Charles Dickens’s title *Dombey and Son: Wholesale, Retail, and for Exportation* provocatively misleads readers. The novel does indeed open with Mr. Dombey’s ecstatic welcome of his male heir. Yet in directing attention to father and son, the title also diverts readers’ attention from the centrality of a second narrative launched in those first few pages: the story of mother and daughter. “Son”—named Paul like his father and grandfather before him—appears aged and frail in infancy and dies before reaching either adolescence or the midpoint of the novel. The daughter not only quietly dominates the novel, as many critics have pointed out; she also introduces a series of mothers and daughters. Destined to be divided from both her biological mother and stepmother, Florence Dombey assuages the trauma of maternal loss by assuming the role of mother herself—nurturing her beloved brother Paul, her own children, and ultimately her father. The other daughters in the novel face quite different challenges.

From the first serial installment in 1846 until the conclusion appeared in 1848, the novel divided readers’ attention between the father/son focus of the title and the mother/daughter iterations in the plot. The opening paragraphs show as well as tell readers that Dombey senior has long

* I wish to thank the University of Iowa Provost’s Office and the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies for supporting the writing of this essay. I am also grateful to members of the Dickens Project for inviting me to give an earlier version at the “Dickens Universe” in Santa Cruz and for offering helpful suggestions.
neglected his wife and daughter Florence. When Mrs. Dombey dies just
after Paul’s birth, the heartbroken six-year-old daughter is forever divided
from the mother whom she adores. Later, as a young girl still grieving for
her biological mother’s death, Florence nevertheless thrills to the possibil-
ity of having a second mother. This stepmother—the seething, imperious,
vengeful Edith—succumbs to a social demise as decisive as the first Mrs.
Dombey’s material death. The second Mrs. Dombey punishes her would-
be conqueror, Mr. Dombey, and her would-be seducer, Dombey’s manager
Carker, first by absconding to France with Carker and then by abandon-
ing the double-crossed double-dealer to the consequences of his profes-
sional suicide. In both cases, Florence labors as diligently throughout the
novel to absolve these absent mothers of their seeming abandonment of
their daughter as she does to forgive the far more prominent father figure’s
cruelty and neglect. While a father’s eventual recognition of a daughter’s
worth forms the bathetic resolution of the ironically titled *Dombey and Son*,
Mrs. Dombey’s death motivates the novel’s complementary fascination
with daughters who struggle toward reconciliation with their mothers.
This sometimes submerged mother/daughter plot surfaces in two crucial
secondary plots that interrupt and obliquely comment upon the Dombey
family saga. Two pairs of pimping mothers and violated, vengeful daugh-
ters—Mrs. Brown and her daughter Alice Marwood, on one hand, and the
formerly wealthy Mrs. Skewton and her daughter Edith, on the other—
concentrate tensions between parents and children into the often lived but
seldom told story of grown daughters and their elderly mothers. Rather
than facing maternal loss as Florence does, these daughters must make
their peace with the overwhelming, unjust, and even injurious demands
of long-lived mothers whose age and rage position them as deeply Other
to sentimental portraits of radiant new mothers or reassuring middle-aged
mothers, much less to the sweetly melancholy memory of dead mothers.

In the father/daughter plot of *Dombey and Son*, filial self-abnegation
and masochism win praise; in the mother/daughter plot mothers are sternly
called to account for the home truths coming to haunt their midlife daugh-
ters.\(^1\) At the same time, these midlife daughters learn to master not their
mothers but their own anger, blame, and self-pity. The novel rewards the
youthful Florence for turning her father into a man emotionally dependent
upon her and a loving grandfather to her children. The two middle-aged
daughters are also rewarded, but in a far more qualified fashion. Rather

\(^1\) The ages defined as midlife are as flexible then as now. I am using the term loosely to
encompass adult daughters. Both of these daughters are not only past girlhood, but they are
prematurely matured and aged by their unprotected, exploited youths.
than winning love and pity, these bitter, unsentimental, yet conscientious daughters choose to take responsibility for their intractable elderly mothers. The learning process each midlife daughter undergoes rewards readers with what might be the greatest achievement, given the value system of Victorian fiction—genuine character development leading to greater psychological complexity and maturity. As with so many Victorian fallen female characters, the “ruined” daughter is inevitably punished with literal or social death, but not before she fully acknowledges the forces that shaped her mother. Pitted against one another by class but linked as victims of dominating men and manipulating mothers, these two adult daughters rewrite sentimental Victorian narratives of mother/daughter love in order to survive the selfish parents whom they must now unselfishly mother.2

Critical studies of mothers and maternity very often focus on childbirth, on the early years of child rearing, or on the relationship between a young woman struggling through her courtship years and her supportive (or problematic) mother. But how do we study, much less judge, elderly mothers whose authority and judgment are overthrown by such illnesses as strokes, Alzheimer’s disease, or dementia? Literary critics, sociologists, and psychologists alike scrutinize younger mothers for characteristics such as maternal devotion, evidence of responsibility, endurance in the face of hardship on their children’s behalf, self-sacrifice (or, alternatively, the capacity to balance maternal and other roles), as well as for their patience, understanding, and empathy. Yet these already unfairly high standards are clearly unreasonable expectations for enfeebled elderly women who are themselves no longer capable of reason or judgment. A novel like Dombey and Son suggests that when it comes to such maternal figures, we are driven to examine and even to judge mothers through the character, choices, and actions of their daughters. The daughter is the remaining trace of the mother, not only in a biological sense, but also in social, emotional, and ethical senses as well. Forbidden to judge the mother in her shattered old age—however vicious she might have been in her own youth

2 In her essay on the suppression of the “woman’s story,” that is, the sexual pasts of female characters in the novel, Joss Marsh similarly argues for this same internally conflicted plot structure but in regards to sexual stories. Just as I see the novel quite uniquely first tell the story of elderly mothers and middle-aged daughters and then suppress it, Marsh brilliantly demonstrates that the novel “both gives woman a voice and silences her” (405) in what she ultimately describes as a logic not of silencing but of displacement. She argues that this displacement moves the stories of fallen women into the knowledge of pure women (Edith’s story is a gift to Florence while Alice tells the story of her birth and her fall to Harriet Carker). Thus, in her own distinctive argument, Marsh joins numerous critics who argue in one way or another that the core of Dombey and Son “may in fact be a woman’s story” (406).
and midlife—the reader must rely on the daughter, who judges for us and in whom the mother continues to live and so to be judged. The degree to which the daughter accepts, rejects, or abandons the mother is therefore crucial to readers’ response to the mother. In effect, the daughter’s actions form a judgment upon the mother, but the person the daughter is or becomes—how she thinks, feels, and acts—also enacts a judgment of her mother’s past mothering.

