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Gillooly, Eileen, David, Deirdre

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Little Dorrit’s Theater of Rage

DEIRDRE DAVID

“Little Dorrit is a more seditious book than Das Kapital.”
—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW (1862)

ANGRY “ATTITUDES”

Almost at the close of Little Dorrit, Amy Dorrit, Flora Finching, and that extraordinary bundle of rage, Mr. F’s Aunt, repair to a pie-shop where Flora orders “three kidney ones.” In her genuinely good-hearted way, Flora confides to Amy that she harbors no more nonsensical feelings about Arthur and that she wishes them to be happy: “The withered chaplet my dear . . . is then perished the column is crumbled and the pyramid is standing upside down. . . . I must now retire into privacy and look upon the ashes of departed joys” (LD, 2, ch.34). Mr. F’s Aunt takes a less happy view of the impending marriage and, having eaten her pie with great solemnity, declares to Flora: “Bring him forward, and I’ll chuck him out o’winder!” This is not a new demand on her part since she has, almost from the moment she meets Arthur Clennam, demanded that she be allowed to hurl him to the street; as justification for him to be brought “for’ard,” she proclaims, “I hate a fool!” (LD, 1, ch.13). Always staring, she refuses to acknowledge any individual, and every man retires “cowed and baffled” after attempting to engage her in rational conversation, which is understandable since there can be no response to such opaque announcements that when she lived at Henley, “Barnes’s gan- der was stole by tinkers.” Already half-broken by the emasculating rule of
his mother, Arthur is absolutely terrified when in her presence.

At the pie-shop, Mr. F’s Aunt stages a remarkable scene of unappeasable female rage. When Arthur fails to be produced so that he can be pitched through the plate-glass window, she folds her arms, sits down in a corner, and refuses to budge until such time as “the chucking portion of his destiny” can be accomplished. She remains in place throughout the afternoon, during which time Flora fortifies herself with a tumbler brought from a neighboring hotel in order to fight off embarrassing rumors of an old lady’s having sold herself to the pie-shop “to be made up” and now refusing to complete the bargain. Allowing for the fact that Mr. F’s Aunt is a superbly comic figure (and, of course, a minor character), the enraged image of this furious old lady, her bonnet “cocked up behind in a terrific manner” and her “stony reticule” as rigid “as if it had been petrified by the Gorgon’s head” (LD, 2, ch.34), suggests the powerful feeling of injury and injustice that seems to infect the social order in Little Dorrit.

In particular, Little Dorrit seethes with the resentment of angry women, and what interests me in this chapter is the creation of a theater of rage by three characters who share the fury and animosity for the male sex that is exhibited by Mr. F’s Aunt: Tattycoram, Miss Wade, and Mrs. Clennam. They construct vivacious performances of the role of enraged and vengeful woman, and in scripting their shared desire to destabilize oppressive ideologies of social class, complacent domesticity, and lax male sexual morality, they reject rules of behavior for dependent servants, orphaned governesses, and betrayed middle-class wives and mothers. In their rebellion, they may be said to attempt a rewriting of the social roles to which they are relegated, and in staging their theater of rage, they cast their shadows upon what Dickens terms, in Little Dorrit, “the great social Exhibition” (LD, 1, ch.13). As we know, throughout this novel, characters move into and out of literal and metaphorical shadows, and, at the end, Arthur Clennam and Amy Dorrit walk out of the church after their marriage into “the autumn morning sun’s bright rays” (LD, 2, ch.34).1 The darkness of Mrs. Clennam’s adamantine and punitive refusal to disclose the secret of Arthur’s parentage; William Dorrit’s miserable exploitation of his daughter; Merdle’s dubious financial operations; and the malevolent manipulations of that “smooth polished scoundrel,” Rigaud: all fade in the somber union of Arthur and Amy as they go down into “the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed” (LD, 2, ch.34). What fades, too, in the autumnal brightness of the Clennam/Dorrit marriage is the destructive passion of Little Dorrit’s angry women.

That Dickens chooses to represent the anger of these women in a theatrical mode is not surprising given the pervasive incorporation of such tropes
into his fiction, the staging of highly theatricalized public readings of his novels, and the abundance of his writings about and for the theater. In a speech delivered at the thirteenth anniversary dinner of the Royal General Theatrical Fund, held at the Freemasons Tavern on 29 March 1858 (ten months after the first edition of *Little Dorrit* appeared on 30 May 1857), Dickens proposed an after-dinner toast to Thackeray in which he declared, “Every writer of fiction, although he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage.” In his own fiction, Dickens often mounts lengthy, elaborate monologues that dramatize extreme passions (think, say, of Edith Granger’s speech to her mother in *Dombey and Son* about having been “hawked and vended” on the marriage market), and he often embellishes his staging with the arrangement of characters in positions that recall an important motif of early-nineteenth-century theater: the adoption of various physical “attitudes.”

