever. (Holding up her hands appealingly).<sup>68</sup>

The language Martha uses here ('devote', 'fervently', 'faithfully', 'divine') and her physical gesture of entreaty, which suggests hands clasped in prayer or extended towards heaven, reassures the audience that she is eager to return to the path of virtue. In this way, Halliday subscribes to the moral didacticism that underpinned many cultural representations (pictorial, literary, theatrical) of prostitutes at mid-century. These women were frequently depicted as sorrowful, suffering and, most importantly, contrite.<sup>69</sup> Martha recognises that reclaiming a fallen woman, and repairing the broken home which she has left behind, is a sacred task, and her account of Emily's rescue verifies this:

I says to her "Rise up from worse than death, and come with me" [...] cried I, "I am a ghost that calls her from beside her open grave!" I wrapped her hastily in her clothes, and took her out, faint and trembling on my arm [...] minding only her—and brought her, safe out in the dead of night, from that black pit of ruin!<sup>70</sup>

In the novel, Martha plays a more passive part in Emily's rescue, for she acts largely as a messenger. Contacting Peggotty by letter and turning up unexpectedly at David's door, she asks both men to come to London, but initially refuses to explain the purpose of their meeting. Indeed, she conducts the entire affair almost silently, and sits in the coach 'with one trembling hand before her face [...] as if she could not bear to hear a voice'. She still performs an important role, for she guides David through the 'sombre streets' to the dilapidated boarding house in which they find Emily being persecuted by Rosa, but, like David, fails to stop the assault.<sup>71</sup> Halliday's Martha is given the opportunity to intervene directly. According to Eltis, in fallen woman plays 'the sinful woman lacks the moral agency and active force to recover herself, relying instead on the [...] commanding force of man'.<sup>72</sup> This is certainly true of Brougham's drama, in which Emily is wholly dependent on David's masculine intervention to secure her safe return to her uncle, but

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<sup>68</sup> Halliday, *Martha*, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting, and companion poem, *Found* (1853–1882). Rossetti's painting depicts a prostitute who has sunk to the ground against a wall: her slumped posture, distressed expression, and efforts to turn her face from the man who recognises her are typical Victorian visual markers of the fallen woman's shame and despair. See Béatrice Laurent, 'Hidden Iconography in *Found* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *The Victorian Web*, <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/dgr/paintings/laurent.html> [accessed 12 November 2018].

<sup>70</sup> Halliday, *Martha*, p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Dickens, *Copperfield*, p. 696.

<sup>72</sup> Eltis, *Acts of Desire*, p. 24.

although in Halliday's adaptation Emily is equally helpless, the role of her rescuer is audaciously given to Martha, a woman whose prostituted condition allegedly makes her an even greater moral failure than Emily herself. Unlike the fallen women in the plays Eltis describes, however, Halliday's Martha lacks neither 'agency' nor the will to carry out her mission. In a fairly radical move, Halliday gives the fallen woman back the moral resolution which, according to widespread Victorian assumptions about women's sexual virtue, she had renounced forever. Rescuing Emily from the 'black pit of ruin' in which she is trapped allows Martha to step outside of her own body and escape, albeit momentarily, the sexual taint it carries. Indeed, in this extraordinary moment, Martha is not a woman at all, but a 'ghost', or supernatural being, who acts as Emily's redeemer. Yet she is also a pragmatic physical presence, dressing the helpless young woman and leading her to safety. Emily leans 'faint and trembling' with stereotypically feminine weakness on Martha's arm, while Martha ignores traditional gender boundaries, stepping easily into the chivalrous, masculine role of protector. The fact that she states that saving Emily has 'let me make myself better than I ever was', indicates that she hopes for a better future, a veiled challenge to the notion that, once fallen, sexually transgressive women cannot be redeemed.<sup>73</sup> Thus, although in earlier scenes Martha is depicted as a conventional anguished magdalen, helping another woman in distress empowers her. Halliday provocatively suggests that her womanly selflessness and moral resolve remain intact, thus collapsing the rigid moral dichotomy between the virtuous maiden and her carnal sister.

As its title suggests, *Lost Emily* is very similar to Halliday's adaptation in key areas of plot, character, and even dialogue. However, the manuscript gives us unique insights into how the play would have been staged. Music was used to add accents and nuances to virtually all Victorian theatre, but was a particularly important feature of melodramas, sometimes even taking precedence over dialogue. In this play, the songs chosen appear at pivotal moments and are used to foreground the importance of hearthside virtues. When David, Peggotty, and Martha are discussing Emily's flight from Yarmouth, stage directions indicate that the song 'driven from Home' should be 'played very Piano through Martha's long speech'.<sup>74</sup> In this speech, Martha draws attention to the parallels between herself and Emily and laments the fact that her fallen condition forces her to

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<sup>73</sup> Halliday, *Martha*, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> [Murray Wood?], *Lost Emily*, Act 2, sc. 3.



wander the streets: 'I am a solitary curse to myself — to everyone I come near'.<sup>75</sup> The lyrics of 'Driven from Home' do not appear in the manuscript, but the version of the song which I have examined has melancholy words which evoke feelings of loneliness and despair:

Out in this cold world, out in the street  
Asking a penny of each one I meet  
Shoeless I wander about thro' the day  
Wearing my young life in sorrow away  
No one to help me, no one to love  
No one to pity me, none to caress  
Fatherless, motherless, sadly I roam  
A child of misfortune, I'm driven from home.<sup>76</sup>

It is not difficult to draw parallels between Martha's plight and the miserable circumstances in which the narrator of this song is eking out an existence. Both are forced to wander the streets, repulsed by respectable society, and long for the comfort and security they associate with home. Spectators would surely have recognised the song's significance at this particular juncture in the narrative, when both Emily and Martha have been 'driven from Home': Emily, by her illicit passion for Steerforth, and Martha, because her sexual transgressions have led to her expulsion from the community. However, this mournful musical accompaniment makes Martha an individual object of pity rather than a vehicle for exploring the wider social and economic issues that have driven her into prostitution; the pathos is largely apolitical.

Later in the play, Emily is restored to her uncle and the haven of safety and love that he represents, and a brief stage direction indicates that 'Home sweet Home Piano' should be used to lend emotional weight to this pivotal moment.<sup>77</sup> The lyrics of 'Home Sweet Home' were written by the American actor and dramatist John Howard Payne. The song originally appeared in Payne's 1823 opera *Clari, or The Maid of Milan*, and the melody was composed by Sir Henry Bishop, the first English composer to receive the honour of a knighthood, allegedly because of Queen Victoria's enthusiasm for the song.<sup>78</sup> Janet and Peter Phillips maintain that 'Home Sweet Home' 'was the most popular of all Victorian

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Will S. Hays, 'Driven from Home', (New York: J. L. Peters, 1868), pp. 1–2. Accessed via *The Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection*, <<http://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/catalog/levy:129.041>> [accessed 7 March 2017].

<sup>77</sup> [Murray Wood?], *Lost Emily*, Act 2, sc. 5.

<sup>78</sup> [Anon.], "'Home Sweet Home!'" (1823) — A Victorian parlour song sung by Derek B. Scott', *The Victorian Web*, <<http://www.victorianweb.org/mt/parlorsongs/2.html>> [accessed 6 March 2017].

songs' and 'was sung endlessly [...] at the piano in parlour and drawing-room, in music-hall and concert-hall'.<sup>79</sup> The song provides an aural accompaniment to an affecting tableau in which Emily 'flies to [Peggotty] + falls in his arms', and the lyrics have clear resonances with Emily's story.<sup>80</sup>

Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,  
Be it ever so humble there's no place like Home!  
A charm from the skies, seems to hallow us there,  
Which seek thro' the world is ne'er met with elsewhere.<sup>81</sup>

Emily is seduced by the prospect of leaving behind her working-class origins but ultimately realises that the worldly 'pleasures' Steerforth offers her are hollow and meaningless. This song communicates an unambiguous warning: women who forsake the hearth for the promise of riches will sink into misery and vice; cherishing 'humble' homely virtues is a much safer option. The didacticism at work here is entirely typical of the fallen woman play, in which working-class women like Emily frequently make the fatal mistake of surrendering their honour for the sake of worldly finery.<sup>82</sup> As Bridget Bennett avers, 'Home has an important place within both cultures and structures of sentiment and melodrama', and this is clearly apparent in *Lost Emily*. Payne's hymn to hearthside virtues portrays home as 'a kind of talismanic holy site', a sanctuary in which Emily can be healed and offered the chance of redemption.<sup>83</sup>

### The Melodramatic Marriage Plot

We have seen, then, that the *Copperfield* adaptors attach considerable emotional, emblematic, and ideological importance to the physical space of home in their plays. This is not to assert that the domestic sphere is consistently portrayed as a safe shelter from the outer world: like the Peggottys, the Wickfields have to fight to safeguard domestic happiness, but only when an invader (Heep) crosses their threshold. Dickens, on the other

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<sup>79</sup> Janet and Peter Phillips, *Victorians at Home and Away* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 90–91.

<sup>80</sup> [Murray Wood?], *Lost Emily*, Act 2, sc. 5.

<sup>81</sup> [Anon.], 'Home Sweet Home!', from a Sicilian air, arranged by Sir Henry Rowley Bishop, with words by John Howard Payne (First Published London, 1823; this version 1830), <[http://parlorsongs.com/content/h/hmswthm\\_lyr.php](http://parlorsongs.com/content/h/hmswthm_lyr.php)> [accessed 6 March 2017].

<sup>82</sup> See Eltis, *Acts of Desire*, p. 16.

<sup>83</sup> Bridget Bennett, 'Home Songs and the Melodramatic Imagination: From "Home, Sweet Home" to The Birth of a Nation', *Journal of American Studies*, 46 (2012) 171–87, (p. 173).

hand, suggests that the biggest menace to familial tranquillity lurks within the walls of the home itself. Murdstone is far more terrifying than anything David encounters on his perilous journey to Dover, and the struggles of Clara Copperfield and Dora in their unhappy marriages expose some of the contradictions written into the domestic ideal. In the novel, domesticity is internally fragmented and ideologically troubling; in the plays, the hearth is a solid touchstone of moral goodness that threatens to disintegrate only when external sources of evil enter the home.

Like Steerforth, Heep is a villainous male character who poses a sexual threat to a virtuous woman—Agnes—and wreaks havoc in a contented home. In Brougham's play, David is distressed to learn from Agnes that 'this house is not the cheerful home of pure, domestic joy it was when you left us', and that Heep has manipulated her father and 'taken advantage' of 'his weaknesses'.<sup>84</sup> In Dickens's novel, Agnes mutely endures Heep's wrongdoing, but in Brougham's play, she passionately condemns him: 'Tempter! Fiend! Who destroyed [...] the peace of this once happy family? Who crept like a pestilence within our midst, to poison every breath of life? [...] Who but *you*? Subtle and designing villain,---*you*!'<sup>85</sup> The language in which Agnes frames her outburst here is entirely characteristic of a melodramatic heroine: 'Fiend' and 'villain' are terms that unambiguously establish Heep both as her own nemesis and the wider representative of evil in the tale. In a manner more explicit than Dickens, Brougham situates domesticity at the heart of his moral universe, pitting its potential destroyer, Heep, against its champion and protector, Agnes. In Dickens's novel, Agnes is undoubtedly depicted as a moral compass, but rarely is she permitted to articulate her feelings explicitly. On a generic level, Agnes's denunciation of Heep is entirely in keeping with melodrama's drive to communicate emotions openly but Brougham also revises Dickens's characterisation, making Agnes an altogether bolder, if equally righteous, female figure. In the text, she is an accurate, but reticent, judge of character; in the play, she offers more explicit commentary on the action designed to guide the audience's sympathies in the appropriate direction.

