Over the past two decades or so, the work of literary and cultural criticism has come to be widely described as a project of interrogation. This is a striking and outwardly perplexing development. Why should a discipline that so insistently professes resistance to authority and power find its idiom in the activity of police and prosecutors? One answer to this question would explore the recent provenance of the usage, which seems to derive mainly from France, particularly the example of Althusser. Another path, however, would take us to a more remote genealogy: within the Victorian novel. The novel has been an especially fruitful ground for interrogation, largely because Victorian fiction seems to generate the very archetype of human identity on which the procedure depends. In the wake of broadly Foucauldian readings, the Victorian novel has been associated with the effort to produce a fundamentally private subjectivity anchored in an integral, “deep” psyche, which is defined against the hostile glare of publicity, or the universalizing, abstracting dynamics of instrumental reason. Viewed thus, the novel always has much to hide. As it attempts to screen its characters from surveillance (so the official story runs), the novel inevitably reinscribes the power it ostensibly resists. The critic must then elicit from the fictional artifact its complicity in a web of oppressive forces. We read for the pleasure of scandalous exposure—a pleasure borne out in the titles of a number of important studies: “Caught in the Act,” “Secret Subjects, Open Secrets,” “Sex Scandal.”
Such critical engagements tend to reserve pride of place for interrogations of sexuality. The Victorian novel, it is presumed, produces erotic desire as the very archetype of privacy—a realm of “inwardness” that can only be intimated through a rhetoric of obliquity and circumspection, a strategy which in itself suggests the high stakes in being found out. This interrogation of the private self typically extends to the agency of the author, who is seen to be enmeshed in sexual discourses or desires that elude his or her awareness and control—a further mode of complicity in orders of power that await the triumphant exposure of the critic. Recently, however, this understanding of sexuality and subjectivity has been challenged on two very different fronts. Within queer theory, critics (most notably Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) have objected that symptomatic or paranoid modes of exegesis have obstructed richer, suppler understandings of human identity and experience that might be derived from what Sedgwick calls “reparative reading.” Within study of the Victorian novel proper, critics, including Judith John and Elaine Hadley, have contested notions of the Victorian subject as a radically privatized self, by pointing to the countervailing power of theatricality, particularly melodrama, within Victorian culture.

These conflicts, I will argue, are in fact centrally and cannily rehearsed within the novels of Charles Dickens, who found an especially resonant forum for them in the Victorian courtroom. This is not as somber as it may sound, for the courtroom in Dickens is notoriously sparing in gravitas; indeed, for my purposes the most telling courtroom drama occurs in *The Pickwick Papers*, in the memorable trial of Bardell versus Pickwick. The famous performance of Serjeant Buzfuz, counsel for the plaintiff, may seem to subject our own strategies of interrogation—or something very much like them—to withering parody. Yet the misplaced ingenuity of Buzfuz’s interpretation points us to a suggestive clash between two different models of sexuality, and of novelistic character, that will resonate throughout Dickens’s career and in much of Victorian culture. Reading with Buzfuz helps us to see the point of familiar distinctions between early and late Dickens; at the same time, his performance suggests important continuities between those two bodies of work. The forms of suspicion anatomized in *David Copperfield*, for example, are far more somber and momentous than those of Buzfuz, but they share with the earlier work an understanding of sexuality as a markedly public transaction, a collective construction at odds with the conjuring of a “deep” private self. In this light, Buzfuz’s example repays more serious reflection.
In his famous courtroom interrogation of two messages from Pickwick to the widow Bardell, Serjeant Buzfuz sets a daunting example for close readers everywhere. “These letters,” he exhorts the jury, “bespeak the character of the man.”

