

DICKENS AND  
THE DAUGHTER OF  
THE HOUSE

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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Monotype Baskerville 11/12½ [SE]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Schor, Hilary Margo.

Dickens and the daughter of the house / Hilary M. Schor.  
p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in nineteenth-century literature  
and culture: 25)

ISBN 0 521 44076 9 (hardback)

1. Dickens, Charles, 1812–1870 – Characters – Daughters.
2. Women and literature – England – History – 19th century.
3. Domestic fiction, English – History and criticism. 4. Dickens, Charles, 1812–1870 – Characters – Women. 5. Fathers and daughters in literature. 6. Daughters in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PR4592.D27838 1999

823'.8 – dc21 99-11166 CIP

ISBN 0 521 44076 9 hardback

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*The uncanny daughter: Oliver Twist, Nicholas  
Nickleby, and the progress of Little Nell*

Charles Dickens's early novels are a mess. Where critics have rightly reveled in their comic energy, their linguistic verve, and their anarchic plots, it is impossible not to note the incoherence that is their strongest effect, in particular the battle they seem to stage over realism and the forms the fiction is to take. That passive form is intentional, for the early novels seem to be without much narratorial or narrative control, veering uneasily in style, diction, point of view, and even genre. But these novels do offer one recurrent device that is of particular use to readers of the later fiction, something even Dickens was to note when he reread his earlier novels. When Dickens went back to this body of work to present it to readers in a more definitive form through authorial prefaces, he seized on the figure of a woman to exemplify his fictional method and morals. In virtually every case, and most strikingly in *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the reader looking for the author is told: *cherchez la femme*.

This authorial habit suggests something powerful at stake for Dickens in the allegorizing of women, but the language of these prefaces, as well as the thematic and narratorial work the figures of women are set to do in the early novels, suggests more than a simple process of allegory: Dickens's obsession with female presence and representation (and, increasingly, with female narrative power) suggests a spectacularizing of women as well, one marked out by the two very different images of women these texts offer, Nancy (the "vicious" and murdered prostitute of *Oliver Twist*) and Nell ("good, gentle, patient, quiet Nell") of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The obsession with the figure of the woman, and particularly of the uncanny daughter, suggests that Dickens's own icon for his literary art is, from the start, a devious and twisting figure.

The Preface to the 1838 edition of *Oliver Twist* makes enormous claims for the power of its realism and the originality of its perspective: just as "Cervantes laughed Spain's chivalry away," so *Twist* will dim the glitter

of the Newgate novel and the tradition of glamorous thieves and their “ladies.”<sup>1</sup> To do this, Dickens must assert his own “unattractive and repulsive truth,” showing “by words and deeds” the “most debased and vicious kind” of degraded life (36). “In the case of the girl, in particular, I had this intention constantly in view,” the author claims, and stresses that he would not abate “one scrap of curl-paper in the girl’s dishevelled hair” (36, 35).

A Mrs Massaroni, being a lady in short petticoats and a fancy dress, is a thing to imitate in tableaux and have in lithograph on pretty songs; but a Nancy, being a creature in a cotton gown and cheap shawl, is not to be thought of. (35)

Morality, Dickens seems to be arguing, could be as simple as couture and hairstyle.

But the emphasis on the realism of his tale (“that Sikes is a thief and Fagin a receiver of stolen goods; that the boys are pickpockets, and the girl is a prostitute”) gives way to a different problem of verisimilitude: that Nancy’s “devotion to the brutal house-breaker does not seem natural” (36). And here Dickens strikes a new tone of indignation:

It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE. Every man who has watched these melancholy shades of life, must know it to be so. Suggested to my mind long ago, but what I often saw and read of, in actual life around me, I have tracked it through many profligate and noisome ways, and found it still the same. From the first introduction of that poor wretch, to her laying her blood-stained head upon the robber’s breast, there is not a word exaggerated or over-wrought. It is emphatically God’s truth, for it is the truth He leaves in such depraved and miserable breasts . . . it is a contradiction, an anomaly, an apparent impossibility; but it is a truth. I am glad to have had it doubted, for in that circumstance I should find a sufficient assurance (if I wanted any) that it needed to be told. (36)

The passage is a catalogue of realism’s alibis: it is useless to discuss; IT IS TRUE; every man must know; it was suggested by what I saw and read of; I have tracked it; not a word is exaggerated or over-wrought; it is God’s truth, a contradiction, and it needed to be told. In short, it is true because I said so; it is true because I shout it; everyone knows it’s true; I read it in a book; it is true because I am not over-wrought; it is a moral truth; it is true because it makes no sense (“an apparent impossibility”) and, most interesting for our purposes, it is true because *no one believes it*. The very fact of its implausibility makes it not only a true story but one that “needed to be told.”

For Nancy’s realism (and particularly the realism of her passionate

loyalty to “the house-breaker”) to be doubted is the very condition of Dickens’s fiction: the appearance of female exaggeration is what makes fiction both necessary and good. The less likely it seems, the more the novel must represent it. A similar exaggeration clings to the figure of Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, in its own terms “a tale that is told” by the presence of a female icon, one around whom great authorial feeling congregates, and claims of affective power collect. “In reference to the tale itself,” says Dickens in the Preface to the 1848 edition, “I desire to say very little,” going on to note only the “many friends it has won me, and the many hearts it has turned to me.”<sup>2</sup>

I will merely observe, therefore, that in writing the book, I had it always in my fancy to surround the lonely figure of the child with grotesque and wild, but not impossible companions, and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first foreshadowed. (42)

Here again, in a “strange and uncongenial” world, the text and the female body become one: where Nancy’s curl-papers guaranteed the grittiness of realism, the wanderings of the “lonely figure” of Nell ensure the readerly engagement: “I have a mournful pride in one recollection associated with ‘little Nell,’” the author recounts: “While she was yet upon her wanderings, not then concluded,” an essay appeared “of which she was the principal theme, so earnestly, so eloquently, and tenderly appreciative” that the author could not read it without “an unusual glow of pleasure and encouragement” (42). Praise of little Nell becomes praise of Boz; her peregrinations become the public progress of the novel-in-parts; and author and heroine blur together in a “glow” of pleasure and encouragement.