For a time, things seem hopeless because Agnes is willing to sacrifice herself to Heep to save her father's good name. However, in a melodramatic speech entirely absent from

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<sup>84</sup> Brougham, *Copperfield*, p. 4.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

the novel, David reassures Agnes that poetic justice will be secured: ‘Trust in Heaven, Agnes, who will never suffer the wicked to triumph!’<sup>86</sup> Like the *Twist* adaptors, Brougham emphasises the ‘triumph’ of virtue and suggests that Heep’s defeat has been predetermined by divine authority. Following Heep’s exposure, David and Agnes are quickly united. David exclaims, ‘Agnes!’, Agnes briefly replies, ‘Life, hope, and honour recovered! I am thine, thine for ever!’ and ‘They embrace’.<sup>87</sup> Agnes’s succinct speech assures the audience that her father’s ‘honour’ is now secure, and that she has been spared the misery of being bound to a man she despises. Spectators can leave the theatre safe in the knowledge that she has gained a fitting reward for her moral goodness. David’s failure to view Agnes romantically, which is, for a long time, a real impediment to their happy future in the novel, is simply not an issue here. The only obstacle to their union is an outsider figure (Heep) whose expulsion from the Wickfields’ home heralds an end of all domestic trouble.

The coming together of David and Agnes is much more complicated in the text, largely due to David’s inability to see Agnes as a suitable candidate for marriage. On one occasion he observes a ‘distressful shadow’ cross her face but struggles to grasp its meaning: ‘even in the start it gave me, it was gone; and she was [...] looking at me with her own calm smile’.<sup>88</sup> Agnes’s subdued symptoms of anguish suggest that maintaining a decorous silence causes her significant distress. David is unable to acknowledge that she remains his childhood companion and moral counsel only because he has, perhaps unconsciously, pigeonholed her into these roles and arrested her development. In Brougham’s play, Dora’s absence means that Agnes never has a rival for David’s affections, but cutting her from the action also erases Dickens’s troubling portrait of the unhappiness that ensues when an ill-matched couple make a commitment to marriage. Dickens’s notably sympathetic portrayal of Dora’s domestic ineptitude points to a ‘complex sensitivity to the plight of child wives [...] in his society’.<sup>89</sup> Dora is frank about her own failings and entreats David, ‘When you are going to be angry with me say to yourself, “It’s only my child wife!”’<sup>90</sup> As Dora suggests, the fact that she disappoints David is not her fault. Her guitar, her drawings, and her love of dancing indicate that she

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Dickens, *Copperfield*, p. 822.

<sup>89</sup> Margaret Flanders Darby, ‘Dora and Doady’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 22 (1993), 155–69 (p. 155).

<sup>90</sup> Dickens, *Copperfield*, p. 627.

has acquired only ornamental accomplishments and can thus hardly be expected to be adept at balancing the household accounts. The crucial difference between the novel and Brougham's play, then, is this: while Dickens prods at the fissures in domestic ideology until its credibility threatens to collapse, Brougham never examines these contradictions because he uses marriage to provide resolution, rather than to raise questions. Dickens exposes the disillusionment that follows a fairy-tale courtship; Brougham expects his audience to be satisfied with the mere *promise* of a happy-ever-after.

Like Brougham, Halliday cuts Dora from the action entirely, which allows David to bypass his unsuccessful first marriage, and devote himself to a more suitable wifely candidate from the beginning of the play. Again, this works to create a simple melodramatic marriage plot in which an imperilled heroine (Agnes) need only be saved from the lascivious attentions of a rogue (Heep) in order to be paired with the man she loves (David). At the close of his drama, Halliday allows Peggotty to assure David that, '[Agnes] will be a happiness to you, and a honour and comfort all her life!'<sup>91</sup> This glowing testament to Agnes's suitability as a helpmeet leaves the audience comfortable in the knowledge that David has made the right choice. The dominant mood here is one of tranquillity: the emigrants are going to a new home in Australia, and David and Agnes are beginning to build a life together on their native shores.

Victorian dramatists made both minor and radical alterations to the representations of domesticity in *Copperfield*. Pruning Dickens's intricate depictions of familial life was a pragmatic necessity, but it was also an ideological choice. In Dickens's text, the most poisonous threats to domestic bliss originate within the family itself. Murdstone exploits his new role as David's stepfather to subject the young child to a reign of terror. Clara Copperfield's inability to prevent the abuse, and her eventual death, highlight the destructive consequences of women's subjection. Although David is no Murdstone, Dora's similarly premature demise points to her failure to reconcile her upbringing with the expectations placed on her in married life. In cutting David's troubling childhood, and his relationship with Dora, from the narrative, the adaptors erased most of the elements that, in the novel, work to undermine the notion that marriage is the pinnacle of middle-class achievement.

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<sup>91</sup> Halliday, *Peggotty*, p. 10.

All three playwrights gave precedence to Emily's story over David's and used her violation of social parameters to explore contemporary anxieties about the connection between women's sexual transgressions and their neglect of domestic and familial duties. Brougham was more forgiving of Emily's desertion of the Peggottys than Dickens; her permanent return to Yarmouth undermines the assumption that, once a fallen woman has forsaken the hearth, she can never again be permitted to pollute it with her presence. At the same time, however, sequestering Emily in her childhood home suggests a desire to reinstate her within the bounds of established social and familial norms, and to protect society from being contaminated by her moral weakness.

One of the most important innovations Halliday made was to flesh out Martha's character and give her greater agency: her act of sisterly redemption negates the need for male intervention, giving herself, and Emily, the promise of a better future. *Lost Emily* also placed a spotlight on *Copperfield*'s fallen women, using music to elicit sympathy for Martha and Emily at key points in the narrative. These plaintive songs were clearly designed to enhance the visual elements of the scenes in which they appeared as well as the dialogue, but were constrained by sentimental convention and a push for pathos. Although Halliday's depiction of the fallen woman is more complex than that of his fellow adaptors, none of the playwrights agitate for political change. The larger factors that drive Emily and Martha to violate conventional modes of conduct go unaddressed. All three dramatists remain conservative in failing to explore the possibility that the two women are victims of social and economic forces outwith their control, and casualties of a world in which the sexual double standard rules supreme.

## **II – *Bleak House***

Dickens's magisterial ninth novel, *Bleak House*, is a tricky text to define. Strong elements of both mystery and melodrama lend it clear affiliations with sensation fiction but, as has been frequently noted, Dickens's fascination with police procedure also anticipates the detective novel that came into its own later in the century. Yet it is principally a 'Condition-of-England' novel: the evils of Red Tapism and the circumlocutions of the Court of Chancery, governmental inertia, the deplorable absence of a sense of social responsibility amongst the aristocracy, and the ill-judged, ineffective methods used by philanthropists to educate the urban poor are all the targets of vociferous satire. Dickens's

tightly organised exposé of social ills placed a spotlight on the crumbling institutions which, in his eyes, formed the rotten core of a system that, by the 1850s, was reaching the point of collapse.

Yet *Bleak House* is also deeply concerned with anatomising domestic spaces, the vast majority of which fall desperately short of the Dickensian ideal. There are exceptions: Jarndyce generously acts as guardian to Esther, Ada, and Richard and takes them into his comfortable home, and the affectionate Bagnet family live in a reassuringly snug household run with efficiency and love by competent, kindly matriarch Mrs Bagnet. However, even these havens are vulnerable to intrusion: Bleak House fails to protect Richard from the evils of the Chancery case in which he is ensnared, and Trooper George gets a nasty surprise when he is arrested by Bucket in the middle of an entertaining evening with the Bagnets. Krook's filthy rag and bone shop, the disturbingly chaotic Jellyby household, the melancholy Chesney Wold, and the wretched rooms in Tom-all-Alone's are, needless to say, even less inviting.

Reviews of *Bleak House* were mixed, largely because readers were uneasy about the radical implications of Dickens's hard-hitting political critique, but sales remained high, averaging at 34,000 copies of each monthly number.<sup>92</sup> Some reviewers lamented the absence of the cheerful good spirits that had made Dickens's earlier works so appealing to readers. Groups who found themselves at the receiving end of his satire, such as Evangelical Christians, lawyers, and supporters of foreign missions were, unsurprisingly, offended by the manner in which they were portrayed.<sup>93</sup> John Stuart Mill responded indignantly to Dickens's unforgiving portrait of philanthropists like Mrs Jellyby and Mrs Pardiggle, and attacked him for having the 'vulgar impudence' to 'ridicule rights of women'.<sup>94</sup> Others were critical for different reasons: despite Dickens's painstaking efforts to link myriad storylines and characters together more carefully than ever before, reviewers continued to pronounce his work deficient in structural coherence. One critic writing in the *Illustrated London News* flatly stated that 'Mr Dickens fails in the construction of a plot [...] the very point in which he has generally been weakest', while George Brimley similarly asserted that 'Bleak House is, even more than any of its

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<sup>92</sup> Paul Schlicke, 'Bleak House', in *Oxford Reader's Companion*, pp. 46–52, (p. 51).

<sup>93</sup> Philip Collins, Introductory remarks to *Bleak House*, in *Heritage*, p. 272.

<sup>94</sup> J. S. Mill, From a letter to Harriet Taylor, [20 March 1854], in *Heritage*, p. 298.

predecessors, chargeable with not simply faults, but absolute want of construction'.<sup>95</sup> Another reviewer accused Dickens of overcrowding his story with unnecessary characters: 'There are a great number of dramatis personae moving about in this story, some of them exercising no perceptible influence upon its action'.<sup>96</sup> Having said this, one character was frequently singled out for praise: Jo. Henry Fothergill Chorley was particularly effusive in his admiration:

Perhaps among all the waifs and strays, the beggars and the outcasts, in behalf of whose humanity our author has again and again appealed to a world too apt to forget their existence, he has never produced anything more rueful, more pitiable, more complete than poor Jo.<sup>97</sup>

Chorley clearly regarded Jo as one of Dickens's most distinctive and credible creations, an individualised representative of countless other 'outcasts' who had fallen through the cracks of society. John Forster, by contrast, sidestepped the political implications of Jo's struggles, perhaps in an attempt to placate those readers concerned about Dickens's radical leanings. Instead, he argued that Dickens's representation of Jo's sufferings was one of his finest attempts at pathos: 'we can remember none by which we have been touched so deeply [...] as the entire tale of the street-wandering Jo'.<sup>98</sup>

Reactions to Esther were more divided. Several reviewers suggested that she was implausibly virtuous, even annoyingly so; others regarded her portion of the narrative as stylistically unconvincing. Brimley discussed both issues and suggested that Esther's decision to write her own narrative was incompatible with her domesticity:

Such a girl would not write her own memoirs, and certainly would not bore one with her goodness till a wicked wish arises that she would either do something very 'spicy', or confine herself to superintending the jampots at Bleak House.<sup>99</sup>

Brimley seems to find Esther troubling because she resists being pigeonholed into fixed categories of feminine identity. Her impeccable housekeeping abilities ostensibly make her a model of idealised womanhood but she audaciously trespasses into the masculine domain of writing, overstepping the boundaries of her domestic role and undermining

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<sup>95</sup> [Anon.], from an unsigned review, *Illustrated London News* (24 September 1853), in *Heritage*, p. 281; George Brimley, from an unsigned review, *Spectator*, 26 (24 September 1853), in *Heritage*, p. 283.

<sup>96</sup> [Anon.], unsigned review, *Bentley's Miscellany*, 34 (October 1853), in *Heritage*, p. 287.

<sup>97</sup> [Henry Fothergill Chorley], from a review, *Athenaeum*, (17 September 1853), in *Heritage*, p. 276.

