Victorian Freaks
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THE POWER to transform belongs to freaks in Charles Dickens’s Our Mutual Friend (1865) and Wilkie Collins’s The Moonstone (1868). Physically challenged, visibly disfigured, emotionally isolated, and sexually deviant (in truth or innuendo), Our Mutual Friend’s Jenny Wren and The Moonstone’s Ezra Jennings are viewed as freaks by other characters in their respective novels. In a world in which impairment, deformity, slander, and queerness are grounds for abjection, Jenny and Jennings navigate unfriendly borders by sharpening their insight, honing their sensitivity, and developing their imaginations. Thus empowered, they manage to not only survive but also make themselves useful, reading and communicating unarticulated desires that others find incomprehensible. In their service as interpreters—of the lovelorn and the dying—these outcast figures, sacrificing their own queer attachments, become critical aids to the traditional heroes and heroines whose lives they transform and save. In the limited but representative contexts of these two Victorian novels, marriage (the crux of Victorian society) is the product of epiphany facilitated by—even contingent on—freakery, the powers of a sacrificial body serving as a nexus of difference. A textual receptacle for nonnormative desire, race, and physicality, the freakish body matters because of rather than in spite of that which makes it different, though
its ostensible value resides in its ability to bolster the normative. Useful in establishing order but necessarily disposable once that order is restored, queer freakishness is the conduit transformed—or destroyed—in the process of generating heterosexual union.

Charles Dickens introduces the character of Jenny Wren as a freak who is yet far more than a “queer little comicality.”¹ “A child—a dwarf—a girl—a something,” she calls out to the visitors on her doorstep to come in: “I can’t get up . . . because my back’s bad, and my legs are queer. But I’m the person of the house” (271). “[A] child in years” but a “woman in self-reliance and trial” (498), Jenny is a “Doll’s Dress-maker”² who supports both herself and her alcoholic father. Rejected and taunted by other children and plagued by pain and loneliness, Jenny uses her imagination to endure a brutal childhood, one in which she is “surrounded by drunken people” (277). Her intense familiarity with physical and emotional suffering and her heightened imaginative faculty, which help her survive difference, further mark her as different. “Far from blurring the contradictions of Jenny’s make-up, Dickens heightens the inconsistencies. She is compounded of opposites.”³ She is at once silly and serious, creative and practical, abrasive and tender, young and old, deformed yet angelic. Jenny’s duality exists both beneath and on the surface; it is noticeable—visible—much like that of Ezra Jennings, whose “doubleness is inscribed on his body, making him a walking set of contrasts.”⁴

An “explicitly cross-category figure,”⁵ Jennings is visually and hermeneutically striking. A doctor’s assistant, he has become an opium addict in his attempt to manage the pain of his own mysterious, debilitating, and agonizing ailment. He suffers equally, however, from his status as an outcast, the result of others’ discomfort with “his appearance [and] mixed race, and the stigma of some ‘horrible accusation’” that hangs over him.⁶ Unattractive, striking, and of indeterminate age, his “remarkable” body “produce[s] an unfavorable impression”—disgust, distrust, “downright terror,” and, at best, pity—in others: “Judging him by his figure and his movement, he was still young. Judging him by his face, . . . he looked [old]. . . . [H]is fleshless cheeks had fallen into deep hollows, over which the bone projected like a pent-house. . . . His marks and wrinkles were innumerable. From this strange face, eyes, deeply sunk in their orbits—looked out at you. . . .”⁷ Observing that his “complexion [is] of a gipsy darkness,” his nose is the nose of “the ancient people of the East,” and his hair is starkly black and white, divided arbitrarily, as by a “freak of Nature,” “without the slightest gradation of grey to break the
force of the extraordinary contrast” (321), Blake guesses that “there was the mixture of some foreign race in his English blood” (367). For Jaya Mehta, “Jennings’s appearance—his gypsy complexion, his asiatic nose, his parti-colored hair”—signals and “affronts” “the code of racial segregation. . . . His very body figures the mingling of East and West.” 

“The bastard child of the British Empire,” “imperialism’s shameful secret,” Jennings was “born, and partly brought up, in one of our colonies. My father was an Englishman; but my mother - - We are straying away from our subject . . .” (366). Collins suggests but does not explicate Jennings’s colonial heritage, an allusion enhanced by Jennings’s placement of Henry Mackenzie’s The Man of Feeling (1771), which includes an anti-imperialist diatribe, in Blake’s bedroom on the night of the reconstruction of the theft. On the skin and in the blood, Jennings is tainted—marked as different. 

Treated poorly by his family for reasons not specified and hounded by “slander that was death to [his] character” (374)—by rumor and innuendo—Jennings’s malady is an English malady. Perceived as a contaminative subject, he is actually the victim of colonial subjugation, “the violence and cruelty of British imperialism which obscures its motives and accuses its victims.” Despite Jennings’s ill-founded reputation, Blake needs the help of the gypsy-skinned stranger, whose liminal status makes him an able translator. In order to secure it, however, he must confess his own suspected criminality, for only then does Jennings become willing to assist. Born to a colonial subject on colonial soil, Ezra is not only permitted but requested to enter the inviolate English family circle, and thus he becomes “simultaneously the outcast [and] the . . . detective” who “interpret[s] and explain[s]” the insensible mumblings (of Dr. Candy) that no one can else understand. Like his counterpart in Our Mutual Friend, Jennings’s importance—to others in the novel and to the novel itself—hinges on his status as an outsider, precisely because his familiarity with the unusual makes him an able translator of words spoken at the edge of death.