Perhaps today more than ever the seldom-recounted stories of elderly mothers and adult daughters need telling. Kathleen Buckwalter, a professor of nursing trained in psychiatry and geriatric medicine, has done fascinating research on the many middle-aged women who—like the fictional Edith and Alice—unexpectedly find themselves the caretakers of feeble, failing mothers whom the daughters believe have done them great wrong. In “Negotiating Family Relationships: Dementia Care as a Midlife Developmental Task,” Buckwalter and her collaborators Kathleen Sherrell and Darby Morhardt discuss the path to what Margaret Blenkner labeled “filial maturity” in the title of a 1965 article on the topic. In response to innumerable representations of bristling, burdened, middle-aged children who care for their elderly parents only under duress, these multidisciplinary gerontological researchers seek more hopeful stories of caregiving. Their years of interviewing caregivers suggest that parent care is “a developmental task that provides opportunities for psychological growth and the potential for positive rewards from the care-giving experience” (Sherrell, Buckwalter, and Morhardt 383). Until fairly recently, they argue, researchers have overlooked the ways painful family histories “adversely affect the degree of concern adults feel toward their aging parents as well as the quality of their contemporary relationships” (385). The researchers’ alternative view of caregiving focuses on the midlife caregiver’s version of her (and occasionally his) family history and the plot twist—or “filial crisis”—that converts oppression into opportunity for those caregivers who make peace with familial pasts (386). They believe that to reconstruct a sense of intractable victimization as a narrative of development the adult child must overcome at least three obstacles to empathy and maturity. Those obstacles are the tendency to become trapped in reviews of perceived past injustices; the consequent failure to view the ill, aged parent with any degree of objectivity; and, finally, the often unconscious anxieties about one’s own mortality that can further alienate a caregiver from a dying parent (386). In other words, until a crisis forces a caregiver to surrender interpretations of the personal plot that positions her as the victim of her parent’s past abuses, caregiving is felt to be a burden. On the other hand, caregivers who relinquish long-held grievances often discover that each period of life has what
these researchers call “distinct tasks or psychological mini-crises that are expected and healthy aspects of growth” (390). As an additional benefit, adult caretakers who accomplish the task of reconciliation with their and their parents’ pasts also have great hope for fulfilling relationships with their children when, in the years to come, they find themselves in need of that next generation’s care.

Turning the sociological insights of contemporary gerontological research to fiction, we can see that a genuine transformation of the midlife daughter/aging mother plot would require not merely individual growth and maturity, but also vistas beyond most available fictive family tropes. Perhaps it should not be surprising that Dickens, who is habitually described as the leading Victorian novelist in celebrating (and skewering) the family, would also tend to interrogate and critique family life. George Newlin, in fact, argues that the novelist actively and consistently resisted conventional family structure based on Newlin’s count of 149 full orphans and 318 full or partial orphans in Dickens’s novels (120). The experiences of older mothers and daughters lies outside the familiar family plots that gave shape to Victorian novels, which tend to ignore or marginalize midlife women and elderly women, with rare exceptions such as the aging spinsters and widows in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford (1853). For a typical young Victorian heroine like Florence Dombey to anticipate any sort of adulthood, much less a future that hints of happily ever after, fictions of family romance would require a more nuanced, capacious account of the life course, rather than ending with the marriage of youthful characters. In Dickens’s case, as the world of the novel spreads its generational wings, new mother/daughter plots take flight even if the limits of Dickens’s personal and historical vision clip those wings by the novel’s end.

Dombey and Son’s account of midlife daughters intriguingly anticipates the insights of these optimistic gerontologists: even very bitter, very angry, and very unwilling midlife daughters, such as Edith and Alice, find unanticipated, hard-won accomplishment in caring for their mothers once they forgive those mothers for real and imagined abuses. In Dickens’s paired plots, the middle-aged daughters wrestle with feelings of being unloved, abused, exploited, and denied the simple pleasures of girlhood. Out of this youthful, sullen vengefulness, however, each character slowly makes her way toward the kind of maturity, acceptance, and generosity we all hope will come to us as gifts of midlife as each daughter learns to forgive her mother. Only then can the middle-aged daughter find fulfillment in simultaneously accepting herself as a daughter and mothering her own mother.

3 See, for example, Catherine Waters’s Dickens and the Politics of the Family (1997).
The melodramatic juxtaposition and moments of recognition that mark the final moments of both mother/daughter relationships envision such reconciliation, in a unique if only partial stitching together of the shredded social ties that have left Edith and Alice, these similar yet also deeply different middle-aged daughters, so desperately, furiously alienated from nearly everyone, yet still tied to their mothers.

