

“AN IRRESISTIBLE PROPENSITY TO PLAY WITH HIM”:
TORMENT AND DELIGHT IN *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND*

By

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Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

August, 2011

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

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Charles Dickens's vision of family relations is distinctive in its use of so-called "inverted parenthood,"¹ in which a (usually female) child nurtures or provides for her hapless or cruel parent. Dickens's last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*,² illustrates how strongly this familial structure is associated with the dynamics of fathers and daughters. The novel's main plot, focusing on the inheritance and faked death of John Harmon, is undergirded by several father-daughter narratives: Lizzie Hexam works alongside the waterman Gaffer Hexam on the Thames; Pleasant Riderhood supports her deadbeat father, Rogue Riderhood, by running a pawnshop by the river; and Jenny Wren's career as a "dolls' dressmaker" keeps herself and the drunken "Mr. Dolls" off the streets. Although these relationships are hardly affectionate, they nevertheless promote a rather conventional view of gender relations: reifying the father's position at the head of the household while the daughter devotes herself to serving him.

Despite its predominance in *Our Mutual Friend* and in several of Dickens's other works,³ one father-daughter relationship in *Our Mutual Friend* deviates sharply from this pattern of daughterly servitude, even as it proves the most sentimental subplot in the book: that of Bella Wilfer and her father, "Pa" Wilfer. Rather than serving to reinforce the family unit, Bella and Wilfer's relationship is instead an erotic escape from their lives as husband and father and daughter and wife. This escape is characterized by playful mock violence: Bella teases, manhandles, and otherwise dominates her father, while he gleefully submits and begs for her forgiveness.

¹ A subset of Dickens criticism has devoted itself to this phenomenon: see, for example, Arthur A. Adrian, "Dickens and Inverted Parenthood," *The Dickensian* 67 (1971): 3-11.

² Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, 1864-5, repr. ed. Michael Cotsell (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008). Hereafter cited in text.

³ Among others, Agnes in *David Copperfield* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*'s Little Nell come to mind.

Critics have generally characterized Bella and Wilfer as having an ideologically uncontroversial relationship which typifies Dicken's sentimental mode. Catherine Waters, for example, argues that Bella and Wilfer's seeming alternative to conventional domesticity is merely a detour en route to Bella's domestic reformation in her marriage to John Harmon. Rather than destabilizing and questioning domestic values, Waters says, Bella and Wilfer's ". . . delight in eccentricity recuperates the middle-class family, as the exceptional and the irregular help to produce a definition of the normative and conventional."⁴ Furthermore, critics read the erotic dimension of Bella and Wilfer's relationship as typical of what Lynda Zwinger terms the "sentimental romance" of fathers and daughters, which she posits as a rationalization of the father's desire for his daughter: "The daughter of sentiment is a heterosexual, patriarchal alibi: what do we really want with a submissive, sweet, self-abnegating, vulnerable, loving daughter? To have our way with her, of course."⁵ Grouping Bella with the father's daughters of Jane Austen, such as *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth Bennett, Zwinger argues, "Far from any design of arrogating the paternal privilege to herself, the daughter-written daughter props the patriarch up, straightens his collar, reties his cravat, and makes him look like what the heterosexual fiction says he is" (Zwinger 127). By casting the daughter as helpmate in her erotic relationship with her father, Zwinger argues, Bella's characterization is built around a presupposition of patriarchal dominance.

⁴ Catherine Waters, "Our Mutual Friend," in *Dickens and the Politics of the Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 193. Hereafter cited in text.

⁵ Lynda Zwinger, *Daughters, Fathers, and the Novel: The Sentimental Romance of Heterosexuality* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 8. Hereafter cited in text.

Critics' easy reinscription of Bella and Wilfer into such a "patriarchal alibi" overlooks the erotically charged violence of their relationship. This violence constantly erupts in their seemingly tender exchanges, recasting anodyne domestic scenes as over-the-top exercises in sexual dominance and submission. To better understand the anomalous, critically underexplored nature of this relationship, my essay argues that the peculiar erotics of Bella and Wilfer offers a prescient description of a sadomasochistic power dynamic. Drawing on pre-Freudian psychopathology, Victorian material studies, and Dickens's own biography, I argue that Bella and Wilfer affirm contemporary psychological studies of male masochism while also inverting the patriarchal power structure with the willful sadism of Bella. While Bella's toying with her "Pa" provides a viable sexual outlet for the otherwise emasculated Wilfer, it also serves as a source of subversive authority for Bella, even as she is chastened and domesticated through the novel's primary marriage plot.

* * *

Our Mutual Friend was published decades before sadism and masochism were defined by Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886.⁶ However, as Ian Gibson observes, the male sexual behaviors which came to be called masochistic had been subject to considerable scrutiny for centuries.⁷ Men's desire to be dominated, and in particular flogged, was examined by Johann Heinrich Meibom in 1629, and many other studies followed, ranging from scrupulously scientific, physiological investigations to the

⁶ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct*, 12th English ed., repr. ed. Brian King (New York: Bloat, 1999). Hereafter cited in text.