In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens’s deployment of this theatrical trope has a significant dual effect. First, and most obviously, it places the reader in the position of spectator, with the result that we become, in a sense, members of the audience for whom the performance is intended. When Tattycoram rants against the condescending benevolence of the Meagles family, we are imaginatively grouped with them as witnesses of her rage; similarly, when Mrs. Clennam stages her Calvinist drama of self-denial (the meager supper of rusks and port, the virtual entombment in her black bolsters), we stand with Affery in a dark corner, half appalled and half terrified by what we witness. And, it may be said, we press our noses against the pie-shop window to witness the spectacle of Mr. F’s Aunt: furious, recalcitrant, waiting for Arthur to be brought “for’ard.” Second, Dickens’s theatrical presentation of his characters as a means to intensify their passion has significant political consequences: paradoxically, he tempers the fury that fuels the performance. By virtue of the ephemeral and transitory nature of all performance, a threat to the social order embodied in female fury is fragmented, scattered to the shadowy corners of the novel from whence it came: Dickens employs theatrical effects to express extreme emotion and to neutralize its potential to disrupt the order of “the great social Exhibition.” If, as Michael Slater argues, in the decade 1847 to 1857 Dickens was “preoccupied with women as the insulted and injured of mid-Victorian England” (243–44), then by the end of that decade, he seems, at least temporarily, to dispatch their insult and injury to the wings. When the curtain falls at the end of *Little Dorrit*, the female theater of rage has played itself out, the actors’ vengeful desire to punish the oppressive structures that have stoked their fury having been exhausted by its presentation.
Although fundamental Romantic concepts of dramatic character were not altered by the innovations in mid-nineteenth-century theater enabled by technical advances and demanded by changing audiences, the stylized “attitudes,” which involved the assumption of exaggerated positions and the extended articulation of speech, had lost favor by the time Dickens began composing *Little Dorrit* in 1855. Theatrical performances that followed a specific taxonomy of elaborate poses had given way to a more spontaneous and psychologized mode favored by such actors as Dickens’s good friend, William Macready. The earlier fashion for actors to hold a physical position indicating intense emotion—supplication, astonishment, anger, disgust, grief, and so on—was derived from classical modes of rhetorical gesture, and the “attitudes” served a very real practical purpose: only those in the pit and in the boxes closest to the stage could expect to hear and see the nuances of speech and facial expression perfected by such famous actors as John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons, who were renowned for the broad physicality of their acting, for being skilled practitioners of the art of the “attitudes.”

Sometimes, early-nineteenth-century actors also relied upon what was ridiculed as the “teapot school,” a label derived from the fashion for actors to place one hand on the hip, the other extended and moving in curved lines, with a gradual descent to the side. But whether favoring fancy, unnatural movements or remaining frozen in place and articulating the text to the point of distortion, actors needed to hold the audience in theaters that were fully lit by gas chandeliers, where people in the pit munched on meat pies and swigged ale, and where those in the upper galleries often roared and shrieked and indulged in debaucheries “so openly,” according to a shocked Walter Scott, “that it would degrade a bagnio.” Dickens’s fictional arrangement of his angry women in riveting positions serves much the same purpose for his readers as did the exaggerated “attitudes” assumed by early-nineteenth-century actors for the theater audience: both the novel and the drama aim to hold reader and spectator in a state of enthralled attention, eager either to buy the next number or to remain rooted to the spot in the pit or in the galleries.

**VICTORIA’S FEMALE SUBJECTS**

At the time Dickens was writing his novel of literal, psychological, and social incarceration, contemporary public discussion of women’s rights was critiquing, in a more formal but no less impassioned way, the patriarchal order that infuriates a number of women in *Little Dorrit*. Dickens planned the novel in the first five months of 1855 and began to write in May of that year; the first
number appeared in December 1855, and the last, the nineteenth, appeared in June 1857. It was in 1855 that Caroline Norton composed her pamphlet, “Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth’s Marriage and Divorce Bill,” in which she declared that she wished to point out to the queen “the grotesque anomaly which ordains that married women shall be ‘non-existent’ in a country governed by a female sovereign.” Victoria’s female subjects cannot make a will, cannot legally claim their own earnings, cannot leave their married homes or divorce their husbands—but can be divorced if found guilty of infidelity—cannot prosecute for libel, and cannot sign a lease. Seething with indignation and grounded in an observation of the ironic disjunction between a female sovereign and oppressed female subjects, Norton’s pamphlet was a crucial text in the 1850s development of a politicized feminist movement that gathered strength throughout the rest of the century and that led, in the next, to significant advances in the cause of women’s rights.

In her argument about the serious absence of gender equality in relation to the nineteenth-century claim that economic individuals were equivalent in the marketplace, Mary Poovey notes that feminists such as Caroline Norton and Barbara Bodichon challenged the naturalization of female virtue and by association, one might add, the saccharine domesticity that saturates the Meagles family in *Little Dorrit*: “This challenge was articulated in the 1850s in a self-consciously politicized feminist movement, which was itself a response to the increasing numbers of women entering the workforce. . . . Even though the 1857 Married Women’s Property Bill did not become law, the controversy it aroused interjected the issues of women’s rights, property, and work into parliamentary discussion, quarterly review articles, and popular novels as well.” Nowhere in *Little Dorrit* do we find explicit reference to women’s rights: no one demands more and better opportunities for women to enter the workforce; no one inveighs against hobbling codes that prohibit women from owning property, divorcing their husbands, and so on; no one refers to a country-wide campaign taking place in 1855 to gather proof of hardship under the law and to collect signatures on a petition to Parliament requesting reform. Such reference would be severely anachronistic given the setting of the novel in the mid-1820s, the same period in which Dickens’s father was imprisoned for debt. Yet it is a woman’s fierce feeling of injustice and betrayal that drives the plot of *Little Dorrit*: the violent shame of Arthur Clennam’s parentage endured by Mrs. Clennam and her vengeful secretion of a codicil that would have sprung the Dorrit family from the Marshalsea are the forces that, in essence, propel the action. By the same token, it is the recovery and return of this codicil to its rightful place by a tamed and repentant Tattycoram that enables a restoration of familial and social order.
In a note to the first sentence of the most recent Penguin edition of the novel (“Thirty years ago, Marseilles lay burning in the sun, one day”), Helen Small observes that as is so often the case in his fiction, “Dickens’s concerns in Little Dorrit included those of the time in which he was writing: financial fraud, bureaucratic inefficiency, ‘the Sunday question,’ the new Poor Law and others.”¹² I would include in “others” an ambiguous concern with the position of women registered in the presentation and consequences of their anger, and in this way Little Dorrit may be said to participate in the heated public discussion of women’s rights taking place during the months of the novel’s composition. In that participation, the novel seems to offer an implicit warning about the class and sexual resentment felt by Tattycoram, Miss Wade, and Mrs. Clennam, since each of these women, in her own destructive way, disrupts the domestic harmony of the Victorian family. Tattycoram, the girl taken by the Meagles family from the Thomas Coram Foundling Hospital in Bloomsbury to become a maid to Pet, burns with resentment against the bourgeois benevolence practiced by Mr. Meagles; her desire is to be recognized as an autonomous individual rather than to be treated as a dependent functionary, a lesser version of Pet’s dead twin, Minnie Meagles. Miss Wade nurses a deep-seated grudge against the class system that has relegated her to the position of governess, and she aids and abets the roguish Rigaud in defiance and blackmail of the middle class; the grudge is compounded by the experience of a tumultuous love affair with Henry Gowan, and Wade seeks revenge upon patronizing families such as the Meagles, and, in particular, punishment for Pet, who marries Gowan. Mrs. Clennam exhibits none of the forgiveness and stoical forbearance that the Victorian wife might be expected to display in the face of marital infidelity, or in the face of an arranged and loveless marriage; she chooses instead to imbue her husband’s illegitimate son with the “wholesome repression, punishment, and fear” that were the “themes” of her own childhood (L.D, 2, ch.30).