<sup>98</sup> [John Forster], from an unsigned review, *Examiner*, (8 October 1853), in *Heritage*, p. 291.

<sup>99</sup> Brimley, *Spectator*, p. 285.



the doctrine of the separate spheres. James Augustine Stothert made remarkably similar comments:

as to Esther Summerson, the angelic, self-forgetting young lady, who notes in her journal every thing that a self-forgetting mind would not note, we have found her a prodigious bore, whom we wish the author had consigned to the store-room the moment she was fairly in possession of her housekeeping keys.<sup>100</sup>

Such reluctance to accept the idea that women could be authors as well as housekeepers may seem surprising considering that female writers were so prolific in the 1850s, but the mid-nineteenth century feminisation of the novel naturally prompted a conservative backlash, with some commentators claiming that the literary sphere was no place for women. Brimley suggests confining Esther with the jampots she so meticulously organises; Stothert sardonically recommends locking her in the store cupboard. Both reviewers use images of domestic enclosure to literally and metaphorically put Esther back in her place.

The ideological complexity of *Bleak House* marks a significant departure from what Edwin Eigner describes as the ‘relatively “straight” melodrama’ of Dickens’s early novels.<sup>101</sup> Yet although *Bleak House* is not melodramatic in the same manner as *Twist* or *Nickleby*, Stothert argued that many of the genre’s defining characteristics remained integral to Dickens’s approach:

His good creatures are awfully benevolent; his scoundrels are as black as the devil himself [...] In fact, they are not men and women at all; they are stage-characters transferred from the boards to the page [...] Tulkinghorn, and the rest, they are all so many varieties of the standard stage ‘villain’. Of his variations on the dramatic ‘benevolent old gentleman’, his last novel furnishes one of his most characteristic specimens.<sup>102</sup>

Like many of his contemporaries, Stothert notes that *Bleak House* harnesses key elements of theatrical melodrama, namely stark moral oppositions and stock character types. Modern critics tend to view Jarndyce as a complex character with mixed motives for taking Esther, Ada, and Richard under his wing, but Stothert argues that he is merely a

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<sup>100</sup> [James Augustine Stothert], from ‘Living Novelists’, *The Rambler* (January 1854), in *Heritage*, p. 295.

<sup>101</sup> Edwin Eigner, ‘Melodrama’, in *Oxford Reader’s Companion*, pp. 380–82 (p. 382).

<sup>102</sup> Stothert, *Rambler*, p. 295.

reincarnation of the selfless benefactors whose improbable interventions aid the imperilled heroes and heroines of stage melodrama.

Whereas Stothert traced the theatrical origins of Dickens's characters, Brimley discussed the likelihood of those characters returning to the stage from the pages of the novel. Not only did he argue that they were inherently adaptable, he even went so far as to suggest that Dickens may have had particular actors in mind when he was writing *Bleak House*:

Wright and Keeley could act many of the characters without alteration of a word; Skimpole must be constructed with an especial eye to the genius of Mr Charles Matthews; O. Smith will of course choose Krook or the sullen bricklayer, but probably the former, for his effective make-up, and the grand finale by spontaneous combustion,—which, however Nature and Mr Lewes may deride in the pride of intellect, the resources of the Adelphi will unquestionably prove possible.<sup>103</sup>

Brimley had no difficulty envisaging well-known Victorian actors convincingly embodying Dickens's characters: most of the performers he mentions had already appeared in Dickens adaptations. As I have noted, the Keeleys produced several Dickens dramatisations during the period of their management of the Lyceum Theatre. Charles James Mathews, the son of Charles Mathews the elder, was one of the most successful comedians during Dickens's lifetime, and Richard John Smith (known as O. Smith after playing Obi in a melodramatic adaptation of William Earle's 1800 novella *Three-Fingered Jack*) had played Newman Noggs in Stirling's adaptation of *Nickleby*, Bill Sikes in *Oliver Twist* (1839), Hugh in *Barnaby Rudge* (January 1843), and Scrooge in Stirling's production of *A Christmas Carol* (February 1844), all of which were staged at the Adelphi.<sup>104</sup> Victorian playwrights and actors forged a network of connections based on their involvement in the Dickens dramatising industry, connections that have the potential to deepen our understanding of what makes the practice of adapting Dickens distinctive in the period.

It is also worth noting that Brimley draws a clear distinction between the critical reception of the novel and spectators' responses to the adaptations. In his view, the two mediums have different target audiences with widely divergent expectations. His

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<sup>103</sup> Brimley, *Spectator*, p. 285.

<sup>104</sup> Joseph Knight, rev. Klaus Stierstorfer, 'Smith, Richard John [O Smith] (1786–1855)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004)  
<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25889>> [accessed 1 June 2017].

reference to George Eliot's partner, G. H. Lewes, a literary reviewer known for his searching critical judgements, indicates that the novel is subject to probing intellectual appraisals. Conversely, the implication that playgoers are fixated on the prospect of a sensational *coup de théâtre* suggests that the adaptations are assessed primarily as entertainment. Yet these assertions point to certain cultural assumptions: Brimley presumes that Dickens's readership is largely educated, middle-class, and capable of intellectual engagement and, conversely, that the masses attending the theatre are more interested in spectacle than cerebral speculation.

Despite Brimley's conviction that the sensational aspects of *Bleak House* would prove irresistible to adaptors, its theatrical career was initially unpromising. It appeared on the stage only a handful of times during the 1850s and 1860s, until the surge of interest in revisiting Dickens's texts after his death produced a flood of adaptations in the 1870s and 1880s. J. P. Burnett's *Jo*, first performed at the Prince of Wales Theatre in Liverpool in November 1875 and revived at the Globe Theatre the following year, sparked enthusiasm for dramas focusing on the woes of Dickens's orphan crossing-sweeper. George Lander's *Bleak House; Or, Poor Jo* was first performed at the Pavilion Theatre on 27 March 1876, but subsequently went on an extended and successful tour around the country. Although the version of the play which I have examined lists J. B. Howe as Jo, another review published in *The Era* praised Katie Logan's moving representation of Dickens's child crossing-sweeper: 'The best proof we can give of her talent is, perhaps, the effect produced in the death scene. Few could hear it and see it unmoved, and the ladies amongst the audience were sobbing audibly, so deeply were their sympathies appealed to'.<sup>105</sup> Like Mrs Keeley before her, whose impersonation of Smike provoked emotional responses from spectators, Logan moved her audience to sobs of pity. This skill surely proved useful when she played Nell in Lander's adaptation of the *Curiosity Shop* just a year later. A contemporary reviewer writing in the *Liverpool Mercury* praised Logan's performance in *Bleak House* but suggested that she deviated from Dickens's depiction of Jo: 'Her style of personating Poor Jo, although perhaps what the author did not exactly intend, gained for her the plaudits of a good audience'.<sup>106</sup> Although brief, these comments are of interest because they reveal something about Victorian attitudes to adaptation. The critic considers deviation from authorial intention important enough to mention but does not

<sup>105</sup> [Anon.], 'The Marylebone', *The Era*, (30 April 1876), p. 10.

<sup>106</sup> [Anon.], 'Prince of Wales Theatre', *Liverpool Mercury*, (9 May 1876), p. 7.

dwell on the matter at any great length. The vagueness of the phrase ‘what the author did not exactly intend’ suggests that faithfulness to the source text was not particularly important to nineteenth-century audiences. Interestingly, the reviewer’s attempts to move beyond a discussion of the play’s fidelity to the novel chime with contemporary thinking about adaptation. Linda Hutcheon, amongst others, advocates challenging the ‘morally loaded discourse’ of fidelity criticism.<sup>107</sup> Although she concedes that adaptations ‘have an overt and defining relationship to prior texts’, she also insists that they are ‘autonomous works that can be interpreted and valued as such’.<sup>108</sup>

The Pavilion Theatre, in which Lander’s adaptation of *Bleak House* began its illustrious career, was the first major theatre to be built in London’s East End. Following reconstruction in 1871, its seating capacity swelled to an impressive 4,000, so Lander’s production must have played to large audiences. The Pavilion offered spectators a characteristically varied programme of popular entertainment, staging melodrama alongside farce and pantomime. Fanny Clifton (the wife of Dickens adaptor Edward Stirling) earned her acting stripes in this theatre.<sup>109</sup> More importantly, Lander’s play was not the first version of *Bleak House* to be performed here: George Dibdin Pitt’s production, the very first adaptation of Dickens’s (then unfinished) text, had been staged at the Pavilion on 4 June 1853.

While the trajectory of Lander’s adaptation is well documented, John Palgrave Simpson’s *Lady Dedlock’s Secret*, an adaptation of *Bleak House* which appears to have been staged for the first time a couple of years before Lander’s work, has a more complicated performance history. The version of the play which I have examined states that the play was first performed on Wednesday 26 March 1884 at London’s Opera Comique Theatre.<sup>110</sup> Another Dickens adaptation—of the *Curiosity Shop*—was performed there in 1884, starring the American actress Lotta Crabtree in a dual role as Nell and the Marchioness. However, although Bolton includes the Opera Comique production in his bibliographic list of *Bleak House* adaptations, he also records earlier performances of Simpson’s drama: on 18 March 1874 at the Amphitheatre, Liverpool,

<sup>107</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 7.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 3; p. 6.

<sup>109</sup> Philip Allingham and Jacqueline Banerjee, ‘Theatres in Victorian London’, *The Victorian Web*, <<http://www.victorianweb.org/mt/theaters/pva234.html>> [accessed 23 November 2018].

<sup>110</sup> John Palgrave Simpson, *Lady Dedlock’s Secret: Play in Four Acts, Founded on an Episode in Charles Dickens’ ‘Bleak House’* (London and New York: Samuel French, 1885) p. 2. Accessed via *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database* (Proquest Literature Online).

on 3 April 1874 at the Opera House, Aberdeen, and on 28 November 1883 at the Theatre Royal, Windsor.<sup>111</sup> A short review in *The Morning Post* confirms the date of the Windsor performance.<sup>112</sup> I have been unable to find advertisements or reviews pertaining to the productions at Liverpool and Aberdeen, but the 1884 performance was evidently not a debut run: a short reference to *Lady Dedlock's Secret* in *The Newcastle Courant* confirms that the play was staged in Newcastle on Friday 17 April 1874.<sup>113</sup> Another advertisement indicates that it was performed in Bradford just a few days later.<sup>114</sup> It was also staged in Birmingham the same year, and a reviewer writing for the *Birmingham Daily Post* reported that it was 'very heartily received'. Mrs Hermann Vezin received glowing praise for her convincing turn as Lady Dedlock:

Although even as Dickens drew the character, and still more when presented on the stage, such a character has a more or less melodramatic air, Mrs Vezin [...] made it so thorough and so skilful that all the faults were lost in the general admiration of so great a work of histrionic art.<sup>115</sup>

Interestingly, this critic suggested that Mrs Vezin's representation of Lady Dedlock was more convincing than Dickens's original. The reference to Lady Dedlock's 'melodramatic air' is slightly derogatory, probably because, by the 1870s, the demand for greater realism on the stage was growing and melodrama was forced to evolve accordingly. Nevertheless, the reviewer argued that Mrs Vezin's performance erased 'all the faults' of the novel. Conversely, William Rignold's representation of Sir Leicester was criticised for falling short of the subtleties of Dickens's vision: 'He lost the real effect and power which Dickens meant to show'. Yet the reviewer felt that the drama was, on the whole, 'capitally played, and excited great interest in every act'.<sup>116</sup> Ten years later, a review in *The Pall Mall Gazette* described the play as 'a model of neatness and simplicity', suggesting that Simpson's cuts had produced a well-structured narrative that was less unwieldy than Dickens's text.<sup>117</sup> However, a critic writing for *The Era* took precisely the opposite view, accusing Simpson of taking 'sundry liberties with the original', which 'if [...] voted pardonable [...] must at the same time be regarded as

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<sup>111</sup> Bolton, p. 354; p. 359.