Jenny and Jennings are meant to be recognizably freakish, but their roles are more complex than those generally attributed to Victorian freaks and monsters—that is, as conduits for sympathy, horror, or discipline. Henry James, simplistically—dismissively, even—described Jenny as a “pathetic character, . . . a little monster [who] belongs to the troop of hunchbacks, imbeciles, and precocious children who have carried on the sentimental business in all Mr. Dickens’s novels.” More recently and more searchingly, Judith Halberstam has interpreted the Gothic
monster as “the place of corruption,” noting that its Victorian manifestations represent “a symptomatic moment in which boundaries between good and evil, health and perversity, crime and punishment, truth and deception, inside and outside dissolve. . . . Gothic fiction . . . produces the deviant . . . opposite which the normal . . . can be known.”15 In her Foucauldian reading of the Gothic’s “significant role in the history of discipline and punishment,” she adduces that “the Gothic monster is precisely a disciplinary sign, a warning of what may happen if the body is imprisoned by its desires or if the subject is unable to discipline him- or herself fully and successfully.”16 Though the freakish characters of Victorian fiction, two of whom I examine here, should indeed be read in light of their relationships with more traditional characters, they do far more than stabilize notions of the normative. Indeed, the gallery of freaks who populate the fiction of the nineteenth century should also be read for their capacity to construct themselves. Rejected by society, they become more than self-reliant; they become useful. “[I]ndustrious [and] virtuous,” and possessing “a secret sympathy or power” (OMF 332, 809), Jenny and Jennings “give . . . new life” (MS 410) to others, demonstrating that difference can be (re)generative. Without these freaks, the next generation—“little Miss Harmon[. . .]” in Our Mutual Friend (883) and the child Rachel is carrying in The Moonstone—would not exist. In their own way, Jenny and Jennings are an intrinsic part of (pro)creation.

**Freaks That Desire**

*Our Mutual Friend* corroborates Janet Todd’s contention that “although the action in the [Victorian] novel usually takes place in the heterosexual plot, its sentiment may be centered in female friendship.”17 Jenny’s love for Lizzie, the virtuous heroine who nominates Jenny as her closest ally despite familial objections, is laden with romantic nuances. At every opportunity, Jenny’s hand “cre[eps]” (283) or “st[eals] up to her friend’s” (333), her arm slips “round her friend’s waist,” or she “manage[s] a . . . touch or two of her nimble hands” (403). On one occasion, Jenny “rock[s] herself on Lizzie’s breast” (405). Sitting before the fire, brushing out her own and Lizzie’s hair, Jenny “lay[s] a cheek on one of [Lizzie’s] dark folds, seem[ingly] blinded by her own clustering curls to all but the fire, while the fine handsome face and brow of Lizzie [are] revealed without obstruction in the somber light” (403). “Lizzie-Mizzie-Wizzie,” Jenny
affectionately calls out to her friend at sunset on this “sultry night,” the first time that we see the pair alone together, “This is what your loving Jenny Wren calls the best time in the day and night’. . . . Her real name was Fanny Cleaver; but she had long ago chosen to bestow upon herself the appellation of Miss Jenny Wren” (283).

Here, in what Helena Michie describes as a “confession scene, an oddly erotic centerpiece to the novel,” we are told of the one change that Jenny effects upon not another but herself. Though far from nominal, the change she makes is her name itself. Unlike Jennings, who, despite the protection it would afford him, “scorn[s] the guilty evasion of living under an assumed name” and keeps his own “ugly” name (375, 322), Jenny Wren discards her given name, Fanny Cleaver, and creates the name by which she is known. Her new appellation fits her, as the narrator points out, because Jenny, like the “bird whose name she ha[s] taken” (403), is uncommonly bright-eyed and watchful, qualities that serve her in interpretation—reading and reading for other people. Jenny’s original name was not wholly unsuitable if one considers the contradictory double meaning of “cleave” (from which Cleaver is derived): to bring together and to tear apart. Jenny herself acts as a cleaver, simultaneously bringing together (Lizzie and Eugene) and splitting apart (Lizzie and herself) in a single action: discovering a word. Also, like the word “cleave”—and like Ezra Jennings—Jenny is inherently contradictory.

Perhaps Jenny rejects the name of Fanny Cleaver because of its sexual—and homosexual—suggestiveness. The name “Fanny” would have been considered rather crude in nineteenth-century Britain given that, then as now, fanny “referred to female genitals.” “Cleave,” a name that Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders takes for herself during her most promiscuous period, is also a word that has historically connoted the sexual. Writes David Blewett, “In the slang of [Defoe’s] time an immoral woman was said to be one who would cleave.” Less than a century and a half later, Victorian readers would also have been familiar with this association. Sedgwick writes that “Fanny Cleaver is a name that hints at aggression—specifically, at rape, and perhaps at homosexual rape,” and contends that the name signals “two scenes in Our Mutual Friend whose language . . . strongly suggest[s] male rape.” I would argue for a reading of Fanny Cleaver that is closer to the source: Jenny’s real name, mentioned only once—in the intimate fireside scene referred to above—connotes her own homosexual, wholly unaggressive desire for Lizzie, a one-sided (homo)sexual attraction that is never consummated, a cleaving that never occurs.
Having disclosed the fact but not the history of Jenny's name change, the narrator cedes to Jenny: “I have been thinking . . . as I sat at work to-day, what a thing it would be, if I should be able to have your company till I am married, or at least courted. Because when I am courted, I shall make Him do some of the things that you do for me. He couldn’t brush my hair like you do, or help me up and down stairs like you do, and he couldn’t do anything like you do; but he could take my work home, and he could call for orders in his clumsy way. And he shall too. I’ll trot him about, I can tell him!” (284). “Jenny, of course, has . . . sexual desire,” writes Michie, who points to such “fantasies of an erotic future” as evidence; but the erotic, contrary to Michie’s opinion, cannot be found in Jenny’s description of her imaginary husband, someone more servant than lover, more nuisance than pleasure. The erotic, rather, is evident in the intimacy between the “loving Jenny Wren” and her “Lizzie-Mizzie-Wizzie,” whose gentle touch Jenny welcomes and who can do for her what, Jenny tells Lizzie, a husband cannot. Since Victorian portrayals of children are often “coded ways of thinking and writing about the erotic,” writes Michie, Dickens, “by making Jenny a child and a cripple[,] outlines a safe space for the articulation of female sexuality”—queer (Jenny) and otherwise (Lizzie).24 Charley’s language regarding his sister and the “extraordinary companion” to whom she has “giv[en] herself up” (449) underscores the domestic, one-sidedly romantic nature of the relationship. Charley deems it “one of [Lizzie’s] romantic ideas” (450) and, afraid the liaison will hamper her chances of marriage, warns Lizzie that Jenny’s “way is not your way as Mr Headstone’s wife” (460)—or, implicitly, as a wife. When Lizzie is in hiding, Jenny, with “tears . . . in her eyes,” confides in Riah: “I feel so much more solitary and helpless without Lizzie now, than I used to feel before I knew her” (494). Riah commiserates, mentioning the loss of his own romantic partner, his wife.