In enacting their scenes of dramatized female rage, these three women embody a symptom of what Caroline Norton (in her “Letter to the Queen”) sees as a society infected from within: “Madam,” she concludes, “in families, as in nations, Rebellion is a disease that springs from the malaria of bad government” (151). If Dickens does not aim explicitly to present women’s anger and rebellion against patriarchal rule as a sign of Caroline Norton’s “bad government,” it is clear that the angry women in Little Dorrit are deeply dissatisfied with the workings of Victorian society: their anger is a sign of something wrong, somewhere. We are prompted to consider the cause of their fury and to wonder about its justification.¹³ Their injuries are open wounds, their passions transparent, and in this sense they are unlike such opaque characters
as the financial conjurer Mr. Merdle or the deceptively benign landlord Mr. Casby—“a mere Inn signpost without any Inn” (LD, 1, ch.13).

Caroline Norton’s image of a diseased government is, of course, the primary theme and the controlling metaphor of Bleak House, yet in many ways the world of Little Dorrit is equally infected. With less of the fierce indignation with which he invests scenes of metropolitan misery in Bleak House, Dickens, in a more somber, even resigned, mode that seems to match the emotional temperature of Arthur Clennam, discloses in Little Dorrit many symptoms of diseased government. Instead of a corrupt legal system, we find the addled bureaucracy of the Circumlocution Office; in place of the cholera-infested Tom-All-Alone’s, we find “fifty thousand lairs . . . where people lived so unwholesomely, that fair water put into their crowded rooms on Saturday night, would be corrupt on Sunday morning” (LD, 1, ch.3); and just as we recoil from the grease-smeared cave of Krook’s rag-and-bottle shop, so we shrink from the “turbid tide” of the Thames as it wards off “the free air and the free country swept by winds and wings of birds” (LD, 2, ch.10). Where Esther Summerson discovers her mother lying dead in a burial ground “hemmed in by filthy houses, with a few dull lights in their windows, and on whose walls a thick humidity broke out like a disease” (BH, ch.59), Amy Dorrit endures her so-called party—a night spent locked out of the Marshalsea, huddled with Maggy in a doorway, where they are surrounded by the “shame, desertion, wretchedness, and exposure, of the great capital: the cold, the slow hours, and the swift clouds, of the dismal night” (LD, 1, ch.14).

As is so often the case in Dickens’s fiction, the remedy for all this political corruption, urban pollution, and sheer misery is to be found in the private, domestic sphere: Arthur and Amy go down into the roaring secular world to do the best they can to live “a modest life of usefulness and happiness” (LD, 2, ch.34) and the festering anger of resentful women is imaginatively drowned out in the roar of the teeming city. Tattycoram returns chastened to the Meagles family; Miss Wade fades away into some kind of French obscurity; and Mrs. Clennam is felled by a stroke, a suitable punishment for her stony cruelty. And Mr. F’s Aunt is eventually removed from the pie-shop by its owner, wedged into a carriage by Flora, and taken home, rigid as ever, to the Gray’s Inn Road.

In terms of the threat to a social order controlled, in essence, by men, it is significant that the audience for the theater of rage mounted by angry women in Little Dorrit is more often male than female. Mr. Meagles watches helplessly as Tattycoram tears her hair and stamps her feet; Arthur Clennam gloomily witnesses his mother’s melodramatic ritual of eating her rusks and reading her Bible, and he becomes the passive reader of Miss Wade’s
“History of a Self-Tormentor,” a text designed specifically for his eyes only; and the demonic fury of Mr. F’s Aunt freezes Arthur in the position of virtually paralyzed audience for her wildly uninhibited spite. It seems as if certain male characters in Little Dorrit are either implicitly punished for a more general social inattention to women’s needs and rights (even if they possess no direct responsibility) or function as the vehicles of warning to Dickens’s readers about the consequences to the social order if those rights and needs are ignored. Either way, women’s anger with male governance is admitted into the novel and then dispatched through repentance, exile, and death.