While both prefatorial presentations are made to *preserve* something about Dickens’s representational practices, each turns out to be unsteady in some way essential to the book’s plot and thematic concerns. Nancy’s very vulgarity disappears, as the dark, angry woman blends into her opposite, the good, gentle woman; Nell’s allegory dissipates, as the heroic daughter blends into her freakish opposite. In both texts, the literary terms the prefaces meant to invent and contain, realism and romance, become unsettled. Both prefigure an instability in the *representation* of women which will become, in the later novels, an anxiety about the narrative *place* of women, a refusal of women to sit quietly in their narrative station. What the women share (in their wanderings, in particular) is an anxiety about female propriety that gives way to anxieties about property

itself; both women (figured by the text and by the narrator as fictional “goods”) show an uncanny willingness to get up and move the property about themselves.

Much of Nancy’s power as spectacle comes from a curious absence at the center of *Oliver Twist*: the book offers, in its subtitle, to give us a “parish boy’s progress,” but it is fairly careless of its boy; in fact, it has a tendency to lose its hero while he is on the road. And while Oliver faints, weeps, and disappears, only rarely does he think, and even more rarely does he act. Not only is he not heroic, he is only marginally, in conventional gender terms, even a “boy.” Critical responses to *Oliver* have ranged from those who view him as no character at all, a cipher, to those who, while allowing him to be a character, believe him an improbable one; these critics either make the excuse (doubtless the right one) that this is an *unrealistic* novel, or they take the happy expedient of singling out other heroes for praise.<sup>3</sup> Never, it seems, do they ask if this novel without a hero could, in fact, be a novel with a heroine.

The confusion that runs throughout the novel about its relationship to its new-born author, about a hero the novel can comfortably leave in a ditch for five chapters, even about the gendering of narration, all seem to be related to an alternative pattern of story-telling, one that unites an autobiographical anxiety about the hero’s story to an obsession with the heroine’s version of that story, and the kind of progress the novel must undergo – a pattern of narrative disruption – to tell that story.<sup>4</sup> The harlot’s progress in this novel is one that moves in ways opposite to the forward motions of the parish boy’s, and is one that Dickens was repeatedly drawn to in his career; that progress suggests that female wandering (in particular, the way Nancy both occupies and controls the central spectacles of the novel) contains the truth of representation that the “Preface” was so anxious to locate. But it also suggests, as does Dickens’s obsessive performance of the murder of Nancy, literally up until the day of his death, that the narrative of female wandering opens up a powerful space of authorial speculation, and of authorial anxiety, that will mark the rest of Dickens’s career.

To see Nancy’s progress as central is to reverse critical truisms, for her role in the novel has been consistently described as essentially passive: she is there to represent the element of good, to both arrange and suggest Oliver’s salvation. But in fact, she dominates the second half of the novel, disrupting the expectations of others, generating new plots of her own. Her primary activity is narrating: as Monks says late in the

novel, “but for babbling drabs, I would have finished as I began” (459). But Nancy does more than babble: she opens up the text of Dickens’s realism, performing a series of textual transgressions – sneaking, watching, betraying – that mirror the sexual transgressions the text cannot represent. Nancy has lived among – and done – she tells Rose Maylie, “something worse than all” (362) that marks her as finally fallen in the novel, but it is her freedom as a streetwalker that seems to allow her the freedom to walk from plot to plot. No other character chooses to move or even to speak in so many different worlds: Oliver is notably mystified and silent every time he is transported; only Nancy, as it were, is able to translate. Because she can read all these stories, she can act in all of them – and she does.

Significantly, her first verbal activity in the book is to say no, and her first long scene is one of deceptive theatricality. While introduced as one of what Oliver thinks “very nice girls indeed” she is first addressed when Fagin asks her to rescue Oliver from prison. “What do you say,” the Jew asks in a soothing manner, and she replies, “That it won’t do; so it’s no use a-trying it on, Fagin” (139). But after a variety of “threats, promises and bribes” she is persuaded, and she does “a-try it on,” literally trying on the dress of a more respectable lower class. She is given a white apron, a straw bonnet, a little basket, and a door-key to carry; she is transformed in front of us into a domestic heroine, and she goes off to perform her own play, acting out a devoted sister rescuing a lost brother – acting out the role Rose Maylie is to play in the second half of the novel.

But Nancy’s “trying it on” is itself an oddly transformative moment in the text, for she reenters the novel already a different character, ready to see in Oliver a lost self. When the virginal but illegitimate Rose Maylie first sees Oliver, she exclaims to her guardian,

“Oh! as you love me, and know that I have never felt the want of parents in your goodness and affection, but that I might have done so, and might have been equally helpless and unprotected with this poor child, have pity upon him before it is too late!” (269)

Rose assumes immediately that he is an orphan, that he “may never have known a mother’s love, or the comfort of a home.” As it turns out, Rose is right, but what Nancy sees of herself in Oliver is even stranger. From the moment she adopts the fiction of a younger brother (she spontaneously rechristens him “Nolly,” a name much like her own, and one she continues to use even after the fiction is ended), she sees in him some shadow of what she, too, could have been:



“I shall be glad to have him away from my eyes, and to know that the worst is over. I can’t bear to have him about me. The sight of him turns me against myself, and all of you.” (240)

This divided Nancy is not only the most complex character in the novel, the one most capable of fictions for the benefit of others, she is the one who most consciously articulates a self – a self she can create through the blank space of Oliver, that she can act out through rescuing him; she is the character who tells the most complicated story.