While the individual scenes of importance in understanding the distinctive features of each mother/daughter relationship happen before and after the moment of the pairs’ meeting, their strategic encounter provides the most crucial and revealing thematic and structural links uniting these characters. The importance of the scene is registered through a further doubling of text and image: the accompanying illustration by Hablot Browne (or “Phiz”), titled “A Chance Meeting,” repeats and intensifies the force of the unexpected meeting (Fig. 4.1). In this uncanny confrontation, Alice voices her anger to Edith with shocking directness: “‘What is it that you have to sell?’ said Edith, . . . ‘Only this,’ returned the woman, holding out her wares, without looking at them. ‘I sold myself long ago’” (Dickens 481). Stung by the implied accusation, Mrs. Brown pleads with Mrs. Skewton for sympathy as well as coins: “‘She’s my handsome and undutiful daughter. She gives me nothing but reproaches, my Lady, for all I have done for her. Look at her now, my Lady, how she turns upon her poor old mother with her looks’” (482). Stunned from her post-stroke haze by this startling reiteration of her own grievances, Mrs. Skewton doubles her coins and whimpers reassurance, even lecturing the silent Alice: “‘I hope’ addressing the daughter, ‘that you’ll show more gratitude and natural what’s its name, and all the rest of it . . . for there never was a better mother than the good old creature’s been to you’” (482). The mothers recognize themselves in one another as do the daughters, but at this point the daughters have yet to reconcile themselves to their respective mothers. Each accepts the care of her mother as an exhausting, inevitable, painful duty; neither has found much more than misery in her role as adult caretaker of a mother she may in some way love, but certainly also hates. The meeting of these four characters—the haggard, miserably failed, self-pitying old mothers for once placed at the center between their two proud, angry, yet curiously loyal middle-aged daughters—elevates the suppressed story of middle-aged daughter and dependent aged mother into an emblematic social script in the succinct melodramatic tableau vivant that Hablot Browne’s etching makes it hard for us to forget. The scene most obviously works to introduce Mrs. Skewton and Edith to Mrs. Brown and Alice. However, it also self-consciously situates each pair as a mirror to the other in doubled, intensifying assertion of the thematic and formal importance.
of the case that is building for fractured and alternative families that the novel ultimately pits against the suffocating effects of conventional family dynamics.

Turning to the individual pairs of mothers and daughters and their particular conflicts, we see that both Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Skewton are constructed through a range of associations that condemn them for being bad mothers and for failing to retreat before the desires of the middle-aged who seek to supplant older generations. An event outside the margins of the novel suggests how fascinated readers must have been with the terrifying exploiter of children, Mrs. Brown.⁴ Even before the final installment of the novel appeared, Thomas Prochulus Taylor’s play, *Dombey and Son; Good Mrs. Brown the Child Stealer* (sometimes with two acts, sometimes three, and often with fifteen tableaux based loosely on Browne’s etchings) opened

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⁴ This fascination continues in the few recent critical studies that focus on Mrs. Brown. Michelle Mancini discusses Mrs. Brown’s fusion of “the monstrous and infernal” with “the incapacitated, abject and needy” into an “agent of surveillance” who embodies Dickens’s “fantasies and fears about observation and narration” (113–40).
at the Royal Strand Theatre in London on August 9, 1847. The play was short-lived, but popular enough to be published in *G. Purkess’ Penny Pictorial Plays* in 1848 (print editions also appear in 1858). Audiences’ interest in Mrs. Brown probably emanated from the threats she embodied: as a thorough outcast whose chief allegiance—like Carker and Dombey himself—is to coin, Mrs. Brown barters stolen goods, secrets, and children with no remorse.

In the actual novel, the perversity of Mrs. Brown’s maternity is established early on. We are introduced to her through her livelihood—kidnapping and robbing helpless and vulnerable children. When young, motherless Florence is separated from her maid in the chaos of London streets, she is briefly “adopted” by the brutally antimaternal Mrs. Brown, “a very ugly old woman, with red rims round her eyes, and a mouth that mumbled and chattered of itself when she was not speaking” (58). In addition to kidnapping Florence and stealing her clothes, Mrs. Brown also, and even more ominously, absconds with Florence’s social identity by dressing the child in “a girl’s dress quite worn out and very old; and the crushed remains of a bonnet that had probably been picked up from some ditch or dunghill” (60). Then in a mad scene worthy of Lear, Mrs. Brown is stopped short of violently pilfering Florence’s hair by the paralyzing memories of her own lost daughter—“If I hadn’t once had a gal of my own—beyond seas now—that was proud of her hair . . . I’d have had every lock of it” (60). Mrs. Brown’s brutal treatment of Florence—in what Joss Marsh considers the key chapter in the novel as the scene of this daughter’s defilement (408)—threatens us with the likelihood that the taint of the bad mother fatally dooms the daughter to become a social pariah as well as an emotional orphan. The moment graphically anticipates the emotional problem with which the plot must wrestle when that lost—in multiple senses of the word—daughter reappears. The extravagant grotesqueries of this “mother”—she is unrelentingly dirty, depraved, avaricious, brutal, violent, and witchlike in her periodic madness—forbid sympathy, much less redemption. The narrative encourages both our revulsion and a desire to see Mrs. Brown punished ruthlessly. This, then, is the mother whom the middle-aged Alice must claim.

The novel exploits, even as it inverts, the full resources of sentimental fiction when we first see mother and daughter together. To heighten readers’ aversion to this terrible mother, the novel poisons the potentially soul-stirring scene of the mother/daughter reunion. We learn that after being

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5 The play is still available in the British Library, which holds a fascinating array of parodies, plays, and plagiarized short versions of the novel.
seduced and abandoned, Mrs. Brown’s daughter Alice Marwood was convicted of theft and transported to the colonies. Alice’s return seems equally motivated by her determination to destroy her seducer and her grudging sense of duty to her mother. Michelle Mancini argues that Mrs. Brown is seldom considered by critics and that when she is, her importance arises from her abduction of Florence or her role as Alice’s mother, rather than as “someone who both has a story of her own and who learns, deploys, and manipulates the stories of others” (121). But in a perhaps too subtle distinction, I would argue that her connections to Florence and Alice constitute the real subject of the story. First the ersatz and then the actual mother/daughter relationship form that subject rather than either mother or daughter alone.

