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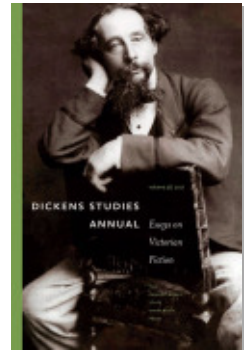
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# The Challenge of Female Homoeroticism in *Our Mutual Friend*

Michael D. Lewis

*Queer studies of the Victorian period have debated female homoeroticism's relationship to heterosexuality. Critics debate whether female dyads contest or support courtship and marriage. For Martha Vicinus, the Victorians saw women's friendships as an "unnamable threat to social norms," while Sharon Marcus contends that they celebrated such relations and that same-sex "relationships worked in tandem with heterosexual exchange." In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens belongs to both camps, showing women's connections as pervasive and disruptive. He celebrates women's erotic friendships precisely because they threaten heterosexual exchange: Abbey Potterson and Jenny Wren seek to protect Lizzie Hexam from her family and suitors; Sophronia Lammle gives Georgiana Podsnap a space away from her father to articulate her own feelings. These relationships that shelter women from heterosexual predation disappear in the novel's second volume. I argue, however, that we shouldn't read this disappearance as the unqualified triumph of normative relations. Mutual attraction continues to flicker—between Jenny and Abbey, Lizzie and Bella Wilfer—and the novel's heroines only accept marriage proposals once suitors cast off predatory designs and demonstrate an affection that resembles that of the female friends who have sustained them throughout the novel.*

*Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65) occupies a privileged place in the history of queer studies. In *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick discusses her project's origins and "their inextricability from a reading of late Dickens" (161), describing the novel

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as “so thick with themes associated with male homophobia and homosexuality” (163). Her stunning reading locates the novel’s obsession with anality in dust mounds and love triangles. But the novel is as thick, if not thicker, with desire between women. If male homosociality subordinates women to desire between men, female homoeroticism challenges such subordination, providing an autonomous space where women become agents of their own bodies, emotions, fantasies. A few critics have noted these relations. Helena Michie identifies a conversation between Lizzie Hexam and Jenny Wren as “an oddly erotic centerpiece to the novel” (211). Melissa Free discusses Jenny in the context of freakery, calling her an “outcast figure” (259). But *Our Mutual Friend* doesn’t present desire between women as odd, “outcast,” or freakish, and it doesn’t involve only Jenny Wren. Rather, queer attraction is potent and pervasive. Major and minor characters become attracted to other women: Abbey Potterson invites Lizzie to live with her; Georgiana Podsnap only seems able to talk to Sophronia Lammle; and Lizzie and Bella Wilfer declare admiration of each other’s beauty.

*Our Mutual Friend* contrasts these protective female relations with predatory opposite-sex ones. It shelters the former from the latter in safe spaces: Abbey’s bar, Lizzie and Jenny’s domicile, the rooftop garden where Jenny and Lizzie learn to read.<sup>1</sup> These secure spaces participate in what Hilary Schor calls the “novel’s savaging of marriage” (194). Kinship and courtship are themselves savage, as they rely on violence, threats, a gaze of which the object is unaware. “Half savage” (13; bk. 1, ch. 1), practically a swamp creature, Gaffer Hexam keeps his daughter attached to an unwanted life of corpses and crime. As Eugene Wrayburn gazes on Lizzie without her knowledge or consent, he reduces her to a “deep rich piece of color” (166; bk. 1, ch. 13), seeing only hair and cheek. Mr. Podsnap happily plots Georgiana’s marriage, in which she has no agency “save to take as directed” (272; bk. 2, ch. 5). These relations rely on coercion rather than consent, self-interest rather than mutuality. Men degrade these women, while same-sex friendship uplifts them. The women’s counter to patriarchy makes female friendships both intense and impossible to sustain, their subversion threatening the requirements of both the social order and the literary genre. They challenge women’s dependence on men for happiness and money, and Jenny and Georgiana imagine alternative lives and social arrangements. In order to remain a realist novel rather than a socialist, lesbian utopia, the text separates Jenny and Lizzie, who never share emotional, physical closeness in its second half. The challenge of female homoeroticism, then, is twofold. First, it offers a significant objection to patriarchy and heterosexuality, and, second, it’s difficult to make sense of, given its omnipresence and disappearance.

The pervasiveness and disappearance of this queer desire makes *Our Mutual Friend* an intriguing case study in relation to recent queer studies of the nineteenth century. Martha Vicinus’s *Intimate Friends* and Sharon Marcus’s *Between Women* offer competing understandings of homoeroticism’s relationship to patriarchy. Vicinus argues that compulsory marriage “ensured the continued marginality

of women's friendships and their construction as second best to heterosexual marriage" (xvi) and made such relationships an "unnamable threat to social norms" (59). Marcus, on the other hand, contends that the Victorians expected and accepted the "intense physicality of British representations of female friendship" (15), arguing that same-sex "relationships worked in tandem with heterosexual exchange" (21). *Our Mutual Friend* fits neither paradigm perfectly, becoming a kind of Venn diagram between them. The novel comfortably celebrates "intense physicality" between female characters, but this intimacy works against rather than with heteronormative exchange. These friendships thus threaten norms, as Vicinus asserts, but paradoxically the novel presents queer love as universal, not marginal, as superior, not inferior, to normative relationships.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, heterosexual marriage must be remade in the image of queer friendship. This remaking asks us to consider the concluding marriages not as the triumph of heterosexuality or tragedy of homoeroticism. Female homoeroticism paradoxically dies as a central feature of the plot but nevertheless survives in brief flickering of desire, forceful rhetoric, and the reform of Eugene and marriage.

### Abbey's Alternative to Patriarchal Authority

An alternative to patriarchal logic, female homoerotic desire liberates female characters from the triangles that trap and threaten them. Lizzie Hexam finds herself between numerous men. The first triangle is familial, as she tries to satisfy both her father and brother, and Abbey Potterson proffers a refuge from patriarchal rule. The unmarried proprietress of the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters, Abbey serves as an example of female agency and authority, self-reliance and a single life. She offers Lizzie female fellowship as a cure for patriarchal illness. After Rogue Riderhood accuses Gaffer of murder, the bar mistress summons Lizzie, asking "how often have I held out to you the opportunity of getting clear of your father and doing well?" (73; bk. 1, ch. 6). Her question condemns familial relations as inhibiting and impairing, celebrates female ones as emancipating and elevating. The same-sex dyad, Potterson posits, offers "opportunity" of self-advancement and self-determination, moral and financial benefits, "doing well" in both senses. Importantly, Abbey has repeatedly made the offer but insists on the choice and consent that Gaffer denies. Abbey's offer might strike us as more maternal than carnal. But, when Lizzie resists the offer, the older woman articulates her physical attraction: "'I vow and declare I am half ashamed of myself for taking such an interest in you,' said Miss Abbey, pettishly, 'for I don't believe I should do it if you were not good-looking. Why ain't you ugly?'" (73; bk. 1, ch. 6). With its reference to shame, Abbey's assertion seems to contradict itself: homoeroticism appears as both shame and salvation, sinking and rising in the moral scale. But the shame seems caused more by the repeated refusals than the non-normative desire. Any

shame disappears, as Abbey presses her case. “Leave him. You needn’t break with him altogether, but leave him. Do well away from him. . . . No matter whether it’s owing to your good looks or not, I like you, and I want to serve you. Lizzie, come under my direction. Don’t fling yourself away, my girl, but be persuaded into being respectable and happy” (75; bk. 1, ch. 6). The repeated emphasis on “do[ing] well away from him” identifies the inability to flourish with her father, contrasting paternal and protective ties. The command that Lizzie not “fling” herself away depicts familial connections as requiring the self-sacrifice of women, their preferences, desires, development. Abbey rejects self-sacrifice for men in favor of self-determination with women. Her desire to both “serve” and “direct” Lizzie situates Abbey as both pedagogue and partner, implying a relationship of give-and-take, of mutuality unseen with Lizzie’s kin. Eugene and Bradley will fight over the right to educate Lizzie, but the heroine’s first lesson comes from Abbey. The female homoerotic is not a counter to, but the condition of, “being respectable and happy.”