They are not open, fervent, eloquent epistles, breathing nothing but the language of affectionate attachment. They are covert, sly, underhanded communications, but, fortunately, far more conclusive than if couched in the most glowing language and the most poetic imagery—letters that must be viewed with a cautious and suspicious eye—letters that were evidently intended at the time, by Pickwick, to mislead and delude any third parties into whose hands they might fall. Let me read the first:—“Garroway’s, twelve o’clock. Dear Mrs B,—Chops and Tomata sauce. Yours, PICKWICK.” Gentlemen, what does this mean? Chops and tomata sauce. Yours, Pickwick! Chops! Gracious heavens! And Tomata sauce! Gentlemen, is the happiness of a sensitive and confiding female to be trifled away, by such shallow artifices as these? (PP, ch.34)

This travesty bears on the way we read now, first of all, as it captures the risk that our own pursuit of deep meaning may end up sounding like that of Buzfuz. Never more so than now, perhaps, when so much exegesis, particularly that dealing with sexuality, similarly relies on the raised eyebrow, the insinuating quotation, the portentous repetition of some outwardly banal phrase. But the more pointed relevance, I think, is not that this could seem a comic travesty of our own procedures—or that the line between those procedures and travesty is sometimes difficult to draw. Instead, I want to stress the sheer cannyness of Dickens’s mockery, on a subject on which he is often thought to be profoundly evasive or unknowing, at best uncanny. For the comedy here allows Dickens to represent with hyperbolic insistence a concerted, deliberate construction of transgressive desire.

The comic travesty of a breach-of-promise suit may seem an helpfully oblique approach to sexuality. But for Dickens’s contemporaries, the sexual dimension would have been underscored by an unmistakable allusion to recent news, a notorious trial on which Dickens had reported for the Morning Chronicle just weeks before. “The memorable trial of Bardell against Pickwick” recasts the action brought by the Hon. George Norton against Lord Melbourne, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, alleging “criminal conversation”—that is, adultery—with Norton’s wife, the Hon. Caroline Norton. The social prominence of the parties naturally created quite a stir, but
what caught the young Dickens’s ear as a court reporter was the plaintiff’s counsel’s interpretation of what passed for evidence. Here, for example, is (in toto) one of the notes introduced at the trial: “I will call about half past 4. Yours, Melbourne.” And here is the argument of Norton’s attorney, Sir William Follett, as taken down by Dickens himself: “The style and form of these notes, Gentlemen, seems to impart much more than they contain. Cautiously, I admit, they are worded; there are no professions of love . . . but still they are not the letters of an ordinary acquaintance.” And the same line of interrogation was reported in a different paper, *The Morning Advertiser*:

They state that Lord Melbourne would be there by such an hour, and nothing more; but there is something in the style of the notes that seems to me to lead to something like a suspicion of what was going on. The first note merely said, “I will call about half-past four. . . .” This letter has no beginning; it has no commencement. It does not commence as letters actually do which are written by gentlemen to ladies. The next letter was in these words: “How are you? I shall not be able to call today, but I probably shall tomorrow.—Yours” This is not the note of a mere acquaintance.

And on it goes.

This lofty but willful insinuation clearly echoes in Buzfuz’s virtuoso turn with “Chops and tomata sauce.” And the echo brings home a larger design and historical resonance in what commentators tend to call vaguely Buzfuz’s “absurd manipulation” of evidence. Dickens’s target is less aristocratic transgression than the legal system itself—or, more precisely, the modes of suspicion that the legal system engenders and enforces. Like the plaintiff’s counsel in *Norton v. Melbourne*, Buzfuz transforms a seemingly mundane communication into a textual field of erotic insinuation. “Why is Mrs. Bardell so earnestly entreated not to agitate herself about a warming-pan, unless (as is no doubt the case) it is a mere cover for hidden fire—a mere substitute for some endearing word or promise, agreeably to a preconcerted system of correspondence, artfully contrived by Pickwick with a view to his contemplated desertion?” (*PP*, ch.34) For Dickens’s earliest readers, the joke drew added point from awareness that Buzfuz corresponded to a world outside the novel, a world in which a very substantial and weighty judicial apparatus was dedicated to doing just that—to producing from textuality a trove of (among other things) carnal knowledge.