⁷ Ian Gibson, *The English Vice: Beating, Sex and Shame in Victorian England and After* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1978), 32. Hereafter cited in text.

novels of Sade and Sacher-Masoch. With its inclusion of case studies, Krafft-Ebing's work contributed to the pathologizing of aberrant sexual behavior. *Psychopathia Sexualis* focuses on the physical and mental peculiarities of its case subjects, Krafft-Ebing's thesis being that ". . . the great problem . . . can only be solved with the help of science, and especially with the aid of medicine, which studies the psychological subject at its anatomical and physiological source, and views it from all sides" (Krafft-Ebing x).

Despite Krafft-Ebing's attention to signs of anatomical "degeneracy" in his patients, his conclusions about male masochism in fact counter popular opinions linking the perversion to childhood beatings, which assumed that the physical manipulation of the body could induce a particular sexual preference.⁸ On the contrary, Krafft-Ebing asserts, "[f]lagellation only awaken[s] ideas of a masochistic nature" that are already latent (148). Furthermore, he argues that actual violence to his person is not always necessary to satisfy the masochist, who above all craves being subjected to another's *will*: "The ideal, or even actual, enactment of violence on the part of the controlling person is only the means to the end, i.e., the realization of the sentiment" (146).

Although his explanation of the emergence of masochism favors a psychological explanation rather than a physiological one, Krafft-Ebing's paradigm of masochism is nevertheless based on an assumption about sexual difference. For Krafft-Ebing, male masochism is a "partial *effemination*" of the sexual instinct, in which ". . . the masochist imagines himself in a passive, feminine role toward his mistress whereby his sexual

⁸ This opinion gained considerable traction following the publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* in 1782, in which he claimed that his own masochistic tendencies were caused by his childhood beatings: "How differently people would treat children if only they saw the eventual results of the indiscriminate, and often culpable, methods of punishment they employ!" (quoted in Gibson 21).

gratification is governed by his experiencing a successful illusion of complete subjection to the will of the consort” (180). Along with his observation of any want of masculine characteristics in his masochistic patients’ bodies, Krafft-Ebing’s description of masochists as “individuals endowed with feminine feelings” aligns masochism, and what he perceived as its opposite, sadism, with a reversal or inversion of gender characteristics which he also associates with homosexuality (181).

Considering his interest in the physical manifestations of sexual perversions, Krafft-Ebing’s understanding of masochism as a kind of effeminacy invites a discussion of the distinctive appearance of Mr. Wilfer. As a meek, almost prepubescent-looking little man, Wilfer shows affinities with the archetypal masochist in his very physique. The narrator likens Wilfer to a “conventional Cherub” whose “chubby, smooth, innocent appearance was a reason for his being always treated with condescension when he was not put down” (Dickens 32).⁹ A sentence later, however, the incipient violence in this “condescension” is emphasized: “So boyish was he in his curves and proportions, that his old schoolmaster meeting him in Cheapside, might have been unable to withstand the temptation of caning him on the spot” (32). This reference to the notorious flogging of English schoolboys emphasizes Wilfer’s position as a kind of Foucauldian “docile body” in an institutional realm. Indeed, the “docility” and ductility of Wilfer’s body is also implicated in his being like a “conventional Cherub.” Over the course of the novel,

⁹ *Our Mutual Friend*’s first physical description of Wilfer is curiously similar to a description of another masochist, Mr. Barville, in John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill*, which Ian Gibson applauds for its attention to detail: “He is rather podgy, looks even younger than he is. Cleland’s description of his expression is superb: his ‘round, plump, fresh colour’d face gave him greatly the look of a Bacchus, had not an air of austerity, not to say sternness, very unsuitable even to the shape of face, dash’d that character of joy, necessary to complete the resemblance”” (Gibson 14).

Wilfer comes to be referred to simply as “the cherub”: the category of the cherubic functioning as a “machinery of power” that breaks down and rearranges Wilfer’s body to its specifications.¹⁰

In addition to emphasizing Wilfer’s “conventionality,” the characterization of Wilfer has special significance in a novel that is so notoriously populated by dolls and doll-like people. Wilfer’s manner and movements are described as comically childlike or doll-like, such as his making “chubby motions towards a chair” (Dickens 38) or “bobb[ing] away” to buy new clothes at Bella’s behest (316). Along with being pegged a “cherub”—a pseudo-classical figure which is male and graphically naked, and yet desexualized—Wilfer becomes, in his child- and object-like qualities, Bella’s inert, pliable doll.

The doll-like utility of Wilfer for Bella resonates with Sharon Marcus’s study of doll play in Victorian children’s literature and culture as providing homosexual “fantasies of omnipotence and subjection” for otherwise disempowered young girls.¹¹ Marcus presents these fantasies as being facilitated by the nature of the playthings themselves. These dolls were often “fashion dolls” that took the form of beautiful, elegantly dressed women, thus complicating popular assumptions about dolls as “training” girls for motherhood: “Like a mythical figure, the doll simultaneously embodied opposed states: adult and child, husband and wife, slave and mistress, adoring and adored, punisher and punished, subject and object” (Marcus 165). Aside from its focus on “idealizing and

¹⁰ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 136-138.