In the case of Mrs. Brown and Alice, the two characters struggle repeatedly for control of that mutually constituted story and its implications in a conflict that reinterprets maternal obligation on a social, even national scale. Mrs. Brown awaits Alice’s arrival in a frightening, hysterical, animal state of pleasure and misery, “rocking herself to and fro with every frantic demonstration of which her vitality was capable” (409). The mother’s only greeting for her “contemptuous” daughter is “a low moaning sound” of “inarticulate complainings” (410). Inevitably, that muttered complaint turns into demand, a demand expressive both of the mother’s uncontrolable greed and of her insistence that Alice acknowledge her as a good mother. They debate their relationship in thoroughly Victorian terms as each raises the question of who owes duty to whom and of how one would exercise familial duty in the midst of poverty, deprivation, and utter collapse of any familial or social support. Alice adamantly resists her mother’s interpretation of their story, as will Edith in an analogous scene with her equally insistent mother:

“I don’t know who began to harden me, if my own dear mother didn’t. . . . Listen, Mother, to a word or two. If we understand each other now, we shall not fall out any more, perhaps. I went away a girl, and have come back a woman. I went away undutiful enough, and have come back no better, you may swear. But have you been very dutiful to me?” (410)

In shock and fury, her mother denies the claim of maternal duty: “‘I!’ cried the old woman. ‘To my own gal! A mother dutiful to her own child!’” to which Alice coolly replies: “‘I have heard some talk about duty first and last; but it has always been of my duty to other people. I have wondered now and then—to pass away the time—whether no one ever owed any duty to me’” (410–11). Alice is so traumatized by her mother’s neglect of
maternal duty, a failure exacerbated by the further evisceration of duty first by her gentleman seducer and then by a judge—in effect the legal system of the mother country itself fails her—that she is reduced to describing herself as a child in the third person. She forces her version of the past upon her mother, beginning the first of several versions of that history “in terrible derision of herself”: “‘There was a child called Alice Marwood . . .’” (411). Ultimately, the daughter couches her accusations against the now elderly mother as bitter memories of being “‘born among poverty and neglect, and nursed in it,’” where “[n]obody taught her, nobody stepped forward to help her, nobody cared for her,’” or alternately of being “‘too well helped on, too much looked after’” once her mother discovered the value of her beauty (411). At this point in the shifting power structure of the mother/daughter relationship, the daughter’s inability to escape their past temporarily resolves itself through the construction of a mutual enemy, the seducer both women can agree stole Alice’s childhood and hence the villain they can mutually plot to punish.

In this phase of the mother/daughter plot, displacement of daughterly rage from the aged mother to the man who served as Mrs. Brown’s sexually exploitive double leads Alice to a midlife truce with her mother, but not with their past. Though Carker has exploited her sexually and abetted her transportation and is therefore the object of her most intense rage, Alice’s hostility to her mother, because more complex, is more corrosive. At the same time, Alice’s third-person monologue moves from her own “ruin” (411) to the “‘crowds of little wretches, boy and girl’” who face the same fate (412), thereby redefining maternal duty as the social obligation of the reader, of middle-class society, of the courts, and even of the country. These elaborated associations assert the epic proportions of failed maternity even as the novel castigates Victorian treatment of the poor. Yet this larger “maternal” failure also marks Alice’s first steps toward forgiveness as she wearily calls a temporary truce:

“There! I have done Mother. . . . Don’t let you and I talk of being dutiful, whatever we do. Your childhood was like mine, I suppose. . . . I don’t want to blame you, or to defend myself; why should I? That’s all over, long ago. But I am a woman—not a girl, now—and you and I needn’t make a show of our history, like the gentlemen in the Court. We know all about it, well enough.” (412)

Here again, the language links maternal failure to social and legal failure, but because Alice is suppressing rather than addressing the anger she feels at her mother’s past abuses, she falsifies a difference between familial
and social “duty.” The significance of this suppression becomes clear when Alice seems to turn into her mother, which would completely end any hope of her own redemption, much less that of her mother.

That dreaded fate—becoming the bad mother—threatens when Alice and her mother set aside their differences and indulge in mutual brutalization of a child. Young “Rob the Grinder” is a fawning, double-crossing weasel, but a child nonetheless. Mother and daughter torture Rob into revealing Carker’s whereabouts after the manager’s flight with Edith so that the enraged Mr. Dombey will carry out their vicarious revenge against Alice’s seducer of old. In the scene, Mrs. Brown turns the tables on her daughter. Just as Alice has accused her of maternal neglect, she now accuses Alice of one of the greatest crimes against old age, the misreading of late life need as infantile dependency: “You think I’m in my second childhood, I know!’ croaked the old woman. ‘That’s the respect and duty that I get from my own gal, but I’m wiser than you take me for’” (606). This second charge, like the first, resolves itself through mutual exogamous enmity. But as Alice urges her mother on: “Well done, Mother. Tear him to pieces!” (612), the daughter is tarred by the mother’s brush. Alice degenerates into her mother—beating, badgering, and violently abusing a child for her own bitter ends. The brutally comic picture of Mrs. Brown extorting information, as mother and daughter ricochet between grotesque parodies of maternal tenderness and actual physical torture, confirms Alice’s claims of her mother’s cruelty and of the deeply damaging effects of that cruelty to the child who is now the grown daughter. However, the scene also pinions mother and daughter as doubles as well as antagonists in their generational struggle, thus illuminating yet another fundamental anxiety inhibiting progress in the mother/daughter plot—the dangers of a curiously hereditary identification pictured here as fatal repetition. Before Alice can escape this fate, she will have to face her other mirror, Edith, a second middle-aged daughter in a furious struggle with her mother over her and their futures. In that “chance meeting,” each sees in the other what she might become if she remains trapped in a past of rage against victimization by her mother.

Only as she approaches her own death does Alice turn to her mother’s story—the presumed story of a mother’s failure to save her daughter from ruin. Implicitly asking Harriet Carker to look beyond the “red rims round her eyes, and a mouth that mumbled and chattered of itself when she was not speaking” (15), beyond Mrs. Brown’s unexpected vanity, her wild

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6 For a rich discussion of the damaging impact of this metaphor, see Hockey and James’s essay “Back to Our Futures: Imaging Second Childhood.”
cries, mad laments, and uncertain temper, Alice compels her mother to tell Harriet the story of Mrs. Brown’s own seduction and betrayal (690). Alice thus shares her conversion from embittered daughter clinging to youthful wrongs to a middle-aged daughter who in forgiving her mother has herself learned how to die. Alice explains with eloquent dignity:

“I had heard so much, in my wrong-doing, of my neglected duty, that I took up with the belief that duty had not been done to me, and that as the seed was sown, the harvest grew. I somehow made it out that when ladies had bad homes and mothers, they went wrong in their way, too; but that their way was not so foul a one as mine, and they had need to bless God for it. That is all past. . . . You will not forget my mother? I forgive her, if I have any cause. I know that she forgives me, and is sorry in her heart. You will not forget her?” (691)

Seldom content with the pathetic when the bathetic tempts him, Dickens insistently marks this moment of the daughter’s forgiveness by aligning her with Christian salvation even as she attempts to redeem her mother. Thus Alice dies with the Bible in her arms, saved by her capacity to forgive and rewarded with the rare moment of wisdom and maturity she savors as she connects her mother’s story to her own and then forgives them both. In Mrs. Brown’s case, the daughter is a Son—crucified by her mother and thus her mother’s salvation—after all. Forgiven by the daughter, the sad, mad old woman loses that daughter only to have her resurrected in Harriet Carker. As the sister of the man who seduced Mrs. Brown’s daughter, Harriet finds her own reconciliation with a cruel familial past when she adopts this aging, unregenerate, and pathetic elderly mother.