Intimacy between women is both projected into the future and already present. The narrator tells us, “In the sound good feeling and good sense of her entreaty, Miss Abbey had softened into a soothing tone, and had even drawn her arm round the girl’s waist” (75; bk 1, ch. 6). Abbey receives Dickens’s approval of her “good sense,” the passage characterizing her desire as not perverse but healthy. Abbey’s straightforward assertion of attraction and the narrator’s positive portrait of their physical proximity reflect the novel’s comfort with this queer desire and foreshadows the logic of female homoeroticism throughout the novel. So, if “[l]iterature provided eloquent warnings against adolescent same-sex desire as a threat to paternal control” (Vicinus xxv-vi), this particular work sees this desire as a protective threat. Yet the brief exchange between the two women introduces us to the paradox of this eroticism. The spinster offers a forceful alternative to Gaffer’s logic but fails to persuade Lizzie to join her. Lizzie, too committed to, perhaps too enchained by, patriarchal logic, will facilitate Charley’s, but not her own, break from their father.

### Jenny Wren’s Homoerotic Nest

The cozy physical space of Abbey’s tavern parallels the protective, nurturing nature of its manager. Dickens emphasizes its combined strength and weakness, its “state of hale infirmity” (67; bk. 1, ch. 6). This description is important for two reasons. First, it highlights the paradox of female homoeroticism as (im)potent. Second, it connects Abbey to the second figure of female desire, Jenny Wren, who lives in a state of “hale infirmity,” combining corporeal weakness with emotional, intellectual, imaginative strength. The twelve-year-old offers a robust, relentless critique of both paternity and unworthy suitors, echoing Abbey’s argument and

extending it to all men who threaten women. The dolls' dressmaker deflates the idealization of marriage, revels in queer intimacy, and rejects the necessity of reproduction, thus imagining another way of living and achieving that dream briefly with Lizzie.

Jenny's relationship with Lizzie allows them to heal the scars left by their criminal or callous fathers: the thieving Gaffer and the alcoholic, abusive Mr. Dolls. When explaining to Charley her reason for living with Jenny, Lizzie emphasizes the failure of multiple generations of fathers: "The father is like his own father. . . . This poor ailing little creature has come to be what she is, surrounded by drunken people from her cradle" (227; bk. 2, ch. 1). Describing Jenny's past, Lizzie implies her hopes for their future, wishing to substitute nurture for neglect, healing for ailing, domesticity for drunkenness. The wealth of same-sex bonds will compensate for kinship's penury, and Lizzie seeks to counter her father's crimes as well. Gaffer retrieved and stole from the corpse of Jenny's grandfather. Lizzie hopes to find "compensation—restitution—never mind the word, you know my meaning. Father's grave" (227; bk. 2, ch. 1). Her assertion contrasts life-sustaining relations with dead ones, insisting, as Abbey did, that ethical values belong to female friendship, not consanguinity.

This friendship models female self-sufficiency, giving life to Abbey's proposal. When Charley brings Bradley Headstone to see Lizzie, they encounter Jenny alone. She tells Charley, "I am very fond of your sister. She's my particular friend" (222; bk. 2, ch. 1). The phrase "my particular friend" produces dissonance with the novel's title, announcing Jenny's desire to share Lizzie with no one, to extricate her from love triangles, to thrive on their own. When Lizzie enters, she emphasizes their thriving, telling her brother that she gets on "Very well, Charley. I want for nothing" (226; bk. 2, ch. 1). Her words assert the satiety of domestic partnership divorced from class and heterosexual privilege. Charley, however, sees not satisfaction but abjection. When the siblings are alone, the brother objects to the women's happiness and men's marginality: "'When are you going to settle yourself in some Christian sort of place, Liz? I thought you were going to do it before now.' 'I am very well where I am, Charley.' 'Very well where you are! I am ashamed to have brought Mr. Headstone with me. How came you to get into such company as that little witch's?'" (226-27; bk. 2, ch. 1). Her repetition of "very well" echoes Abbey, connecting this scene and dynamic to the earlier offer. Charley's shame results from her disreputable conditions, but class-based disgust seems accompanied by another sort of embarrassment. The emphasis on moral, not monetary, disadvantages crescendos in his references to shame, Christianity, witchery. This fear of immoral, even supernatural behavior positions his sister's choice and living quarters as improper behavior. And Christianity had long considered homoeroticism improper. In his letter to the Romans, Paul extends the Levitanic interdiction on homosexuality to women in his discussion of "degrading passions": "Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were

consumed with passion for one another” (Rom. 1.26–27). Perhaps adding sexual to economic degradation, Charley both echoes Paul and anticipates twentieth-century homophobia. In 1992, Pat Robertson excoriated what he interpreted as “a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians” (qtd. in Castle 5–6). Charley and Robertson characterize homosocial relations as countercultural and demonic. Jenny fulfills this prophecy, taking aim against Lizzie’s suitors, Charley, children, and capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

When Charley leaves Lizzie and Jenny alone, the reader sees the girls’ intimacy as beautiful, not sinful. We see the features of the female homoerotic from the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters: physical contact, incompatibility with heterosexual relations, and transience. Sitting before the hearth, Lizzie “protectingly drew under her arm the spare hand that crept up to her” (233; bk. 2, ch. 2). Jenny revels in this mutual but momentary security:

“I have been thinking,” Jenny went on, “as I sat at work to-day, what a thing it would be, if I should be able to have your company till I am married, or at least courted. Because when I am courted, I shall make Him do some of the things that you do for me. He couldn’t brush my hair like you do, or help me up and down stairs like you do, and he couldn’t do anything like you do; but he could take my work home, and he could call for orders in his clumsy way.”  
(233; bk. 2, ch. 2)

Her account combines an idealization of feminine love with the inevitability of marital love. Jenny acknowledges that her husband will prove inferior to Lizzie, but she nevertheless sees a normative future as a foregone conclusion. The contrast between same-sex and opposite-sex relations is total; physical intimacy exists between women, practical estrangement between spouses. He will carry her work, but not her body; he will prove clumsy, not comforting; their home will house her work, but not the intense intimacy she and Lizzie enjoy here. Yet he must arrive and must be accepted. So, while Marcus focuses on texts where “female friendships peaceably coexisted with heterosexual marriages” (2), *Our Mutual Friend* presents homoerotic and heterosexual relations as so opposed that they can’t coexist.