But it is not her own story that she tells. Nancy’s narrative is one in which she disappears: like the crime “worse than all” she cannot name, her actions consist in not being observed, in not being narrated. And she has good reason to disappear. Every action she takes to save Oliver leads to more violence against her: in one of the novel’s most poignant moments, she reminds Oliver, “every word from you is a blow for me” (199).

“I have saved you from being ill-used once, and I will again, and I do now. . . . I have promised for your being quiet and silent; if you are not, you will only do harm to yourself and me too, and perhaps be my death. See here! I have borne all this for you already, as true as God sees me show it.”

She pointed, hastily, to some livid bruises on her neck and arms; and continued, with great rapidity. (198–199)

The pattern of violence against women is one that runs through the novel, as through so much of Dickens, but it is linked most often to *Nancy’s* being quiet and silent, and it is quietly, silently, that she will commandeer the novel’s plot.

She does so by, as she ironically claims to Fagin, being “stupid.” After she delivers Oliver to Sikes, only to have him disappear into the “ditch” of narrative, Fagin comes to the Three Cripples and seeing her, seemingly drunk, stops to “test” her docility. He is still fearful after her initial outbursts in protection of Oliver, and she baits him till she provokes from him enough of the story of Monks to lead her to follow Fagin through the streets. But to baffle him, she retreats into the drunken “disorder” in which he found her, saying “You put me up for a minute, but now I’m stupid again” (241). Her pursuit of Fagin requires that she be more than “stupid” – or rather, less, for in the next chapter, she becomes a shadow, an image of a woman in a bonnet and cloak, sneaking into a locked house, crouching on a dark stairway, then escaping, again through locked rooms, again without a trace. But she must disappear for the narrator as well, in order to maintain any sense of mystery: all the narrator tells us is that “a listener might easily have perceived” (243) some por-

tions of their conversation. It is not for many chapters that we learn it was Nancy rather than, as seemed equally probable, a figment of Monks's melodramatic imagination; it is not until after Nancy is dead that her "voice" repeats what she heard, and then, only as it is reported to Monks by Mr. Brownlow. "Shadows on the wall," Brownlow says, "have caught your whispers" (440), but Nancy will soon be a shadow again, lost to the novel. We are kept in the dark to keep us reading; but Nancy is kept in the dark so she can become a narrator.

The only real mystery in this novel is who will solve the mystery, not what it is. As it turns out, the most significant evidence is Oliver's resemblance to a picture on Brownlow's wall, so that it is only the "chance" of his turning up in that living room that can solve the mystery at all. In part, the novel substitutes Nancy for Oliver – her murder for his inheritance – as a central plot, only to provide something to hunt for; though I cannot assert with any conviction that there is much mystery there, either. Nancy achieves heroic stature, one might argue, by allowing herself to be killed in Oliver's place. If the novel's real suspense is if Oliver will "twist" or not, it maintains and releases that suspense, as many critics have noticed, by "twisting" a number of surrogates instead. When Nancy goes to Rose Maylie to betray Monks, she initiates not only the solution of Oliver's identity crisis, but her own self-destruction; in speaking up for Oliver, she has insured that "blows" will fall on her.

But Nancy does not just become another Oliver; rather, her story displaces the progressive, heroic model, and reveals a series of *regressive* and open-ended narratives that begin to suggest an alternative plot. This plot is one of female masochism and sexual obsession, and its patterns are closer to those of the harlot's than of the parish boy's progress. They involve the uncovering of a series of seduced girls, dead mothers, and angry women: they are the "babbling drabs" whose story Nancy begins to set free with her crossing of that magic boundary, taking her unrespectable, almost literally unrepresentable self into the Maylies' hotel, and the darkness of her story into what had been the angelic light of Rose Maylie's pure girlhood.

The contrast between Rose and Nancy is what the novelist thought of as his best idea for the book: at first, it seems to do both narrative and ideological work by presenting the question of the social formation of character, the neglect of children, the initial equality of all humanity. It does so, tidily for the novel, at a moment when the revelation of Oliver's good birth might be likely to *undo* any social message at all: it has begun to look as if Oliver might be incorruptible simply because he is not lower

class – or, in the novel’s terms, because he is not ungrammatical. But the Rose/Nancy opposition suggests once more that it is the *neglect* of Nancy that makes her a prostitute; unfortunately, the Maylies ask her too late, and she can no longer begin again, but for others, not in love with house-breakers, presumably social change may not come tardily. Nancy can still become Rose.

But the opposition is beginning to break down in the opposite direction: it is now Rose, it seems, who sees herself in Nancy; Rose’s desire and obsessive love for Harry Maylie that creates the womanly bond between them. Most readers have taken her rejection of her (adopted) cousin’s love as pure Victorian selflessness, taking their cue from the narrator’s unpalatable introduction of Rose:

The younger lady was in the lovely bloom and spring-time of womanhood; at that age, when, if ever angels be for God’s good purposes enthroned in mortal forms, they may be, without impiety, supposed to abide in such as hers. (264)

She is “not past seventeen,” slight and of an exquisite mold, full of intelligence; her face has “no shadow,” and her “smile, the cheerful, happy smile, [was] made for Home, and fireside peace and happiness” (264).<sup>5</sup> Nothing, presumably, could be farther from Nancy – except that Nancy spends much of the novel by the fire, staring into it, saying nothing, the first of Dickens’s fire-gazing women.<sup>6</sup>

If we do not look for Rose’s “fireside peace and happiness” in Nancy, no more do we look for Nancy’s firm resistance in Rose. Yet it is there, for Rose’s reasons for not marrying Harry Maylie are not entirely the shame and ignominy to *him* of marrying an illegitimate, penniless girl:

“I owe it to myself, that I, a friendless, portionless girl with a blight upon my name, should not give your friends reason to suspect that I had sordidly yielded to your first passion, and fastened myself, a clog, on all your hopes and projects. I owe it to you and yours, to prevent you from opposing, in the warmth of your generous nature, this great obstacle to your progress in the world.” (316)

And more than her refusal to be a “clog,” “fastened” to his hopes, she will not “mingle with such as may hold in scorn the mother who gave me life; nor bring disgrace or failure on the son of her who has so well supplied that mother’s place” (317). It is Rose’s mothers (her own dead mother, and Harry’s, the woman who raised her) whose “name” she imagines here; like Oliver, prompted to his only violent act by the attack on his mother’s reputation, Rose cannot allow her mother’s “gift” to go unthanked; but more, even here, in the love that is so powerful that it makes her see herself “a clog,” in the “withered” hopes that she recol-

lects, and even more in the fever that threatens to kill her, we can see the tension between unfulfilled desire and some “pride” she carries with her – a struggle, of course, much like Nancy’s.

In the scene at the hotel, Rose begs Nancy to abandon her life of “wickedness and misery,” to leave this “terrible infatuation.” Nancy’s reply reverberates through the novel:

When ladies as young, and good, and beautiful as you are . . . give away your hearts, love will carry you all lengths – even such as you, who have home, friends, other admirers, everything, to fill them. When such as I, who have no certain roof but the coffin-lid, and no friend in sickness or death but the hospital nurse, set our rotten hearts on any man, and let him fill the place that has been a blank through all our wretched lives, who can hope to cure us? (366)

Rose cannot argue with that, for her love for Harry Maylie is precisely that absolute: furthermore, her identity, like Nancy’s, is constructed around a “blank,” the lost mother, the disgraced identity, the silent loneliness; she, like Nancy, cannot be “cured.” The surprise of the contact between these two worlds, of Nancy’s introduction to Rose, is that the whore does not disappear into the virtuous woman’s story. Rather, the text constructs a “Banquo’s sons” chain of seduced, innocent, loving women: Oliver’s mother Agnes, Nancy, Rose herself, women who, in Nancy’s phrase, “give away their hearts,” only to be “carried all lengths.” And it is that masochistic, overly generous love that the novel values: that love of the “blank” that saves Oliver; the love of Bill that redeems and destroys Nancy; that love of her own that leaves Rose, after her meeting with Nancy, so “overpowered that she sank into a chair, and endeavoured to collect her wandering thoughts” (366). Rose, after that “extraordinary interview” has become, at least in her own imagination, a story-telling streetwalker.

Nancy, of course, tells her story only to die: while she longs for a quiet death in the river, a tranquil, sexless exile with Bill, what she gets is a horrific murder, and a fame (a history) that generates the rest of the novel. Fagin is hanged for Nancy’s murder, not his life of crime; it is the knowledge that Sikes is about to be apprehended that prompts Monks to talk – that, and the report of Nancy’s eavesdropping success. Nancy, however, has left the novel: there is no place for her in the last chapter; she is even more anonymous than the unnamed “chief remaining members of Fagin’s gang” who die abroad (276). (Bet, Nancy’s friend, is last heard of going mad after seeing Nancy’s corpse; she leaves the novel in a straight-jacket.) Nancy seems to be lost, forever, in the hero’s story, in Oliver’s “progress.” But the novel does end with a lost, silent woman:

with Oliver's mother, Agnes, whose name is "as yet" the only one on a tomb in a silent church; whose name, like the name inside her ring, is unfinished by marriage – and by death. The narrator concludes,

I believe that the shade of Agnes sometimes hovers round that solemn nook. I believe it none the less because that nook is in a Church, and she was weak and erring. (480)

This seems to conjure up a forgiving narrator, one extending his generosity to the fallen. But it doesn't seem necessary here: Oliver's mother was told that her lover couldn't marry her; she is in every essential way presented as unsinning. Indeed, if her "sin" were to persist in the novel, her sister Rose's virtue might continue to be questionable, which is the last thing the novel wants. But portraying Agnes as "weak and erring," and more, portraying her as a "shade," allows back in the shadow-haunting Nancy, otherwise excluded from the novel's conclusion. In the original version of the novel, and in the 1841 edition, the final sentence left even more space for Nancy: the sentence read not "the shade of Agnes" but "the shade of that poor girl," and the fixing of the sign (deciding that "girl" must mean "Agnes") suggests that some of the ambiguity of the reference may have occurred to Dickens. His "erring" (wandering) woman seems to wander back into the book, listening and babbling when we least expect her.

The spectacle of Nancy's return is staged repeatedly throughout the novel and Dickens's career, much as the novel obsessively returns to the moment of Oliver's birth – a scene that we get early, and are told repeatedly we didn't get all of. More and more information needs to be packed into that scene; more and more needs to have happened there, just as more and more information seems to be encoded in the female body. "Carry your memory back" (331), Monks commands Bumble, and in that play on a maternal "carrying" we hear some connection of memory and conception – specifically, of the mother who "carried" Oliver, only to die. The novel seems often to forget the question of Oliver's inheritance ("What [is the] object?" asks Dr Losborne; "Simply, the discovery of Oliver's parentage, and regaining for him [his] inheritance," he is told, to which he replies, "Ah! . . . I almost forgot that!" [373]) but Oliver never forgets his mother. Nor does Rose, whose mother's obsessive concern with Oliver's existence is what generated all this mad plotting (his "beginning and finishing") in the first place. Dead women (particularly dead mothers) hold all the stories in this novel: from old Sally's confession of Agnes's dying words (the originary act elided from the first

scene) to Oliver and Rose standing under the tomb, with the one name “Agnes” staring back at them, women do get the last word. The narrative seems only marginally to belong to Oliver, or even to male storytellers; at times, in its tensions, it suggests that Dickens himself is fighting to keep control of his narrative.