THE MALE AUDIENCE

Little Dorrit is not the first of Dickens’s novels in which male spectators witness the drama of female rage. Rosa Dartle in David Copperfield, for instance, nurses a grudge as fierce as that of Miss Wade. Bearing upon her lip a sign of Steerforth’s own childhood fury, she assumes upon his death an “attitude” of desperate grief as she stands before David and Steerforth’s mother. Smiting herself theatrically upon her breast and lip (where the ugly mark remains of a hammer thrown by Steerforth), she cries, “Look at me! Moan, and groan, and look at me! Look here! [at her scarred lip] at your dead child’s handiwork!” A captive audience for Rosa’s rewriting of the role of docile, dependent companion, David watches fearfully as she stamps her feet and releases years of suppressed resentment against both mother and son for the mother’s condescension and the son’s treatment of her as “a mere disfigured piece of furniture . . . having no eyes, no ears, no feelings, no remembrances” (DC, ch.56). Fated to be Rosa’s principal audience, when he goes in search of Emily in the shady dockside streets of East London, guided by Martha Endell, he witnesses another sensational scene of female rage that could have been lifted from any contemporary melodrama featuring a “fallen woman.” Remaining hidden behind a door from Rosa, yet able to hear every word and to see almost all the action, he watches as Emily crouches quivering on the floor and Rosa stands over her, laughing contemptuously, gesturing theatrically, and drawing away her skirt from the “contamination” of Emily’s fallen touch. Stretching out her hands in a pose of jealous fury and seeming to address her unseen audience, David (although she is at this moment unaware of him), she points to Emily as a “piece of pollution, picked up from the waterside, to be made much of for an hour, and then tossed back to her original place!” (DC, ch.50). As David recounts the scene, Rosa strikes Emily with a face of “such malignity, so darkened and disfigured by passion, that
I had almost thrown myself between them.” But he does not. His passivity suggests that Dickens means to station him to the very last moment as a male spectator of Rosa’s melodrama, even allowing for the fact that David wishes Peggotty to be Emily’s rescuer and not himself.

Critics have long noted that in *Great Expectations*, almost all of Pip’s life, from the marshes and the forge to London and a gentlemanly pursuit of leisure, is characterized by passivity. His emotional fear and uncertainty are compounded by his unsought-for position as spectator for women’s fury, a training in subjugation that begins, of course, in early childhood at the rough hands of Mrs. Joe Gargery. Always on a “rampage,” “tickler” in hand and bottle of castor oil at the ready, Mrs. Joe bullies Pip and Joe: they are her cowed audience as they huddle by the fire (with Orlick dropping in occasionally) for her theater of rage at having to take care of Pip and having to manage a husband whose passivity, goodness, and patience drive her to distraction. A frightened boy who brings Magwitch “vittles,” Pip quickly becomes the toy of Miss Havisham, then a bewildered young man mysteriously elevated to the life of gentleman, and, finally, a plaything for Estella.

On his first visit to Satis House, Pip witnesses a more stylized and sumptuous performance than that enacted by his sister. Led by Estella as if by an usher in a darkened theater into a room lit dramatically by wax candles, he finds Miss Havisham posed in an “attitude” that signals resigned dejection: she sits with her head resting on the hand of an arm that is draped across her dressing table. Dressed all in grubby white, wearing white satin shoes, and adorned with a few dried bridal flowers, she garbs herself in a theatrical costume that displays her rejection at the altar, and she surrounds herself with the props of her jilting: trunks half-packed with her trousseau, a watch stopped at twenty to nine, handkerchief and white kid gloves, and a prayer-book. The consummate manager of her long-ago rejection, Miss Havisham maliciously stages scenes in which Pip must play the role she herself plays to perfection: casting him as victim, she uses Estella as her human prop to play an allotted part in the cruel theater of his humiliation.

Tellingly, Joe Gargery refuses to assume any part in Miss Havisham’s revenge tragedy, and he rejects the role of humble beneficiary of her charity when she pays Pip for his painful attendance at Satis House: ignoring the script, he wants none of her manipulative posturing and persists in speaking only to Pip. Pip, though, remains a willing, if increasingly disillusioned, audience to the very end, her confessor as she asks for forgiveness and her savior (at least for a little while) as he sees her transformed into tinder by her moth-eaten wedding dress: she runs at him, “shrieking, with a whirl of fire blazing all around her and soaring at least as many feet above her head as
she was high” (GE, ch.49).

In Our Mutual Friend, Dickens raises the theatrical curtain on the last and most comical of his enraged women characters, Mrs. Reginald Wilfer. Driven to almost demented self-stagings of class resentment by the “sprat-like” appearance of her husband, she is a woman of gloomy majesty who presents to the world an “attitude” of perpetual injury and disappointment. As armor against misfortune, she dons a carefully planned costume of gloves within doors and a handkerchief on her head; she speaks in tones of severe monotony and favors biting sarcasm (the Boffins are “much too kind and too good for us”). Skilled at putting on a show for her despised Holloway neighbors, she calls loudly for the “male domestic of Mrs. Boffin” when Bella leaves the humble Wilfer home to return to the home of the “Golden Dustman”: she delivers her to the footman “like a female Lieutenant of the Tower relinquishing a state prisoner. The effect of this ceremonial was for some quarter of an hour afterwards perfectly paralysing on the neighbours, and was much enhanced by the worthy lady airing herself for that term in a kind of splendidly serene trance on the top steps” (OMF, 2, ch.8).