¹¹ Sharon Marcus, “Dressing Up and Dressing Down the Feminine Plaything,” in *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 149. Hereafter cited in text.

aggressive homoerotic fantasies “ in Victorian doll culture (149), Marcus’s argument resonates with the expressions of heterosexual, incestuous desire through play in *Our Mutual Friend*. Like the dolls that Marcus describes, Wilfer’s body takes on a series of “opposed” roles: he is at once a patriarch, a childish “cherub,” a human being and an object whose very movements seem uncannily predetermined.

It is in relation to Bella, however, that Wilfer’s doll-like potential is fully realized. In the strong physicality of their interactions, Bella shows an “irresistible propensity to play with” her father’s body in a way that resembles nothing so much as a girl roughly handling her doll (Dickens 606). At various points, she hugs him in “an attitude highly favorable to strangulation” (36), musses his hair with a fork (41), shakes him with impatience (458), chokes him with a hug “until her long hair ma[kes] him sneeze” (617), kisses his hat off (459), and thrusts bits of food in his mouth, so that he “didn’t quite know what to do with them when they were put there” (667). This rough play perhaps reaches its height during Bella’s surprise visit from her residency at Boffin’s Bower, as she dresses him in a new suit of clothes, feeds him dinner, and shoves a purse of money into his waistcoat pocket:

. . . . she tugged at his coat with both hands, and pulled him all askew in buttoning that garment over the precious waistcoat pocket, and then tied her dimples into her bonnet-strings in a very knowing way, and took him back to London. Arrived at Mr. Boffin’s door, she set him with his back against it, tenderly took him by the ears as convenient handles for her purpose, and kissed him until he knocked muffled double knocks at the door with the back of his head. That done, she once more reminded him of their compact and gaily parted from him. (322)

In her exaggerated buttoning of his coat, using his ears as “handles,” and pushing him against the door so that he becomes a sort of auxiliary doorknocker, Bella handles Wilfer like an insensate object. In doing so, she effectively immobilizes him, so that any

caressing or kissing is controlled only by Bella herself. Wilfer becomes both an instrument of Bella's pleasure and a figure of submission to whom she may allow or deny affection. The sexual appeal of Wilfer's comically inert body is here similar to Marcus's example of the doll story *Rosabella*, in which "the description of the doll's mechanical attributes make the girl's passion for her slightly ridiculous, but they also highlight the doll's erotic pliability as a love object" (Marcus 164). Like the female doll which a girl is able to make "a bedfellow" with all the romance of a honeymoon (164), Wilfer's doll-like malleability allows Bella to assert complete dominion over his body.

Bella's interactions with Wilfer also take the form of hyperbolic scenes of discipline, in which she instructs or scolds her father. Bella frequently plays at reward and punishment in these scenes, gifting the cherub a lock of her hair on the condition of his being "good" (Dickens 661) and scolding him for being a "very bad boy" on his visit to her new household after her marriage: "'He has been grubbing and grubbing at school,' said Bella, looking at her father's hand and lightly slapping it, 'till he's not fit to be seen. Oh what a grubby child!'" (684). Bella often positions herself as an institutional authority in these playful conversations, likening herself to a teacher physically disciplining a pupil, or even to the Church:

'Now, darling Pa, give me your hands that I may fold them together, and do you say after me:—my little Bella.'

'My little Bella,' repeated Pa.

'I am very fond of you.'

'I am very fond of you, my darling,' said Pa.

'You mustn't say anything not dictated to you, sir. You daren't do it in your responses at Church, and you mustn't do it in your responses out of Church.'

'I withdraw the darling,' said Pa.

'That's a pious boy!' (663)

Even as she ostensibly atones for being “a vexatious, capricious, thankless, troublesome Animal” on the eve of her secret wedding to John Harmon, Bella continues to “dictate” the terms of her relationship with the cherub by positing herself as some sort of religious officiate.

The volatile power dynamic of Bella’s and Wilfer’s relationship recalls another filial power relation that is defined by daughter-initiated violence: that of Jenny Wren and her father, the strategically-named “Mr. Dolls.” Like Bella, Jenny performs fantasies of discipline and punishment, although she does so in a far wider range of roles. In her capacity as a “dolls’ dressmaker,” Jenny is especially fond of projecting scenarios of domination over her dolls, whom she treats as real people, and even the fashionable ladies whose styles they model:

‘There’s a Drawing Room, or a grand day in the Park, or a Show, or a Fête, or what you like. Very well. I squeeze among the crowd, and I look about me. When I see a great lady very suitable for my business, I say, “You’ll do, my dear!” and I take particular notice of her, and run home and cut her out and baste her. Then another day, I come scudding back again to try on, and then I take particular notice of her again. Sometimes she plainly seems to say, “How that little creature is staring!” and sometimes likes it and sometimes don’t, but much more often yes than no. All the time I am only saying to myself, “I must hollow out a bit here; I must slope away there;” and I am making a perfect slave of her, with making her try on my doll’s dress.’ (Dickens 436)

Jenny’s fantasy takes a sadistic turn in the language that she uses to describe her work, with the phrases “cut her out,” “baste her,” “hollow out,” and “slope away” syntactically applying to the stylish woman’s body rather than to her doll-sized facsimile. Actions which take place only in Jenny’s mind—repeatedly “making her try on my doll’s dress”— are imbued with the importance of the real, so that Jenny mocks the woman for not realizing she is being made a “perfect slave.”