Competing sexualities do coexist in a scene where intimacy between Jenny and Lizzie allows them to discuss heteronormative relations, but the coexistence shows the non-normative in a superior light. They lovingly unfasten and smooth each other’s hair, in the scene that Michie calls the novel’s “oddly erotic centerpiece” (211). But I would call it the logical climax of long celebrated queer intimacy:

It being Lizzie’s regular occupation when they were alone of an evening to brush out and smooth the long fair hair of the dolls’ dressmaker, she

unfastened a ribbon that kept it back while the little creature was at her work, and it fell in a beautiful shower over the poor shoulders that were much in need of such adorning rain. "Not now, Lizzie, dear," said Jenny; "let us have a talk by the fire." With those words, she in her turn loosened her friend's dark hair, and it dropped of its own weight over her bosom in two rich masses.

(342; bk. 2, ch. 11)

The pleasures of the prose reflect the pleasure described, as long, sensuous phrases parallel long, sensuous handling of hair. Dickens depicts this queer contact as diurnal and beautiful, liberating and purifying. It's also mutual, as each takes her turn to caress hair. This mutuality contradicts Free's characterization of Jenny's desire as "a one-sided homosexual attraction that is never consummated" (263). Lizzie initiates this contact, and the scene might be the closest we get to sexual consummation in the novel. Dickens channels the erotic through the safe symbol of hair, but he discards synecdochal safety in favor of focusing on shoulders and bosoms. He goes on to describe Jenny "laying a cheek on one of the dark folds" (342; bk. 2, ch. 11). The scene offers an exhaustive catalogue of body parts, proceeding to describe Lizzie's "fine handsome face and brow . . . revealed without obstruction" (342; bk. 2, ch. 11). The scene explicitly contrasts with Eugene's view of Lizzie, obstructed by a dirty window and her lack of participation. The contrast presents traditional relations as wanting, separated, one-sided.

Normativity's inferiority becomes clearer as their discussion turns to heterosexual desire, the scene presenting current pleasure between women and predicting future pain with men. Distrusting her friend's normative attachment, Jenny gets Lizzie to express her love of Eugene. Persuaded to imagine herself as a lady, Lizzie extols self-sacrificial love, the flinging away that Abbey so feared. As Eugene's wife, she "would joyfully die with him, or, better than that, die for him. She knows he has failings. . . . 'Only put me in that empty place, only try how little I mind myself, only prove what a world of things I will do and bear for you, . . . me who am so much worse and hardly worth the thinking of beside you'" (344; bk. 2, ch. 11). Her fantasy starts with willing self-annihilation, ends with an astonishing lack of self-esteem, and is replete with self-denial. Lizzie's ideal relationship is decidedly one-sided, unlike the mutual affection between her and Jenny, as she gives Eugene her heart but doesn't get anything in return. Receiving nary a benefit, she becomes a beast of burden. The "empty place" of heterosexual connection contrasts with the female world of fullness, intimacy, sufficiency.

This sacrificial story produces great pain in Jenny and, presumably, the reader, who has seen female relations as the healthiest in the book. Looking at Lizzie with "alarm," the child moans, "O me, O me, O me!" (344; bk. 2, ch. 11). Lizzie inquires about her companion's agony, and Jenny responds: "Yes, but not the old pain. Lay me down, lay me down. Don't go out of my sight to-night." Turning away, she whispers to herself, "my poor Lizzie! O my blessed children, come back in the long bright slanting rows, and come for her, not me. She wants help



more than I.” This response registers the strength of Lizzie’s fantasy and Jenny’s relative weakness, her plea suggesting Lizzie’s unbounded desire and the limits on women’s companionship. But the normative is both inevitable and uninspiring. Married to Eugene, Lizzie will be respectable but “poor,” emotionally pitiable. Jenny’s lament criticizes the heavy burdens Lizzie takes, and it characterizes sacrificial heterosexuality as an emotional disability, more painful than Jenny’s physical suffering (“She wants help more than I”).

Only heavenly, not earthly, forces can save Lizzie, Jenny suggests as she hails the imaginary, cherubic children who once assuaged her bodily pain by lifting her up. Even as Jenny accepts heteronormative relations as necessary, the dressmaker imagines an escape from society’s demands. In a beautiful reading of her imaginative powers, Garrett Stewart writes that Jenny resorts to “that fitful and harassed refuge in imagination sought by certain characters . . . whom a spoiled world seems increasingly in danger of spoiling” (198). We can queer Stewart’s assertion, identifying her imagination as queer, the harassments of the world as compulsory heterosexuality and reproduction of both children and capital. Jenny’s most potent refuge is her fantasy of “coming up and being dead.” As Jenny and Lizzie read atop the roof, Dickens depicts an Edenic scene, referring to the women’s “basket of common fruit” and “boxes of humble flowers [that] completed the garden” (276; bk. 2, ch. 5). In this queer Eden populated by Jenny and Lizzie rather than Adam and Steve, their fruit of knowledge—of the book, of their bodies—promises not a fall but a return to innocence. The serpent here is Fledgeby, threatening them not with knowledge but with masculinity and normativity, capital and ownership. Faced by Fledgeby and his interrogation, “Jenny stole her hand up to her friend’s, and drew her friend down, so that she bent beside her on her knee” (279; bk. 2, ch. 5), emphasizing their intimacy as a defense against his privilege. Explaining the feeling of being dead, Jenny presents enjoyment as estrangement from spoiled society: “it’s so high. And you see the clouds rushing on above the narrow streets, not minding them, and you see the golden arrows pointing at the mountains in the sky from which the wind comes, and you feel as if you were dead” (279; bk. 2, ch. 5).

Jenny praises the site’s distance from the city’s ground and “narrow streets,” criticizing their constriction, expressing a need for liberation from both England and the earth altogether in her yearning for the sky, clouds, mountain peaks. Jenny develops this idea of emancipation from social incarceration, describing being dead as feeling “so peaceful and so thankful! And you hear the people who are alive, crying, and working, and calling to one another down in the close dark streets, and you seem to pity them so! And such a chain has fallen from you” (279; bk. 2, ch. 5). This liberating vision contrasts imagined tranquility with actual misery. This misery consists of minimal space for self-determination “in the close dark streets” of necessary labor (“working”) and of current social interactions (“calling to one another”). Jenny’s vision demands a radical reconfiguration of society and human relations, an annihilation of the current order. Female homoeroticism

threatens to put a stop to biological and social reproduction, heteronormativity and capitalism, exactly as Pat Robertson feared.<sup>4</sup>

Patricia Ingham has argued that Dickens distrusts “women’s propensity to be fanciful,” arguing that imagination emerges in an “unbridled form in women not schooled to complementarity. It is an excessive characteristic that expresses itself in riotous ways” (73). Here, however, Dickens revels in, not reviles, Jenny’s imagination precisely because it is unbridled. He recognizes that complementarity requires the subordination of her and those like her: subservient female to sovereign male, industrious laborer to idle lady, disabled female to reproductive mother. Jenny’s imagination (and Dickens’s) removes her from these binaries, allowing her to enjoy queer intimacy and riot against the social order and the suffering it produces. Lee Edelman has argued that queerness, in our own moment, necessarily jeopardizes the social order because it negates what he calls “reproductive futurism”: the predication of politics on the question of what kind of world we leave to future generations. This logic protects “heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations” (2). Edelman celebrates “the capacity of queer sexualities to figure the radical dissolution of the contract” (16). Jenny’s imagination and her intimacy with Lizzie threaten, even promise, such a dissolution of the social and sexual contract. Her fantasies articulate a rejection of and envision a termination to compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory reproduction—reproduction in the senses of giving birth, laboring for capital, and perpetuating the society that demands both. Dickens thus proves—temporarily—more radical than our politicians, envisioning and validating feminine queer resistance.<sup>5</sup>