In treating writing as an encryption of desire, Buzfuz’s mode of engagement has an enduring resonance in Victorian culture. Here is an excerpt from another cross-examination, this one drawn from a real courtroom some
thirty-five years later, in which a prosecuting attorney produced a letter that begins, “My darling Ernie, I had another cry in the train after leaving you, then lay back and managed to get to sleep.” The Queen’s Counsel was deeply troubled: “Gentleman, what language is this! A man crying at parting for a few weeks from another man. ‘I had a cry in the train!’ What language is that? Is it the language of friendship, or is it the language of love? It seems to me very strange. . . . Gentlemen, you may put your own interpretation upon that, but it seems to me very strange and I do not understand it, I confess.”

This is an excerpt from the Crown’s prosecution in 1870 of Boulton and Park, two young men arrested for dressing as women and subsequently tried for conspiracy to commit sodomy. William Cohen, who has incisively analyzed this prosecution in his book, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction*, notes that the defense counsel attempted to rebut such insinuation by insisting that it was merely fanciful projection—that the counsel’s inability to distinguish between friendship and love was, in effect, merely Buzfuzian. But Buzfuz is never mentioned in Cohen’s book. Indeed, I have never come across Buzfuz in accounts of Victorian sexuality. And this is perplexing: Buzfuz’s address of what he imagines to be encrypted desire seems so importantly congruent with current literary analysis that we might expect work on Victorian sexuality to cite him at every turn. Could one find a more fundamental example of the interpretation of obliquity (or opacity) as an insinuation of transgressive desire?

We have overlooked the relevance of the episode because of its context. Until very recently, critics have understood sexuality almost entirely in terms of psychic depth; indeed, sexuality probably still remains, in the wake of Freud, our very paradigm of inwardness. *Pickwick Papers*, on the other hand, persistently refuses our yearning for the illusion of interiority, of “deep” and mysterious psychic regions. “It’s like a dream . . . a hideous dream,” Pickwick remarks at one point; “The idea of a man’s walking about, all day, with a horse he can’t get rid of!” (*PP*, ch.5). The deflationary gesture here is exemplary of most of the novel: we may yearn for insinuations of momentous self-recognition, or glimpses of frightening desire, but we get the sheer inanity of walking around all day with an unwanted horse. Now, of course, the truly ambitious exegete might labor to elicit some deeper erotic fantasy in Pickwick’s exclamation, but the result, I daresay, would merely reproduce the example of the master, Buzfuz.

This is not to say, however, that *The Pickwick Papers* offers us a world without sexuality. On the contrary, the novel is absolutely saturated with it. Most obviously, Sam Weller and his father trade in an offhand, comic denaturing of aggression, which frequently takes the form of erotic violence: “I
think he’s the victim o’ connubiality, as Blue Beard’s domestic chaplain said, with a tear of pity, ven he buried him” (PP, ch.20). More subtly, however, Pickwick himself comes to seem enveloped in sexual desire. Not that Pickwick ever expresses such desire; his innocence in this regard, as commentators often note, is a central feature of the idyllic quality of the novel. Less often noted, however, is that Pickwick’s innocence is brought home through his seeming immunity to the sexual contagion that circulates throughout the novel. That circulation is evoked not only by Buzfuz but also by a host of colleagues—including the narrator—who join in an effort to discover erotic desire in even the most outwardly innocent of Pickwick’s gestures. So, for example, during the famous Eatanswill election scenes, when Pickwick kisses his hand to Mrs. Pott, wife of the renowned editor of the Eatanswill Gazette, “this very innocent action,” the narrator tells us, “was sufficient to awaken [the crowd’s] facetiousness.”

“Oh you wicked old rascal,” cried one voice, “looking arter the girls, are you?”

“Oh you wenerable sinner,” cried another.

“Putting on his spectacles to look at a married ’ooman!” said a third.

“I see him a winkin’ at her, with his wicked old eye,” shouted a fourth.

“Look arter your wife, Pott,” bellowed a fifth;—and then there was a roar of laughter.