<sup>112</sup> [Anon.], untitled article, *The Morning Post*, (29 November 1883), p. 5.

<sup>113</sup> [Anon.], 'Theatre Royal', *The Newcastle Courant*, (17 April 1874), p. 8.

<sup>114</sup> [Anon.], 'Local and District', *The Bradford Observer*, (21 April 1874), p. 3.

<sup>115</sup> [Anon.], 'Prince of Wales Theatre', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 21 (13 May 1874), p. 7.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> [Anon.], 'Occasional Notes', *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 39 (27 March 1884), p. 3.

somewhat startling'.<sup>118</sup> A piece in *The Times* similarly stated that although Simpson's representation of Lady Dedlock's death 'ha[d] merits of its own from the stage point of view', it 'misse[d] the exquisite tenderness of the original'.<sup>119</sup> The insistence on the word 'original' here is interesting, for it implies that Dickens's text remains the authoritative version of *Bleak House*, even thirty years after its publication. While the *Liverpool Mercury* critic appraising Lander's play seemed unconcerned by his alterations to Jo's character, these two reviewers clearly viewed the source text as the touchstone for measuring an adaptation's worth. Hierarchical assumptions about the relative merits of the two mediums—drama and prose—underpin a disparaging reference to 'the stage point of view', with the implication being that although Simpson uses the resources of the theatre effectively, a narrative told dramatically will never match the complexities of prose. This is interesting given that the concept of the 'literary drama', which grew out of the impact Ibsen had made on the British theatre scene, was gaining credibility and support during the 1880s. Perhaps the best-known proponent of this new form of realist drama was theatre critic, and champion of George Bernard Shaw, William Archer. Archer published a five-volume translation of Ibsen's prose dramas in 1891, and his collected works, in 1906–7, and believed that theatre could, and should, engage the public in intelligent and subtle ways.<sup>120</sup> Literary adaptations were brought into debates, then, about the role the drama might play in society and what it could be expected to achieve. Their novelistic origins may have set them apart from other theatrical forms but it seems that some critics remained convinced that the drama was incompatible with intellectual nuance.

### **Rewriting Jo: Pathos, Politics, and Social Responsibility**

*Bleak House; or Poor Jo* is a melodrama, with strong elements of sentiment and pathos. As his subtitle makes clear, Lander simplifies the novel's complex web of storylines in order to give prominence to the homeless crossing-sweeper who had proved such a hit

<sup>118</sup> [Anon.], 'Lady Dedlock's Secret', *The Era*, 46 (29 March 1884), p. 7.

<sup>119</sup> [Anon.], 'Opera Comique', *The Times*, (27 March 1884), p. 6.

<sup>120</sup> 'Archer, William', in *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. by Margaret Drabble, Jenny Stringer, and Daniel Hahn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Accessed via Proquest, <[https://literature-proquest-com.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R4434021&divLevel=0&queryId=2999742273472&trailId=15C9CCA8396&area=ref&forward=critref\\_ft](https://literature-proquest-com.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R4434021&divLevel=0&queryId=2999742273472&trailId=15C9CCA8396&area=ref&forward=critref_ft)> [accessed 12 July 2017].

with readers. Although Dickens undoubtedly seeks to secure readers' sympathies for Jo, he portrays the child in a deliberately unsentimental manner. Lander's emphasis on pathos compels him to take the opposite approach and play up the most pitiable aspects of Jo's story. In an incident entirely missing from the novel, Lander's Jo makes an emotional speech after Hawdon's inquest: 'His grave'll be very plain, it will. I'll buy a flower or two, and a bit o' box – somethink that lives in winter [...] I'll plant it on his grave [...] an' I know it won't die for want of my tears to water it'.<sup>121</sup> Although Jo's words may well seem stilted to modern readers, Lander includes this incident to establish the child as the most sympathetic character in the play and highlight his inherent moral decency. Lander's Jo is more articulate than the uneducated crossing-sweeper of Dickens's novel, whose inability to express himself clearly at Hawdon's inquest is presented in a comical manner: 'Name, Jo. Don't know that everybody has two names. Never heerd of sich a think [...] Spell it? No. *He* can't spell it [...] Never been to school'.<sup>122</sup> The only way in which Dickens's Jo can communicate his acute sense of loss after Hawdon's death is to deliver a modest, but heartfelt, tribute to the law-writer's kindness: 'He was very good to me, he was!'.<sup>123</sup> Although Lander's Jo uses typical linguistic markers of Cockney dialect, the mournful phrase 'it won't die for want of my tears to water it' is suspiciously genteel and sits oddly with the rest of his speech. In much the same way that Oliver's grammatical English points to the innate middle-class sensibilities that guard him against corruption by Fagin and his cronies, Lander allows Jo's simple eloquence to point to the fact that his moral integrity has not been contaminated by his harsh surroundings. Despite occupying the lowest rung of the social ladder and having no role models to follow, Jo donates the little money he possesses to preserving his friend's memory.

Dickens's Jo clearly has genuine affection for Hawdon, but he is also well acquainted with the realities of a pauper's burial and offers Lady Dedlock an unflinching account of the event: 'They put him wery nigh the top. They was obliged to stamp upon it to git it in. I could unkiver it for you, with my broom, if the gate was open. That's why they locks

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<sup>121</sup> George Lander, *Bleak House; or Poor Jo, A Drama, in Four Acts. Adapted from Charles Dickens's Celebrated Novel of "Bleak House"* (London: John Dicks, 1885), p. 4. Accessed via *Chadwyck-Healey English Prose Drama Full-Text Database*, (Proquest Literature Online).

<sup>122</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, Oxford World's Classics edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 162

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, p. 165.

it, I s'pose'.<sup>124</sup> In the novel, Jo is unsentimental about death, probably because he has witnessed the disposal of corpses on many occasions. Dickens consistently aims to demonstrate that Jo is nothing if not a product of his environment:

Dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses [...] Homely filth begrimes him, homely parasites devour him, homely sores are on him, homely rags are on him; native ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate, sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts.<sup>125</sup>

This passage constitutes a fierce attack on the hypocrisy of the society that spawns, and then shrinks from, Jo in all of his grubby glory. The persistent use of the word 'homely' is telling. Dickens is insisting that Jo's native country is, in effect, his parent and should be held to account for his misery, but he is also ironically underlining the fact that Jo has no home: parentless and alone, the 'English soil' that should have nurtured him has instead failed to provide him with the basic necessities of life. Yet Dickens is also evoking a 'new discourse of the body' which was gaining momentum at mid-century.<sup>126</sup> Fuelled by the professionalisation of medicine as well as a proliferation of systematic investigations anxious to diagnose social ills, and hasten their cure, cultural commentators frequently posited the human body as an invaluable source of knowledge, 'both the sign and the metaphor of the nation.'<sup>127</sup> Philanthropists read its diseased and disfigured surfaces as incontrovertible evidence of the devastating effects of industrialisation. For Dickens, Jo's body is the index of a rotten society: his ailing form apocalyptically prophesises the collapse of the nation.

Lander's suggestion that admirable moral qualities (Jo's sensitivity, compassion, and sense of decorum) can flourish even on London's harshest streets implies that individual strength of character can triumph over social and economic hardship. This is not to assert that his portrait of Jo's victimhood is entirely apolitical. At Hawdon's inquest, when the coroner questions Jo about his parentage, he replies, 'Parish is father, and a hard one too. Charity is mother, and a stingy old gal she is, I can tell you'.<sup>128</sup> Again, Lander seems to have been inspired by *Twist*. Bumble does his best to portray the workhouse as a benignly

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p. 243.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p. 669.

<sup>126</sup> Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laquer (eds), 'Introduction', *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, L.A. and London: University of California Press, 1987), vii.

<sup>127</sup> Pamela K. Gilbert, *Mapping the Victorian Social Body* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 4.

<sup>128</sup> Lander, *Poor Jo*, p. 4.



paternal institution but, as Dickens takes pains to show, the state proves to be a woefully inadequate surrogate parent. Jo's comments chime with these sentiments and highlight the way in which domestic rhetoric allows organisations responsible for the welfare of vulnerable children (the parish, charities) to hide their incompetence.

Lander also sets up stark moral oppositions between the hollow preaching of the Church, one of the many institutions that have failed Jo, and the kindnesses bestowed on him by benevolent individuals. The clergyman Chadband feeds Jo's allegedly wicked soul with dogmatic sermons, while the compassionate Snagsby offers him real food to strengthen his malnourished body. Jo confides to Snagsby that 'the workhouse chucks me out; and the bobbies [...] only moves me on. And so I wanders about like a dog'.<sup>129</sup> The fact that Jo is denied help from the very organisations that should be offering him safety and protection makes it clear that officialdom breeds callousness; in comparing himself to a stray dog, Jo suggests that the punitive aspects of institutionalism have stripped him of his humanity.

Having said this, at the close of the play, the issue of social responsibility fades quietly from view. In the novel, Jo asks to be buried alongside Hawdon, and Woodcourt promises to fulfil his request, but Lander's Jo makes his pilgrimage to the graveyard while he is still living, warning Snagsby not to accompany him as he wants to avoid infecting him with fever. In Dickens's text, Jo unknowingly passes on the smallpox to Esther. Opting not to dramatise this episode absolves Jo of the guilt of causing Esther's disfigurement, but it also allows Lander to avoid addressing Dickens's discomfiting point that social injustice is dangerous for everyone. In Lander's play, the working classes pose no real threat to the social order or the health of the nation, for their suffering is compartmentalised, and affects only themselves. The densely interweaving stories in the novel, by contrast, continually emphasise shared connections between apparently disparate groups. Esther's illness serves as Dickens's warning to a complacent bourgeoisie: the poisonous consequences of poverty extend to all echelons of society, even those ostensibly far removed from its toxic grasp.

In the text, Jo dies in the presence of Woodcourt, Jarndyce, Phil Squod, and Trooper George in the shooting gallery. In the play, however, stage directions indicate that 'Several poorly-dressed people enter [...] and stop as if arrested by the sight of Jo so ill

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

and weak. They group round. Jo, C., supported by Snagsby'.<sup>130</sup> Interestingly, the 'poorly-dressed' working classes, rather than middle-class individuals, are Lander's touchstone of moral integrity here. In a manner typical of melodrama, Jo sorrowfully voices his final thoughts:

It's time for me to be put along with him. I wants for to be buried there. He used to say, "I'm as poor as you, Jo, to-day" and I wants to say that I'm as poor as him now, and I have come to be laid along with him.<sup>131</sup>

Like the gathering of the crowd, Jo's recollection of Hawdon's words gestures vaguely at a sense of solidarity amongst the poor, but there is never any hint of the possibility of collective action that might challenge the evils of the morally rotten society Lander depicts. The urgent question of who is to blame for the pervasive spread of illness and the wretched sanitary conditions that kill off large swathes of the urban poor is laid to rest with Jo.