### **Miss Podsnap and Mrs. Lammle Challenge Podsnappery**

Queer resistance unites Georgiana Podsnap and Sophronia Lammle and undermines the order celebrated by Mr. Podsnap. Compulsory matrimony requires women to pass placidly, imperceptibly from childish to connubial bliss. The novel lampoons this logic in its satire of Podsnappery. Podsnappery requires that young women remain innocent, ignorant, undesiring. As Ruth Bernard Yeazell has written, “the young person who remains forever a Young Person has no story,” and this lack leaves the youth “[n]ot so much the subject as the victim of an aborted courtship plot” (345). Dickens does, however, provide Miss Podsnap with a story of nonnormative desire where she becomes an agent of her own feelings and fantasies. The friendship between Sophronia and Georgiana provides an intriguing case for my argument for two reasons. First, Mrs. Lammle begins as a representative of heterosexual predation, hoping to deliver Miss Podsnap to Fascination Fledgeby, but ends as an exemplar of homoerotic protection, impeding that

sacrificial delivery. Insincerely and then genuinely attached to her younger friend, Mrs. Lammle extricates Miss Podsnap from the trap she sets with her husband and Fledgeby. Second, the relationship differs from Jenny and Lizzie's, in that it's less intense, verbally and physically. But their relationship becomes intense by its end and serves the same function with respect to patriarchal power.

In Dickens's first description of Georgiana, he tells us that she finds herself nearly "crushed by the mere dead-weight of Podsnappery" (132; bk. 1; ch. 11) and goes on to say that her "early views of life [were] principally derived from the reflections of it in her father's boots, and in the walnut and rosewood tables of the dim drawing-rooms" (134; bk. 1, ch. 11). The description reflects the dehumanizing and darkening effects of both commodity culture and Mr. Podsnap's crushing command. Despite their class difference, both Podsnap and Gaffer traffic in death—figurative and literal—harming and circumscribing their daughters. The narrator condemns this middle-class relationship that involves practical annihilation and, in the Plath-like image (in "Daddy") of the boot, subservience. Descriptions of Georgiana as shrinking (132; bk. 1, ch. 11) illustrate that she too barely dares to "breathe or Achoo."

It's fitting, then, that Miss Podsnap should breathe freely and deliver her first words in the novel to Mrs. Lammle, for the conversation allows her to escape from her father's boots and tables, authority and privilege. These first words bespeak Georgiana's self-erasure, self-annihilation, politely declining Mrs. Lammle's invitation to converse: "I am afraid I *don't* talk" (139; bk. 1, ch. 11). Following this paradoxical opening, however, Miss Podsnap does talk at length, rejecting both class privilege and gender propriety. Sophronia tries to provoke Georgiana into conversation but only gets the birthday girl to talk when she asks about dancing. Not liking the party in her house, Georgiana prefers an alternative site and style of dancing: "how I should have liked it, if I had been a chimney-sweep on May-day" (139; bk. 1, ch. 11). Her fantasy, like Jenny's, is extraordinary. Relinquishing the family's privilege, it substitutes proletarian carnival for wealthy refinement; moving into the streets, it substitutes the freedom of the streets for the fetters of the middle-class home; and transforming the young woman into a sweep, it substitutes gender fluidity for strict gender roles.<sup>6</sup> She thus wishes to surrender the privilege Charley so desperately seeks for his sister. Georgiana knows her wishes break the social rules so valued by Charley and Podsnap; she reveals this recognition in an injunction to silence: "you won't mention it, will you?" (140; bk. 1, ch. 11). Mrs. Lammle responds: "you make me ten times more desirous, now I talk to you, to know you well than I was when I sat over yonder looking at you. How I wish we could be real friends!" (140; bk. 1, ch. 11). Her hyperbole is, of course, ostensibly insincere, but I think it possible to read her as simultaneously genuine and artificial. The conniving Mrs. Lammle sees the girl's discontent to be taken advantage of, while the compassionate Mrs. Lammle recognizes a woman at war with her lot, much as Mrs. Lammle herself struggles with her loveless, dishonest marriage. Her desire to

be “real friends” disguises artifice as reality, and, yet, it also disguises genuine interest as mercenary mendacity.

Miss Podsnap’s resistance to the terpsichorean rituals of compulsory heterosexuality transitions from aversion to aggression: “If I was wicked enough—and strong enough—to kill anybody, it should be my partner” (140; bk. 1, ch. 11). And it becomes vociferous, as her mother approaches with a partner: “Oh please don’t, please don’t, please don’t! Oh keep away, keep away, keep away!” (141; bk. 1, ch. 11). Both utterances register the intensity and impotence of Georgiana’s resistance. Like Jenny, she desires to escape norms and rituals. But neither she nor any female character proves “strong enough” to decline ultimately the proffered partner. The ensuing dance is enforced, less vivacious than insipid. Dickens’s description corroborates Georgiana’s dread: her partner Mr. Grompus “believing that he was giving Miss Podsnap a treat, prolonged to the utmost stretch of possibility a peripatetic account of an archery meeting; while his victim, heading the procession of sixteen as it slowly circled about, like a revolving funeral, never raised her eyes except once to steal a glance at Mrs. Lammle” (141; bk. 1, ch. 11). An extraordinary critique of this mating ritual, the description lambastes male entitlement and self-satisfaction, ignorance and predation, and it laments female ennui and suffering. The younger woman’s desperate look to the older one characterizes their friendship as the sole escape from this oppressive, funereal dance, just as Jenny’s home shelters Lizzie from Charley’s and Eugene’s designs.

Georgiana pursues this escape route, “return[ing] to her seat by her new friend” (141; bk. 1, ch. 11). This continued exchange shows each woman in a more complicated light. Sophronia coyly refers to herself as dull, and Georgiana declines this assessment: “I am dull, but you couldn’t have made me talk if you were” (142; bk. 21 ch. 11). This assertion praises Sophronia as Georgiana’s liberator, the older woman freeing the younger from fear, silence, nonexistence. Mrs. Lammle’s response to this flattery demonstrates her competing impulses: “Some little touch of conscience answering this perception of her having gained a purpose, called bloom enough into Mrs. Lammle’s face to make it look brighter as she sat smiling her best smile on her dear Georgiana, and shaking her head with an affectionate playfulness. Not that it meant anything, but that Georgiana seemed to like it” (142; bk. 1, ch. 11). The closing certainty that “it meant” nothing contradicts the complexities of the preceding lines: the artifice of “her best smile” and the reality of her “conscience,” her simultaneous success and shame in earning trust from this defenseless young woman, her simultaneous enactment of and resistance to her husband’s plan. The physical reflection of her moral response makes her “brighter” in the sense that she’s both less cunning and more beautiful. Georgiana’s reaction to her both dark and bright friend is in direct contrast to her suitor Grompus and the dance macabre. Miss Podsnap responds, speaks to the deceptive woman but not the dancing man. Miss Podsnap’s attraction is as multi-layered as Mrs. Lammle’s: this attraction to a potentially insubstantial friendship results both from the young woman’s naïveté (she doesn’t recognize the game

and trap) and her nuanced awareness of her own desires (she does recognize her attraction to Mrs. Lammle and her “playfulness”).