These and other fantasies of discipline usually occur only in the elaborate stories that Jenny tells her companions, as she imagines wreaking revenge on the children of the neighborhood, “shaking the little fist as before” (224), or punishing her imaginary lover for drinking: ““When he was asleep, I’d make a spoon red hot, and then I’d have some boiling liquor bubbling in a saucepan, and I’d take it out hissing, and I’d open his mouth with the other hand . . . and I’d pour it down his throat, and blister it and choke him”” (243). However, aside from the case of Fascination Fledgby, whom she tortures with hot pepper (724), Jenny mainly realizes her preferred power differential with her father.

Referring to him as “my child,” Jenny takes on the role of parent to the helpless “Mr. Dolls.” However, even though Jenny aligns herself with the maternal in a way that Bella does not, there are nevertheless striking parallels in the two daughters’ ways of engaging with their fathers. The relation between Bella and Jenny’s daughterly behavior is often one of perfect inversion, as Jenny fearlessly probes the violent depths that Bella approaches only obliquely. While Bella gifts her Pa a purse of money, “hammering it small with her little fist on the table, and cramming it into one of the pockets of his new waistcoat” and announcing that it is ““for you, to buy presents with for them at home, and to pay bills with, and to divide as you like, and spend exactly as you think proper”” (322), Jenny takes control of her father’s funds, divesting him of any money on his person and scolding him for his inability to manage it himself, fiercely instructing him to ““[t]urn all your pockets inside out, and leave ’em so!”” (242).

Like Bella, Jenny associates her father’s possession of money with the state of his pockets, although she is concerned with emptying them out, and not in filling them up. Just as the word “cherub” reduces Wilfer’s authority in Bella’s presence, so the narrator’s

repetition of the phrase “person of the house” emphasizes Jenny’s basic personhood over that of her wretched “child.” This correlation in Bella’s and Jenny’s terms of domination appears several times in the course of the novel: at his first appearance, Jenny orders her father, ““Go along into your corner! Get into your corner directly!”” (240), while Wilfer finds “his special chair and his special corner reserved for him on all occasions” in Bella’s new house (684). Both girls also refer to their fathers as “bad boys”: in Bella’s case, as part of her playful assumption of teacherly authority (684), and in Jenny’s, as an expression of her dismay at her child’s drunken state: ““You bad old boy! Oh-h-h you naughty, wicked creature! *What* do you mean by it?”” (241).

These moments of accord reveal how Bella and Jenny draw on much the same language to express their dominion over their fathers’ bodies, whether in their physical persons or in their orientation in space. In particular, the correlation of each girl’s concern with her father’s *pockets*—such an intimate space between the clothing and the body, and so often a euphemism for female genitalia—betrays an eroticization and feminization of their fathers’ bodies.¹² By monitoring the contents of their pockets, Bella and Jenny also seem to corral their father’s sexual energies: a mingling of sex and money that unexpectedly contains and commodifies the mature male body. As they perform much the same actions upon their respective fathers’ bodies, the difference between Bella’s and Jenny’s behaviors is primarily that of context. While Bella’s actions are grounded in pleasure and affection, Jenny’s are rooted in anger and desperation. This difference is not merely grounded in their relative affection for their parent, but more specifically in the sense of security and power which each filial relationship affords each daughter.

¹² My thanks to Professor Michael Kreyling for calling attention to the innuendo inherent in this “pocket preoccupation.”

Many Dickens scholars have emphasized the association of violence and physicality with lower-class characters or villains, such as Marlene Tromp, who argues that in *Oliver Twist*, “the privileged . . . are disembodied and [. . .] it is only in the working class that the novel depicts physical materiality.”¹³ The essential despair and fear that underlie Jenny’s domineering attitude is certainly illustrative of Tromp’s point. Although he responds to Jenny with shrinking submission, her father is nevertheless an ominous figure: as the narrator observes, “The person of the house was the person of a house full of sordid shames and cares, with an upper room in which that abased figure was infecting even innocent sleep with sensual brutality and degradation” (Dickens 243). Although her primary concern regarding her father is financial, Jenny also sees him as a source of danger, commenting, “‘My bad child is always dangerous, more or less. He might’—here the little creature glanced back over her shoulder at the sky—‘be setting the house on fire at this present moment’” (434). As Garrett Stewart notes, Jenny exemplifies “a tradition of progressively minor, marginal people airing their fancies at a self-enforced distance from a society scarred everywhere by too unvisionary a dreariness” in Dickens.¹⁴ Her fantasy is born of necessity, given just how marginalized she is as a poverty-stricken, crippled child: she “laugh[s] satirically to hide that she had been crying” (Dickens 533). Her fantasy of domination over others is not a sustainable one, as she is often reminded of the direness of her situation by the same person who serves to perpetuate her fantasy: her father.