In Simpson's *Lady Dedlock's Secret*, Jo is a victim only in the sense that he is exploited by Tulkinghorn and Bucket in their search to discover the truth about Lady Dedlock. While the Jo of Dickens's novel (and Lander's play) has no means to defend himself against the adults who bully him, Simpson's Jo is more than capable of holding his own. When Krook accuses him of stealing Hawdon's letters in order to conceal his own guilt, Jo boldly seizes him 'by the throat and shak[es] him violently', causing the incriminating letters to fall out of Krook's fur cap.<sup>132</sup> At the end of play, Lady Dedlock realises that Bucket suspects her of Tulkinghorn's murder and, again, Jo proves himself highly capable when he helps her to escape detection. In an incident entirely absent from the novel, Jo appears at Lady Dedlock's window to issue a warning: 'The bobby's after you. The bobby says it was you as killed the old man'. He goes on to explain, 'He's here to nab you. But Jo's alive and kicking'.<sup>133</sup> In this scene, Jo is used primarily to add a touch of comedy to a moment of high tension and assist Lady Dedlock in her distress. The honourable servant was a stock character in Victorian melodrama, and although Simpson's Jo is not employed by the Dedlocks, he is a shrewd working-class figure who aids a member of the aristocracy and is thus a variation on this type. Unlike Dickens's downtrodden crossing sweeper, who is ruthlessly 'moved on' by the police, Simpson's

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Simpson, p. 37.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

Jo outwits the law with the worldliness and insouciance of Fagin's boys. His resilience indicates a significant departure from the novel. Dickens's insistence on Jo's vulnerability is an attempt to convince readers of the pressing need to reform the institutions that fail children like him. Simpson does not address this issue, because his Jo is a resilient child whose poverty does not stop him from outmanoeuvring his enemies.

In the novel, at the time of Lady Dedlock's disappearance, Jo has already been dead for some chapters, and Dickens points an accusatory finger at the institutions he considers responsible: 'Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day'.<sup>134</sup> Raw anger pulses through every line of this incriminating passage. Jo's fate symbolically represents the plight of the individual defeated by a society utterly apathetic to its suffering. Dickens's rage is directed at the multitude of authoritative bodies whose indifference has produced the ravaged body of the dead child. He places Jo's body at the feet of the monarchy, the aristocracy, the parliament, and the church, bringing each group face to face with the incontrovertible evidence of their collective failure. The word 'Dead' reverberates through the passage like a ponderous knell, while the change from past to present tense desperately impresses readers with a sense of urgency. Harnessing the unassailable authority of his omniscient narrator and heavy verbal repetition to emphasise his point, Dickens angrily denounces the negligence of social responsibility that has condemned Jo to death. Lander focuses on creating a pathetic depiction of Jo's final moments that, while exploiting his ill appearance and the sympathy of the poor onlookers to encourage the audience to remember his suffering, ultimately evades the wider implications of his death. Simpson's Jo, by contrast, is not presented as particularly vulnerable; not only does he not die, he never even falls ill. Simpson transforms Jo into a loveable Cockney rogue with the know-how to survive the challenges of life on the streets. The reasons for this are partly generic, for Simpson relies on Jo to provide 'low' comedy in his highly emotive melodrama: imbuing him with impish appeal is necessary in order to make him convincing in this role. It is also probable that both playwrights shy away from using Jo as a springboard to discuss social evils because, by the 1870s, the issues that had preoccupied Dickens when he was writing *Bleak House*—such as the parliamentary debates of 1851 regarding overcrowding in urban areas and poor sanitary conditions—

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<sup>134</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 677.

had started to be addressed. The Public Health Act of 1872 made it compulsory for every public health authority to have a medical officer. Further legislation was put into place in 1875, which required local authorities to improve sanitation by providing adequate water, drainage, and sewerage. Key aims were reducing the spread of diseases such as cholera and typhus and putting an end to the construction of sub-standard housing. Much remained to be done, but the adaptors may well have felt that Dickens's warning about the consequences of a laissez-faire attitude to poverty, although laudable and indeed necessary in the 1850s, was less relevant twenty years later.

### **Motherhood and Sensation**

An aspect of *Bleak House* that Lander and Simpson *do* tackle with gusto is the fallen woman plot, and the eventual revelation of Lady Dedlock's maternity. I have already outlined how fraught discussions surrounding official legislation such as the Divorce Act of 1857 and the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s fuelled the 'phenomenal upsurge in fallen woman plays' in the last few decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>135</sup> The Married Women's Property Acts of 1870, 1882, 1886, and 1893 also had an impact. Lander and Simpson followed the *Copperfield* adaptors in focusing their attention on Dickensian storylines that addressed women's social and moral function.

Although both playwrights depict the domestic turmoil that ensues once Lady Dedlock's sexual transgression becomes known, neither devotes much attention to the characterisation of her daughter Esther. Lander, in particular, makes virtually no attempt to retain her distinctive narratorial perspective, a significant omission considering that Dickens's dual narration is one of *Bleak House*'s most unusual features. However, translating dense sections of text into efficient dialogue and concrete visual images must have made it difficult to retain Esther's notoriously evasive account of events. It is important to note, too, that Esther's multi-layered and psychologically complex narrative is hardly compatible with the unequivocal nature of melodrama, and that the playwrights may have been cautious about giving her a prominent role in their plays because Dickens's readers had not responded entirely favourably to her portions of the novel. Finally, Lander and Simpson would surely have been aware of the phenomenal success

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<sup>135</sup> Eltis, 'The Fallen Woman', p. 227.

of Halliday's *Little Em'ly*, which devotes less attention to the psychological development of Dickens's protagonist than to the fallen woman plot. It is entirely feasible that *Bleak House; or Poor Jo* and *Lady Dedlock's Secret* were attempts to recreate this winning formula.

In Lander's play, Esther appears only briefly in a couple of scenes at Chesney Wold: in the first, Lady Dedlock speaks to her of her parentage, and in the second, Esther learns that she is Lady Dedlock's daughter. Then, when her mother goes missing, Esther accompanies Bucket in his quest to find her, but in all of these scenes she is virtually a blank slate. We receive few clues about her state of mind or internal motivations; she appears only at strategic moments, to drive the plot forward. All of the focus is on Lady Dedlock herself and her inner turmoil as she struggles to conceal her sexual guilt. She is pitted against her enemy, Tulkinghorn, from the beginning of the play, and the canny lawyer quickly works out that she is guarding a secret:

I think I have got a clue to the dark page in my Lady Dedlock's past life [...] Her austerity and gloom; her reserve; the peculiar handwriting that I have discovered in several of her most valued books, and which so clearly resembles that of the affidavit that so excited our curiosity [...] all point to a mystery that I am determined, if possible, to unravel. If I [...] find that she is an unworthy and disgraced woman, she shall be cast down from the high place to which Sir Leicester Dedlock's infatuated love has raised her.<sup>136</sup>

Although Tulkinghorn has his suspicions about Lady Dedlock from a relatively early stage in the text, Dickens compels us to piece together numerous clues in order to fully comprehend the ruthless lawyer's intentions. Lander's Tulkinghorn is not so guarded: in a manner typical of melodrama, he outlines his plan to bring about Lady Dedlock's fall from grace. Lander even drops heavy hints about the nature of Lady Dedlock's secret: allowing Tulkinghorn to hazard a guess that she is a 'disgraced woman' strongly suggests that her transgression is a sexual one. The phrase 'cast down' evokes the social rejection and loss of status Lady Dedlock will face should Tulkinghorn's endeavours prove successful.

In the very next scene, Guppy pays Chesney Wold a visit and mentions several particulars (the letters owned by Hawdon, the resemblance between Lady Dedlock and Esther and, finally, the crucial information that Esther's real name is, in fact, Hawdon)

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<sup>136</sup> Lander, *Poor Jo*, p. 5.

which alert Lady Dedlock to the fact that her only child is still living. In a gloriously melodramatic moment, her emotional soliloquy summons the Ghost of Chesney Wold. Convincingly imitating the legendary apparition, Hortense plays a cruel trick on her mistress that forces her to confront her sexual guilt:

O, my child! – my child! – Not dead [...] as my cruel sister told me, but sternly nurtured by her [...] The ghostly legend is true: when calamity or death is coming to the house of Dedlock, the phantom of its ancestress walks. I have heard its ghostly step upon the terrace, and knew it walked for me. (She hurries with faltering step to the window, and draws the curtains, revealing a ghostly female figure [...] with its gaze directed full upon her, and the forefinger of its right hand pointed menacingly at her [...] she drops the curtains, and utters a loud shriek of terror, falling prostrate; or she may be caught in the arms of SIR LEICESTER DEDLOCK).<sup>137</sup>

Lady Dedlock's uneasy conviction that her wrongdoing will resurrect the malignant spirit is confirmed in hair-raising fashion when the Ghost itself—or, rather, Hortense *impersonating* the Ghost—makes a terrifying appearance on stage. The idea that 'calamity or death is coming to the house of Dedlock' suggests that Lady Dedlock's sexual fall heralds the destruction of the Dedlock family name and, by extension, the decline of the aristocracy. It is no coincidence that Lady Dedlock is at the mercy of middle-class lawyer Tulkinghorn; her vulnerability highlights the precariousness of aristocratic supremacy. Lander is ambivalent about the gravity of her moral weakness: although he acknowledges that she has had a child out of wedlock, he also makes it clear that she is a victim of her sister's cruelty. In her wildly successful sensation novel *East Lynne* (1861), Ellen Wood aims to secure sympathy for her erring female protagonist, Lady Isabel Carlyle, by stressing her frustrated maternity. After her deceptive seducer, Francis Levison, deserts her, Isabel allows her family to believe that she has died in a train crash and returns to her former household as governess to her own children. Wood urges readers to recognise Isabel's longings as the natural feelings of a mother: 'A hundred times [...] did she yearn to hold the children to her heart, and a hundred times she had to repress the longing'.<sup>138</sup> Lander uses similar tactics here. Lady Dedlock's lament, 'O, my child! – my child!', is a passionate affirmation of the unbreakable bond between a mother and her offspring and, as her burden of suppressed maternal longing grows heavier, she confides to the audience that 'my heart yearns to break the secret to

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>138</sup> Ellen Wood, *East Lynne*, Oxford World's Classics edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 418.

[Esther]’.<sup>139</sup> Like Wood, Lander sidesteps his female protagonist’s violation of social and sexual norms, replacing her illicit sexuality with a more morally acceptable form of domestic desire.<sup>140</sup> Drawing attention to Lady Dedlock’s motherly suffering is a covert way of securing the audience’s compassion rather than their moral censure, and makes Lander’s exploration of fallen womanhood more nuanced and sympathetic than it might have been. Lander’s Lady Dedlock is both sinner and saint: although she has violated sexual mores, her motherhood is sacred and prevents her from being consigned to perdition. We can assume that the strict censorship laws in place during this period would have prevented or, at the very least, strongly discouraged, the playwright from openly endorsing Lady Dedlock’s moral choices. Yet although Lander does not propose dismantling the boundaries that define the limits of socially acceptable feminine behaviour, he does shift them to accommodate a woman who, according to widespread Victorian ideas about female sexual conduct, had irrevocably severed herself from the upright members of her sex.

If Lander devotes considerable attention to depicting the trials endured by a female protagonist with a secret life, he also employs numerous other tropes that had made sensation fiction irresistible to readers in the 1860s: skeletons in the family closet, murder (Tulkinghorn’s), heightened suspense, and emotional intensity. Some of the best-known sensation novels had already been successfully adapted for the stage by the time Lander was working on *Bleak House*. *East Lynne* was exceedingly popular with adaptors, and Colin Henry Hazlewood’s version of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1863) enjoyed a long and prosperous run. Lander would have been aware of this; the stage time he devotes to Lady Dedlock’s story suggests that he selected ingredients from Dickens’s text that would appeal to audiences’ appetite for sensation. Dickens’s writing contained classic elements of sensation fiction (many of which were derived from stage melodrama) before the term came to indicate a recognisable genre and, twenty years later, adaptors harnessed this theatrical potential in their productions.