As these taunts were accompanied with invidious comparisons between Mr. Pickwick and an aged ram, and several witticisms of the like nature; and as they moreover tended to convey reflections upon the honour of an innocent lady, Mr. Pickwick’s indignation was excessive. (PP, ch.13)

“Facetious” they may be, but the crowd’s taunts clearly anticipate Buzfuz’s more earnest interrogation. Not only Pickwick’s letters but also his every gesture seem to become in their very lack of hidden depth a screen onto which observers are invited to project erotic fantasy. And this collective enterprise generates a current of insistently sexualized reference—such as the striking allusions to Othello. “Pickwick and an aged ram” recalls the opening scene, where Iago torments Brabantio, “an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe” (lines 88–89), and this allusion is in turn taken up, I think, in the very surname of Pickwick’s good friend, Tracy Tupman. (Later, in chapter seventeen, a minor character, recalling Othello’s demand for “ocular proof,” gains “ocular demonstration” of another character’s wealth).

At moments, even the narrator reproduces the sexualizing dynamic of Buzfuz and the Eatanswill crowd, with yet more potent and subtly prurient
gestures, reinforced as they are by the authority of his privileged vantage. So, for example, as Pickwick departs from Manor Farm at Dingley Dell, the narrator coyly remarks, “He kissed the young ladies—we were going to say, as if they were his own daughters, only as he might possibly have infused a little more warmth into the salutation, the comparison would not be quite appropriate” (PP, ch.11). The narrator thus amplifies even the faintest erotic vibrations that might animate the Pickwickian kiss, by associating it with the whisper of incest. All of this, of course, eludes Pickwick himself; it is the narrator, not Pickwick, who envisions the young ladies as his own daughters.

Pickwick thus not only “blunders into erotically pregnant situations,” as one commentator puts it; the other characters in the novel seem joined in an effort to envelop Pickwick in sexuality. Their chorus incarnates energies most arrestingly focused in the grotesque figure of the “Fat Boy,” whose embodiment of seemingly unbounded appetite also points up the somatic investments in various scenes of romantic affection. After suddenly materializing in the midst of a romantic assignation in the arbor at Dingley Dell, where Mr Tupman is wooing Mrs Wardle with fervent extravagance, the Fat Boy subsequently recounts the scene to Mrs. Wardle’s elderly mother, prefacing his narration with the remark, “I wants to make your flesh creep” (PP, ch.8). Which is, in another context, precisely what Buzfuz seeks to do. Buzfuz wishes to arouse his courtroom audience in a twofold sense, evoking their indignation by appealing to their appreciation of (as he imagines it) predatory desire.

This sustained current of sexual insinuation of course recalls the novels of Fielding and Smollett, from which The Pickwick Papers draws so much inspiration. Like those works, Dickens’s novel is hardly lacking in sexuality. What is missing is psychology—the psychology, that is, associated with the forms of interiority that we are accustomed to in high Victorian realism. In Pickwick Papers, sexuality is a widely dispersed surface effect, or (more precisely) an affect cut adrift from structures of deep psychology. In the scenes I have noted, Pickwick’s sexuality never seems to reside in Pickwick himself—indeed, it hardly seems to belong to him. Instead, it is a collective, public experience, a shared projection onto a character defined largely through resistance to the premises of Buzfuz’s paranoid interpretation. Put differently, Dickens shows us a world in which sexuality is emphatically constructed, but in which sexuality does not constitute a private self. As Buzfuz’s interrogation seeks a hidden, “deep” Pickwick, it only underscores the absence of such a being. And yet Buzfuz thereby sheds unexpected light on the very different model of sexuality that becomes increasingly prominent in Dickens’s later work.

In The Pickwick Papers, Buzfuz’s interrogation is comically misplaced because it presumes a deep psychology at odds with the dominant mode of
characterization in the novel—which is the dominant mode throughout early Dickens (the phase that is typically presumed to end with *Martin Chuzzlewit*). The lawyers presume a world of hidden and therefore sinister design that is alien to the novel, where desire is nearly always transparent, is indeed insistently performed, and is misread only by the utterly foolish or facetious. In this vein, Dickens throughout his early writings calls upon varieties of suspicion to organize fairly consistent and clear-cut moral oppositions. Within the fundamentally melodramatic framing of the major characters, suspicion is an index of villainy, a self-implicating projection of characters who harbor their own damning secrets. One need only think how often the word “deep” is invoked as invective (as in Arthur Gride’s account of Ralph Nickleby) to see how profoundly (as Juliet John has pointed out) the early work resists a model of psychology associated with the alienated self of romanticism. The paranoid interpretive stance that pursues, and thereby reinforces, a solitary, withdrawn selfhood finds an acme of sorts in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, where Mr. Brass recalls the leading maxim of his father, “Foxey”: “Always suspect everybody” (*OCS*, ch.66).