¹³ Marlene Tromp, “A ‘Pound’ of Flesh: Morality and the Economy of Sexual Violence in *Oliver Twist*.” In *The Private Rod: Marital Violence, Sensation, and the Law in Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 48.

¹⁴ Garrett Stewart, “The ‘Golden Bower’ of Our Mutual Friend,” *ELH* 40, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 105.

However, although in isolation Jenny's relation to violence seems to align perfectly with tragic, poverty-stricken figures such as *Oliver Twist's* Nancy, her striking similarity to Bella necessitates a more inclusive understanding of violence in *Our Mutual Friend*. In contrast to the noticeably stark depiction of Jenny's domination of her father, the novel's presentation of Bella and Wilfer shows a permissive attitude toward their mingling of violence and eros, while also locating it in the comfortably domestic and familiar setting of the middle class. Furthermore, a necessary aspect of Bella's imperial play is her father's willing submission, as he promptly "withdraws the darling" at her insistence. Wilfer is delighted by the demands and decrees of Bella, whom he calls his "lovely woman," and refuses to admit any annoyance or inconvenience on her part:

'Did I beat you much with that horrid little bonnet, Pa?'

'Nothing to speak of, my dear.'

'Did I pinch your legs, Pa?'

'Only nicely, my pet.' (Dickens 671)

As Bella reminds him of her childhood brattiness, Wilfer happily plays along as the submissive party, eagerly anticipating the receipt of one of her "'beau—tiful tresses'" and longing for her touch as she engages in "her favourite petting way of kissing Pa" as they steal out of the house together for her clandestine marriage to John Harmon: "she stopping on every separate stair to put the tip of her forefinger on her rosy lips, and then lay it on his lips" (662). Indeed, the suspense that precedes the act, as he waits for the finger on his lips, again resonates with the desires of the masochist, for whom the anticipation of climax trumps the actual physical release.

Wilfer further indicates his pleasure at his daughter's attention by again calling attention to the materiality and malleability of his body. At the start of the novel, Wilfer's rather diminished sense of self is presented as intimately connected to the material

aspects of his shabby appearance. The narrator explains at the outset that “. . . he had never yet attained the modest object of his ambition: which was, to wear a complete new suit of clothes, hats and boots included, at one time” (Dickens 32): a desire which illustrates his own talismanic investment in his clothing more than it does his poverty. This interest in the state of Wilfer’s clothing is shared by Bella, who buys him a new outfit at her first opportunity. The erotic possessiveness of this action is indicated by the way that Wilfer associates the receipt of the new clothes with a new level of intimacy between himself and his daughter, proudly telling John Rokesmith, “‘Between my daughter Bella and me there is a regular league and covenant of confidence. It was ratified only the other day. The ratification dates from—these,’ said the cherub, giving a little pull at the lappels [*sic*] of his coat and the pockets of his trousers” (381). Crucially, the moment in which Bella “ratifies” her “league and covenant of confidence” with her father is also the moment when she most explicitly objectifies her father by purchasing and dressing him in new clothes, not unlike a girl dressing her doll for her own amusement. Wilfer’s delight in this form of ratification again recalls the many doll-narrated stories of the Victorian era, in which a doll frequently indicates her own class status, as well as her girl owner’s devotion, through a detailed account of her clothing.¹⁵

Although many aspects of Bella’s and Wilfer’s relationship mimic the kinds of masochistic scenarios described by Victorian theorists, Bella’s autonomy in her relationship with Wilfer is something of an aberration. Victorian theorists considered that

¹⁵ Victoria Ford Smith discusses the example of the doll narrator and heroine in Julia Pardoe’s *Lady Arabella, or, The Adventures of a Doll*. Sent out for a new outfit, Arabella exults, “‘no infant princess of the blood-royal was ever more carefully attired.’” See “Dolls and Imaginative Agency in Bradford, Pardoe, and Dickens,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 40 (2009): 181. Hereafter cited in text.

heterosexual women could show sexual tendencies toward masochism, as a kind of hyperbolic manifestation of their ordinary relinquishment of sexual agency: “. . . a pathological degeneration of the distinctive psychic peculiarities of woman” (Krafft-Ebing 173). Sadism was not considered to be a common impulse for women, while in men it was seen as having a clear physiological basis: “It affords man great pleasure to win a woman, to conquer her This aggressive character, however, under pathological conditions may likewise be excessively developed, and express itself in an impulse to absolutely subdue the object of desire” (Krafft-Ebing 83). Although, as Sharon Marcus illustrates, women and girls were allowed an outlet for their homosexual desires with such gendered activities as dolls and fashion plates, such role-playing was not seen to extend to the heterosexual sphere. Instead, women were typically understood as playing a still-passive role in sadomasochistic games, being instructed by their male partner on how to act in order to maximize his pleasure.¹⁶

In addition to these historical objections, theorizing Bella as a kind of proto-dominatrix in her relationship with her father would seem to clash with her character’s trajectory in the novel, starting with her first engagement to John Harmon, in which she is “left to him in a will, like a dozen of spoons” (Dickens 37). Later, in her courting by John Rokesmith/Harmon, Bella’s desirability is predicated on her willing acceptance of her husband’s absolute authority. Her own personhood is accordingly diminished: even as Rokesmith/Harmon is ostensibly preoccupied with getting Bella to renounce “mercenary” motives, in his eyes, her worth to him is increasingly associated with monetary value.