Lander’s play also anticipates the ‘woman with a past’ dramas of the 1890s, although works such as Oscar Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), George Bernard Shaw’s *Mrs Warren’s Profession* (1893), and Arthur Wing Pinero’s *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*

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<sup>139</sup> Lander, *Poor Jo*, p. 15.

<sup>140</sup> Lyn Pykett, *The Nineteenth Century Sensation Novel* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers Ltd, 1994), p. 99.

(1893) offer a more nuanced exploration of women's sexual, social, and familial responsibilities than *Poor Jo*. Shaw, for example, aims to show how economic conditions have forced Mrs Warren into prostitution, while Pinero bravely raises the issue of the sexual double standard. Yet other elements of the plots are remarkably similar. Like Mrs Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lady Dedlock is forced to conceal her maternity, and, like Paula Tanqueray, she has risen to a (precarious) position of prominence in society through marriage. Both Paula Tanqueray and Lady Dedlock fail to conceal their sexual histories and this leads to their permanent expulsion from respectable circles and, ultimately, their deaths. Pinero and Lander remain conventional in suggesting that a fallen woman can never be reintegrated into society.

Having said this, Lander's treatment of Lady Dedlock is not entirely conservative, for he clearly depicts her as a victim and even allows her to condemn Tulkinghorn for failing to show her compassion in her distress. When Lady Dedlock pleads with him not to reveal her secret and he refuses, she says impressively, 'May you plead as vainly there (Points upward)'.<sup>141</sup> Lander provocatively allows a fallen woman to take the reins of moral authority in his narrative (as Halliday had done with Martha) and covertly suggests that Tulkinghorn's cold-blooded pursuit of Lady Dedlock is more reprehensible than her illicit relationship. Lady Dedlock's assertion that, 'I do not care for myself, but for him who has been so kind to me, and for my poor child' suggests that, like Halliday's Martha, her fallen condition has not impaired her capacity for womanly selflessness: she is fleeing her home in an attempt to spare her husband and child the ignominy of being associated with her.<sup>142</sup> Thus although Lander does not openly endorse Lady Dedlock's actions, he does evoke sympathy for her by emphasising her sacred roles of wife and mother.

Having said this, Lander's representation of Lady Dedlock's final moments is more conventional. Perhaps in an attempt to placate more conservative spectators, he stresses her remorse and subjects her to the inevitable punishment for her wrongdoing: death. Battling her way through a violent storm in a desperate attempt to escape Inspector Bucket, Lady Dedlock searches for shelter but, unable to find any, 'sinks down' and utters her last words: 'cold, wet, and fatigue are sufficient causes for my being found dead; but I shall die of others, though I suffer from these'.<sup>143</sup> Although Lady Dedlock's

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<sup>141</sup> Lander, *Poor Jo*, p. 16.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, p. 21.



condemnation of Tulkinghorn's actions previously implied that her sins should be forgiven rather than punished, she dies in a manner entirely characteristic of sexually transgressive women on the nineteenth-century stage: penitent, prostrate, and a social pariah. Her melancholy speech makes it clear that she is dying because she is eaten up with remorse, rather than because she is physically ill, a revelation that crystallises her sexual guilt and serves as a deterrent to would-be sinners in the audience.

In many ways, Simpson's characterisation of Lady Dedlock is remarkably similar. Only one word distinguishes the cheekily derivative title of his play, *Lady Dedlock's Secret*, from Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. This was a canny marketing strategy on Simpson's part, for those members of the public who had read and enjoyed Braddon's novel, or seen it on the stage, would have patronised his play in the hope of being treated to a similarly gripping experience. The popularity, not only of Dickens's text, but of Braddon's too, gave Simpson the advantage of a readymade audience for his adaptation, particularly because there were two stage versions of *Lady Audley's Secret*, both of which were phenomenally successful. However, although Simpson's Lady Dedlock shares Lady Audley's need to don a mask in order to conceal her true identity (as Esther's mother), she is no villainess. Like Lander, Simpson reveals Lady Dedlock's secret at a very early stage in the play, and stresses her vulnerability:

Oh, my child—my child!— not dead [...] as my cruel sister told me, but nurtured by her, after she had renounced me and my name [...] And he, false lover of my youth—false to my sister, doubly false to me [...] I could not have desired so horrible a retribution!<sup>144</sup>

Both Lander and Simpson portray Lady Dedlock as the casualty of Miss Barbary's cruelty, but Simpson also suggests that she fell prey to a calculating seducer in her youth. Transforming Hawdon into a ruthless cad who wronged both sisters heightens Lady Dedlock's victimhood and lays the foundations for a sympathetic response to her predicament. The fact that Simpson draws attention to her tender age also suggests that her misconduct was the result of naivety, rather than wilful wrongdoing. Although even in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, cultural representations of women who violated sexual norms frequently emphasised moral weakness, Simpson encourages his

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<sup>144</sup> Simpson, p. 13.

audience to recognise that the other individuals who played a part in Lady Dedlock's transgression should be held to account for their actions.

Unlike Lady Audley, Simpson's Lady Dedlock does not commit extravagant crimes. Nevertheless, the way in which Simpson exploits Victorian anxieties about the domestic sphere not being the haven that it was supposed to be, and wives falling disturbingly short of angelic perfection, is characteristic of the sensation genre. The playwright sneaks in self-conscious references to these conventions, allusions that his audience would have understood and enjoyed. Once Tulkinghorn begins to suspect Lady Dedlock of concealing something, he tries to rattle her by saying ominously: 'There is a skeleton in the closet of most families [...] I may say in all'. Lady Dedlock replies haughtily, 'am I to suppose [...] that you insinuate I have one of these anatomical horrors locked up in any closet of my own?'<sup>145</sup> In a later scene, Tulkinghorn probes Lady Dedlock about her interest in Hawdon's handwriting, and asks if she desires to learn more about the law-writer. She replies coolly, 'I don't disdain a good romance', to which Tulkinghorn responds grimly, 'This is no romance, Lady Dedlock, but stern reality'.<sup>146</sup> This escalating tension must have been extremely enjoyable to watch, but these little exchanges also indicate that although Simpson embraces some of the principal conventions of the sensation genre, he does so with a knowing wink to his audience. His play was staged in the 1870s, a decade after sensation had first made its mark on the public imagination, so openly acknowledging the well-worn tropes that he is using adds flashes of humour and prevents the drama from feeling stale.

Lady Dedlock's death is the emotional climax of the play, and the scene with which Simpson opts to end his tale. In the novel, none of the principal characters glimpse Lady Dedlock alive after she has vanished: when Esther and Bucket finally discover her, she is already dead. In Simpson's play, by contrast, Jo pursues her and manages to restore her to Chesney Wold before she dies, in what proves to be a dramatic and emotional homecoming. Stage directions indicate that 'LADY DEDLOCK appears amidst the storm, on the terrace without, slowly following JO down the walk', but when Sir Leicester approaches her, he gets an unwelcome surprise: 'Come to me, my own'—(staggering back) Ah! she does not know me! Her mind is gone!<sup>147</sup> Madness was one of

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

the most common punishments meted out to fallen women on the Victorian stage, but the fact that Lady Dedlock loses her mind is surely also another knowing nod to *Lady Audley's Secret*: Lady Audley is eventually diagnosed with latent insanity and imprisoned in an asylum. Lady Dedlock is slightly more fortunate, for she does eventually recognise her husband and Sir Leicester proves his inherent nobility by forgiving her:

*Sir L*: There is no avenging spirit here! Light of my life (music till end) look at me! I can forgive —I do forgive you all! (kisses her hands)

*Lady D*: Generous and noble as you always were! But it is too late! [...] It has been all too much for me! My strength is ebbing fast!<sup>148</sup>

Unlike Dickens, Simpson gives his audience the emotional solace of a reconciliation between the Dedlocks. Sir Leicester's passionate speech and physical demonstration of affection suggest that his love for his wife is as steady as ever, while Lady Dedlock finally recognises her husband's true worth, albeit 'too late' to make proper amends for having deceived him. Allowing spectators to witness the Dedlocks emotionally reconnecting with one another before Lady Dedlock's death gives added pathos to her final moments and lends Simpson's drama a sense of closure. In her final speech, Lady Dedlock makes it clear that her own death is necessary if she is to avoid passing on her sexual taint to her daughter:

Esther, my child, the cloud will pass away in time. You love each other, though you do not know. You will be happy [...] when I am in my grave [...] (to ESTHER) Give me your hand (to JARNDYCE) and yours. You will have life's best protector, darling, much beloved child – and that generous man (looking for SIR LEICESTER) will be a father to the erring mother's child!<sup>149</sup>

In this speech, Lady Dedlock attempts to convince Esther that she will enjoy a happy future. As if to compensate for her own death, she offers her child a new surrogate father in Sir Leicester, but this feels unconvincing, largely because the bond is formed so hurriedly, but also because Lady Dedlock fails to consult either her daughter or her husband before making the arrangement. She even gives her approval to a marriage between Esther and Jarndyce, an outcome Dickens ultimately rejects in favour of uniting his heroine with her younger suitor, Allan Woodcourt. In the novel, Jarndyce resigns hopes of making Esther his wife and, at least officially, steps back into the role of her

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

‘guardian’, but Simpson cuts Woodcourt from the action entirely, which means that Jarndyce has no rival for Esther’s affections. Yet it is difficult not to feel that bringing Esther and Jarndyce together in this manner is perfunctory and unsatisfying. Simpson’s attempt to tie up loose ends clearly entails assuring the audience that, in losing her mother, Esther is gaining a new family. This is troubling, not simply because Lady Dedlock fails to ascertain Esther’s feelings before handing her over to Jarndyce, but because Simpson has already indicated that those feelings are entirely platonic. In an earlier scene, Esther ‘blesses the guardian who has been a father to her’, and later reiterates that ‘I do love [Jarndyce] —as a father—only as a father, of course’, which makes it clear that she does not view him as a prospective husband.<sup>150</sup> In Dickens’s novel, it is Jarndyce himself, rather than Lady Dedlock, who gives Esther away on the assumption that he understands her needs better than she does. Dickens suggests that although Esther finds it difficult to acknowledge her true feelings, she does, in fact, love Woodcourt, but Jarndyce’s intervention remains disturbing:

“Allan,” said my guardian, “take from me, a willing gift, the best wife that ever a man had. What more can I say for you, than that I know you deserve her! Take with her the little home she brings you [...] Let me share its felicity sometimes, and what do I sacrifice? Nothing, nothing.”<sup>151</sup>

The phrase ‘a willing gift’ is deliberately ambiguous: Jarndyce may be referring to his own willingness to give Esther to Woodcourt or, equally, suggesting that Esther is ‘willing’ to be Woodcourt’s wife. Either way, describing Esther as a ‘gift’ is troubling because it reminds us that, despite his generosity, Jarndyce has a tendency to view people as objects: he gives young maidservant Charley to Esther as ‘a little present’, and subsequently treats Esther in a similar way.<sup>152</sup> Esther pays a high price for domestic happiness; she becomes a commodity, and a passive object of exchange between men. Jarndyce’s hope that he can ‘share’ the ‘felicity’ of Esther and Woodcourt’s life together is also unsettling for it suggests an, albeit repressed, desire to encroach on their marriage. Our suspicions that Jarndyce’s attempts to master his proprietorial feelings towards Esther have not been entirely successful are confirmed when he provides her and Woodcourt with their marital home: an uncanny duplicate Bleak House. The layout

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid, p. 5; p. 29.