This lack of authorial control is reflected everywhere in the novel, as a confusion and slipperiness of point of view and – more – of narrative voice. Steven Marcus has suggested the ways in which the narrator of the opening chapters, in parodying Utilitarian prose style, takes on the limitations of that voice, and depends on an almost Malthusian habit of abstraction.<sup>7</sup> The narrator is habitually ironic – but one of his tricks of irony is that of identifying with the character he is mocking, of taking on that voice just long enough to make it ridiculous. So, when Oliver first sees the prostitutes and the narrator seconds his assertion that they are “nice girls” with his own “there is no doubt they were” (111), he tells us that there is every doubt they were. The narrator pretends to assume Oliver’s innocence to get us to agree to his own knowledge – that is, he pretends an identification with the object of his satire, to insure our identification with his narrative authority.

But this process of narratorial identification, and our reading of this voice, becomes more difficult as the plot (and problems of identification in general) becomes more complex. In the scene where Nancy goes to recapture Oliver, assuming the dress of a respectable woman, the narrator assumes a new style of address:

“She’s a honour to her sex,” said Mr Sikes, filling his glass, and smiting the table with his enormous fist. “Here’s her health, and wishing they was all like her!”

While these, and many other encomiums, were being passed on the accomplished Miss Nancy, that young lady made the best of her way to the police-office; whither, *notwithstanding a little natural timidity consequent upon walking through the streets alone and unprotected*, she arrived in perfect safety shortly afterwards. (p. 140, emphasis added)

The narrator becomes “missish” here, stressing both his and his subject’s gentility – both possess “natural timidity,” and the heroine (who is, after all, a streetwalker) becomes equally genteel with the importation of this new language. And the language persists until she leaves the jail:

In a dreadful state of doubt and uncertainty, the agonized young woman staggered to the gate, and then, exchanging her faltering walk for a swift run, returned by the most devious and complicated route she could think of, to the domicile of the Jew. (p. 141)

Nancy's whole journey into this "state of doubt," this state of sisterly affection, is shared by the narrator – who only breaks out when she does, "exchanging" her walk for a run, moving into the old "devious and complicated" routes.

At no point does the narrator signal any separation from Nancy – but for whose benefit is this irony being exercised? It is the same ironic portrayal ("acting beautifully") that Nancy has put on to deceive the good characters, but why should it be used for us? It allows readers to enter into Nancy's fiction (the description may be an account of the way she is narrating her journey to herself, so she can better play her part) but since we are already in on the con, it also allows us to laugh at those who are taken in by it, increasing our identification with the thieves. Some of this irony, of course, is directed at Nancy, at her coarseness and *lack* of a need for protection (Rose Maylie would not be able to take this walk alone) and as such, it is one with the early illustrations of the overweight, blowsy Nancy – illustrations Dickens needed to separate from the rest of the novel, wishing later they had not been drawn. But reading this passage after the novel's conclusion, one can see in it some preparation for Nancy's later genuinely ladylike behavior: Nancy's "natural timidity" is her innate goodness, the quality Oliver's suffering will bring out in her. The "accomplished Miss Nancy" *will* die "alone and unprotected," and her last, dangerous, devious routes through the streets to the "domicile of the Jew" will be taken with exactly this doubt, this uncertainty, this agony. The uncertainty of the narrative voice, directed at no one, anticipating no reader's needs, pointlessly ironic, in fact allows the space for the rewriting of Nancy, for her complication of the narrative route. Nonetheless, it suggests a continuing uncertainty about how best to tell Nancy's story and give it meaning.

And yet, Dickens retold it repeatedly, told it publicly, and was most proud of his effect on audiences of women. "If one woman cries out when you murder the girl," the "ladies' Doctor" Priestley told him, "you may rely on it that . . . there will be a contagion of hysteria all over the place."<sup>8</sup> A contagion of hysteria is in part the state of the novel, with its sliding female sexuality and masochism; but it is also, of course, Dickens's own response to the reading. When he first came to, "try, alone by myself, the Oliver Twist murder," he told a friend he had "got something so horrible out of it that I am afraid to try it in public," but, like Nancy "trying it on," he "tried it" over and over, killing himself with the effort. When he performed the reading, his pulse-rate rose from 72 to 124; after reading it, he would collapse on a sofa, unable to speak; Wilkie

Collins, among others, believed that this reading “did more to kill him than all his work put together”; his physician forbade him to continue it – and yet, a friend reports that a day or two before his death, he was discovered in the grounds of Gad’s Hill performing the death of Nancy.

One could see in Dickens only the vengeful, mad, driven Sikes, bludgeoning the vulnerable, loving girl, again and again, endlessly destroying women, unable to stop trying to close her eyes. But Dickens made a remarkable comment the last night he performed the reading publicly. “I shall tear myself to pieces,” he whispered to a friend, echoing the division of self we saw primarily not among male, but among female characters in the novel. Just as Nancy, feigning repudiation of Oliver, claims, “sight of him turns me against myself,” so in creating and murdering the woman, then destroying her murderer in turn, Dickens can “turn” against himself, and the novel can complicate its own generic moves – though it, like Thackeray’s cathartic novel *Catherine*, also imagined as a critique of the Newgate sensationalism, may wind up emulating and exacerbating exactly what it set out to critique.