As Jenny focuses much of her attention on Lizzie, so is Ezra Jennings preoccupied with assisting Franklin Blake. “What is the secret of the attraction that there is for me in this man?” Jennings wonders, in regard to Blake, in a journal entry in *The Moonstone*. “How useless to ask these questions!” he concludes, “Mr Blake has given me a new interest in life. Let that be enough, without seeking to know what the new interest is” (393). The reader, however, is interested in the nature of Jennings’s attraction. The content of the unspecified accusations against Jennings, the “Evil report” that follows him, further invites speculation (374). “‘Unspeakable,’” according to Sedgwick, “is a favorite Gothic word,”25
“homosexuality, still according to Sedgwick, becomes equivalent to the unspeakable in Gothic romance”26—as well as, I would argue, in Gothic-inspired texts such as The Moonstone. The “unspeakable” accusations that plague Jennings function like the elusive, unnamable specters that haunt the protagonists of the Gothic, “the first novelistic form in England to have close, relatively visible links to male homosexuality.”27 While there is every reason to believe that the accusations against Jennings are false, the possibility of their homosexual content evokes queerness and is supported by Jennings’s cohabitation with Candy, in whose arms he dies, exclaiming “Kiss me!” (456); his excitable references to Blake, whom he watches during the opium experiment with a throbbing heart and beating temples until at last, “I was obliged to look away from him—or I should have lost my self-control” (419); and the innuendo-laden scene between Jennings and Rachel at the experiment’s conclusion, in which Jennings finds Rachel kissing Blake. “‘You would have done it,’ she whispered, ‘in my place’” (425). It is, in fact, Jennings’s experiment that allows Rachel to take her place, by taking his place as Blake’s closest ally and dearest companion. The happy couple gone to London, Jennings confesses that his “brief dream of happiness is over” (425). Just as Jenny without Lizzie feels “solitary and helpless” (494), so Jennings without Blake feels “friendless and lonely” (425). Of course, neither character is actually unloved or alone—Jenny has Riah, just as Blake has Candy. Though unable to articulate it with precision, what they both are is lovelorn.

Freaks That Attract

While the majority of characters in Our Mutual Friend and The Moonstone are put off by the visible peculiarities of, respectively, Jenny and Jennings, Lizzie and Blake are drawn to these characters against the will of others. “You talk as if you were drawn or driven [to that] little crooked antic of a child, or old person, or whatever it is” (OMF 278), Charley Hexam reprimands his sister in an unsuccessful effort to undermine the relationship with Jenny that he thinks will make it difficult for Lizzie to “rise” in the world. Refusing to adhere to her brother’s wishes, Lizzie independently elects to continue lodging with Jenny. Consider Lizzie’s choice in light of Todd’s contention that, in the Victorian novel generally, “[f]emale friendship is the only social relationship [that] the heroine actively constructs. The family commonly selects the
lover (or the man nominates himself), where the woman chooses the friend.” In the virtuous heroine’s nomination of Jenny as her closest ally—and domestic partner—we see her independence asserted through her approval of and affection for the unconventional Jenny, who, contrary to Charley’s predictions, facilitates rather than deters Lizzie’s social transformation. Though an affair of the heart, so to speak, rather than of social ambition, Lizzie’s unconventional alliance with Jenny enables Lizzie to become both lady and wife.

A similar attraction exists between Jennings and Blake. Knocking on the door as Blake speaks the words, “I don’t know of a living person who can be of the slightest use to me,” Jennings enters Blake’s life, immediately taking his “attention captive” (321). Shortly thereafter, at a crowded railway station, the two men’s “eyes me[et] at the same moment” (321). “[T]he irrepressible Ezra Jennings”—Blake’s description—next appears in image, as Blake finds himself “idly drawing likenesses from memory”—“a dozen portraits at least”—of the man who, like a lover, he cannot get out of his mind (356). Though both his “appearance” and his reputation, “speaking from the popular point of view, [were] against him[,] it is not to be denied,” writes Blake, “that Ezra Jennings made some inscrutable appeal to my sympathies, which I found it impossible to resist” (364). Flouting public opinion and the judgment of the faithful steward Betteredge, Blake allies himself with the bizarre-looking stranger, exhibiting a trust that is by no means misplaced. Standing at “a place where the highway . . . branched off into two roads . . . watch[ing Jennings] walking farther and farther away from me; carrying farther and farther away with him what I now firmly believed to be the clue of which I was in search,” Blake “rash[ly]” decides to call Jennings back, a decision that Blake knows “might be the turning point of [his] life” (372). As Peter Thoms points out: “The importance of Blake’s eventual decision to confide in Jennings is emphasized by the way Collins suspensefully plays out the choosing with Blake finally halted in doubt at the figurative fork in the road. . . . It can be argued, then, that the most significant moment in Blake’s quest is not his reunion with Rachel but his union with Jennings, a decisive act of communion from which all the rest proceeds. Reunion with Rachel is the motivation for his quest and its symbolic fulfillment, but understanding Jennings more satisfactorily represents Blake’s personal development.” Blake not only understands but also approves of Jennings, though his endorsement alone is inadequate to remove the stigma of difference from the outcast doctor. In choosing him as a companion.
and ally, however, Blake inadvertently gives Jennings the chance to demonstrate his worth to others. Employing his differences, his interpretive and imaginative skills, on the hero’s behalf, Jennings makes the most of the opportunity and displays abilities that no one else possesses in an unselfish act that proves Blake’s innocence and secures him the hand of his beloved. This relationship between central and marginalized character, in which the latter demonstrates his value by assisting the former, directly parallels the dynamic between Lizzie and Jenny; as in Dickens’s novel, a powerful emotional same-sex attachment is at the heart of freakish sacrifice.