¹⁶ Steven Marcus notes this instrumentality of women in pornographic works, including a rather tawdry flagellation scene in *My Secret Life*. See *The Other Victorians* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), especially 124-128.

Rather than seeing her as a “lovely woman,” as her adoring father does, Rokesmith/Harmon quickly translates Bella’s charms into financial terms: she is a “. . . most precious and sweet commodity that [is] always looking up, and that never was worth less than all the gold in the world” (683). Ironically, the conclusion of Bella’s story comes full circle in her fraught relation to marriage: though she initially resists a system which will make her “the property of strangers” (377), she becomes even more exaggeratedly so in her marriage to Rokesmith/Harmon, who promptly ensconces her in a honeymoon “doll’s house” cottage.

For Hilary Schor, this objectification of Bella shows that, for the women in *Our Mutual Friend*, the “apotheosis of female identity is to . . . imagine themselves already sordid possessions, hoping only for redemption by someone more ‘worthy.’”¹⁷ Indeed, Bella’s wifely behavior at the end of the novel seems to indicate a full relinquishing of her own agency; as Schor calls it, learning “not to want, and not to be curious” (Schor 182). However, Bella’s maintenance of her relationship with her Pa shows just the opposite, as she instigates their encounters and dictates their terms.

* * *

Along with the rest of Dickens’s oeuvre, *Our Mutual Friend* has always been susceptible to biographical interpretations. In particular, the vulnerable Lizzie Hexam, who alternately fends off her debonair lover Eugene Wrayburn and her psychotic admirer Bradley Headstone, has often been read as an analogue to Ellen Ternan.¹⁸ However,

¹⁷ Hilary M. Schor, “*Our Mutual Friend* and the Daughter’s Book of the Dead,” in *Dickens and the Daughter of the House* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 185. Hereafter cited in text.

¹⁸ Peter Ackroyd sums up this point of view: “The danger of seeing her is everywhere, in fact Is it she who informs Dickens’s description of Bradley Headstone’s passionate

although Lizzie Hexam's status as a "kept woman" of sorts is most similar to the arrangement that Dickens may have had with the young actress, the character of Bella has also been acknowledged as possibly inspired by Ternan. Certainly the age difference between Dickens and Ternan is a starting point for thinking about an erotic father-daughter relationship; as Angus Wilson points out, Ternan "could, in age, so well have been his daughter."¹⁹ Peter Ackroyd also delicately posits an explanation for Dickens's desire for Ternan in the portrayal of Bella's and Wilfer's relationship: ". . . in Dickens's last completed novel, the central vehicle of safe passion is to be found in the playful relationship of father and daughter. Could it not be precisely this form of love which Dickens had for Ellen Ternan?" (Ackroyd 915). Admittedly, the reflexive biographer's fallacy of aligning certain characters or scenes from Dickens's novels with his life becomes most obviously reductive with Ackroyd's invocation of the Bella-Wilfer relationship, which is not so much safe as it is titillatingly transgressive. Like the critics cited earlier in this essay, Ackroyd here seems to overlook any tension in Bella and Wilfer's interactions in order to find a parallel with Dickens's tendency to sentimentally rationalize his own feelings.

Whether or not he saw himself as a paternal figure, Dickens's own words indicate that he hardly viewed himself as having an authoritative role in his relationship with Ternan. On the contrary, Dickens describes himself over and over again as being a victim

and violent attachment to Lizzie: "Yes! You are the ruin – the ruin – the ruin – the ruin of me. I have no resources in myself, I have no confidence in myself, I have no government of myself when you are near me or in my thoughts And you are always in my thoughts now. I have never been quit of you since I first saw you. Oh, that was a wretched day for me! That was a wretched, miserable day!"¹⁹ *Dickens* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 2:954. Hereafter cited in text.

¹⁹ Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens* (New York: Viking, 1970), 276.

of his feelings. He articulates his psychic anguish in terms that are notably violent and embodied, commenting that “I do suppose that there never was a man so seized and rended by one spirit” (quoted in Ackroyd 792), and that “I am the modern embodiment of the old Enchanters, whose Familiars tore them to pieces.”²⁰ However, although Dickens describes himself as tormented, he does not then figure Ternan as his coy tormentor.²¹ Rather, this language of outside forces “seizing” and “rending” him seems to have been his way of rationalizing his own internal struggles.