Dickens closes the chapter by mocking patriarchy’s limited and limiting view of women. Podsnap’s one-dimensional understanding of his daughter flattens the three-dimensional character we’ve seen interacting with Sophronia. The narrator says that “nothing would have astonished him more than an intimation that Miss Podsnap or any other young person properly born and bred, could not be exactly put away like the plate, brought out like the plate . . . that such a young person’s thoughts could try to scale the region bounded on north, south, east, and west, by the plate” (146; bk. 1, ch. 11). Podsnap would consider this possibility “a monstrous imagination,” refusing to believe “that there may be young persons of a rather more complex organization” (146; bk. 1, ch. 11). Podsnap’s narcissism blinds him to the fact that his daughter proves more complex than the plate and strays from propriety, with her newfound voice and desire, her homicidal hostility to dancing partners, and her attraction to Mrs. Lammle’s playfulness. The “monstrous imagination” that depicts women as more than one-dimensional commodities belongs to Dickens. He grants her the space—physical, emotional, psychic—to articulate her desire for liberation, for scaling the region of her father’s house, patriarchy, and wealth, just as Jenny hopes to scale the mountains in the sky.

The friendship continues to exist in complex relationship to male power. As the Lammles prepare the sacrifice of Georgiana to Fledgeby, the narrator characterizes the women’s friendship as freedom from Miss Podsnap’s father and the social order he reveres: “Whenever Georgiana could escape from the thralldom of Podsnappery; could throw off the bedclothes of the custard-colored phaeton, and get up . . . she repaired to her friend, Mrs. Alfred Lammle” (254; bk. 2, ch. 4). With its verbs of liberation and rebellion, the lines describe these visits as giving some reality to Georgiana’s fantasy of becoming a chimney sweep, as the visits free her from the Podsnaps’ worship of feminine insignificance and material excess. Dickens also describes the friendship in terms of spiritual union: “To use the warm language of Mrs. Lammle, she and her sweet Georgiana soon became one: in heart, in mind, in sentiment, in soul” (254; bk. 2, ch. 4). Exaggeration again covers truth. Mrs. Lammle might only halfheartedly believe her own words, but, for Georgiana, this is the most, indeed only, meaningful relationship in her life. The reader only sees Georgiana’s emotional, mental, communicative capabilities in her interactions with Sophronia. The homoerotic provokes and promotes female development and well-being, as Abbey Potterson promised at the novel’s start.

Sophronia’s words describe the friends in the terms of companionate marriage, and, in the ensuing conversation, Georgiana camouflages her transgressive affection in admiration of the normative Lammle marriage. She praises Sophronia’s husband: “Mr. Lammle is like a lover” (255; bk. 2, ch. 4). This praise of Alfred seems to offer a contrast of Sophronia’s supposed marital happiness

and Georgiana's misery. She declares that the "dreadful wretches that ma brings up at places to torment me, are not lovers" (256; bk. 2, ch. 4). Her praise is complicated. Georgiana desires both to praise and occupy Alfred's position, receive and express attentions such as his. Sophronia perceives the complexities of this desire, seeing "something suspicious in your enthusiastic sympathy with Alfred's tenderness" (256). Sophronia describes her friend's sympathetic and unexpected identification with her husband's affection, and her ensuing comments reposition Georgiana in various heterosexual narratives of adultery and of pining for a suitor and of desiring Alfred himself. This sequence implies the need to vanquish queer desire and its roadblock against heterosexual sacrifice, even as she fans the flames of Georgiana's affection. Georgiana emphatically denies affection for her husband, highlighting her distance from heteronormative plots, as Sophronia hints that Miss Podsnap must desire a lover of her own. Sophronia intimates: "'What I insinuated was, that my Georgiana's little heart was growing conscious of a vacancy.' 'No, no, no,' said Georgiana. 'I wouldn't have anybody say anything to me in that way for I don't know how many thousand pounds'" (256; bk. 2, ch. 4). Georgiana refuses adultery, courtship, and an exchange of herself for money, her refusal marking a significant obstacle to both her friends' and parents' plans. While Georgiana's "anybody" is unmarked by gender, the conversation makes clear that she really means any man, for she makes no objection to Sophronia's amatory language, affection, possession. Sophronia likewise contradicts herself: referring to "my Georgiana's little heart," the married woman acknowledges not "vacancy" but plenitude, not isolation but union. While Sophronia's words depict heterosexual courtship as needed, her actions depict it as unnecessary, leaving heterosexual liaisons as an essential afterthought. Sophronia and Dickens thus reveal normative desire as compulsory, not natural or given. This attachment lacks the physical and verbal intensity that we see between Jenny and Lizzie, but this permutation of same-sex friendship leaves the reader with the same impressions about limiting marriage and liberating friendship.

Mrs. Lammle nevertheless persists in placing Miss Podsnap in heterosexual plots, revealing her conflicting attachment to and detachment from heterosexual exchange. She says that Fledgeby was impressed by "'a certain heroine called—' 'No, don't say Georgiana Podsnap!' pleaded that young lady almost in tears. 'Please don't. Oh do do do say somebody else!'" (258; bk. 2, ch. 4). Georgiana's predictably effusive response resists the marriage plot, subverting the plans of Sophronia no less than those of Mr. Podsnap and many a Victorian novelist, including Dickens. Dickens saves Miss Podsnap from such plotting—marital and mercenary—when Mrs. Lammle asks Twemlow to cut off Georgiana from Fledgeby, Lammle, and herself. For Schor, Sophronia changes her mind "suddenly, with little preparation" (187), but this change seems less abrupt if we attend to her longstanding complexities. After a long struggle, sincerity triumphs over artifice, conscience over cunning, love of Georgiana over love of gold. She pleads, "She will be sacrificed. She will be inveigled and married to that connexion of

yours. It is a partnership affair, a money-speculation. She . . . is on the brink of being sold into wretchedness for life" (409; bk. 2, ch. 16). Her plea emphasizes the sacrificial nature of traditional marriage. It contributes to the novel's unyielding indictment of the marriage market that commodifies women, such as Bella Wilfer being left to John Harmon in a will and Sophronia investing everything—her body, her future—in a high-risk marriage with few returns. Sophronia proceeds: "I tell you this, only to show you the necessity of the poor little foolish affectionate creature's being befriended and rescued" (410; bk. 2, ch. 16). Her assertion is important, as it underscores the profoundly potent and impotent nature of female relations in *Our Mutual Friend*. Sophronia disrupts but cannot terminate her husband's scheme, in part because she doesn't want Alfred to know of her transgression and in part because the novel can't quite imagine women fully extricating themselves from heterosexual partnerships. The female dyads successfully fend off predatory men, but these dyads also give way to good men. This isn't a total failure. Heterosexual partnerships only become true partnerships once they're patterned on female friendship, as I argue at the end of this essay.

### Mourning the Loss of Female Friendship

In the second volume of *Our Mutual Friend*, Lizzie and Jenny never converse in person again and Sophronia and Georgiana meet only to part ways. How should we read these terminations? It seems to me that the fate of female homoerotic relations is paradoxically tragic and triumphant. It's tragic for obvious reasons: we see minimal interaction between the women. We can again queer Stewart, who writes of "the recurring tragedy of Jenny's life: that fancy is an unreliable refuge from drudgery, that what is beautiful in her life must inevitably evaporate, the lovely lapsing away into what is mean and demeaning" (209). Jenny's relationship with Lizzie is lovely, beautiful, fanciful, but it too lapses. Yet that love triumphs in an altered form by the novel's end.