This comic tension offers a suggestive fulcrum for distinguishing early and late Dickens. Over the course of Dickens’s career, the comedy in Foxey’s imperative grows increasingly unstable, as Dickens’s own writing more openly and pervasively trades in its own momentous secrets—and conjures up its own hermeneutics of suspicion. Buzfuz and his fellow representatives of the law, in and out of fiction, not only depend on but also help to generate a model of psychology increasingly prominent in Dickens’s later fiction—and, more broadly, in Victorian realism. The misplaced ingenuity of Buzfuz, I am suggesting, throws into especially sharp relief a fictional technique in which the illusion of psychic depth depends on evoking an aura of mystery or reserve, which not only accommodates but often incites the discovery of transgressive desire. In *Pickwick* itself, the seductions of “mystery” are treated light-heartedly, as an appeal to traditionally feminine curiosity: “the temptation . . . of hearing something at present embellished in mystery” is what calms the agitated residents of the seminary for young ladies in chapter sixteen. In *Barnaby Rudge*, curiosity grows more portentous but remains harnessed by moral and rhetorical authority. “To surround anything, however monstrous or ridiculous, with an air of mystery, is to invest it with a secret charm, and power of attraction which to the crowd is irresistible,” the narrator remarks. “Curiosity is, and has been from the creation of the world, a master-passion” (*BR*, ch.37). In immediate context, the comment indicts the demagogue who would inflame “the unthinking portion of mankind,” but it also points to the fascinations of the novelist. In Dickens’s later novels,
the two callings are less securely distinguished. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, for example, critics have noted an unsettling complicity of the novelist’s interests with those of the revolutionary conspirators: both thrive on the fantasy that dangerous secrets lurk everywhere.\(^\text{16}\) Within this pursuit of dangerous secrets, sexuality tends to become similarly associated with hidden, private recesses of a character’s psyche.

As Buzfuz points us to this momentous shift, the familiar conjunction of fiction and the law—the novel and the police—is demonstrated with startling clarity in a novel that New Historicists rarely notice. We miss the import of Buzfuz’s interrogation because we devalue “early” Dickens, reading these works as if they were failed efforts at the techniques that predominate from roughly *Dombey* onwards—as if, for example, the characters of Pickwick and Nicholas Nickleby represented a psychology of the same order as that of David Copperfield or Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend*. Nonetheless, crucial continuities exist between the two modes of characterization, which suggest that throughout Dickens’s writing, sexuality remains a complexly public dynamic, its association with a private, “secret” self more qualified and self-conscious than received wisdom allows. This fact emerges when one sets the comic preoccupation with breach of promise in the early novels against the far more somber and consequential suspicion directed toward hints of adulterous or “fallen” sexuality in women. Buzfuz, it turns out, has a great deal to tell us about *David Copperfield*.

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*David Copperfield* has become something of a *locus classicus* for the study of Dickens and sexuality, largely through the influence of D. A. Miller’s scintillating reading in *The Novel and the Police*. I want to dwell on an important subplot of *David Copperfield* that Miller does not mention—that involving Annie Strong, the young wife of David’s schoolmaster, Dr. Strong, to whom David, in concert with virtually every character acquainted with the couple, suspects Annie of being unfaithful. (As it turns out—I hope I am not giving too much away—she is innocent.) This subplot is emphatically a drama of knowledge, whose psychological involutions in many ways epitomize what critics find most compelling about later Dickens. The self-conception of the protagonist is obscurely related to his radical ambivalence toward the figure of a young woman who, as she stands on the verge of “fallenness,” unwittingly expresses what David takes up as a kind of personal blazon, a mantra of self-recognition for his own errors in object choice: “my undisciplined heart.” The forms of recognition brought about through this subplot evoke
a sense of psychic depth that is alien to *Pickwick*, and the tonal register is dramatically different, as the suspicion brought to bear on Annie is far more momentous than that of Buzfuz’s interrogation. For all of these differences, however, this subplot recasts Dickens’s concerns in the account of *Bardell v. Pickwick*. The suspicion of “breach of promise” is importantly congruent with the suspicion of sexual transgression in Annie: she is suspected, as it were, of breach of promise after the fact. And this congruence in turn reveals Dickens’s persistent concern with forms of interpretation that, in an effort to discover illicit sexuality, in fact construct it.