**Freaks That Dream**

If sacrifice is compelled by emotional attachment, it is enabled by the imagination. For Jenny and Jennings, fantasy, “a condition made necessary by pain”—both physical and emotional—“is also enabling”—an asset. For these suffering characters, fantasy, the realm of the imagination, is not only a shelter from the intolerable; it is also a means of sating unquenchable desires, queer or otherwise, and a practical resource that makes them of use. Deprived of grandparents, a mother, and a sober father, Jenny is further isolated by her small stature, bad back, and queer legs, which prevent her from playing with other children and fuel their cruelty toward her. To withstand their taunting, Jenny makes do with imaginary playmates, “long bright slanting rows” of children who swoop down and make her “light,” giving her “delicious ease and rest” (298). Though Jenny’s children leave her as she grows older and her physical pain diminishes, she continues to smell flowers that are not really there and to hear birds that “sing better than other birds” (290). As for her home life and the challenges of social interaction, Jenny bears her father’s alcoholism by envisioning herself as the parent of a troublesome child, whom she threatens, scolds, and disciplines. In uncomfortable situations with adults who intimidate her, she tells riddles, peers through imaginary glasses, and brings dolls to life as moral arbiters—as we see with “Mrs Truth. The Honourable” (397), who sits in judgment of Bradley Headstone. An imaginary “Him” (284) who will one day come to court and marry her serves to keep worries about her future at bay. Unable to extend her vision to preclude her future husband’s drunkenness, Jenny imagines “boiling liquid bubbling” down his throat in place of alcohol (294). Her world—even the world of her
imagination—may be darkened by alcohol, but Jenny will deal with it—with “Him,” as with her father—creatively.

Until she meets Lizzie, Jenny’s interaction with women is limited to the imagination. Just as, while a young child, Jenny watched children only from a distance, generating playmates from the realm of make-believe, so as an adolescent she creates doll-companions, turning live women into the dolls she earns her living clothing. “Making . . . perfect slave[s]” of the women she admires, Jenny “make[s] great ladies try [her] dresses on” (496, 495). Catching sight of someone who strikes her fancy, she “take[s] particular notice of her, and run[s] home and cut[s] her out and baste[s] her,” then comes back to examine her again, imagining her adorned in her dolls’ clothing, as she has imagined her dolls clothed in theirs. “When they go bobbing into the hall from the carriage, and catch a glimpse of my little physiognomy poked out from behind a policeman’s cape”—gazing, thus, illicitly—“I dare say they think I am wondering and admiring with all my eyes and heart, but they little think they’re only working for my dolls!” (496). Michie describes Jenny’s sewing as “a metaphor for the possibility of . . . female transformation and transfiguration,” but it is also a metonym for her queer desire. Her scissors, thread, and needles give form to her longing: shaping with her eyes, caressing with her hands, Jenny makes virtual contact with women otherwise beyond her reach.

As Jenny makes use of fantasy for income, so she employs it in changing her name. Shedding the name that identifies her queer desire, the former Fanny Cleaver elects to call herself Jenny Wren, the name of the bird-heroine in various “Cock Robin” stories that proliferated in the nineteenth century. A plain dresser who refuses to array herself in wedding finery, she is widowed on her wedding day. Though the dolls’ dressmaker has a happier ending than that of her nursery-rhyme counterpart, she is similarly disinterested in her own transformation into the traditional image of femininity. Our Mutual Friend’s queer Jenny Wren transforms not herself but others, turning ladies into dolls, her best friend into a lady, and the real-life clergyman who presides over her father’s funeral into a “doll clergyman [capable of] uniting two of my young friends in matrimony” (804). In a reversal of the Cock Robin story, in which the wren participates in a marriage ceremony that devolves into a ritual of death, Dickens’s young Wren defeats death by means of marriage, using her imagination as a means of communicating with Eugene and uncovering the word that, in securing Eugene’s marriage, saves his life.
Other fairy tales that Jenny invokes include Jack and the Beanstalk, Little Red Riding Hood, and, most frequently, Cinderella. Michie claims that Jenny “names herself ‘Cinderella,’” and in so doing “sets in motion the multiple ironies of the fairytale subtext.” Jenny, however, does not explicitly name—or ever call—herself Cinderella; rather, she invites the name by calling Riah “godmother” (492) and actuates the fantasy by pretending that Riah possesses the capacity to grant her wishes— sobriety for her father, freedom from her physical problems, and the return of days gone by when she and Lizzie shared a home. Jenny’s play-acting as Cinderella is indeed ironic, a temporary indulgence while Lizzie, the novel’s true Cinderella, is in hiding. Sitting at the fireside, telling fortunes, Lizzie cannot imagine herself into the role of Cinderella, cannot envision herself as the lady that flickers before her in the “hollow down by the flare” (404). Jenny does this for her, reading her veiled fantasies of love for Eugene as imaginative texts of unarticulated desire, just as she later reads Eugene’s fevered wish to make Lizzie his wife. Interpreting and articulating other people’s desire, Jenny herself acts the part of fairy godmother, transforming the working girl into a lady and wife—and in so doing sacrificing her beloved Lizzie to Eugene. These fairy-tale allusions made by the girl with the Rapunzelesque hair underscore Jenny’s linguistic, emotional, and practical capabilities: living in the real world but utilizing fancy to do so, she speaks two languages, ultimately serving as a translator not only between the realms of fantasy and reality but also between those of health and illness, childhood and adulthood, queerness and conventionality, margin and center.