Our introduction to Mrs. Skewton and her daughter Edith similarly functions to cast the elderly mother in the flattening, distancing light of the grotesque in order to dramatize the distance the middle-aged daughter must go to reconcile with her mother and hence with herself. The closing lines of the sixteenth number of the serialized version of the novel explicitly link the two mothers and daughters, shifting narrative attention from the poverty-stricken pair to the pair dancing on the brink of middle-class financial disaster:

Were this miserable mother, and this miserable daughter, only the reduction to their lowest grade, of certain social vices sometimes prevailing higher up? In this round world of many circles within circles, do we make a weary journey from the high grade to the low, to find at last that they lie close together, that the two extremes touch. . . . Allowing for great
difference of stuff and texture, was the pattern of this woof repeated among
gentle blood at all?

Say, Edith Dombey! And Cleopatra, best of mothers, let us have your
testimony. (417)

At this “high grade” of the social scale, Mrs. Skewton and her widowed
daughter Edith haunt social settings where Mrs. Skewton uses her wiles to
procure a husband for Edith and thereby to secure a ticket to wealth and
social position for herself. Oddly analogous with, if far more polished and
arrogant than, Alice, Edith lives in a state of barely suppressed fury, steeled
to the bitter duty of buying a future for herself and her mother, yet cling-
ing to her sense of honor by refusing any pretense that she feels love or
pleasure at the prospect of marrying Mr. Dombey. While Alice submerges
her anger at her mother in revenge on a third party, Edith first seems to be
offered a much more fulfilling choice. She can escape her elderly mother
by lovingly mothering her own new “daughter,” Florence, to whom she
is immediately drawn. However, Dombey makes clear that Florence
will suffer if Edith shows the daughter tenderness even as she arrogantly
defies her husband (and Florence’s father). Thus, Edith’s avenue of escape
from her misery is cut off along with her hopes for maternity. One could
argue that it is not Dombey nor Carker nor the bad mother (Mrs. Skew-
ton) who sends Edith to her destruction, but aborted motherhood—first
in the drowning of a son from Edith’s previous marriage and then the
even crueler, because utterly unnecessary, loss of her “daughter” and hence
herself.

On the other hand, the novel goes to great lengths to tell the story,
once again, not only of a mother and a daughter, but also of the history
and character of their relationship. Mrs. Brown is driven by poverty to
turn her daughter’s beauty into a commodity, adding young Alice to the
goods through which she might satisfy her greed as well as need; Mrs.
Skewton’s maternal failures arise from vanity. For years she lives in denial
of her aging—a process that encompasses her social as well as familial role
as “mother.” Even after she submits to substituting Edith for herself as bait
for male attention and the economic and social privileges of marriage, she
ventriloquizes the daughter, using and usurping Edith for her own ends.
Mrs. Skewton’s maternity is thus stunted by her selfish desires. She clings
to the privileged position of “the daughter,” the character who commands
center stage in the courtship plot. At the same time, she exploits her own
daughter for the social rewards that accrue to young and beautiful heroines
of Victorian fiction. At best, she plays at the fantasy that she and Edith are
sisters rather than mother and daughter. At worst, she positions Edith as a
sexual surrogate. She courts Edith’s potential partners, flirting ferociously while shrewdly assessing tactics for her success. First she substitutes herself for her daughter and then she substitutes her daughter for herself. Ironically, both characters have aged past this role, a difficulty Mrs. Skewton circumvents in Edith’s case by inventing tender emotions and delicate feelings that she attributes to her cold, steely daughter.

Whereas Mrs. Brown counters the losses of aging by perverting assumptions about maternity, quelling children to secure an income, Mrs. Skewton fends off poverty by subduing her physical self. For years, she freezes her aging body into what had popularly come to be seen as a timeless pose of that ageless seductress, Cleopatra. Adopting a famous Cleopatra “attitude” captured decades earlier by a painter who fancifully titled both portrait and girl “Cleopatra,” Mrs. Skewton curiously embodies that ancient queen and her imagined vices. Dickens’s initial notes make no reference to “Cleopatra,” so that tag must have come to him late. In fact, Valier Gager speculates that Dickens initially intended to parody the neoclassical poses found in the Countess of Blessington’s annual Book of Beauty. Several volumes between 1833–49 include flowery verses to young ladies by “a Septuagenarian” Mrs. Skewton’s age, a suggestion obliquely supported by Hablot Browne’s 1848 portrait of Mrs. Skewton in which a lady’s magazine lies open to “La Mode” (Gager 204) (Fig. 4.2).