Her animated performance of the role of Holloway housewife is magnificent. She declares the Boffin mansion to be “the halls of slavery,” and she addresses a polished rebuke to Bella’s sister Lavinia (who has announced that such references are nonsensical) that projects her words into the Wilfer parlor as if she were declaiming from the stage at Covent Garden: “I say, presumptuous child, if you had come from the neighbourhood of Portland Place, bending under the yoke of patronage, and attended by its domestic in glittering garb to visit me, do you think my deep-seated feelings could have been expressed in looks?” (OMF, 3, ch.16). Her adoption of idiosyncratic roles expressing class envy and female disgust with pretty much all the men in the novel runs the gamut from appearing “like a frozen article on sale in a Russian market” (OMF, 3, ch.16), through going to bed in the manner of Lady Macbeth, to conducting herself when she visits the Boffin mansion at the end of the novel with the bearing of a Savage Chief. When she takes her leave at last, she departs magisterially in the self-assigned role of neglected mother-in-law, her audience a bewildered Mr. Boffin, an amused John Harmon, and the henpecked cherub Reginald Wilfer.

TORMENTED “ATTITUDES”

In her contribution to a discussion among her fellow-travelers about being quarantined in Marseilles, Miss Wade declares that if she had “been shut up
in any place to pine and suffer,” she would “always hate that place and wish to burn it down, or raze it to the ground” (LD, 1, ch.2). Immediately afterwards, she walks to her room and spots Tattycoram, an enraged incarnation, at this moment, of her own contemptuous anger: Tattycoram’s face is flushed and hot, and she sobs and rages, plucks at her lips unsparingly, and pinches her neck so that it comes out in great scarlet blots—all as self-punishment for her cry that the Meagles family are “Selfish brutes . . . Beasts! Devils! Wretches!” (LD, 1, ch.2). Presciently, she cries out to Miss Wade, “You seem to come like my own anger, my own malice, my own—whatever it is” (LD, 1, ch.3). In this scene, and throughout the novel, the older woman figures as the enraged shadow of the younger: both are driven by a powerful and self-destructive sense of injustice.

Mr. Meagles’s remedy for Tattycoram’s rages is to instruct her to count to five and twenty, a disciplinary tactic that several critics suggest Dickens appropriated from the system of a “Mark Table” at Urania Cottage, the “Home for Homeless Women” in Shepherds Bush (principally for seduced and abandoned girls and prostitutes), which he managed for its founder, Angela Burdett-Coutts. Counting to five and twenty, however, eventually fails with Tattycoram, as Arthur Clennam discovers one day after coming home to find Pa Meagles lamenting her loss: “Wouldn’t count to five-and-twenty sir; couldn’t be got to do it; stopped at eight and took herself off” (LD, 1, ch.27). Burning with hatred of Pet as the one always to be “cherished and loved,” Tattycoram takes herself off to Miss Wade, and when Clennam and Meagles arrive in search of her, Dickens stages a theatrical scene in which Clennam plays a supporting role in the Meagles family drama and in which Miss Wade gets all the good lines. She thunders forth to her cowed apprentice in female rage: “You can be, again, a foil to his pretty daughter, a slave to her pleasant wilfulness, and a toy in the house showing the goodness of the family. . . . You can again be shown to this gentleman’s daughter, Harriet, and kept before her, as a living reminder of her own superiority and her gracious condescension” (LD, 1, ch.27). Pa Meagles’s parting lines also ring with a melodramatic warning for Tattycoram: Miss Wade’s influence over her is grounded in a passion and a temper fiercer and more violent than hers. “What can you two be together? What can come of it?” he asks (LD, 1, ch.27)—questions for which the reader already has one ready answer: together, the two women will not enjoy the cozy heterosexual domesticity of Twickenham.

At the close of this scene, Miss Wade puts her arm around Tattycoram “as if she took possession of her for evermore” (LD, 1, ch.27). Whether they enjoy a lesbian relationship has been the subject of much critical speculation,
from assertions that Miss Wade’s “History of a Self-Tormentor” should be read metaphorically as a wish to create social havoc, not as a confessional narrative of lesbian desire,\textsuperscript{15} to assertions that even if Miss Wade is a lesbian, to read her purely in terms of sexual identity is to ignore the fact that she embodies a much larger threat of “political rebellion.”\textsuperscript{16} It seems to me that Miss Wade may, all at once, be read as a lesbian, a metaphor, and a political insurgent: her aim to seduce Tattycoram away from the normative bourgeois domesticity of the Meagles family signals an overdetermined passion to disrupt the Victorian social order, whose stability rested, at core, upon the family. An outsider by virtue of being an orphan, an unhappy governess, and an unmarried woman severely disappointed in her relationships with men, for whom she seems to have nothing but contempt: she is bent on destroying the forces that have placed her in these miserable positions. Seducing unhappy young women is a powerful weapon in her arsenal.

Frozen in the theatrical “attitude” of rage, Miss Wade is described by Pancks as a woman “who writhes under her life. A woman more angry, passionate, reckless, and revengeful never lived” \textit{(LD, 2, ch.9)}. Her face is the dramatic register of her feelings, as we see when she sits apart from her fellow-travelers in Marseilles, her indifference to them signaled in her “proud eyes, the lifted nostril . . . the handsome, yet compressed and even cruel mouth” \textit{(LD, 1, ch.1)}. Late in the novel, when Clennam confronts her in Calais, her rage rivets his attention, keeps him rooted to the spot, and emphasizes his passivity: “It flashed out of her dark eyes as they regarded him, quivered in her nostrils, and fired the very breath she exhaled; but her face was otherwise composed into a disdainful serenity, and her attitude was as calmly and haughtily graceful as if she had been in a mood of complete indifference” \textit{(LD, 2, ch.20)}. Dickens means “attitude” here, of course, not in the sense of assuming a theatricalized position, yet Miss Wade’s immobility, her inclination to assume inflexible poses of indifference, suggest her psychological hypersensitivity to how she appears to others. That hypersensitivity feeds her resentment, and this is disclosed to Clennam, the male audience for her “History.” Thoroughly stylized in her movements and gestures, and in textual presentation of herself, she writes “The History of a Self-Tormentor” as a textual performance fashioned for a male audience: she gives Clennam this text—her autobiographical fragment—with the words that she has written it explicitly for \textit{his} perusal, and no one else’s. On the packet back to England, he reads her extraordinary “History.”