Like Jenny, Jennings is, of necessity, resourceful, creative, and capable. When “the one man who had befriended” him lies dying before his eyes (368)—Mr. Candy having fallen ill after secretly dosing Blake with opium—the doctor’s assistant defies the advice of “two physicians of established local repute” (367), whose treatment views differ from his own. Detecting a “feebleness” in Candy that the others are unable to sense (367), Jennings administers stimulants, though he knows that in doing so he drives his colleagues from his—and his patient’s—bedside: “If I had been a happy man, if I had led a prosperous life, I believe I should have sunk under the task I had imposed on myself. But I had no happy time to look back at, no past peace of mind to force itself into contrast with my present anxiety and suspense—and I held firm to my resolution through it all” (368). “Death and I fought over the bed” (368), and Jennings’s stimulants prove life-saving. Distinct by admission, though not, he tells us, unnatural, Jennings explains to Blake the
burst of tears that follows: “Physiology says, and says truly, that some men are born with female constitutions—and I was one of them!” (369). Thus, Collins suggests, genetically coded intuition (a “feminine” trait) as well as circumstantial wretchedness enables Jennings’s service to others. Daring (limit pushing, in essence), perseverance (easily applied, suggests Jennings, when one’s life is a misery), and diagnostic (interpretive) and creative capabilities are the instruments at the freakish Jennings’s disposal in his facilitation of Candy’s physical recovery and, as we will see shortly, of Blake’s salvation. What the other physicians—like the novel’s other detectives—lack, Jennings possesses and freely gives.

The last exertions of Jennings’s life are spent on behalf of Blake, the former suffering the extremes of opium use to withstand the pain of his illness. “The progress of [his] disease has gradually forced [him] from the use of opium to the abuse of it” (375), and Jennings considers giving it up, since the “frightful dreams” that plague him while he is under its influence are worse than “the physical suffering” he must withstand without it (396). “A slight return of the old pain” is even “welcome” for its ability to “dispel the visions” of the past that opium inevitably brings on. Phantoms of the dead, “empty space,” “hideous . . . phosphorescen[ce],” and a grotesque image of “the one beloved face which I shall never seen again” are the substance of his nightmares (392). Perhaps generously, perhaps addictively, perhaps both, Jennings persists in his use of the drug because, he claims, the pain he would endure without it would slow his progress toward vindicating Blake. His nervous system “shattered,” his nights a “horror” (375), Jennings is nonetheless aided by opium in his investigation. Not only does it sustain—even as it tortures—Jennings, opium proves to be the key to the riddle of Blake’s unconscious theft—the key only the doctor’s assistant can determine, because of his firsthand experience with the effects of the drug. Functioning as a sort of imaginative potion for unlocking the truth, opium determines Blake’s innocence by demonstrating his guilt—his narcotic, unconscious, well-meaning abduction of the diamond—in an experiment conducted by Jennings. Free from calumny, Blake begins a new life, while Jennings, spent, finishes his own. Opium in The Moonstone is double-edged: a coping mechanism for Jennings and the means by which he clears Blake’s name, it is also the precipitous factor in his own demise. In Jennings’s narcotic nightmares, we see fantasy in excess. In his intuition-inspired assistance to Candy and Blake, we see imagination that proves useful. Where even the imagination turns on the much maligned outcast, it benefits those whom he serves.
Freaks That Translate

The help of these characters, though freely given, is actively solicited, in *The Moonstone* by a man who finds himself unexpectedly a criminal suspect and in *Our Mutual Friend* by a man pummeled into a state of incomprehensibility—to all but Jenny Wren. Mangled and immobilized by a savage beating and near drowning, Eugene Wrayburn asks that Jenny be sent to his sickbed. His summons is unexpected given that previously these characters have appeared together in only two scenes, in which, enduring Jenny for the sake of Lizzie, Eugene quickly grows “weary of the person of the house” (289). Though their mutual love for Lizzie may motivate Jenny’s readiness to go to him, Eugene beckons her not for any comfort she can offer Lizzie but for the help she can offer him. Referring to Jenny’s imaginary children, Eugene simultaneously acknowledges and requests the assistance of her powerful interpretive skills. Little more than a child herself, Jenny does for Eugene what her children did for her: read and ease pain as no one else can. Jenny’s familiarity with pain, her heightened imagination, and her sensitivity to unmet, often unexpressed, desires, some of those very aspects that make her different, make her valuable to the wounded Eugene on his “death bed.” Able to do more than merely sympathize, Jenny listens to, observes, and assists Eugene with the patience that pain has taught her, easing, turning, altering, adjusting, recognizing, and soothing Eugene’s pain with a “delicacy of touch” and a “fine . . . perception” learned through suffering and possessed by her alone (809). Although Eugene is unable to move so much as a hand, Jenny, “through this close watching . . . attain[s] an understanding of him that” is incomprehensible to even his best friend, who sees “the little creature” as “an interpreter between this sentient world and the insensible man” (809). Nursemaid and matchmaker, Jenny interprets and articulates Eugene’s desire to make Lizzie his “Wife” (811), as she earlier interpreted Lizzie’s undeclared love for Eugene, thus enabling the marriage that allows Eugene to flourish, physically and otherwise. Wrayburn enters the novel as a mere reflection in the Veneerings’ mirror, “buried alive at the back of his chair” (53). As Albert Hutter writes, “long before his near drowning and rescue by Lizzie, he is badly in need of resuscitation, if not resurrection.” But Hutter, like the fictional Mortimer, fails to note that Jenny also plays a role in Eugene’s resuscitation. The medium through which love is conducted, Jenny literally translates desire, in an act that ultimately saves Eugene’s life. Mortimer predicts that Eugene’s “noble
wife” turns out to be the “preserver of [his] life” (812), but this occurs only through Jenny's mediation. In the novel’s final pages, the gentleman Twemlow publicly argues that Lizzie is a lady because her marriage to Eugene makes her so; readers, however, know that Jenny, with her discovery of the “Word” (“Wife”) and its communication to Mortimer, is the person truly responsible for Lizzie’s accession to the status of lady (811). It is a gift—and a sacrifice. Hiding within her “golden bower,” weeping at the wedding of Eugene and Lizzie as she weeps at the bedside parting of Eugene and Mortimer, Jenny is really weeping for herself and for the loss of her “particular friend.”