The two episodes differ most tellingly, for my purposes, in their differing understandings of the mechanisms of interpretation. The Annie Strong subplot in effect develops the preoccupation in Pickwick with “the force of circumstances.” This is a phrase Pickwick utters soon after he is served with notice of the widow Bardell’s lawsuit, an event that prompts Mr. Tupman to recall an incident in chapter twelve, when he and other friends had burst in on Pickwick with Mrs. Bardell “reclining in his arms.” “Gracious powers,” the innocent Pickwick responds, “what a dreadful instance of the force of circumstances!” (*PP*, ch.12). The comic possibilities of the scene echo, of course, throughout the domestic intrigues of the novel. Pickwick’s remark, “We are all the victims of circumstances” (*PP*, ch.18), is truer than he realizes. As the novel repeatedly stages collisions between character and context, agency and circumstance, breach of promise comes as near as any structure can to organizing its notoriously diffuse action. The accusation of breach of promise underscores the often vexed relation between desire and obligation that organizes modern “respectable” domesticity. It also links erotic yearning to an insistent preoccupation with social appearances—a preoccupation that may readily shade into the paranoid and even at lesser intensity obviously may compromise the autonomy of the actors thus preoccupied. At their most extreme, banal domestic anxieties can thus enforce rituals of suspicion, interrogations of fidelity, rivaling those that Buzfuz deploys in the courtroom.

This deference to “circumstances” may seem to endow them with an agency of their own. Not merely a misleading frame, circumstances seem to exert an active power over the human beings entrapped within them. “Is it not a wonderful circumstance,” a bewildered Pickwick announces just before the lawsuit is served, “that we seem destined to enter no man’s house without involving him in some degree of trouble?” (*PP*, ch.18)—the “trouble” that typically turns on sexual misunderstanding. Here, in effect, “circumstance” itself seems to be doing the work I have noted in the commentary of observers throughout the novel. “Circumstance” mimics the sexualizing dynamic in, for example, the reference to Pickwick kissing young women as if they were
his daughters. Accordingly, when “the force of circumstances” seems to com-
promise a character’s virtue, the idiom conjures up an agency at odds with the character’s own. Circumstances themselves seem to be indicting Pickwick, quite apart from any legal assistance. We have, in essence, a comic version of a fantasy that powerfully unites legal argument and narrative, as Alexander Welsh has shown in Strong Representations: the fantasy that sufficient evi-
dence speaks its own truth, that facts cannot lie.

In a sense, then, Pickwickian “circumstances” comically externalize a form of paranoia, and it is not hard to imagine someone doing a Foucauld-
ian number on this structure analogous to the Freudian reading of Pickwick’s dreams—with similarly disconcerting results. For in Pickwick the comic mode disarms the potentially dire consequences of misplaced suspicion. “Cir-
cumstances” shape judgment in a form that does not determine character but merely frames it—in the dual sense that it both isolates and distorts a character’s actions. Put differently, comedy ultimately disables the consequen-
tiality of “circumstances”: the force of circumstances is the power of acci-
dent, that power which so often vexes, but ultimately redeems, heroes of the picaresque.