But the problems go deeper than this. The traces of the Newgate novel, and the intricate battle it stages between romance, realism, and violence, return throughout Dickens’s career: the battered woman who forgives her merciless lover haunts not only the early fiction (in “The Hospital Patient” and “A Visit to Newgate” in *Sketches*; the stroller’s tale, the madman’s manuscript, and “The Convict’s Return” in *The Pickwick Papers*) but the later, more generically coherent novels. Lucie Manette, standing outside the prison signalling Charles Darnay, and Amy Dorrit, standing inside the Marshalsea with her loving, devoted heart, carry echoes of Nancy, walking with Bill Sikes beside the walls of Newgate, saying that she would be true to him even if he were condemned to death – even if it were, as it is in this novel, her murder for which he were imprisoned. Masochism, written first on the body of the woman and then on the imagination of the violent man, is the power Dickens imagines women to have – the power to soften, to make disappear the stone walls of the prison. This is, as the career progresses, a power at once personal and political, individual and social, a power Dickens needed to believe in.<sup>9</sup> Dickens’s faith in that power suggests something more about the roots of *Twist*’s progress (from the parish boy’s progress into the harlot’s; from Newgate to new realism), and the roots of the violence the narrative directs towards Nancy – a violence connected to its own narrative wanderings and anxieties; a violence that, not properly contained and narrated, would tear the author to pieces.



As the assemblage of images (babbling drabs, walking shadows, angelic heroines, and their specular doubles) suggests, there is more to the uncanny heroine than the spectacle of violence directed towards her, and it remains to ask, what do her various embodiments, her narratorial wanderings and “twistings,” accomplish for the fiction and for the new author; in what ways does she serve as an opening for Dickens’s literary career?

We might best answer that question by counterpoising Nancy’s wanderings to Dickens’s other spectacular heroine, little Nell, who similarly stages her own wandering mortality, and around whom Dickens stages his challenge to the novel. The central activity of any reader of *The Old Curiosity Shop* is watching Little Nell walk herself to death; as passionately as we are expected to follow the hunt for Nancy’s murderer (“the eyes! the eyes!” cries Bill Sikes, as Nancy haunts him to his accidental but just hanging) so do we follow Nell’s virtuous, painful, and lonely path to the grave. But as Dickens’s Preface suggests, while on one hand we are caught up in Nell’s wanderings, which become the peregrinations of the novel itself, on the other, we are to hold fixed in our mind the still, sad icon of goodness, the small girl in her bed, surrounded by misshapen and eccentric figures, among whom she is both a perfect object, and an object of perfect goodness.

The language of the Preface, as it contrasted her “innocent face and pure intentions” with “associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed” (42) suggests the power of Dickens’s “fancy” about her; and the narrator’s language goes on to recapitulate this theme:

the child . . . alone, unwatched, uncared for (save by angels), yet sleeping peacefully. So very young, so spiritual, so slight and fairy-like a creature passing the long dull nights in such an uncongenial place – I could not dismiss it from my thoughts. (55)

Master Humphrey takes repeated “turns” about the room as he “speculates” on Nell’s “curious” wanderings, and his inability to move forward in his thoughts takes us in the same circular directions as does the novel, for the sections of description I have quoted were, like the Preface, written *after* the novel was finished – hence their uncanny pre-science, which suggests not only the book’s difficulty in proceeding but Dickens’s own obsession with the uncared-for child, who manages to

recapitulate not only Oliver's passive goodness, but Nancy's uncomfortable display of sexuality and self-sacrifice.

Master Humphrey cannot "dismiss her from my recollection, do what I would" (56). Or perhaps he means he cannot dismiss her from his *collection*, for he goes on to turn her into a different kind of curiosity, "imagin[ing] her in her future life, holding her solitary way among a crowd of wild grotesque companions; the only pure, fresh, youthful object in the throng. It would be curious to find –" and the breaking off of his thoughts suggests the dangers of following the girl, as he goes on to reflect, into "a region on which I was little disposed to enter" (56). But just as Nancy's wandering into the shadows of *Oliver Twist* seems to suggest some incipient unrest in the narratorial voice of that novel, so here the thematic and formal tensions of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and its anxiety about Nell's place, suggest some of Dickens's own thematic and formal anxieties, and the wanderings of the novel some of the young Dickens's experiments in realism and its variations.

These experiments seem centered on the multiple speculations that characters (and readers) are encouraged to indulge in about Nell and her melodrama. Master Humphrey's "tender reflections," it unfolds, are only his fantasy: the "fairy-like" creature he perceives does not have the "light and sunny dreams" he imagines, and her tale progresses through a series of nightmare visions of flight, pursuit, and pain. Most of Nell's problems arise from the speculations of others about her, those who single her out as a "pure fresh youthful object" (56), selected by the idler Dick Swiveller for her fortune ("a young and lovely girl . . . saving up for me" [118]) and for her "pretty face, [her] very pretty face" (103); by the dwarf Quilp, to be my "number two," my "cherry-cheeked, red-lipped wife" (93); by her grandfather, as a guarantor of his luck in his gambling speculations. From the first, she is a particular kind of commodity: a "Fine girl of her age, but small" (103), or, as her brother says, "Nell will be a woman soon . . . [and will have] money" (64–5), or, as Quilp says, "such a chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell!" (125). Her journey is similarly punctuated by evaluation: she is noticed by many people along the road who "praised Nell's beauty and were at once prepossessed in her behalf" (184), but also by equally many who, seeing "this fair young child a falling into bad hands, and getting among people that she's no more fit for, than they are to get among angels as their ordinary chums" (to quote the unsavory Short), "take measures for detaining . . . and restoring [her]" – that is, for kidnapping her, and profiting from her "fall" (199). In that

way, everyone is interested in gazing at Nell – if not in making her among “their ordinary chums” – and it is the vulnerability of that object that moves them to desire it.<sup>10</sup>