At an early age, she declares she began to “see” how she was patronized by others; made wild with jealousy by “an unworthy girl,” she obtains revenge by reducing her to hysterical tears and then holding her in her arms
until morning, “loving her as much as ever, and often feeling as if, rather than suffer so, I could hold her in my arms and plunge to the bottom of a river—where I would hold her, after we were both dead” (LD, 2, ch.21). When Miss Wade becomes a governess, she admits she is treated decently by the family, something she meets with studied rejection; in another family, she attracts the attention of a nephew and persists in repulsing him, which rather peculiarly leads to their engagement. Henry Gowan’s arrival at the house encourages her paranoid self-consciousness, and she departs in a display of prideful injury in which she believes herself degraded by the affectionate concern of the woman who employs her. In Tattycoram, she writes, she found a girl much like herself, feeling much of the resentment she has felt against “swollen patronage and selfishness, calling themselves kindness, protection, benevolence, and other fine names” (LD, 2, ch.21). Consistent with her self-absorption, she is drawn to Tattycoram because she sees within her no one but herself: both are illegitimate orphans; both lack privilege; and both possess volatile temperaments. As several critics have noted, their shared spite and jealousy serve to highlight the lives of other women in the novel, most particularly Pet Meagles and Amy Dorrit: Pet enjoys the material comfort and parental indulgence they lack, and Amy displays an angelic acceptance of deprivation that is foreign to their natures.17

While the flaming anger of Tattycoram and Miss Wade stems primarily from class envy and patriarchal condescension, the anger nursed by Arthur’s mother from before his birth derives more from resentment of patriarchal despotism and sexual betrayal. Married off by her father to the orphan nephew of old Gilbert Clennam and discovering that her husband within a year of their marriage has “held a guilty creature” in her place, she takes it upon herself to “lay the hand of punishment upon that creature of perdition” (LD, 2, ch.30). Her indignant announcement that Arthur’s mother “fell hiding her face at her feet” reveals her adoption of an “attitude” of self-righteous injury reminiscent of Rosa Dartle’s position as Emily cowers in fear beneath her wrathful accuser. Mrs. Clennam also forms a pair with Mr. F’s Aunt, who, as we know, bears herself with an “extreme severity and grim taciturnity” that anticipates the stern majesty of Mrs. Wilfer; the physical rigidity of Mr. F’s Aunt serves as a comic parody of the paralyzed body of Mrs. Clennam (just as she refuses to budge from the pie-shop, so Mrs. Clennam becomes a “statue” in her final paralysis); and, lastly, the vituperative shouts of Mr. F’s Aunt form a demonic, crazed, and jumbled analogue to Mrs. Clennam’s recitation of biblical creed.18

At the beginning of Little Dorrit, Arthur has returned to Europe after some twenty years in China working in the family business, and in a reveal-
ing response to Mrs. Meagles’s question as to what he plans to do next, he says, “I have no will. . . . Trained by main force; broken, not bent; heavily ironed with an object on which I was never consulted and which was never mine; . . . what is to be expected of me in middle life? Will, purpose, hope? All those lights were extinguished before I could sound the words” (LD, 1, ch.2). His mother’s rage and perverse pleasure in becoming the instrument of punishment for Arthur’s true parents ensure that as a young child he is terrified by warnings of perdition, that as a boy at school he is marched to chapel three times a day on Sundays, and that as a young man he is sentenced to listen to his mother’s reading from the Bible, “sternly, fiercely, wrathfully.”

As Miss Havisham arranges the soured bridal theater of her jilting—replete with costumes, props, and appropriate lighting—so Mrs. Clennam constructs her tragedy of martyrdom in the face of sexual betrayal. Going out perhaps once a year, she is confined to a wheelchair with a paralysis never fully explained by the novel. She inhabits a “dim bedchamber, the floor of which has so sunk and settled, that the fireplace was in a dell” (LD, 1, ch.3), as if the house itself is giving way, one imagines, under the weight of its family secrets (as indeed it does). Where Miss Havisham dresses herself in grimy white as mourning for the husband who never appeared, Mrs. Clennam dresses in dusty widow’s black for the husband who betrayed her; where Miss Havisham sits moodily by her dressing table, Mrs. Clennam sits on a black bier-like sofa “propped up behind with one great angular black bolster, like the block at a state execution in the good old times.” Neither woman will forgive, and both are driven by self-consuming vengeance to present their tableaux of female martyrdom to their male audiences, surrogates for those who have abandoned them: Pip and Arthur. Mrs. Clennam’s props consist of several devotional texts, her handkerchief, a pair of steel spectacles, and an old-fashioned gold watch in a heavy double case. As terrified by his mother as he is by the implacable hostility of Mr. F’s Aunt, Arthur retreats to a dark and damp room in the house, curious only about why his mother would have Little Dorrit sewing in the corner and feeling the “shadow of a supposed act of injustice, which had hung over him since his father’s death” (LD, 1, ch.27).