David Copperfield, however, brings a new weight and complexity to the force of circumstances in understanding human action and identity. Here Dickens is interested not only in the way in which that power may abridge autonomy and agency but also in the complicity of human beings in construct-
ing and sustaining what in the early novels is a more impersonal dynamic. Although the alleged transgressions of Pickwick and Annie are outwardly congruent, in David Copperfield the suspicion of sexuality is understood as an interpretive project requiring analysis in its own right—unlike Buzfuz-
ian interrogation, whose weaknesses are presumed to be self-evident. The suspicion directed at Annie Strong therefore elicits scrutiny not only because it is more consequential than that of Buzfuz—particularly as it is focused on “fallen” womanhood rather than male transgression—but also because its complexity, as a mode of interpretation, makes it subject to momentous error, which is precisely what entraps Annie. As it entraps Annie, however, suspi-
cion also underscores her affinities with Pickwick—and David’s with Buzfuz. In this epistemological drama, the guilty party turns out to be not Annie but David, and the locus of desire turns out to be less any particular character than (once again) the interpretive project itself.

That the drama surrounding Annie is as much epistemological as sexual emerges from her first appearance in the novel, in chapter sixteen, “I am a New Boy in more Senses than One.” In a chapter centrally concerned with forms of knowing, Dr. Strong, master of the school at which David is newly
arrived, is a figure highly reminiscent of Pickwick. He is “the least suspicious of mankind,” Mr. Wickfield remarks (DC, ch.16)—one of the many remarks that inevitably generate suspicion of Annie, who is so much younger than her husband that David presumes she is his daughter. Set against Strong’s innocence, David’s guilty knowledge is thrown into sharp relief. Acutely conscious of his lack of formal schooling, he nonetheless reflects that “in what I did know, I was much farther removed from my companions than in what I did not” (DC, ch.16). The other boys, David thinks, are so “innocent” that he shrinks from their discovering “how knowing I was”—knowing in “some of the meanest phases” of London life and London streets (ch.16). While David quails before his own knowledge, however, Uriah Heep, taken on as Mr. Wickfield’s assistant, is busy gleaning and storing whatever compromising evidence falls his way, apparently as befits an aspiring attorney: when David first encounters him in this chapter, he is reading Tidd’s Practice, “improving my legal knowledge.” Yet for all his alliance with the legal powers of darkness, Heep is also—as many readers have observed—something of a double to David. David is riveted by “a sort of fascination” for Heep (ch.16), “attracted to him in very repulsion” (ch.25), and later, when Heep in chapter forty-two springs his trap to expose (as he imagines) Annie’s waywardness, there is a virtual melding of the two characters: “I saw so plainly, in the stealthy exultation of his face, what I already so plainly knew; I mean that he had forced his confidence upon me.” The exasperated David slaps Heep, who “caught the hand in his, and we stood in that connexion looking at each other. We stood so, a long time” (ch.42). When Heep then berates Copperfield for so losing his self-possession as to strike someone of Heep’s lowly status, the turn of the knife is complete: “He knew me better than I knew myself.”

There are, of course, many grounds of identification here, and one might interpret this strange exchange as a screen for all sorts of intimacy—including homoerotic desire. But one common ground is suspicion of both Annie and one another. David’s own suspicions are projected onto Heep, as the unwitting observer tries to distance himself from the eagerly grasping spy, a character in whom both suspicion and sexuality can be disowned as perversion, the distinguishing attributes of (yet again) the predatory legal mind. Yet the effect of this structure is to join the two characters more closely than ever. Hence the striking fact that the sense of interiority generated in this episode characterizes the interpreters of sexuality rather than the character who ostensibly embodies transgressive sexuality. Initially, when Annie’s red ribbon inexplicably disappears along with her cousin Jack Maldon, it seems an emblem of her guilt, and David senses in her face, “such a face as I never
saw,” a psychic complexity alien to the world of Pickwick: “It was beautiful in its form, it was so ashy pale, it was so fixed in its abstraction, it was so full of a wild, sleep-walking, dreamy horror of I don’t know what” (DC, ch.16). Ultimately, however, Annie remains, like Pickwick, a screen for projection rather than a harbor of psychic depth. Moreover, the interiority that develops in this episode is not that of a radical privacy but instead is emphatically intersubjective. David discovers himself, and the desire that rules his project, by seeing himself in the eyes of Uriah Heep.