The spectacle of *The Old Curiosity Shop* is organized around the alternate veiling and discovering of Nell’s sexual vulnerability. Nell is a kind of pornographic object, and it would seem that the novel invites us to share in her fate as a pleasure victim, a tiny Justine, ready to be initiated into a Sadeian world of violence and perversion. But it is important to note the ways Nell does not participate in such a plot, and also to note our own discomfort with the ways she is imagined in the novel: the plot of the novel is largely Nell’s attempts to escape Quilp (who spends a fair bit of time staring at Nell as well as playing in her bed) and the rape he has planned for her.<sup>11</sup> Quilp’s fascinated viewing of Nell being kissed by her grandfather (“just upon the rosy part” [125]) seems to force us to participate in the structures of his desire. But the novel repeatedly forces our view away from his watching of Nell into Nell’s anxiety about being watched; early in the novel, she stares into the darkening streets “wondering whether those rooms [opposite] were as lonesome as that in which she sat, and whether those people felt it company to see her sitting there, as she did only to see them look out and draw in their heads again” (120). Nell sees her own objectification as like (if more terrifying than) that of everyone else in London; she is both drawn to being looked at and terrified of the perceptions of others. But merely to read her as a “blank” to our projections (the customary role of the object in pornography) would be to evade both her pain at being the site of so much looking, and her willingness to look back, to participate in the visual world in which she seems to be only a “lonely figure.”

Nell, like Nancy, is more than a passive object, and her progress takes her farther than her slight frame might suggest. She plans and executes her escape with her delusional grandfather; she travels across the wilds of industrial England, singing ditties to wild men on a barge; she enters into small towns and barbers for goods; she sleeps one night on a factory floor, beside a begrimed and mysterious worker. At times, she anticipates the later work Dickens’s investigative daughters will perform, interrogating the condition of England. But only rarely is she allowed to pause to examine what she sees: what she cannot escape on her journey is not (as most critics would have it) her own death, which certainly seems to be following her, but her own status as exhibition. The only times Nell seems to be happy is those few times when she can embrace her own “curiosity,” and join in the show: these scenes, unlike the scenes in her

grandfather's shop or within the uneasy family circle, seem to offer Nell some release, and the possibility of a looking-on not fractured by the anxieties of voyeurism. When Nell joins Mrs Jarley's waxworks, she enters into a wider world of curiosities:

Rumbling along with most unwonted noise, the caravan stopped at last at the place of exhibition, where Nell dismounted amidst an admiring group of children, who evidently supposed her to be an important item of the curiosities, and were fully impressed with the belief that her grandfather was a cunning device in wax. (280)

Nell proves so adept at *being* a commodity, that she soon begins to move freely *among* the commodities, and to exhibit the "devices themselves":

The beauty of the child, coupled with her gentle and timid bearing, produced quite a sensation in the little country place. The Brigand, heretofore a source of exclusive interest in the streets, became a mere secondary consideration, and to be important only as a part of the show of which she was the chief attraction. Grown-up folks began to be interested in the bright-eyed girl, and some score of little boys fell desperately in love, and constantly left inclosures of nuts and apples, directed in small text, at the wax-work door.

This desirable impression was not lost upon Mrs Jarley, who, lest Nell should become too cheap, soon sent the Brigand out alone again, and kept her in the exhibition room, where she described the figures every half-hour to the great satisfaction of admiring audiences. (286–8)

The brigand really is a "cunning device in wax," but Nell might as well be one here – she is the "chief attraction . . . of the show," producing "quite a sensation" everywhere she goes, until, in fact, she runs the risk of making herself "cheap."<sup>12</sup> In these scenes, Nell is threatened, but only comically: a schoolmistress vows to have Mrs Jarley put in the stocks and Nell forced onto the treadmill, but Mrs Jarley admonishes Nell that she is to laugh every time she thinks of Miss Monflathers, and the novel moves on unperturbed.<sup>13</sup>

But the sight of Nell on the road, collecting "desirable impressions" is not always so benevolent. More often she is exposed to harm, vulnerable to the schemes of onlookers, and fearful, most often, of course, not of the threat she might encounter, but of the danger she carries with her, her deluded and desperate grandfather, who (in the novel's darkest moment) enters her room and removes the coins she has hidden in the folds of her dress. The sexual threat her grandfather seems to represent for her is a hidden one, but it lines up almost too neatly with the threat that faces her in her travels: precisely that of being a woman on the road. In a powerful scene, Nell meets a woman (almost certainly a prostitute)

at the races, and the woman, after buying flowers from her, begs her to stay at home. And here the eeriness of the waxwork child comes together with the other threats against Nell: to be in danger of becoming “too cheap” is one with the danger of becoming one of the goods yourself; if Nell must be on the road to achieve her status as iconic heroine and to die her sanctified death, she is also at the mercy of everyone who sees her on that road – of everyone who has a penny with which to look at her.

Dickens’s Preface invited this speculative gaze, in drawing the “pure, innocent child” surrounded by “grotesque and wild but not impossible companions” (42), the object that gathers together all the value of his work of representation. But the longer we gaze at her – and indeed, the longer we speculate about the novel as a whole – the more Nell and the book seem equally “impossible,” if not “wild” then certainly grotesque. While Nell is carefully situated (as are Kit Nubble and his family, the Garlands, and the girlish Barbara) to be an icon of good, to oppose the great eccentric characters like Quilp, the Brasses, and Dick Swiveller, she increasingly departs from any realist or even tidily allegorical conception of femininity: as she is converted by the narrative into a figure of redemption, she becomes herself no less freakish than her companions, another version of “the little lady without legs and arms” who arrives at the Jolly Sandboys having “jogged forward in a van” (203) – and Dickens’s “constructed” tale takes on more of the flavor of the showman’s improvisation, itself more curiosity warehouse than allegorical fable. But the curio collection is centered curiously on Nell’s own body: Dickens will be attracted in particular to female carnival figures throughout his career,<sup>14</sup> and I will return to them later in this book, but in his earliest depiction of the powerful daughter, the *redemptive* daughter Nell is meant to be, he moves his heroine herself close to the realm of the female freak.