As Jenny translates Eugene’s wishes for Mortimer, so does Ezra Jennings, in The Moonstone, interpret the ailing Candy’s words for Franklin Blake. In so doing, he, too, facilitates a marriage for his favored companion, rendering himself, at least partially, redundant. Admittedly having “attempted to make [his] poor friend’s loss of memory the means of bettering his acquaintance with” Blake (376), Jennings’s ultimate goal—for which he makes the ultimate sacrifice—is Blake’s happiness. Unwilling to dismiss Candy’s words as nonsense, Jennings decodes and relays their meaning. Familiar with intense pain, colorful dreams, and the power of imagination, Jennings uses the same “principle which one adopts in putting together a child’s ‘puzzle,’” gives “order and shape” (370) to “the patient’s ‘wanderings’” (369), and “penetrate[s] through the obstacle of disconnected expression to the thought that was underlying it connectedly all the time” (382).

His translation of Mr. Candy’s discursive exertions, insensible to all but himself, is insufficient on its own to prove Blake’s innocence. Jennings’s notes, which “produce . . . the [words] which Mr Candy himself would have used if he had been capable of speaking connectedly” (382), serve only as a guide to his “bold experiment” (384). No mere scientific experiment, Jennings’s experiment is an imaginative one that hinges on the same “element of intuition” that he employed in saving Candy’s life. Just as on that earlier occasion, Jennings’s colleagues looked down on what seemed to them “like unreasonableness” (663), so, too, on the night of the experiment do Betteredge and Blake demonstrate doubts about Jennings’s instincts. Chiding Bruff for having “no more imagination than a cow!” (415), Jennings proceeds with his attempted recreation of the past, which, like Jenny’s enactment of the Cinderella fantasy, is compounded of “multiple ironies.” A man who admittedly believes that “we should all be happier . . . if we could but completely forget!” (365), Jennings is also “a man with no future [who]
help[s] a friend recover his past,”37 “renew[ing]” a love “which is of [his] bringing back” (394).38

The Limits of Difference

In facilitating the marriage of the same-sex companion to whom each is affectionately devoted, Jenny and Jennings use skills that only they possess, thereby demonstrating the functionality of difference. The negative connotations of freakishness, these novels seem to tell us, are matters of faulty perception; while inflexible and morally questionable characters mock and fear freaks, open-minded and redeemed characters support them. Eugene’s request that Jenny come to his sickbed is a sign of his moral rehabilitation: now that he is morally fit, he comprehends Jenny’s value, just as now he recognizes Lizzie’s true worth—her fitness to be his wife. And just as Lizzie, privileged because of her marriage to Wrayburn, is recognized by Twemlow as a lady, Jenny, privileged “because of her association with Mrs Eugene Wrayburn,” is recognized by the Harmons “as having a claim on their protection” (875). In The Moonstone’s conclusion, Bruff and Betteredge, who had doubted Jennings, acknowledge their wrong, ask his pardon, and sign a written statement in support of him as “atonement” (423). Regeneration—spiritual and moral reformation—prevails.

Unlike freakishness, same-sex bonding is not a matter of perception but of extent, so while freakishness has its merits, queerness, manifestly, does not. The taint of homosexual attachment carries with it the penalty of marginality to the degree that that taint persists. Having served her purpose at Eugene’s bedside, Jenny takes up a “new and removed position” from which she is no longer able to “see the sufferer’s face,” enabling Lizzie to take her rightful—soon to be legally sanctioned—“station by [his] pillow” (812). Having overseen Eugene’s transformation, Jenny relinquishes her central location, retreating to the corner of the room, the edge of the text. In her final scene—an interlude within a chapter titled “Persons and Things in General” (4.16)—Jenny, less proud than we have seen her previously, meets Sloppy, the “cabinet-mak[er],” for the first time. “And what do you think of Me?” she asks. “‘Out with it!’ said Miss Wren, with an arch look. ‘Don’t you think me a queer little comicality? . . . I am lame.’” Freed from the euphemisms of a “bad back” and “queer legs,” Jenny takes her crutch in hand, demonstrating—and narrating—her walk for Sloppy. “Hoppetty, Kicketty, Pep-peg-peg. Not
pretty; is it?” (881, 882). In the moment in which she enters the world of heteronormativity, meeting and accepting “Him,” Jenny asserts her lameness. Spoken, the lameness emerges, as, unspoken, the queer disappears. The nubile Jenny is left with only one sign of difference—which must be named so that the unnamed can be extinguished. As a final act, Jenny hands Sloppy the doll she has made for Lizzie’s daughter: “‘Take care of her, and there’s my hand, and thank you again.’ ‘I’ll take more care of her than if she was a gold image,’ said Sloppy, ‘and there’s both my hands, Miss, and I’ll soon come back again’” (883). The “her” with which Sloppy is entrusted is not just the doll. It is also Jenny herself, the “Her” for whose hand, we are to presume, he will shortly return. Further, and more critically, it is Jenny’s (queer) desire that, transferred to him—not necessarily as object but surely as bearer—becomes heteronormative.