Far from enacting a disjunctive break with strategies in Dickens’s early novels, then, the management of suspicion and innocence in David Copperfield in fact suggests the enduring relevance of Buzfuz. What in The Pickwick Papers is mocked as a delirious paranoia is reconstituted in the later fiction as a far more unsettling, because more pervasive, habit of social reading, which has the power to constitute the sexuality it purports to discover. The persistence of this structure, moreover, complicates the view that in David Copperfield (and “the Novel”) “the self is most itself at the moment when its defining inwardness is most secret, most withheld from writing.”13 On the contrary, Annie’s self is most itself when it is being acquitted in something akin to an informal tribunal, a tacit interrogation. And David’s self is most itself as he is participating in that process. David’s inchoate recognition of his own investments in the interrogation does develop an interiority not to be found in The Pickwick Papers. But as it also reveals a fundamental continuity with earlier, broadly melodramatic structures of recognition, the novel resists an association of identity with radically alienated interiority.

That continuity also confounds the premise in so much recent criticism that sexuality in the Victorian novel is a largely unwitting or uncanny production, an effect generated by novelists unable to grasp their own dynamics of representation. The axiom that Victorian novelists could never be masters in their own house of fiction is a difficult one to relinquish, not least because it sustains so many performances of our own critical mastery. In the wake of Freud, with sexuality as our archetype of knowledge, we pursue meaning as an inadvertent disclosure, an unwitting insinuation or an uncanny eruption of buried energies or systems of meaning that eluded the writer—and that only the daring and subtlety of the modern critic can elicit. To be sure, no fictional design is entirely transparent to its author. But the example of Buzfuz suggests that Dickens’s engagement with sexuality, however circumspect or oblique, is a good deal more canny, more knowing, than we tend to allow. We might derive an importantly different history of both sexuality and the Victorian novel by attending to the reading of Buzfuz.
NOTES

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 5.
2. John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work, 71.
4. Ibid.
5. William Cohen, Sex Scandal, 117.
6. The one exception, as many readers have noted, is the so-called interpolated tales, which open onto a world more akin to gothic, but for that reason have always seemed something of a discord in the novel.
7. Readings that seek the requisite depth for psychoanalytic interpretation of the characters typically appeal to forms of doubling, as in John Glavin’s recent account of the novel (After Dickens, 88–89). Karen Chase offers the most supple alignment of the novel with psychoanalysis, conceding that psychoanalysis has encouraged a misplaced impulse “to look for depths even in the shallow,” but arguing that in Pickwick the dispersal of “personality” among disparate fragmentary characters anticipates a Freudian questioning of “the sovereignty of the individual subject” (Eros and Psyche, 32).
8. Glavin, After Dickens, 89.
9. Judith John points up a similar effect in the work of melodrama, in which “emotions do not ‘belong’ to the individual experiencing them but to common experience” (Dickens’s Villains, 30). In The Pickwick Papers, however, the projective, communal grounding of sexuality is all the more apparent in Pickwick’s ultimate resistance to it.
10. See Catherine Gallagher, “The Duplicity of Doubling in A Tale of Two Cities.”
11. The burdens of obligation are illuminated in Randall Craig’s account of the legal grounds of Mrs. Bardell’s lawsuit—an action, Craig argues in Promising Language, that under contemporary legal constructions (Buzfuz’s special pleading aside) would have been highly plausible.
12. My emphasis here complements Amanda Anderson’s incisive reading of this episode in Tainted Souls and Painted Faces, in which she sees the “fallen” woman as a figure of “attenuated autonomy”; to be fallen is to be fated, to have lost one’s powers of self-determination. David’s powerfully vicarious response to Annie not only reflects as Mary Poovey comments, that “woman is the site at which sexuality becomes visible” (Uneven Developments, 97) but also worries over the extent and durability of human freedom. As she doubles the anxiety that besets David in worries over the exposure of his contamination in the blacking warehouse, Annie also figures “the threat that coercive narrative forms are perceived to pose to the recovery and representation of the self” (94–95). In this sense, the narrative of “falling” is one version of “the force of circumstances” as I have described them. My main interest, however, lies in Dickens’s meditation on how this suspicion generates its own forms of subjectivity, in both the observers and their object.