<sup>151</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 891.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, p. 356. See Margot C. Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 41–42. Finn discusses Charley’s role as an economic unit of exchange.

meticulously resembles the original, and Esther perceives the ‘tastes and fancies’ of her guardian’s old home ‘in the arrangement of all the pretty objects’. Esther expresses fears that this house will ‘remind [Jarndyce] mournfully of what he believed he had lost’, but it is also clear that Jarndyce is determined not to allow Esther to forget *him*, and the house of which she was nearly mistress.<sup>153</sup> Moreover, as Sally Ledger points out, the new Bleak House ‘is presented [...] almost as a stage set [...] painstakingly crafted (by Mr Jarndyce as a proxy for Dickens), and thereby draws attention to itself as a constructed object’.<sup>154</sup> Esther’s perfect haven is thus not quite as simple and beautiful as it seems. Although allegedly fashioned to her own ‘tastes and fancies’, it is, in fact, a physical space constructed exclusively by men (architecturally, by Jarndyce, and imaginatively, by Dickens).

Lander and Simpson made significant alterations to *Bleak House*, some of which (the lack of attention given to Esther’s narrative, for example) reflected the shift in medium. Others, such as Simpson’s comic treatment of Jo, pointed to a reluctance to deviate too widely from the generic conventions of melodrama. Lander and Simpson presented Jo in different ways, with Lander playing up his martyr status and Simpson transforming him into a mischievous urchin, but both ultimately avoided using him as a vehicle for critiquing institutional inertia. As I have already speculated, this was, perhaps, because the exposure of the chronic sufferings of the urban poor that had shocked the public at mid-century had led to important social reforms, and Dickens’s warning was not, therefore, as prescient as it had been in the 1850s. By the time the plays were staged in the 1870s, significant ideological shifts had taken place and new social issues were dominating the public consciousness. One such issue was ‘the woman question’, and both Lander and Simpson, no doubt inspired by the proliferation of plays that explored the plight of the fallen woman as well as the success of *Copperfield* adaptations that focused on Emily’s story, opted to make Lady Dedlock a principal figure in their dramas. The links between gender and genre are key here: the two adaptors adopted the female-focused tropes of sensation fiction (womanly suffering, sexual transgressions, domestic secrets) because they were aware of their dramatic potential and popular appeal. Like some of the most successful sensation novelists, Lander and Simpson neither condemned

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<sup>153</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, pp. 888–89.

<sup>154</sup> Sally Ledger, ‘From Queen Caroline to Lady Dedlock: Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32 (2004), 575–600, (p. 594).

their female protagonist outright nor endorsed her actions, although Simpson presented Lady Dedlock's death as the catalyst to Esther's domestic contentment. However, Lady Dedlock's hasty attempts to secure her daughter a new family before she departs for the next world leave us uncertain about the probability of Esther's future happiness. In the novel, Esther's strangely unreal new Bleak House raises the disturbing possibility that home is not a material reality, but an imaginative construct. In *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), Bella Wilfer is presented with a marital haven akin to a fairy-tale palace, complete with gold and silver fish and a casket of jewels. Esther's idyllic refuge is another fantasy of domesticity, but entering this doll's house, on Jarndyce's command, compels her to surrender her agency. Both Dickens and Simpson make it necessary for Esther to be manoeuvred into marriage. However, the crucial difference is that while Dickens deliberately draws attention to the problematic aspects of this arrangement, Simpson appears to do so unintentionally.

## Conclusion

Like adaptors of the 1830s and 1840s novels, all of the playwrights featured in Part III pruned Dickens's diffuse narratives and focused their attention on plotlines that foregrounded the symbolic, emotional, and ideological importance of the hearth. Medium and genre-specific constraints (such as the difficulty of retaining first-person narration on the stage and the need to keep the plot rattling along in a manner befitting melodrama) also necessitated shifts in perspective and pace. In their afterlives on the stage, David and Esther were not psychologically complex individuals struggling for fulfilment and selfhood, but plot-mechanisms that hastened the action towards a satisfactory conclusion.

The adaptive strategies that dramatists of the 1850s novels adopted (shifting emphasis to marginal characters, capitalising on the potential of their medium, cutting material, and revising endings) had been tried and tested before. What was new, however, was the feminine focus of their adaptations and their engagement with topical anxieties surrounding women's place in the home and society more widely. Legislation that aimed to delineate marital norms, women's sexual freedoms, and feminine identity inspired the adaptors to focus on the fallen woman and her violation of hearthside virtues and, in so doing, to revise and expand the role she played in the texts. Dickens's Martha is a passive figure imprisoned by her fallen status, but Halliday makes her Emily's saviour. Poised

ambiguously between the morally degenerate prostitute and her spotless sister, Martha fails to fit comfortably into either category. Her ability to act as Emily's rescuer suggests that her moral faculties remain intact and covertly hints at the possibility of her reintegration into society. In Brougham's version of *Copperfield*, Emily does not emigrate to Australia as she does in the novel. On one level, Brougham's decision to offer her the chance of redemption in the home that she has forsaken is a more progressive, and less punitive, response to her transgression than Dickens's transportation sentence. However, protectively sheltering Emily in Peggotty's arms also suggests the need to contain her desires and re-establish the familial norms placed under threat by her flight. In adaptations of *Bleak House*, Lander and Simpson were similarly ambivalent about Lady Dedlock, encouraging the audience to pity her maternal suffering whilst stressing the inevitability, and indeed the necessity, of her punishment. The author of *Lost Emily* offered a more conventional approach to the problem of fallen womanhood, using melancholy songs from popular culture to supplement Dickens's dialogue and elicit pity for Martha. However, the wider implications of Martha's predicament, and the conditions that force her into homelessness and prostitution, remained unaddressed; the playwright proposed only that the audience should recognise her humanity.

The plight of the poor and the dispossessed also formed the emotional core of Lander's *Poor Jo* but, unlike *Lost Emily*, Lander's play may be seen as an attempt to marry pathos and politics. Although he did not replicate Dickens's systemic attack on governmental inertia, Lander's sympathetic portrayal of Jo's clashes with the church, the police, and the workhouse highlighted the heartlessness of officialdom and gestured towards the necessity of protecting vulnerable children without homes or families to support them. Having said this, Lander's decision to give precedence to Jo's emotional connection with Hawdon over the pressing issue of social responsibility (particularly in the death scene) arguably undermined his brief attempts to critique institutional failures.

The adaptors also modified Dickens's treatment of marriage. In *Copperfield*, Dickens raises questions about the links between hegemonic gender roles and power. However, in the adaptations, unhappy marriages (namely Clara Copperfield's and Dora's) were simply excised from the plot, allowing David and Agnes's union to perform the conventional melodramatic function of securing them a fitting reward for their virtue. In *Lady Dedlock's Secret*, Simpson ignored Dickens's ambivalence about Jarndyce's proprietary feelings towards Esther. Enlisting Sir Leicester to be a father to Esther left

Jarndyce free to relinquish this role and become her husband but, in order to be satisfied with this ostensibly happy ending, spectators were required to forget that Esther had already expressed an inability to envisage marrying her guardian. Thus, although Simpson attempted to erase the undercurrents of irony and scepticism that make Dickens's novel a covert critique, as well as a celebration of, the pleasures domesticity appears to offer, the inconsistency of his characterisation inadvertently resurrected the very issues he sought to resolve.

Although in some ways dramatisers of *Copperfield* and *Bleak House* blurred the ideological nuances of the novels, they also took a bolder approach to the adaptation process than their predecessors. Not only did they opt for more radical shifts in narratorial perspective, they were also more actively engaged with delineating, and covertly complicating, the social and moral function that women were expected to perform in domestic culture.



## Conclusion

This thesis has explored a variety of domestic themes in nineteenth-century theatrical adaptations of Dickens's texts and the gaps (aesthetic, structural, ideological) between their representation in the novels and on the stage. Throughout, my focus has been on examining how a range of factors—namely theatrical trends, audience expectations, generic conventions, and the social and cultural contexts in which the plays were conceived—prompted Victorian adaptors to offer their audiences a selective version of Dickensian domesticity. All of the adaptations that I have discussed heighten Dickens's veneration of hearthside virtues while diluting, or overlooking, those portions of the novels that flag up the internally fragmented nature of the domestic ideal and test its credibility.

I have not been arguing, however, that the adaptors were merely conservative censors of Dickens's work, rather that, using a variety of adaptive strategies, they selectively reimagined his narratives and reoriented their ideological focus. I have endeavoured to avoid making value judgments about the aesthetic merits of the adaptations; instead, I have sought to unpick the cultural work they performed. Scholars are increasingly acknowledging the importance of exploring the connections between Victorian literature and popular culture. Juliet John's sourcebook on *Oliver Twist* includes contextual material relating to nineteenth-century adaptations and the Public Readings as well as advertising and pressbook extracts from twentieth-century film adaptations. Although John encourages 'an appreciation of "the text" in its own right', her inclusion of these materials 'problematizes any purist idea that literature functions in a privileged and separate space'.<sup>1</sup> Bratton and Davis advocate a similar approach, and rightly emphasise the need to move beyond the 'wincing distaste most twentieth-century critics displayed for the links between Dickens and the popular stage in his own lifetime'.<sup>2</sup> In her overview of Victorian adaptations of *The Chimes*, Bratton asks whether these dramas 'had

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<sup>1</sup> Juliet John (ed.), 'Introduction', *Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist: A Sourcebook* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Jacky Bratton, 'Introduction', *Dickensian Dramas: Plays from Charles Dickens*, ed. by Jacky Bratton and Jim Davis, 2 Vols (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), Vol. 1, xiv.

something special to contribute to a wide audience at this particular moment in the development of the modern theatre', an important question that further scholarly work on Dickens adaptations might endeavour to answer.<sup>3</sup>

Although this thesis contends that adherence to melodramatic convention compelled the adaptors to condense Dickens's labyrinthine plots and straighten out the ideological ambiguities that characterise his depictions of domestic life, the adaptation process was by no means consistently reductive; neither were these plays simply derivative. The adaptors knew what made audiences tick, and provided it, even when they were working from texts that were, as yet, incomplete. As my case studies have demonstrated, they were adept at embroidering their source material, expanding the roles of minor characters, and working entirely new scenes into Dickens's narratives. One of the aims of this thesis has been to place the creative efforts of these little-known figures in the spotlight and foreground the important role they played in forging Dickens's cultural legacy. The adaptors were Dickens's curators and his (albeit usually unacknowledged) collaborators and should be recognised as such.

The ideological foregrounding of the domestic that I have identified in the adaptations demonstrates that, like nineteenth-century novelists, dramatists were active participants in contemporary discussions about familial life and helped to promulgate, and shape, the mid-Victorian cult of domesticity. I have examined this connection exclusively in relation to Dickens, but work remains to be done on how nineteenth-century theatre shaped domestic culture more broadly. Given the wealth of material available, it need hardly be said that a plethora of Dickens adaptations did not make it into this thesis. My decision not to include dramatisations of Dickens's 1860s novels was based on the need to set realistic parameters for my research; attempting to cover these plays would have compromised my ability to offer detailed close readings. Further exploration of these adaptations would be a worthy undertaking for any scholar seeking to broaden our knowledge of Dickens's popular appeal, his relationship with the theatre, or wider connections between the nineteenth-century novel and the stage. My own focus has been on domesticity, but studies of Dickens dramatisations need not be limited to this theme: unpicking the ways in which nineteenth-century playwrights responded to Dickens's engagement with politics, or matters of class, would surely prove equally productive.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, xxx.