Lamenting the loss of Lizzie, Jenny eulogizes same-sex love, commencing a requiem that reverberates throughout the novel's second half. She asks Riah, "Is it better to have had a good thing and lost it, or never to have had it?" (430; bk. 3, ch. 2). It's fitting that Jenny should process grief by echoing the century's great queer elegy, *In Memoriam* (1850). The commoner joins the queen in deploying and appropriating Tennyson's verse to work through loss. In her daily mourning for Albert, Victoria heterosexualizes the poem, while Jenny feminizes its queerness. Her modification marvelously challenges patriarchal and class hierarchies: it pushes women to the center of Tennyson's query, whereas his poem marginalizes them, and its prosaic speech—"a good thing"—makes the elegy accessible to anyone, not just Cambridge Apostles. Jenny focuses on loss, despite Lizzie's well-being: "I feel so much more solitary and helpless without Lizzie now, than I

used to feel before I knew her" (430; bk. 3, ch. 2). She funereally forecasts that, even though she will see Lizzie (they're on their way to visit her at this point), Jenny's separation from her is as final and painful as Tennyson's from Hallam, as Victoria's from Albert. Riah's response continues, albeit less explicitly, the Tennysonian logic: "'Some beloved companionship fades out of most lives, my dear,' said the Jew,—'that of a wife, and a fair daughter, and a son of promise, has faded out of my own life—but the happiness was'" (430; bk. 3, ch. 2). In Tennyson's sixth lyric, he compares himself anxiously expecting Hallam's arrival to a father waiting for his soldier son, a mother waiting for her sailor son, and a woman waiting for her lover. The third of these, in a wonderful coincidence, resembles Jenny: "O somewhere, meek, unconscious dove, / That sittest ranging golden hair; . . . Poor child, that waitest for thy love" (vi, 25–26, 28). Tennyson's and Riah's comparisons elevate the homoerotic to the intensity and significance of traditional relations. Active and conscious wren possesses no less legitimacy than passive and unreflecting dove. Riah's final assertion—"the happiness was"—offers a Tennysonian consolation to both Jenny and the twenty-first-century reader yearning for gay marriage in Dickens. The forces of courtship, narrative closure, and realism's requirements may terminate Jenny and Lizzie's bond, but they cannot eliminate the memory of that potent bond for either Jenny or us.

Georgiana, unsurprisingly, offers a more passionate articulation of grief. As the Lammles attempt to insinuate their way into the Boffins' lives, Miss Podsnap barges onto the scene:

"Oh, my dear Sophronia," cried Georgiana, wringing her hands as she ran up to embrace her, "to think that you and Alfred should be ruined! . . . Oh, Mr. and Mrs. Boffin, pray forgive me for this intrusion, but you don't how fond I was of Sophronia when Pa wouldn't let me go there any more, or what I have felt for Sophronia since I heard from Ma of her having been brought low in the world. You don't, you can't, you never can, think, how I have lain awake at night and cried for my good Sophronia, my first and only friend!"

(633; bk. 4, ch. 2)

Georgiana's words and actions mark the growth she has undergone through her relationship with Sophronia. Here, she appears not as a passive recipient but as an initiating agent of physical embraces and amatory language, not as a shrinking daughter but as a blossoming lover. She initially, briefly mourns the married couple, her mourning associating heterosexuality with ruin and being "brought low in the world." But the opening and closing references to her "dear" and "good" friend showcase her concern for the wife alone, extricating her from Alfred. The queer nature of her friendship is further confirmed in her repeated insistence that the Boffins can't possibly comprehend the intensity of her emotions. Forbidding them to understand the relationship as everyday friendship, she insists on their once-in-a-lifetime connection, as she describes herself as a disappointed damsel



sleepless (like many a teenager) and crying (like Jenny) for a lover's loss. In her closing reference to Sophronia as her "first and only friend," Georgiana affirms that women, in this novel, can only form meaningful relationships with each other, away from the threats of mercenary men—whether fathers like Podsnap or suitors like Fledgeby.

While Sophronia initiated friendship in an attempt to trade Georgiana to Fledgeby for debt relief, Mrs. Lammle's response to this outburst demonstrates the mutuality and sincerity of their affections. Her latent sincerity surfaces, as the narrator informs us: "There were actually tears in the bold woman's eyes, as the soft-headed and soft-hearted girl twined her arms about her neck" (634; bk. 4, ch. 2). We can read these tears as signs of either guilt or love. Mr. Lammle reads them as the latter. "'Sophronia,' asked her husband, mockingly, 'are you sentimental?'" (636; bk. 4, ch. 2). The wife remains silent but lachrymose: "there was a struggle within her . . . and then some tears fell from her eyes. 'Why confound the woman,' exclaimed Lammle, 'she *is* sentimental!'" (636; bk. 4, ch. 2). Mr. Lammle appears confounded, as both his wife and her friend exhibit more "complex organizations" than either he or Mr. Podsnap calculated. Vicinus includes "sentiment" in a list of nineteenth-century "words used to describe women who seemed too interested in a particular friend" (xxii). For certain readers then, Mr. Lammle names, albeit in code, his wife's queer affection. He acknowledges its disruptive intensity, asking his wife whether she intends to bring her sentiment abroad. Sophronia assures him, "There is no fear of my taking any sentiment with me. I should soon be eased of it, if I did. But it will be all left behind. It *is* all left behind" (637; bk. 4, ch. 2). Repressing her affection before our eyes, Sophronia acknowledges how queer sentiment is both useless and dangerous, not serving but subverting their marriage and future scheming. It is "left behind" by her and by Lizzie. And yet, even as it leaves behind these relationships, *Our Mutual Friend* proves incapable of leaving queer female desire behind, recognizing it as a combustible force that sparks any-time two women encounter one another.

### The Persistence of Homoerotic Attraction

Dickens terminates particular queer relations but perpetuates universal queer desire. The requiem for female homoeroticism thus creates dissonance with its triumphal march. Jenny sings both tunes. In the midst of grieving, the dressmaker turns her eyes toward countless women. Using these ladies as inspiration for her dolls, she eroticizes them. She tells Riah:

"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 dresses." (431; bk. 3, ch. 2)

With her repeated references to seeing, looking, and taking notice, Jenny theorizes and delights in feminine, queer scopophilia. This female gaze potentially replicates the objectifying male gaze. Jenny veers toward Eugene's indifference and narcissism when she nonchalantly reports that some women don't appreciate the attention. But there are important differences: Jenny hides behind no screen, these women look back, the vectors of desire are mutual, multidirectional. The women are objects of her gaze and subjects of their own, consciously aware of and returning the dressmaker's attention. The construction of the dresses moves Jenny's desire from the visual to the tactile, her deliberate construction of the dresses becoming a kind of womanhandling. In making slaves of these elegant ladies, Jenny reforms the gaze that objectifies women and rejects the class hierarchy that subordinates her to the privileged women.<sup>7</sup>