In the years before Dickens began Dombey and Son, the ancient queen was increasingly on view in Britain and the Continent. Theater historian Margaret Lamb notes that nineteenth-century versions of Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra were either spectacles in which artillery and naval battles took precedence over actors—as in the 1813 Covent Garden production—or fusions of Shakespeare’s play and John Dryden’s All for Love; or The World Well Lost (1678), the tack taken by Dickens’s close friend William Macready, in a short-lived 1838 Drury Lane production (Lamb 52). Lamb credits the 1813 play with establishing the “Cleopatra Pose,” which came to dominate popular images of Cleopatra and which Dickens capitalizes on in the novel (58). A second theater historian, Lucy Hughes-Hallett, identifies colliding anachronisms in Victorian representations of Cleopatra. She is at once a Pharaonic Egyptian ruler; an Islamic,
Figure 4.2. Phiz (Halbot K. Browne) published a series of etchings based on the characters in *Dombey and Son* in 1848, including this portrait of Mrs. Skewton. Michael Steig discusses these etchings in chapter 4 of *Dickens and Phiz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978). The chapter also appears on the Web at http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/phiz/steig/4.html#plate64.
Orientalized prisoner of the harem (though she lived six hundred years before Muhammad’s birth); and a domesticated queen, utterly dependent upon men, living in a contemporary European palace complete with Egyptian Revival decor (261). (Perhaps this last gave rise to the often-repeated anecdote that a spectator of Sarah Bernhart’s much later Cleopatra protested, “How unlike—how so unlike—the home life of our own dear Queen” [Hughes-Hallett 268]). In addition, Hughes-Hallett says that European stories, novels, and plays featuring Cleopatra in the 1820s through 1840s increasingly emphasized her sexual voraciousness, her decadent hungers, and her association with a civilization not merely old but extinct.

In England, Cleopatra’s foreignness and her association with a dead culture and its monuments were highlighted in plays, paintings, and popular exhibitions, associations of special interest to critics such as Jeff Nunkawa and Suvendrini Perera who explore connections between the rise of capitalism and the marketing of empire to British citizens. We cannot precisely know which of the many incarnations of the ancient queen Dickens encountered, but as an avid reader and frequent traveler to Europe, he must have absorbed at least some of these newly charged, newly fraught images of—in several senses—“old Egypt.”

The contrast between Mrs. Skewton’s age and social position as a widow, on one hand, and her dress and appearance, on the other, dominates her characterization:

The discrepancy between Mrs. Skewton’s fresh enthusiasm of words, and forlornly faded manner, was hardly less observable than that between her age, which was about seventy, and her dress, which would have been youthful for twenty-seven. Her attitude in the wheeled chair (which she never varied) was one in which she had been taken in a barouche, some fifty years before, by a then fashionable artist who had appended to his published sketch the name of Cleopatra: in consequence of a discovery made by the critics of the time, that it bore an exact resemblance to that Princess as she reclined on board her galley. Mrs. Skewton was a beauty then, and bucks threw wine-glasses over their heads by dozens in her honour. The beauty and the barouche had both passed away, but she still preserved the attitude, and for this reason expressly, maintained the wheeled chair and

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8 Francesa T. Royster’s *Becoming Cleopatra: The Shifting Image of an Icon* also offers a fine overview of cultural exploitations of Cleopatra, including a chapter on George Bernard Shaw’s *Caesar and Cleopatra*.

the butting page: there being nothing whatever, except the attitude, to pre-
vent her from walking. (241–42)

The comic contrast between the faded gentility of a grasping mother who
makes a spectacle of herself while pandering (echoing the character Pan-
derus from stage versions of Cleopatra) escalates into vicious ridicule of an
elderly woman who refuses to move from the center stage of youth to the
wings where the elderly are told they must be content. This passage thus
demonstrates the forged connection between the Victorian Englishwoman
and the ancient Egyptian queen, on one hand, and the old/young tension,
on the other.

Playfully tyrannical, lustfully flirtatious, willing prostitute of herself
and panderer of her daughter, Mrs. Skewton, like an insect Cleopatra, is
thus intent on creating an empire of her own. When the narrator wryly
references Shakespeare in describing her inevitable pose—“Mrs. Skewton
arranged, as Cleopatra, among the cushions of a sofa: very airily dressed:
and certainly not resembling Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, whom age could
not wither” (245)—he exaggerates the comedy with an added flourish of
dramatic irony. Not only may time “wither” this Cleopatra, but she is addi-
tionally “withered” in a different sense by the ministrations of her male
servant, Withers. Mrs. Skewton’s libido has not grown stale; it is she after
all who longs for “all those yearnings, and gushings, and impulsive throb-
bings” (246), which she mimics in her empty flirtation with the equally
grotesque Major Bagstock and pretends to detect in her daughter Edith’s
hostile tolerance of Mr. Dombey. Insinuating sex, exoticism, shrewdness,
power, perfidy, betrayal, corruption, perverted maternity, mummiifica-
tion (as Robert Newsom has noted in Charles Dickens Revisited 101), and, above
all, vast empires and great age, Cleopatra confronts us with the bitter losses
that loom for an old woman without the financial security of a kingdom
or a consort. Her only justification for manipulating her daughter into a
miserable marriage, and it satisfies neither Edith nor the audience, is that
the daughter is a sacrifice to Mrs. Skewton’s longed-for economic empire.
Like Carker the Manager, Mrs. Skewton succeeds by her careful manage-
ment of more powerful figures than herself. Also, like Carker, she fancies
that she can manage her powerful double—her daughter/sister Edith—
into fulfillment of her own empire-building desires.

The figure of the old woman unwilling to sacrifice the pleasures of
youth—from fashion to curls to flirtation to sex itself—draws frequent
ridicule in Victorian periodicals as well as Victorian novels (sadly, a custom
that also fails to grow stale). In 1863, in a Cornhill Magazine article, “Aids
to Beauty,” George Henry Lewes observes that “[t]he art of adorning the
person is the earliest art acquired by the savage, and the last relinquished by reluctant old age,” scorning men and women who indulge in the too common attempt to disguise age, and to dress old mutton like spring lamb. No one is deceived for more than a moment, and the reaction of disgust endures. . . . Old men and women, who would resist the irresistible fact of age, will never be brought to acknowledge the beauty of age; they want another beauty; they cling to the remembrance of departed charms. If the rouge-pot and the hair-dresser can help them to dead simulacra of those charms, they are welcomed; and although they keenly see through the like pretences in others, they cannot be argued out of the wisdom of employing such pretences themselves. (391; emphasis in original)

Mrs. Skewton understands far better than these fashion commentators what she stands to lose if she relinquishes her false youth and accepts her aged motherhood. Like the other elderly women who attend the Dombey’s first at-home and whom Dombey’s middle-aged sister-in-law (from his first marriage) describes as “these indecent old frights with their backs and shoulders” (434), Mrs. Skewton has ample evidence that a visibly aging, postreproductive body means lost bargaining power, lost erotic pleasures, and lost economic salvation in the form of a husband and home. The price of no longer being “the daughter” drives the desperate woman into a refusal of aging and maternity alike.