Significant progress has been made in making these adaptations, and Victorian plays more generally, easily accessible through online databases and digital archives such as the *Victorian Plays Project*, which is jointly run by the University of Worcester and the National University of Ireland Galway. Despite this, Victorian reworkings of popular novels remain an understudied area. My research has highlighted the importance of recovering a cultural history of adaptation in the nineteenth century. Reconstructing this history presents a number of challenges, some of which I have confronted in the process of completing this thesis. The obscurity into which the majority of the adaptors have fallen means that archival materials pertaining to their personal lives, networks, and creative aims (journals, recollections, correspondence) are limited. We must also acknowledge that reading these plays as texts, rather than seeing them dramatised on the stage, inevitably alters how we experience them. Nevertheless, theatre historians have made significant progress in recovering nineteenth-century performance conditions. Each play featured in Bratton and Davis's edited collection of nineteenth-century Dickens dramas is prefaced by explanatory notes pertaining to the dramatists who authored the plays and the theatres in which they were performed. Both volumes also include introductions that situate the adaptations firmly in the Victorian theatrical world and foreground Dickens's creative collaborations with particular playwrights and actor-managers.<sup>4</sup> Exploring the political, ideological, and cultural contexts in which popular novels were reinvented and retold for new audiences helps us to historicise nineteenth-century adaptation. The Victorian public encountered narratives in multiple media, and although the scope of this thesis has compelled me to limit my analysis to dramatic adaptations, prose and pictorial reworkings remain ripe for further study.

I have focused on exploring the ways in which Dickens's contemporaries reimagined his works, but the patterns that I have identified continue to resurface in modern Dickens adaptations. Victorian adaptors played a vital role in forging Dickens's association with the hearth, and the impulse to protect and preserve his reputation as a guardian of family values is still with us. The enduring appeal of Dickens's jovial, paternal image is remarkable: scholars have long since uncovered the contradictions at its core, and Dickens's less-than-idyllic domestic circumstances have also been placed under the microscope in contexts outside academia. In his account of the Dickens bicentenary celebrations in 2012, Ben Winyard notes that newspaper articles and television

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

programmes which focused on the ‘insalubrious aspects of Dickens’s personality’ coexisted with adulatory commemorative events. Winyard suggests that, ‘In the prominence given to Dickens’s marital troubles, we perhaps detect a gleeful cutting-down-to-size of this cultural giant, this literary Father Christmas’.<sup>5</sup> Filmmakers, too, have explored the dissolution of Dickens’s marriage. Ralph Fiennes’s 2014 adaptation of Claire Tomalin’s pioneering biography, *The Invisible Woman*, foregrounds the complexities of Dickens’s affair with young actress Ellen Ternan, his ruthless treatment of wife Catherine, and the gender inequalities that defined both relationships.<sup>6</sup>

Yet Dickens’s association with joviality, festive goodwill, and the family stubbornly endures. Numerous adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* are shown on television every year and, for many, the term ‘Dickensian’ is virtually synonymous with cheerful hearths and family fun. In his book, *The Man Who Invented Christmas*, Les Standiford portrays Dickens as the figurehead of the festive season and maintains that although ‘No individual can claim credit for the creation of Christmas’, Dickens heroically ‘came to the rescue of a downtrodden holiday that a repressed Western world was fairly bursting to revive’.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, for much of Bharat Nalluri’s 2017 film adaptation of Standiford’s book, Dickens is portrayed as a restless and irascible man who frequently shuns his family to devote himself to his fictional creations. Much like Scrooge, Dickens struggles to get into the Christmas spirit, groaning when his parents turn up unexpectedly at his door and dismissing his blameless maid when she disturbs his feverish attempts to finish writing the *Carol*. His irritable behaviour distresses his neglected wife, and he eventually orders his hapless and financially improvident father to leave his household. Yet, once Dickens has devised an ending for the *Carol*, he rediscovers his love of Christmas and family tensions quickly dissolve. Dickens reinstates maid Tara and reconnects with his family. Like his Victorian predecessors, Nalluri acknowledges threats to domestic harmony in the Dickens world but resolves them neatly before the credits roll. The Dickens household celebrates Christmas in style, and Dickens proposes a hearty toast:

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<sup>5</sup> Ben Winyard, ‘“Should I feel a moment with you?”: Queering Dickensian Feeling’, 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, <<https://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/articles/10.16995/ntn.638/>> [accessed 9 October 2018].

<sup>6</sup> *The Invisible Woman*, dir. by Ralph Fiennes (Sony Pictures Classics, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Les Standiford, *The Man Who Invented Christmas: How Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol Rescued His Career and Revived Our Holiday Spirits* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008), p. 193; p. 180.

I wish you all many many happy Christmases, and friendships, a great accumulation of cheerful recollections, and Heaven at last for all of us. In the season of hope, we will shut out nothing from our firesides, and everyone will be welcome. Welcome what has been, and what is, and what we hope may be, to this shelter underneath the holly. Merry merry Christmas to one and all.<sup>8</sup>

Although the real Dickens never uttered these words, this cheerful speech combines short extracts from a letter he sent to Forster on 27 December 1846 with phrases plucked from ‘What Christmas Is As We Grow Older’, an article which appeared in the 1851 Christmas issue of *Household Words*. Like the nineteenth-century adaptors, Nalluri picks and chooses which parts of Dickens to reveal to his audience and, in so doing, irons out the melancholy undertones present in the original article. For example, Dickens’s words, ‘Welcome, alike what has been, and *what never was*’<sup>9</sup> (italics mine) become ‘Welcome what has been, and what is’: Nalluri opts not to preserve Dickens’s hints that recalling the past forces us to confront disappointment and unfulfilled desires. He also ignores Dickens’s ominous question, ‘In yonder shadow, do we see obtruding furtively upon the blaze, an enemy’s face?’<sup>10</sup> The sinister undercurrents here suggest that domestic happiness, signified by the blazing hearth, is transient and fragile, at risk of being extinguished by external forces. At the close of Nalluri’s film, by contrast, the joyful family portrait remains undisturbed.

In his review of *The Man Who Invented Christmas*, *Guardian* film critic Peter Bradshaw remarks wryly that Nalluri’s need to grant viewers a wish-fulfilment ending means that ‘there’s no question of a real look at Christmas present for [Dickens’s] friends and relatives, and certainly no Christmas yet-to-come when his marriage has collapsed’<sup>11</sup>, while Geoffrey Macnab similarly comments that,

There are tensions here which the film doesn’t delve into too deeply. Dickens was writing *A Christmas Carol* to make money, not simply to spread good

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<sup>8</sup> *The Man Who Invented Christmas*, dir. by Bharat Nalluri (Elevation Pictures and Wildcard Distribution, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘What Christmas Is As We Grow Older’, *Household Words*, 4 (25 December 1851), p. 2. Accessed via *Dickens Journals Online*, <<http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-iv/page-602.html>> [accessed 18 October 2018].

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Bradshaw, ‘The Man Who Invented Christmas Review – Bah, Humbug!’, *The Guardian*, (1 December 2017), <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/dec/01/the-man-who-invented-christmas-review-dan-stevens-charles-dickens>> [accessed 10 October 2018].

cheer. When he was in the frenzy of creation, he was as much of a bad-tempered curmudgeon as Scrooge himself.<sup>12</sup>

While I cannot agree that the film sidesteps Dickens's financial motivation for writing the *Carol*, it is clear that adaptors continue to reinforce his reputation as an enthusiastic celebrant of human fellowship and familial feeling. In some ways, then, we have continued the work that the nineteenth-century adaptors began, for we are still culturally appropriating, and domesticating, Dickens.

This is not to say, however, that all modern adaptors seek to provide audiences with safe, reassuring, and unchallenging interpretations of Dickens. David Edgar's 2017 adaptation of the *Carol*, performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company, incorporated Dickens and Forster as characters in the action, an unusual move that, as Michael Billington observed, underlined Dickens's urgent plea on behalf of the poor:

Dickens's fury at the exploitation of child labour is changed from a tract into a tale only at Forster's prompting [...] Dickens even explains to Forster [...] that his childhood experience in the blacking factory could easily have turned him into a robber or vagabond [...] the presence of Dickens and Forster as quasi-Brechtian commentators reinforces the political message [...] the need to treat poverty as a rectifiable evil rather than a moral failing comes through loud and clear.<sup>13</sup>

Billington contends that allowing Dickens to appear on the stage is an effective means of directly communicating his social criticism to the audience. Yet, interestingly, he suggests that this innovation also has a distancing effect, 'prevent[ing] the story gaining its usual unstoppable momentum' and lessening its emotional impact.<sup>14</sup>

Others, however, felt that Edgar's production successfully married family fun and social commentary:

David Edgar's adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* [...] opens on the author himself and his real-life anger at a report into child labour. Edgar frames Scrooge's redemption with a light-touch history lesson about its origins [...] Having Dickens 'write' the story on stage, against a backdrop of workhouses

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Macnab, 'Film Reviews Round-up: The Man Who Invented Christmas, Wonder, Happy End, Love is Thicker Than Water', *The Independent*, (29 November 2017), <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/film-reviews-round-up-the-man-who-invented-christmas-wonder-happy-end-love-is-thicker-than-water-a8082091.html> [accessed 17 October 2018].

<sup>13</sup> Michael Billington, 'A Christmas Carol Review – Dickens's Social Ills Touch the Mind but not the Heart', *The Guardian*, (7 December 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/dec/07/a-christmas-carol-review-rsc-stratford-upon-avon-phil-davis> [accessed 1 November 2018].

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

and actual Victorian testimony, sharpens edges softened by the tale's status as a Christmas favourite. Want and Ignorance are street kids. Nonetheless, 'tis the season and this is a family show. Director Rachel Kavanaugh's bright, energetic production is a splash of colour and dance [...] Aided by Stephen Brimson Lewis' versatile, snow-sprinkled set and Catherine Jayes' score, Kavanaugh gives us a Victorian Christmas card drawn in telling details [...] As the Ghost of Christmas Present, Brigid Zengeni is [...] emblematic of this production's mix of wit and grit. This is a Christmas stocking of a show: full of goodies alongside an evergreen message about the importance of empathy.<sup>15</sup>

Like Billington, Tom Wicker argues that Edgar's adaptation manages to retain the raw 'anger' and social conscience at the core of Dickens's novella. Yet he also suggests that his production is a 'family show' replete with 'Victorian Christmas card' details and the pretty 'snow-sprinkled' aesthetics audiences nostalgically associate with Dickens's London. Wicker's reference to the 'light-touch history lesson' the production delivers suggests that factual information relating to Victorian working conditions and child labour is delivered in a manner easily digestible for the young spectators in the audience. Nevertheless, he argues that this 'backdrop of workhouses and actual Victorian testimony', and the appearance of Ignorance and Want (omitted from the majority of *Carol* adaptations) ensures that Dickens's political message remains intact. Although Dickens's association with cheerfulness, happy endings, and the family continues to shape adaptations of his works, Edgar's play demonstrates that these elements can coexist with, and do not necessarily undermine, his social criticism.

This thesis has argued that Dickens's nineteenth-century adaptors were equally creative with their source material, and that their plays should be recognised as important contributions to the debates that shaped Victorian domestic life. I have acknowledged the contradictory impulses at work in nineteenth-century theatrical adaptations of Dickens while not losing sight of the persistent foregrounding of the domestic that shaped his public image and subsequent cultural legacy. Dickens's own attempts to cement his status as a beloved custodian of the hearth amongst his contemporaries have attracted considerable attention but, ultimately, only partially account for the tenacity of this reputation. My research has highlighted a crucial gap in our understanding of the

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<sup>15</sup> Tom Wicker, A Christmas Carol Review at Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon – 'intelligent and inventive', *The Stage*, (6 December 2017), <https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2017/christmas-carol-review-royal-shakespeare-theatre-stratford-upon-avon/> [accessed 1 November 2018].

Dickensian domestic by demonstrating that nineteenth-century dramatic adaptations played an equally important role in forging powerful, and enduring, popular conceptions of Dickens.



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*The Man Who Invented Christmas*, dir. by Bharat Nalluri (Elevation Pictures and Wildcard Distribution, 2017)