In imagining this gaze, Dickens promises that queer looking will last as long as Jenny and her colleagues continue their craft. This episode gives us a universal queer desire among various women, and the chapter proceeds to offer a particular example of this eroticism. Riah and Jenny step into the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters, and Abbey Potterson admires Jenny. When they arrive, Riah starts to introduce Jenny to Abbey, but the dressmaker interrupts, offering the barkeep her business card. This offering describes Jenny on her own terms, insisting on self-authorship, self-reliance, and the economic independence shared by these small business owners. Abbey proceeds to praise Jenny's tresses. The child's "loosened bonnet dropped on the floor. 'Why, what lovely hair!' cried Miss Abbey" (435; bk. 3, ch. 2). We witness a familiar encounter: a woman's unabashed admiration of another and the focus of female desire on hair. Delighting in Abbey's admiration no less than that of her dolls' models, Jenny proudly displays the rest: "'Call *that* a quantity?' returned Miss Wren, 'Poof! What do you say to the rest of it?' As she spoke, she untied a band, and the golden stream fell over herself and over the chair, and flowed down to the ground. Miss Abbey's admiration seemed to increase her perplexity" (435; bk. 3, ch. 2). Dickens again presents this eroticism as liberating ("loosened," "untied") and natural ("stream"), and again implicitly contrasts heteroerotic and homoerotic attention to women's hair. Eugene stares at Lizzie's hair without her consent, while Jenny proudly exposes her own hair. This exposure highlights the abundance of Jenny's hair, and, as Elisabeth Gitter has written, "the more abundant the hair, the more potent the sexual invitation implied by its display" (938).<sup>8</sup> Jenny's potent invitation heightens Abbey's desire and perplexity. The puzzlement results from Abbey's inability to determine Jenny's age,

wondering if she desires a minor and proceeding to seek clarification from Riah. “‘Child in years,’ was the answer; ‘woman in self-reliance and trial’” (435; bk. 3, ch. 2). Riah’s answer acknowledges the pain produced by her father and the power fostered by Lizzie, emphasizing the strength associated with queer femininity throughout the novel.

Dickens makes Jenny the focal point of mutual female homoeroticism, but, as the relationship between Mrs. Lammle and Miss Podsnap demonstrates, *Our Mutual Friend* offers a network of homoerotic relations, moments, gazes. If Lizzie doesn’t continue to run her fingers through Jenny’s hair, she and Bella do strike each other speechless with their beauty. In their brief encounter as single women, they admire each other, and, as always, admiration of women and condemnation of men prove two sides of the same coin. Lizzie exclaims, “‘It’s a pleasure to me to look at you.’ ‘I have nothing left to begin with,’ returned Bella, blushing, ‘because I was going to say that it was a pleasure to me to look at you, Lizzie’ (515; bk. 3, ch. 2). Bella’s blush highlights the embarrassment a reader expects in an encounter between admirers, between Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy, for instance. But this novel’s reader has come to expect the features of same-sex admiration: physical pleasure, frank assertion, mutual gaze. Like Jenny, Bella gets Lizzie to describe her desire and tell her story of both Headstone’s unpalatable proposal and Wrayburn’s disreputable desire. Like Jenny, she recognizes the danger attendant upon heterosexual desire. Listening to the account of Headstone’s proposal, “Bella made and clasped a girdle of her arms round Lizzie’s waist” (517; bk. 3, ch. 9), and this physical intimacy persists throughout the exchange, Lizzie pressing “her hand upon her living girdle.” As we’ve seen before, the homoerotic context provides Lizzie with the security and freedom to articulate heterosexual desire. Lizzie admits that Eugene admires but doesn’t love her. In response, Bella urges Lizzie to relinquish self-sacrificial love. “‘Wear out too,’ said Bella soothingly, ‘this weakness, Lizzie, in favour of one who is not worthy of it’” (518; bk. 3, ch. 9). When Lizzie insists that she doesn’t want to “wear out” this dangerous desire, Bella pauses before proceeding. “Bella’s expressive little eyebrows remonstrated with the fire for some short time before she rejoined: ‘Don’t think that I press you, Lizzie; but wouldn’t you gain in peace, and hope, and even in freedom? Wouldn’t it be better not to live a secret life in hiding, and not to be shut out from your natural and wholesome prospects?’” (518; bk. 3, ch. 9). The encouragement to “wear out” affection for Eugene echoes and develops Abbey’s exhortation to “leave him!” and Jenny’s distrust of the careless suitor. Queer women seek to sever destructive relations and to substitute soothing affections. Also like Abbey, Bella desires not to “press” Lizzie, wishing both to respect Lizzie’s autonomy and to prod her to reconsider her affections. The liberation and possibility that Bella describes (“freedom” and “hope”) point forward to a future without Eugene and back to a future with Jenny. The “natural and wholesome prospects” are delightfully vague, without any references to romance, marital or professional condition, gender, leaving room for a wide array of relations and domesticities. In this

novel, traditional relations become worthy of shame and the closet (“a secret life in hiding”), as they persistently appear unwholesome and unnatural.

But the novel doesn’t offer Lizzie’s return to Jenny, creating tension between the necessity of forming and the impossibility of sustaining homoerotic friendships. It’s tempting to read these brief encounters between Lizzie and Bella, Jenny and Abbey, as false starts. These relationships don’t really go anywhere (although Bella and Lizzie spend time together in the novel’s penultimate chapter) and potentially reflect Dickens’s succumbing to normative relations and plots. But I read the encounters more optimistically, seeing the multiplication of homoerotic encounters as a sign of their irrepressible vitality, even as the female characters end up in marriages. And these marriages are radically reformed by Abbey’s, Jenny’s, Bella’s challenge to them.

### The Persistence of Queer Resistance

If the physical intimacy between women is less visible in the novel’s close, the rhetoric of the homoerotic challenge to courtship lives on in Lizzie’s attempt to free herself from Eugene and in Jenny’s finding the word “wife” for Eugene. The female homoerotic disappears physically and reappears rhetorically. It fends off predatory heterosexuality, only promoting marriage after Eugene and his desire have been reshaped by the women’s objection and ideals.

Throughout the novel, Jenny serves as a barricade against Lizzie’s suitors. Towards its close, she becomes a rhetorical shield that Lizzie wields against Eugene. Physically absent, Jenny’s rhetoric, voice, and gesture persist. Eugene hounds Lizzie after she leaves her factory, and their interaction beside the river highlights the power dynamics of heterosexual pursuit that Jenny, Georgiana, and Bella fear. “She submitted to walk slowly on, with downcast eyes. He put her hand to his lips, and she quietly drew it away. ‘Will you walk beside me, Mr. Wrayburn, and not touch me?’ For, his arm was already stealing round her waist” (674; bk. 4, ch. 6). Eugene seeks Lizzie’s submission to his desire, taking control of her hand, willfully ignoring the meaning of its withdrawal, pursuing her waist after finding her hand inaccessible. Winding his arm “round her waist,” Eugene copies Abbey’s, Jenny’s, and Bella’s earlier physical intimacy with Lizzie. But the similarity emphasizes difference. Women’s arms were welcome and sustaining, Eugene’s unwanted and threatening. This contrast between male and female suitors continues as Lizzie pits the latter against the former, putting up a fight against unwelcome desire with words she learned from Jenny. Her defense relies on the class difference between them. She pleads, “I know the distance and the difference between us” (675; bk. 4, ch. 6). Insisting on an impassable divide, Lizzie invokes Jenny’s earlier warning: “Not of our sort; is he?” (342; bk. 2, ch. 11). Jenny doubted whether a gentleman can pursue a working-class girl for respectable ends, her

concern proving well-founded throughout the novel and here near its close, and Lizzie ventriloquizes these doubts. Before, Lizzie lacked self-worth, considering herself “hardly worth the thinking beside you” (344; bk. 2, ch. 11). But, here, she battles such erasure. “Think of me, as belonging to another station, and quite cut off from you in honor. Remember that I have no protector near me” (676; bk. 4, ch. 6). She demands consideration, acknowledging at last his indifference to her, and the demand draws on Jenny’s lessons. When Jenny expresses her dislike of Charley to his schoolmaster, she explains, “Selfish. Thinks only of himself. The way with all of you” (337; bk. 2, ch. 11). In staving off Eugene, Lizzie counters this solipsistic shortsightedness with Jenny’s mutual consideration. Lizzie learns to stand up for her self-worth, revealing that she has been as nurtured by Jenny as much as she nurtured her. As the separation of Sophronia and Georgiana reveals, female homoeroticism transforms both members of the dyad. So, while Lizzie has “no protector” physically near, she has a potent protector rhetorically. Jenny, even in absentia, plays a vital role in *Our Mutual Friend*. Dickens may be able to do without the relationship between Lizzie and Jenny, but he cannot do without the dressmaker’s words and perceptions in his sustained critique of traditional heteronormativity and marriage.