In a chapter aptly entitled “Closing In,” Mrs. Clennam stages the last act in her family melodrama. The stage is taken first by Rigaud, complete with “evil leer,” who is arranged by Dickens in the fashion of a theatrical villain, as if he were directing amateur theatricals at Gad’s Hill: “Leaning over the sofa . . . his right hand sometimes arranging his hair, sometimes smoothing his moustache, sometimes striking his nose, always threatening her with whatever it did; coarse, insolent, rapacious, cruel, and powerful; he
pursued his narrative at his ease” (LD, 2, ch.30). For the benefit of Affery and Jeremiah Flintwinch, he maliciously relates the dreadful history of the Clennam marriage and Arthur’s birth and childhood, whereupon Mrs. Clennam, desperate to be the narrator of her own tragedy, cries out, “I will tell it myself!,” which she proceeds to do in bone-chilling detail. In a gesture symbolic of the release of years of suppressed anger that has “preyed upon itself evenly and slowly” (LD, 1, ch.15), the fingers that have long remained virtually immobile suddenly become looser; she vigorously hits the table with a clenched hand and raises her whole arm in the air in the classical “attitude” of defiance.

The confession to her audience that she has withheld a codicil to old Gilbert Clennam’s will that would have benefited Arthur’s true mother is followed by an extraordinary scene in which Mrs. Clennam makes her gaunt way west through the London streets to the Marshalsea—unearthly pale, “a spectral woman.” Bent on reclaiming the codicil and letters from Amy Dorrit, to whom they have been sent by the crafty Rigaud, she stages a dramatic confrontation in which the vengeful mother who is not a mother begs the woman who loves her adopted son to keep secret the narrative of anger and revenge until she is dead. In turn, Amy, positioned in the softened light of the window, begs Mrs. Clennam, relegated to a dark corner of the room, to put aside a punitive Old Testament god of retribution and to be guided by a New Testament god who heals, raises from the dead, and sheds tears of compassion for man’s infirmities.

As they go through the streets together, back to the rotting house, the light of the summer evening falls upon the clear steeples of the City churches, and Dickens paints a backdrop saturated with Christian imagery devoted to the pure goodness of Amy Dorrit, who possesses not a theatrical bone in her little body: “great shoots of light” stream “among the early stars, like signs of the blessed later covenant of peace and hope that changed the crown of thorns into a glory” (LD, 2, ch.31). Amy transforms the thorns of Mrs. Clennam’s bitterness and rage into the glory of remorse and compassion for the man who is, and is not, her son. They arrive at the house just in time to see it heave, surge outward, open asunder, collapse, and fall to the ground—a spectacular moment worthy of any of the elaborate pantomimes offered in the mid-nineteenth-century theater that featured such things as “The Battle of Waterloo” complete with cavalry advances, bugle calls, and cannon fire. With the collapse of the house, its owner falls to the ground—never to move again and to die three years later as she has lived, “a statue.”

Mrs. Clennam, then, is punished by a fatal paralysis for her construction of a revenge tragedy, just as Tattycoram is punished for her lack of gratitude
by enduring the obsessive jealousy of Miss Wade; and Miss Wade is punished, one may assume, by living out her life in French exile, gnawed from within by her unappeasable rage at having been wounded by all and sundry. *Little Dorrit* admits their resentment of oppressive ideologies of class and gender and occasionally allows the reader to understand the origin of that resentment, even to sympathize with it. As we have seen, much of this understanding and sympathy, and the eventual erasure of women’s anger from the novel, gains imaginative force from Dickens’s deployment of theatrical tropes, particularly the “attitudes.” Male characters are very often the principal audience for female performance, and they also become agents for the social change that, in the imaginative economy of *Little Dorrit*, will dispense with women’s grievances.

**WOMAN’S DUTY**

While Arthur Clennam lies ill in the Marshalsea, Mr. Meagles in his characteristically good-natured way travels to Calais in search of Miss Wade. He is eager to clear up the mystery surrounding Arthur’s childhood and to retrieve the box of papers deposited, he discovers correctly, by Rigaud with Miss Wade for secrecy and safekeeping. She claims to know nothing of such things, and Pa Meagles returns to England disappointed, only to be astonished when Tattycoram bursts in carrying the iron box. Overhearing the conversation between Miss Wade and her old protector, she takes the box and travels back to England (hidden in a cloak) on the same boat as Mr. Meagles, and now she falls on her knees and begs to be re-admitted to the family, vowing to count not just to five and twenty but to five and twenty hundred and twenty thousand, if she must.

In a quasi-sermon that offers a familiar Victorian remedy to neutralize the destructive rage wreaked upon so many characters in *Little Dorrit*, Mr. Meagles asks Tattycoram to look at Amy Dorrit gliding out of the Marshalsea, a “little, quiet, fragile figure.” Think, he admonishes her, that if Amy had constantly thought of herself, she would have led an “irritable and probably useless existence”; rather, she chose a life of “active resignation, goodness, and noble service” founded in a dedication to duty (*LD*, 2, ch.33). The familiar imperative directed at Victorian women to be good, to be dutiful, and to resign themselves to whatever the social order might assign them is rejected by Tattycoram, Miss Wade, and Mrs. Clennam—and, as we have seen, is also rejected by a notable number of Dickens’s other discontented women characters. As antidote to the anger of women that, at the historical
moment he was composing *Little Dorrit*, was finding expression in the public sphere in the form of pamphlets, demonstrations, and petitions, Dickens characteristically offers the benevolent interventions of a jolly patriarch, Pa Meagles, and the devotion to duty of a saintly young woman, the resigned Amy Dorrit. His tepid dispatch of the female fury that has given life to so much of *Little Dorrit* suggests a faint-hearted retreat from a postulation of a politically more feasible (if fictional) remedy for the social malaise that is the origin of women’s anger. As for Amy Dorrit: even as she witnesses her father at his most abject and degraded, after he has pitifully suggested she accept John Chivery as her husband to ensure his own continued comfort in the Marshalsea, she has “no doubts,” asks herself no questions, feels no anger. For a woman to doubt and to ask questions is often to discover legitimate causes for resentment, both within *Little Dorrit* and in the Victorian public debate about women’s rights. In Dickens’s imaginative resolution of social discontent, even if the power of women’s rage might direct the plot and force men to become passive, often frightened spectators, that power is eventually vanquished by a delicate woman who harbors no resentment against a father who casts his selfish shadow over her young life.