Parodic versions of Nell surround her throughout the novel: Sally Brass, the angular and angry sister of the spineless attorney Solomon Brass, is the “sphinx of private life” (466), “the Virgin of Bevis” (325), “The beautiful virgin” (542), “that amiable virgin” (348); showing “maiden modesty and gentle womanhood” (320), she is “the female who has all the charms of her sex and none of their weaknesses” (325). Further, she generates the same fascinated gaze that Nell does; Swiveller stares “with all his might at the beauteous Sally, as if she had been some curious animal whose like had never lived” (327). But the curiosity she conjures is more monstrous: Swiveller calls her “that strange monster”

(328); he claims he is “clerk to a female dragon”; he stares transfixed at her “vampire cap,” which he – Perseus like – attempts constantly to knock off.<sup>15</sup> Yet her monstrosity is particularized as female – and as sexual:

“It’s of no use asking the dragon . . . I suspect if I asked any questions on that head, our alliance would be at an end. I wonder whether she *is* a dragon by-the-by, or something in the mermaid<sup>16</sup> way. She has rather a scaly appearance. But mermaids are fond of looking at themselves in the glass, which she can’t be. And they have a habit of combing their hair, which she hasn’t. No, she’s a dragon.” (349–50)

The threat of Sally Brass is of a woman who *is* half-monster – and the other half alluringly feminine.

If Sally is a horrible parody, the Marchioness is the comic – and romance – version of Nell, an altogether more amiable freak. She is referred to repeatedly as the “small servant,” but (like Nell) she is an “old-fashioned child in her looks and manner,” so lost in her clothes “She might as well have been dressed in a violin-case” (332). And like Nell, she prompts wonder wherever she goes: she is “a very extraordinary person – surrounded by mysteries, ignorant of the taste of beer, unacquainted with her own name (which is less remarkable), and taking a limited view of society through the keyholes of doors.” “It is,” as her admirer, Dick Swiveller, goes on to note, “a most inscrutable and unmitigated staggerer” (532). She literally staggers, racing across London in one shoe to rescue Dick from illness, proving again her relationship to the plucky and staggering Nell, but what she shares most profoundly with Nell is her use literally as an object – in the Marchioness’s case, she is “objectified” as a battering ram, as a slavey, as a projectile to be thrown downstairs to rouse the sleeping Gentleman; as an object of the rage of others, as in the horrific scene when Sally Brass “dart[s] suddenly forward, and falling on the small servant give[s] her some hard blows with her clenched hand” (353); the Marchioness is remarkable not only for her size and her mobility, but for her endurance.

These other versions of Nell suggest the way that the modest daughter is transformed into something monstrous, something that (as Susan Stewart describes it<sup>17</sup>) suggests the etymological roots of monstrous, both of showing forth (*monstro*) and warning (*moneo*). Nell, in her persistent emblemizing of goodness, is a monitory figure, but she also reminds us of the showman-like quality of all of Dickens’s early fiction, the “mountebank” figure that David Musselwhite and others have located in the early Dickens, “Boz,” the narratorial flâneur whose sheer

pleasure in spectacle resists the joys of a tidy narrative.<sup>18</sup> What Dickens is showing off here is, in the Marchioness's eloquent phraseology, the heroine who is "such a one-er," both "a wonder" (and a cause of wonder in others) and a unique (one of a kind) spectacle in herself. The pleasures of the "curiosity shop" in which Nell is a principal display conjures up the anthologies of wonders that Dickens loved and collected, books like G. H. Wilson's *The Eccentric Mirror* and *Wonderful Characters*, which contained "authentic biographical accounts of persons . . . [who] deviat[e] in a remarkable degree from the ordinary course of human existence."<sup>19</sup> These "MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS, ANCIENT AND MODERN, who have been particularly distinguished by extraordinary QUALIFICATIONS, TALENTS AND PROPENSITIES, Natural or Acquired, comprehending singular Instances of Longevity, Conformation, Bulk, Stature, Powers of Mind and body, wonderful exploits, adventures, habits, propensities, enterprising pursuits, etc., etc., etc.," included dwarves, giants, misers; Margaret Lambrun, who dressed up as a man to kill Queen Elizabeth; Hannah Snell, "the Widow in Masquerade, or the Female Warrior;" the Queen of the Gipsies, "Louisa, the Lady of the Hay-Stack," women frozen for a week, living in caves or dressing like men, even a man who lives as his own dead sister. Dickens's Nelly would be considerably less unusual in this catalogue than his Preface suggests.

Dickens loved the extraordinary, but yearned always for the ordinary, and the longer he surrounds Nell with eccentrics, the more of a "one-er" she becomes. But her centrality to his vision poses a problem essential to his fiction: the question, to return to Wilson's title, of what the "Eccentric Mirror" reflects. Is it that the mirror is eccentric, and distorts what it reflects, or is the mirror (the novel) merely a "reflection" of an eccentricity ("adventures, habits, propensities") already existing somewhere outside it? We are, unexpectedly, led back to the problem posed by *Oliver Twist's* rejection of the Newgate novel's false realism: what *Twist* depicts "is a contradiction, an anomaly, an apparent impossibility; but it is a truth." In the same way, Little Nell, however improbable she might seem, represents "the truth," and yet her very uniqueness challenges the "truth" of what is around her.

The question would seem to be, what kind of truth does the eccentric female body possess – and what kind of object is it? This returns us to the problem of the showman Dickens and his affinity with other, extranovelistic forms of spectacle. In Dickens's collections of "miracles of conformation," to quote Wilson, we would find several miniaturized