When Jenny finds the word “wife,” then, we can view her love of Lizzie as both vanquished and victorious. She is supplanted by Eugene, but she finds the word he has either been unable or unwilling to find throughout the novel, the working-class girl replacing the gentleman’s desire with her own. It’s tempting to see the episode as heterosexuality’s triumph. She, after all, facilitates Lizzie’s connection to Eugene, not to her. The end of the chapter highlights the women’s lost communication. Lizzie returns to the sickroom to take her position as Eugene’s fiancée. “‘Is he conscious?’ asked the little dressmaker, as the figure took its station by the pillow. For Jenny had given place to it immediately, and could not see the sufferer’s face, in the dark room, from her new and removed position. ‘He is conscious Jenny,’ murmured Eugene for himself” (723; bk. 4, ch. 10). This only attempted dialogue between Jenny and Lizzie in the novel’s second half (beside their letters) is aborted, goes nowhere as Eugene intervenes.

Jenny’s “removed position” seems to describe her newly marginalized place in the sickroom, in Lizzie’s life, in the novel. Yet, her role is central in discovering the word “wife.” Throughout this chapter, Jenny alone possesses the ability to interpret Eugene. “The doll’s dressmaker, all softened compassion now, watched with an earnestness that never relaxed. . . . through this close watching (if through no secret sympathy or power) the little creature attained an understanding of him that Lightwood did not possess” (720; bk. 4, ch. 10). Through the Latinate “compassion” and Hellenic “sympathy,” the narrator emphasizes that Jenny feels with Eugene, cutting across differences of age, gender, class. They share physical pain, but the two characters also share a love of Lizzie. Jenny possesses an exclusive understanding of Eugene because she identifies with his desire, just as Georgiana identified with the supposed love of Alfred Lamble. Eugene cannot

find the word “wife” because he’s suffered trauma, but also because he’s only ever felt treacherous, traumatizing desire. In discovering the legitimate, reputable outlet for desire, Jenny substitutes her mutual love for his one-sided one. So it’s certainly possible to read this discovery as the triumph of traditional values and desires.<sup>10</sup> But it’s equally possible to read Jenny’s discovery as the novel’s view that heterosexuality must be queered. In a novel where heterosexual courtship depends on deception, objectification, and oppression, marriage can only succeed once it has taken on the values that we have only seen between women: honesty, equality, mutuality. The female homoerotic, then, transforms the women who admire each other, the men whom it criticizes, and the institution of marriage that demands its termination. This desire may be the most potent affective and erotic energy in the novel.

### Conclusion

Henry James disliked *Our Mutual Friend*, expressing disdain for Jenny Wren: “What do we get in return for accepting Miss Jenny Wren as a possible person? . . . she is a little monster; she is deformed, unhealthy, unnatural” (155–56). Calling her a “monster,” James, like Podsnap, recognizes and recoils from a woman’s powers; calling her “unnatural,” he, like Charley, recognizes and recoils from her sexual transgressions or crimes against nature; calling her “pathetic,” he recognizes and recoils from her intense pleasure in Lizzie’s presence and intense pain in her absence. What we get, of course, from accepting Jenny Wren as a person is an anticipation of lesbian desire and its undermining of the social, sexual, generic rules of Dickens’s time and our own.

Jenny and Lizzie, of course, finally live by those norms but only once they have helped rewrite the rules. The end of their friendship potentially qualifies them as what Terry Castle calls apparitional lesbians. Castle calls Western literature a “derealization machine: insert the lesbian and watch her disappear” (6). The non-normative relationships do partially disappear from novel’s end, but Dickens’s vision doesn’t quite fit Castle’s paradigm any more than it does Vicinus’s or Marcus’s. “Passion is excited, only to be obscured, disembodied, decarnalized. The vision is inevitably waved off. Panic seems to underwrite these obsessional spectralizing gestures: a panic over love, female pleasure, and the possibility of women breaking free—together—from their male sexual overseers” (Castle 34). The novel partially participates in this logic. It liberates Lizzie from her overseers (father, brother, suitors) only to return her to Eugene. The desire between women is potently physical in the novel’s first half and mostly “disembodied” in its second (with the important exceptions of physical attraction between Abbey and Jenny, Lizzie and Bella). But Dickens surrounds these relations with pleasure and pain rather than panic, with admiration and approval

rather than aversion. *Our Mutual Friend* cannot, doesn't want to, eliminate entirely homoerotic desire. It lives on in fleeting encounters between women and in the reformed heart of heterosexuality.

## NOTES

- 1 These sites fit Halberstam's definition of queer space, which exists "in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (1).
- 2 Queer attachment subverts family relations in *Dombey and Son* (1846–48). Susan Nipper's outburst against Dombey asserts her clearer perception of Florence. Declaring "I love her—yes, I say to some and all I do!" (649; ch. 44), Spitfire scorches Dombey's misperceptions: "you don't know your own daughter, Sir" (651). Dombey's ignorance of his daughter's worth multiplies in *Our Mutual Friend*, shared by fathers (Gaffer, Podsnap, Mr. Dolls) and suitors (Eugene, Bradley, Fledgeby). Susan's subversive challenge also multiplies, being voiced by Abbey Potterson, Jenny Wren, Bella Wilfer. These multiplications make Dickens's last novel the thickest with female homoeroticism.
- 3 Lesbianism, of course, has long been associated with witchcraft. See Zimmerman 805.
- 4 Jenny's aversion to children is more explicit elsewhere. In her first appearance, she warns Charley: "Don't talk of children. I can't bear children. I know their tricks and their manners" (224; bk. 2, ch. 1). The command seems to refer simultaneously to her physical inability and emotional intolerance. In her fantasy of the children who pick her up and make her light, Jenny says that "They were not like the children of the neighbours; they never made me tremble all over, by setting up shrill noises, and they never mocked me" (238; bk. 2, ch. 2). This cruelty produces an enduring objection to reproduction.
- 5 Dickens figures in Edelman's discussion, which asserts that *A Christmas Carol* turns Scrooge "toward the promise of futurity by turning him into 'a second father'" (47). The female characters in *Our Mutual Friend* will turn to heterosexuality, but only once it's been reformed.
- 6 This fluidity connects Georgiana to Lizzie, who, as Poovey argues, possesses a "capacity to be like a man" (174).
- 7 As Smith says, Jenny "is reversing the relationship between the seamstress and her patron" (186).
- 8 Her self-exposure contradicts Gitter's strange characterization of Jenny as "virtually asexual" (945).
- 9 Characterizing Headstone's attack on Riderhood as a scene of male rape, Sedgwick focuses on how Headstone "girdled [Riderhood] with an iron ring" (169). The different function of same-sex girdles underscores the novel's contrast of life-threatening aggression and life-sustaining affection.
- 10 Free argues that "queer freakishness is the conduit transformed—or destroyed—in the process of generating heterosexual union" (260). But heterosexuality is "transformed" and Eugene's mercenary desire "destroyed."

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