Ezra Jennings, unlike Jenny Wren, remains not only associated with the possibility of homosexuality but also, inescapably, infused with colonial blood. Whereas Jenny can grow up and out of deviant desire, Jennings can outgrow neither the queerness of his “female constitution [. . .]” (369) nor the darkness of his skin, both of which mark him from birth. Although, like the dolls’ dressmaker, Jennings removes himself from the bedside of the man (whose character) he resurrected, allowing the novel’s heroine to take his place, unlike Jenny he remains other as a result of queer domesticity (continued cohabitation with Candy), inherent gender deviance, and race. The taint, then, that remains with Jennings is both literal and elusive: dark skin that he cannot shed and dark rumors that he cannot outrun. Franklin’s absolution and reunion with Rachel, both facilitated by Jennings, are in many ways the equivalent of a rise to manhood across his back, the back of a queer, colonial body that deteriorates in its final efforts to assist the heterosexual Englishman. Though Blake and Jennings once coexisted in a “fraternity of guilt,” Blake’s guilt, while real, was only temporary. Absolved of wrongful intent, Blake is wholly redeemed. Jennings’s “guilt,” on the other hand, though unjustified, is never disproved. “His story is”—and remains—“a blank” (455) and death his only haven from unnamed “disgrace” (374). His request that his story die with him, that he be buried with his letters, notes, journal entries, and manuscripts in an unmarked grave, underscores the tragedy of queer erasure and colonial exploitation. Homosexual desire, though transmutable (as with Jenny), is inassimilable when racially other. Freakishness may have its merits, but, finally, queerness and “darkness” do not (321). The lame can use
crutches, the queer body can pass, but the colonial body, the racial hybrid, like the queer character who persists in his associations, must be made to disappear.

**Aggregates That Threaten**

“Queer theorists,” writes Robert McRuer, “are now used to unpacking how performances of heterosexuality depend on gay bodies and their repudiation,” but they do not address how these performances are “relat[ed] to ability and disability.”42 McRuer has called for “an alliance between queer theory and critical disability” in order “to affirm, strategically, that the two activities are in many ways of a piece.”43 Similarly, Judith Butler has argued that “collective disidentifications”—the feminist and the queer are her examples—“can facilitate a reconceptualization of which bodies matter and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern.”44 The challenge is to bolster power through strategic alliance without inadvertently supporting the rhetoric of sameness that, in collapsing difference, obscures it. How do we value the queer, the disabled, the politically, socially, even geographically marginalized without, as McRuer wisely warns we should not, “serv[ing] as metaphors for each other”?45 In other words, how do we work “collective disidentification[. . .]” to political advantage without sacrificing the very differences that we have worked so hard to disentangle from the dust mounds of history, literary and otherwise?

Furthermore, how flexible is the queer? And how flexible do we want it to be? Providing background for his analysis of the 1997 film *As Good as It Gets*, McRuer describes how twentieth-century bodies “placed in an inevitable heterosexual relationship and visually represented as able” are reliant on “other bodies”—“invariably queer and disabled”—that “must function flexibly and objectively as sites on which the epiphanic moment”—a moment of “clarity that . . . allows the protagonist to carry, to the close of the narrative, a sense of subjective wholeness that he or she lacked previously”—“can be staged.”46 The “heteronormative epiphany” translates into an “expansion” of identity47 and is coupled with a retraction of the other. In examining two of Victorian fiction’s most memorable freaks, I have tried to show the ways in which, because of their queer coding, they elucidate the uses of queer bodies and abilities. Further, I have demonstrated that in the limited contexts of *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Moonstone*, the freakish body matters because of
its flexibility. Well before there was a big screen, difference was, in its own way, shown to be procreative. At the same time, however, it was quite specifically not self-generating: in producing heteronormativity, it was itself consumed. Flexibility leaks (difference) even as it yields (the norm). Another’s gain, you might say, is the other’s loss. This loss might, as in the case of Jenny, be one of (queer) otherness itself; it also might, as in the case of Jennings, in whom the taint of sexual and racial difference remains, mean the loss of life; and it might simply mean, as in As Good as It Gets, that “disability, . . . queerness,” and the character who embodies them, “having served their purpose, . . . are then hustled offstage together.”

McRuer argues that “the homophobia and ableism represented” by this film enact a “new, improved, and flexible homophobia and able-ism,” one that is “unique to the past few decades.” While I certainly do not agree with the novelty of flexible bigotry, I am otherwise in accord with McRuer’s assessment. Merely modernized versions of flexible freak-fetishism, the self-congratulatory impulses of flexible homophobia and ableism are also self-deceiving, masking an imperative to deny behind a willingness to tolerate. How do we counter this more subtle form of violence? By yet more flexibility? How can we, scholars of the queer, the disabled, and the colonial, intent on recovery and reinscription, use flexibility to our advantage without falling into the traps it so often sets—traps, such as those of sacrifice, elision, and disappearance? Is it really possible to form the kind of alliances, the collective disidentifications suggested by McRuer and Butler, without glossing over the multiple differences of the abjected body, those multiple differences so dangerously “compelled to pass under the sign of the same”? Which differences will we find ourselves hustling offstage?

These are important questions, as evinced by the fact that two of us in this collection (Martha Stoddard Holmes and I) have grappled with them—and both, interestingly, via Collins’s work. Stoddard Holmes makes broad use of the term “queer,” reading Dexter, a legless, wheelchair-bound character in The Law and the Lady (1875), “as a queer . . . character” based on “his atypical body’s work as desire’s instrument, conduit, and register.” He is one of several “‘queer’ men” whose association with Valeria, the novel’s heroine, helps “revive[. . .] [her] marriage.” Dexter, “half man, half chair,” is “only the most visible thread in a fabric of queerness that organizes and gives substance to [the] marriage plot. . . . Hetero-able normativity, as Collins posits it, clearly relies on the queer, disabled energy Dexter generates.” In Stoddard Holmes’s interpretation, the queer includes “[t]he desires
associated with [Dexter’s] extraordinary body and unconventional behavior”; Valeria’s “mimetic attraction to the women in Eustace’s former social circle”; the desires and behaviors of the other “odd” men she terms, à la Queer Eye, the “Fab Four”; and, more broadly still, “the variety of practices and pleasures that underpin human relationships.”