NOTES

1. In “Guilt, Authority, and the Shadows of *Little Dorrit*,” Elaine Showalter explores in detail the imagery of light and darkness. She also points to the remarkable amount of doubling and pairing in the novel, which, she claims, suggests that “characters have their shadows—doubles who enact their repressed roles and desires” (21). As instances of the doubling and pairing, Showalter notes the Meagles twins, the Flintwinch brothers, and Casby and Pancks, adding that the pervasive presence of doubling in *Little Dorrit* reveals “the underside of Victorian authority, the shadows behind the sunny promise of bourgeois self-help, parliamentary democracy, and private charity” (21).

2. Quoted by Renata Kobetts Miller, “Imagined Audiences,” (208). Miller notes that Dickens, along with other Victorian novelists, incorporates theatrical motifs into his work as a means of conceiving “of the place of the novel in relation to audiences, to other genres, and to Victorian culture” (208). Deborah Vlock in *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre* argues that Dickens “regularly borrowed characters, dramatic idioms, even stories from the melodrama” (3), doing so, she claims, with “an evident confidence” in the familiarity of theatrical tropes to his readers—tropes such as stylized patterns of physical gesture and staged physical enactment of character (9). In a paper delivered at the Third Annual Conference of the North American Victorian Studies Association, David Kurnick explored what he describes as “a gradual ‘novelization’ of the theater,” a “disciplining of theatrical culture” that reflects “the new prominence of the private, domestically oriented, psychologically absorbed form of the realist novel.” See “Empty Houses: Thackeray’s Theater of Interiority” (258). In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens
may be said, I think, to theatricalize the novel, in a reverse process to that described by Kurnick.

3. Assuming a theatrical “attitude” of bitter anger, Edith delivers her impassioned speech with “burning brow” and “flashing eyes” and with a “terrible tremble” creeping over her “whole frame” (DS, ch.27).

4. Slater, Dickens and Women, 243–44.

5. See Joseph Donohue, Dramatic Character in the English Romantic Age, 5.


8. The first number was a great success. Dickens wrote to John Forster, “Little Dorrit has beaten even Bleak House out of the field. It is a tremendous start, and I am overjoyed at it” (Forster, 2:182).


10. Poovey, Making a Social Body, 173. See Lee Holcombe, “Victorian Wives and Property,” for a comprehensive discussion of the work of these women and others in agitating for the legal reform of women’s rights.

11. Deborah Vlock finds it remarkable that Little Dorrit is a novel that “seems to concern itself with almost every contemporary social issue except the problem of redundant women . . . [N]owhere, despite the fact that the single woman problem was bandied about while this novel was in progress, does Dickens explicitly engage with the debate over redundancy” (Dickens, Novel Reading, 180).


13. Lionel Trilling argues, “No reader of Little Dorrit can possibly conclude that the rage of envy which Tattycoram feels is not justified in some degree, or that Miss Wade is wholly wrong in pointing out to her the insupportable ambiguity of her position as the daughter-servant of Mr. and Mrs. Meagles and the sister-servant of Pet Meagles. Nor is it possible to read Miss Wade’s account of her life, ‘The History of a Self-Tormentor,’ without an understanding that amounts to sympathy.” Trilling points to the fact that both Tattycoram and Miss Wade are orphans and that they are illegitimate. He believes that their bitterness “is seen to be the perversion of the desire for love” (“Little Dorrit,” 287–88).

14. Dickens is thought to have modeled the character of Tattycoram upon a young woman named Rhena Dollard who was living at Urania Cottage when he began writing Little Dorrit. For Dickens’s description of the young women taken in at Urania Cottage, see his 1853 Household Words article, “Home for Homeless Women,” reprinted in Slater, ed., Dickens’ Journalism: “Gone Astray,” 127–41. See also Jenny Hartley, “Undertexts and Intertexts.”

15. Anna Wilson, “On History, Case History, and Deviance: Miss Wade’s Symptoms and Their Interpretation,” 196–97. Wilson argues that the paradoxical narrative position of Miss Wade’s narrative (both at the heart of the novel and also excisable) parallels her position in social history.

16. Janet Retseck, “Sexing Miss Wade,” 217. That this character threatens the social order is undeniable; I would extend this point, however, to argue that the specific nature of what Retseck terms “political rebellion” is clearly resistance to normative heterosexual
domesticity. Inevitably, Miss Wade must be read as a lesbian.

17. Barbara Black argues that the defeat of Dickens’s violent women allows “the triumph of the good Dickensian heroines” (“A Sisterhood of Rage and Beauty: Dickens’s Rosa Dartle, Miss Wade, and Madame Defarge,” 103).

18. Elaine Showalter believes that this character is the darkest of all in *Little Dorrit*—stony, omnipotent, her power is “quite simply emasculating” (34). For Lionel Trilling, Mr. F’s Aunt is “one of Dickens’ most astonishing ideas, the embodiment of senile rage and spite, flinging to the world the crusts of her buttered toast” (“*Little Dorrit*,” 290–91).