The marriage contract, through which Mrs. Skewton secures her future by selling her daughter to Dombey, prompts Edith to initiate a weary, empty compact with her mother. The cold, contemptuous daughter declares a truce in the long battle of maternal ambition and filial pride in pity at the subjugation of this would-be queen. In an echo of the “reunion” scene in which Alice declares a temporary cease-fire in her ongoing war with Mrs. Brown, Edith briefly lashes out when Mrs. Skewton demands duty to a mother who has cared for her all these years:

“Haven’t you from a child—”
“A child!” said Edith, looking at her, “when was I a child? What childhood did you ever leave to me? I was a woman—artful, designing, mercenary, laying snares for men—before I knew myself or you, or even understood the wretched aim of every new display I learnt.” (333)

She compares herself to a “slave in the market” and a “horse in a fair” who, with her mother, has become “almost notorious” (333) even in the crass world of the marriage market. In Alice and Mrs. Brown’s relationship,
the novel locates one of the unconscious obstacles to a daughter’s reconciliation with the mother: the fear of becoming the bad mother. Edith’s protest zeros in on yet another obstacle, hinted at in Alice’s accusations, the unforgivable loss of childhood and all it represents—innocence, maternal care and protection, safety, and time to progress through the life stages of youth—a loss that the robbed child recognizes only from an adult retrospective. As with Alice, we see justification for the daughter’s rage in the emotional damage the daughter suffers in midlife. Edith’s self-loathing is so profound that she fears contaminating the stepdaughter who could save her. Ultimately, she turns her rage so violently against herself that, like a suicide bomber, she destroys herself to wreak revenge on her enemy, Mr. Dombey, to whom her mother has sold her.

In Mrs. Skewton’s death, social satire gives way to melodrama. Repeated strokes shake her from the Cleopatra pose and the fantasies of power—over time, over her daughter, and over “Society” as represented by Mr. Dombey’s wealth—all of which make her such a miserable mother. Haunted by the crumbling tomb of youth she has built around herself—“the stone arm—part of a figure off some tomb, she says—is raised to strike her” (489), Mrs. Skewton stretches supplicating hands to Edith. She seeks gratitude for the bitter years of labor with which she has built what was to be Edith’s palace but has become a prison, a bitter monument to a loveless, avaricious marriage. True to form, however, when Mrs. Skewton can least control her appearance, her environment, and her imagined suitors, her empire contracts. The only person she can tyrannize is her daughter.

Like Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Skewton whines at her daughter’s distance; in the limited signs and speech of stroke victims, she demands filial duty: “she became hugely exacting in respect of Edith’s affection and gratitude and attention to her; highly laudatory of herself as a most estimable parent; and very jealous of having any rival in Edith’s regard” (445). As other characters retreat from her pathetic decrepitude, the mother attempts to master her daughter with the maternal gaze: “She would look at the beautiful face, in its marble stillness and severity, now with a kind of fearful admiration; now in a giggling foolish effort to move it to a smile; now with the capricious tears and jealous shakings of her head, as imagining herself neglected by it” (479). Initially, just as Edith resists Dombey’s arrogant mastery through stoic defiance, she, like so many daughters, tries to pacify her mother with “mechanical attention and immoveable beauty” (480). In a final protest of Edith’s failure to appreciate the economic empire she has captured on her and her daughter’s behalf, Cleopatra protests: “‘For I nursed you!’” (489) in imitation of her namesake’s final words in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*: “‘Peace, peace! Dost thou not see my baby at my breast? That
sucks the nurse asleep?” (act 5). Implicitly, the allusion positions Edith as
the viper, yet this viper represents long-resisted Death now welcomed and
beloved. Earlier, the narrator has described the stricken “old woman in her
finery leering and mincing at Death, and playing off her youthful tricks
upon him as if he had been the Major” (444–45). In her very last moment
Mrs. Skewton again turns her still animate desire to Death as “with her
girlish laugh, and the skeleton of the Cleopatra manner” she “rises in her
bed” (490), a horrifyingly appropriate courtesan soliciting a lover who will
enfold decrepitude in an adoring if smothering embrace. Mrs. Skewton is
reconciled to her great adversaries—daughter and Death—at last.

Between Cleopatra’s closing line and final gesture, one of the most qui-
etly moving moments of the novel takes place—a scene too easily eclipsed
by Mrs. Skewton’s awful “juvenility.” We see Edith’s rage, directed at her
mother as well as herself, on the few occasions when Edith violently weeps,
physically punishes herself, or verbally flays her mother. Anger against her
mother surfaces in the bitterness with which Edith recalls her own prema-
ture aging, her lost childhood. Anger also motivates Edith’s protectiveness
of Florence, as when she forbids Mrs. Skewton to take charge of Florence
while Dombey and Edith are away for their honeymoon: “‘It is enough,’
said Edith steadily, ‘that we are what we are. I will have no youth and
truth dragged down to my level. I will have no guileless nature under-
mined, corrupted, and perverted to amuse the leisure of a world of moth-
ers’” (364). Eventually, however, Mrs. Skewton’s sufferings precipitate at
least a version of the “filial crisis” that Buckwalter and other gerontologists
believe can lead to reconciliation. The contrast between the bitter accusa-
tions Edith levels at her mother in the scene above and Mrs. Skewton’s
death scene wrenches the mood from satire to sentiment. Edith gives her
mother the greatest gift we can give one another as we face death—gen-
une compassion and forgiveness: “‘Can you recollect the night before I
married?. . . . I told you then that I forgave your part in it, and prayed God
to forgive my own. I told you that the past was at end between us. I say so,
again. Kiss me, Mother’” (490). Edith’s compassion for her mother has as
much potential to resurrect her from the midlife grave she is digging for
herself as does her love for Florence.