Ackroyd argues that Dickens’s perception of himself as victimized and violently maimed by his passion for Ternan were augmented by Dickens’s desire to be infantilized:

It seems also that Dickens still conceived himself as a young man, or even younger; in one of his letters to Wills he declared that he meant to be ‘as good a boy’ as he had even been. Similarly, in *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* he calls himself Francis Goodchild A good boy. A good child. These are the images of himself at the time when he was following Ellen Ternan to Doncaster; this does not suggest the hope or prospect of any sexual relationship but something more pervasive and more infantile. (796)

Ackroyd suggests that the hardships and anxieties of middle age caused Dickens to emotionally revert back to his childhood, sending him “. . . hurtling back to his infancy, or at least to a myth of his infancy in which he is once more the poor, sick child in need of female comfort” (808). Rather than seeing Ternan as a daughter figure, Dickens’s viewing of himself as a “boy” instead suggests an inversion of their roles; positing hers as one of greater agency, if not necessarily one of power. It is in this vulnerability and nostalgia that a plausible link may be forged between Dickens’s life and his work. Like

²⁰ Quoted in Edgar Johnson’s *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), 911.

²¹ Not that Ternan was necessarily incapable of torment: a close friend of Ternan, Ackroyd notes, claimed that she “. . . occasionally ‘victimized’ her household, that she let her husband ‘make a perfect doormat of himself for her’ . . . She could also be ‘rather a cruel tease’ and ‘quite a little spitfire’” (Ackroyd 789).

Dickens, Mr. Wilfer is also a man whose desires send him “hurtling back to his infancy,” becoming both a child and a child’s plaything in his scenes with Bella. Dickens’s apparent fondness for thinking of himself as “a good boy” indicates just how attractive he might have considered Wilfer’s position: not as debasing or unmanly, but rather as full of comfort and security.

The way that Dickens articulates his obsession with Ellen Ternan certainly provides a method of reading the relationship between Bella and Wilfer as a romance whose passion is conveyed in violent terms. However, Dickens locates the violence of his passion for Ternan only within himself. Like his other great loves, Ternan was necessarily a figure of idealized purity and innocence for Dickens (Ackroyd 916)—a characteristic which clashes directly with Bella Wilfer’s role as the instigator of her interactions with her father. Furthermore, Dickens’s own assiduous narration of his feelings for Ternan are discordant with the narrator’s attitude toward Bella and Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend*. While Dickens describes his own feelings for a seemingly unattainable young girl in terms of the highest despair and agony, Bella’s erotic engagement with her father’s body is presented in the novel as mutually pleasurable. The narrative’s evident investment in the pleasures of this father-daughter relationship necessitates another means of understanding not only Bella and Wilfer’s relation to each other, but also the way that they are framed by the text.

One explanation of the concurrency of violence and pleasure in the scenes between Bella and Wilfer can be derived from John Kucich, who offers a means of resolving the apparent polarization of violence and repression in Dickens, taking *Our*

Mutual Friend as his example.²² Instead of being irreconcilable, Kucich argues, violence and repression instead work in a complementary fashion through the vehicle of the text, so that “. . . Dickensian repression actually helps to articulate and even idealize a certain kind of violence, rather than simply denying or sublimating it” (Kucich 199-200). The explicitly violent rhetoric of characters like Jenny Wren and Rogue Riderhood, Kucich argues, belies a certain kind of repression in other aspects of their lives, just as “The obsessiveness of Dickens’s murderers”—such as that of Bradley Headstone—“is always rooted in their circular, claustrophobic economy of passion and guilty self-recognition” (200-201).

In contrast to these marginalized or “freakish” figures, Kucich observes, there are also small articulations of violence attributed to the novel’s romantic heroes. For Eugene Wrayburn and John Harmon, these discordant moments serve to emphasize the repressed nature of their feelings:

At the Veneerings, Wrayburn is said to be ‘buried alive’ (I, 2) by social and paternal pressures. Harmon, playing Rokesmith, is frequently described as repressed and diffident in Bella’s presence. And yet both men are dominated either by desires for violence or by frustrations that are constantly associated with violence. Wrayburn is often ready to strangle that parody of romantic release, Lady Tippins . . . And Harmon is mastered by an attraction to Bella that, frustrated, parallels the volatile disappointments of Headstone and Venus. On first witnessing Harmon’s confusion, Bella tells her father, ‘Pa . . . we have got a Murderer for a tenant’ (205)

Any explicit references to violent acts or weapons are diffused by the lightly comic context of these scenes, such that they are almost subsumed by the humorous prevailing tone. Kucich points out, however, that Dickens’s knitting of such violent allusions into the structure of the text helps to produce an effect of slight uneasiness and instability: “. . .

²² John Kucich, “Repression and Representation: Dickens’s General Economy,” in *Charles Dickens*, ed. Steven Connor (London: Longman, 1996). Hereafter cited in text.

. thus reveal[ing] a tension between essentialist and linguistic representations of the self that any nonfigural conception of repression alone tends to obscure” (200).