The repetition of the two scenes in which Edith first mechanically tells
her mother that she will forget the past—on the eve of her wedding—and
this later allusion to that earlier moment signals Edith’s progress from
an exhausted attempt to silence maternal complaint to a genuine desire
to give comfort. We see Edith kiss no one but the child Florence, whom
she has come to love deeply, except in this scene. The momentary succor
of being a mother teaches this middle-aged daughter compassion even in
the midst of a life fenced in by shame, self-loathing, and vengefulness. In Edith’s case, however, the reconciliation comes much too late to save her from the course on which her mother has set her. Cut off from mother and daughter alike, Edith throws herself into the destruction of “Dombey and Son” and almost welcomes the opportunity to do violence to herself in a hyperbolic enactment of the “training” she chastises her mother for both wrongly instilling and selfishly neglecting throughout her girlhood.

In Dombey and Son, two marginal, ferociously aged, hungry mothers frame “the Son who is a daughter after all” just as the long-dead grandfather, the original Dombey of the original Dombey and Son, frames Mr. Dombey and his domestic and capitalistic ambitions. The women’s presence replaces the frame of sentimentality with genealogy, heredity, sexual abuse, paternal irresponsibility, and neglect, resettling narrow fantasies of the Victorian family in conditions that provoke critique.

Victorians increasingly framed family as an enclosed, exclusive, middle-class retreat from the world. The painful journey that leads these deeply wounded daughters to forgive their profoundly fallible mothers suggests that Dickens understood that compassion far exceeded conventional notions of filial duty. For good or ill, in the long run the novel uses the lessons of these relationships to argue for new filiations. Thus, Dombey and Son draws upon the traumas of midlife and late life to prepare readers for unprecedented cross-class, cross-generational “families” expansive enough to avoid obsessive, inverted, exploitive abuse and porous enough to include the orphaned, the widowed, the well, the ill, the poor, the rich, the falling as well as the rising, the young as well as the old. It should be no surprise that the novel ultimately embraces a range of characters with and without biological connections as a family. By the end of the novel, a unique family forms around the new mother, Florence, beneficiary of these many lessons in mother/daughter failures.

The most appealing couple in Dombey and Son is not Walter and Florence but Captain Cuttle and Sol Gills.10 Captain Cuttle, in fact, takes a wedding vow in his own nautical fashion when Florence asks him to look after “Walter’s uncle” in Walter’s absence: “‘with regard to old Sol Gills,’ here the Captain became solemn, ‘who I’ll stand by, and not desert until death do us part, and when the stormy winds do blow, do blow, do blow’” (277). Joss Marsh very persuasively argues that Dombey and Son is driven by the “mechanism of displacement.” Consequently, she explains, not only

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10 In “Change and Changeling in Dombey and Son,” Gerhard Joseph describes Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Skewton as “carefully paralleled bad biological mothers” set up to highlight the good nursing/mothering of characters like Polly Toodles just as he sees Sol Gills and Captain Cuttles as alternatives to a “bad biological father,” that is, Dombey (190–91).
are characteristics displaced from one figure to another, but “a story which might develop or be uncovered about one character detaches itself, wanders, and becomes attached to another” (414). So it is with the two elderly mothers and their corresponding elderly bachelors. So it is with biological mothers and surrogate grandparents. Unlike mothers who desperately cling to visions of youth and their own youthful selves rather than supporting younger generations, particularly younger daughters, the bachelor couple Cuttle and Gills—assisted by their spinster companion Miss Tox—substitutes the fractious relations between daughters and mothers with a family built upon ontological and postsexual, almost postgendered, grandparenthood.

Not quite mothers or fathers and not in fact grandparents, these three characters mobilize the neglected emotional resources of grandparenthood. David Toise argues that from Florence’s point of view “families are groups of people who ‘act’ like family; but of course, the very circularity of this formulation suggests that what defines family is a set of interpersonal exchanges which correspond to an abstract, representational concept of ‘family’ itself” (339). Toise credits Florence with founding such a family. However, I would argue that what Audrey Jaffe calls the “nonreproductive units” who “combine into a newly configured extended family” through Florence’s wedding constitute the structural frame of this inclusive, cohesive community. Grandparenthood allows unusual flexibility (42). A grandparent or great aunt can shift among the roles of father, older sister or brother, friend, conscience, confidant, “second childhood,” and mother and can even stand in for abstractions like home, history, or the past when necessary. Moving from the margins in the closing sections of the novel, their ultimate presence at its center marries genres, modes, and a richly diverse collection of characters into a communal family structured by social and affectional rather than solely biological relations. Moreover, this family displaces the middle generation—the generation that cannot seem to help abusing its daughters in this novel.

Grandparenthood possesses this flexibility in Victorian culture because grandparents have successfully passed the “great meridian of life.” For many Victorians, the transition from youth to age was thought to be a precipitous fall from midlife into old age known as “the climacteric.” This fall might leave the aged dashed on the rocks of madness. On the other hand, the more fortunate on the far side of the climacteric landed safely in a life newly devoted to moderation. For women, the climacteric was marked by the onset of menopause; for men the change was signaled by a decline in health, a withdrawal from work, or less aggressive behavior. Men and women alike who successfully navigated the dangerous waters of the
climacteric often found themselves in surprisingly smooth seas with broad horizons of expectation when it came to gender roles. Historian Roe Sybylla’s essay “Situating Menopause within the Strategies of Power” draws upon the work of leading Victorian medical practitioners to show that postmenopausal women were often thought to become more masculine, more independent (200–21). Doctor Edward Tilt even claimed women reached their “greatest mental vigor” after fifty-six (27). Similarly, freed from the demands of work, postclimacteric men were believed to develop heightened tenderness, sympathy, and attachment. With this presumed loss of sexual appetite, postclimacteric men and women were held to differ far less in their emotions and in their behavior than men and women in or clinging to youth and midlife.

Out of work, out of the sight lines of politics and social power, Captain Cuttle and Sol Gils serve the mother function far more successfully than the hungry, demonic mothers whose stories they displace. Welcoming all of the misfit, misplaced characters who survive the wreck of biological families, ambitious fathers, and demanding mothers, these ersatz grandparents create a home in which a motherless daughter has a chance to become the good mother. Perhaps the novel’s end, with this family that can contain all manner of characters and relations among characters except that of the midlife daughter and the aging mother, is the novel’s strongest statement about the tragic limitations even of momentary reconciliations between the abused daughter and her mother.

**Works Cited**


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