Notably, Kucich only attributes this fusion of violence and repression to the male heroes of the novel, implicitly aligning his argument with a paradigm of sexual power in which male sexuality is active and women are necessarily passive. This view becomes obvious in his evaluation of the novel’s romantic heroines: Bella Wilfer, for example, is described as having an “emotional blandness” that serves mainly as a contrast to the complexity of male characters like Wrayburn and Harmon (206). However, regardless of Kucich’s dismissive attitude towards the characterization of Bella, we can easily extend his paradigm of violence and repression to her relationship with her father, revealing a psychology which is not bland, but on the contrary quite enigmatic. The intense physicality of Bella’s and Wilfer’s interactions can be seen as an indication of the repression of an incestuous desire, channeling amorous inclinations into brutally physical expressions. For example, the repeated descriptions of Bella as playfully “choking” and “strangling” her father betray sexual connotations which find a parallel in the homoerotic death-embrace of Bradley Headstone and Rogue Riderhood, further connecting it to the novel’s thematic conflation of life and death.²³

* * *

²³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reads Bradley Headstone’s murder/suicide, in which he dies with his arms clasped in an “iron ring” around Riderhood’s body, as rife with the language of “male rape”; Sedgwick argues that Headstone’s feelings of victimization in his hopeless love of Lizzie Hexam are countered by a violent attempt at “sphincter domination.” See “Homophobia, Misogyny, and Capital: The Example of *Our Mutual Friend*,” in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia, 1985).

The narrator's own identification with the romance of Bella and Wilfer helps to achieve its fusion of sentimental eros and violence. His seduction by Wilfer and Bella's own pleasure produces these scenes' pleasantly comic tone, creating, in turn, what Barthes would identify as a "dialectics of desire" between the writer and the reader.²⁴ However, the narrative's almost participative desire does not wholly obscure the violent undercurrents of Bella's fondness for her Pa, but simply softens its effects through the narrator's mediation. The narrator's sentimental view of this filial relationship serves to highlight the discrepancy between what physically happens between Bella and Wilfer and the way in which those events are framed. The narrative strategies deployed can be understood in similar terms to what Ackroyd terms Dickens's "fabulistic" impulses in narrating his own attraction to Ellen Ternan, as his perception of himself as a "good boy" and his insistence on Ternan's moral and sexual purity seem to be a case of protesting too much—that is, of intentionally obscuring the power or violence of his desire, either from himself or from his audience. Similarly, the (presumably male) narrator's insistence on the innocence of Bella and Wilfer's "play" serves instead to prime the reader for any signs of deviance, and effectively increases its potential to fascinate.

Peeling away these fabulistic and sentimental effects reveals a new utility of the subplot of Bella and Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend*. Their relationship becomes not merely a foil or interlude from its other narratives, but rather a part of an "economy of violence" in which "[v]iolence and utility become mutually convertible, as part of a general theme of nondifferentiation that suffuses the book" (Kucich 203). The narration's subtle allusions to doll play in Bella and Wilfer's interactions provide a parallel with the novel's

²⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 6.

other associations of dolls with violence, especially in Jenny Wren's own use of dolls (and of Mr. Dolls). The striking parallels between Bella's scenes with Wilfer and Jenny's interactions with Mr. Dolls further emphasize the violence that shapes Bella's filial affections. By placing Bella and Jenny in conversation with each other in a way that the book's plot itself does not, this reading requires a critical rethinking of Dickens's characterizations: an issue which Kucich begins to address in his discussion of repression and violence in *Our Mutual Friend*.

However, while Kucich remains preoccupied with violence as an expression of male energy (in much the same way that Krafft-Ebing equated sadism with masculinity), the Bella-Wilfer dynamic suggests a reassignment of gender roles which both echoes and defies Victorian understandings of sadomasochism; challenging the reading of Dickens's heroines as emotionally static, "bland" targets for his heroes' itinerant desire. That it does so while remaining within the realm of the heterosexual is all the more remarkable. While Sharon Marcus presents sadistic doll play as bypassing the heterosexual power structure in favor of a homosexual one—a kind of privileged Butlerian performativity that remains under wraps²⁵—Bella's strategy of sexual manipulation allows her to work within heterosexual roles in order to disrupt them. Rather than marking the transition point between her selfish girlhood and her selfless, dollhouse-ensconced wifedom, Bella's hijinks with her Pa instead establish a narrative of desire that runs parallel to her relationship with John Harmon, and whose alternative power structure she shows no intention of relinquishing.

²⁵ e.g., a performance that disputes the originality of the heterosexual paradigm, but which remains necessarily marginalized by vast and anonymous structures of power. See especially the introduction to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

The notion of the Bella-Wilfer relationship as an ongoing alternative to Bella's role as a "little wife" is especially compelling in light of its intimate relation to Bella's courtship and marriage to John Harmon. The erotic intensity of Bella's relationship with Wilfer is closely tied to her "reformation" in the eyes of Harmon: as she becomes increasingly pliable in Harmon's eyes, she assumes ever more authoritative roles in her fantastical encounters with Wilfer. Shortly after her wedding, Bella declares, "'Now we are a partnership of three, dear Pa'" (668), indicating the essentiality of this threesome to her marital status. Although "partnership of three" has all the hallmarks of a Dickensian sentimental flourish that (as Catherine Waters suggests) reaffirms the nuclear family, the phrase's meaning within the context of Bella and Wilfer's relationship is much more ambiguous. Sentiment aside, Bella's whimsical declaration becomes, in the sanctified context of the wedding ceremony, a still more explicit "ratification" of her "covenant" with Wilfer that epitomizes the essential nature of their dynamic. Far from exalting his patriarchal position, Bella's "sentimental romance" with her father continually subordinates and objectifies him: enforcing his role as her primary plaything.

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