In this theoretical amalgamation, nuance itself become coextensive with the queer. In valuing difference by queering difference, Stoddard Holmes inadvertently devalues—by co-opting—the queer.

Frequently convergent though rarely if ever equivalent, differences—the queer and the postcolonial, for example, as in my reading of the doctor’s assistant—should be textually distinguished, regardless of which theoretical approaches to difference are applied. If we fail to do so, we risk replicating some of the problems we are attempting to confront, problems such as the disregard of historically contingent hierarchies of differences, the elision of differences, the naturalization of associations between the abject, and the correlative reinforcement of the normative as a realm apart. Think, for example, of the conglomeration of obsessive-compulsive disorder and bigotry in the character of Melvin in As Good as It Gets: the two “are repeatedly linked, narratively and visually, and the link is naturalized, [though] there is nothing natural about this link.” When Melvin medicates his illness, his bigotry diminishes, suggesting “that there is no material separation between disability and serious flaws in character.” Similarly, physical and mental disability are collapsed in the aforementioned Dexter of The Law and the Lady, who deteriorates mentally as he deteriorates physically.

A 2005 call for papers for a panel titled “The Queer Space of the Postcolonial” sought papers that read postcolonial space as queer space. Instead of the intersection that I had anticipated, I found an appropriation.

This panel proposes to explore the ways in which the postcolonial nation and subject are seen through literature to inhabit what Judith Halberstam, in In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives, terms “queer space.” If we do, indeed, “detach queerness from sexual identity,” we can begin to imagine those spaces which function in non-normative time patterns and across spaces which escape conventional definition. . . . The rendering of the “postcolonial” as queer allows for ways in which literatures can be seen to be revealing narratives which must necessarily work against the concepts of space and time which have been defined by the normative values of the West.
The proposed panel stretches what Halberstam herself, on the first page of *In a Queer Time and Place*, admits is “perhaps [the] overly ambitious claim that there is such a thing as ‘queer time’ and ‘queer space.’” 62 “Queer time” is, for Halberstam, a post-AIDS phenomenon; 63 it is an “adjustment in the way in which we think about time,” which allows for “new ways of understanding the nonnormative behaviors that have clear but not essential relations to gay and lesbian subjects. . . . ‘Queer space’ refers to place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage . . . .” 64 Queer, in other words, is not merely synonymous with the nonnormative; it is not, simply, other. Though Halberstam is willing to “detach queerness from sexual identity,” she asserts, again on page 1, that “queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction.” 65 A misappropriation of Halberstam, the call for papers nonetheless—perhaps, all the more—illustrates my concerns about not only “collective disidentifications” but also the increasingly inattentive use of “the queer.” Having concluded my reading of the call for papers, I was left wondering: What place is there for the queer within the postcolonial, when the postcolonial is the queer? Imagine, for a moment, reading the queer as postcolonial. Who would dare? Is the former proposition any less problematic, even if well intended? What would be gained by such an endeavor? What would be lost? Queer difference is real difference—even as it is sameness (like and unlike that against which it is defined, but by no means equivalent to other forms of “difference”)—and to appropriate it at the expense of its historical—though admittedly continually emergent—meanings, to move not through but utterly beyond its association with socially deviant desires, identities, affinities, tendencies, behaviors, and bodies—is to reinter the queer body in the anonymity of mass abjection. A young scholar, I hesitate to entrench myself in this position, but it is, now, where I stand. I do not object to theoretical alliances, but I suggest we form them with caution, treating our subjects with distinction.

Specificity, fortunately, assists us by struggling to assert itself. The fictions that I have examined demonstrate how even when they are, finally, swallowed whole by the text, queer, disabled, dark bodies force us to consider the ways in which they are “fully human,” 66 fully unique. The poietic power that Jenny and Jennings, because “freaks,” possess, their ability to “draw[. . .] people together and reconstruct[. . .] community,” 67 distinguishes them. The representational connections between freakishness, queer desire, racial hybridity, and disability examined here
in the context of the nineteenth-century novel, but also, clearly, evident elsewhere, illustrate the ways in which such categories—and the people who manifest them—have been, and continue to be, both valued and devalued. Perhaps these associations, conflations, and sometime elisions have something to teach the politically motivated theorist who wishes to form practical and theoretical alliances without merely reordering hierarchies of difference, without incurring further loss.

**Notes**

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2. “I’m a Doll’s Dressmaker,” says Jenny (273). Although when Jenny speaks of her occupation she uses the singular form of “doll,” all other such references, including the two chapter headings in which she figures (4.10 and 4.11), use the plural: “dolls’ dressmaker” (880). One wonders what Dickens had in mind in creating this consistent discrepancy—what he had in Jenny’s mind, that is. Did Jenny envision always the one doll as she worked? And was Lizzie this muse? Except above, where I quote Jenny, I will also use the more accurate plural form of the word.


10. Collins quite pointedly constructs Jennings as a multiracial character. His
model for him, a doctor’s assistant whom he met while on a walking tour with Dickens, was a strikingly pale man: “What was startling in him was his remarkable paleness, [his] extraordinary pallor. There was no vestige of colour in the man” (qtd. in Nuel Pharr Davis, The Life of Wilkie Collins [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956], 250, citing Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices and Other Stories [London: Chapman, 1890], 26).

11. Heller drew my attention to the significance of Mackenzie’s novel in The Moonstone (190n8). In it, Mr. Harley condemns the “conquests in India” as exploitative and lawless (Henry Mackenzie, The Man of Feeling [London, Paris, and Melbourne: Cassell, 1893], 150). The British, he notes, “drained the treasuries,” “oppress[. . .] the industry of their subjects,” and rule by a militia “covered with the blood of the vanquished” (151).


13. Heller, 156; Taylor, 189.


16. Ibid., 72.


21. Sedgwick, Between, 164.

22. No other critic of whom I am aware has identified Jenny as queer, while only one critic whom I encountered, Alexander Welsh, notes the “homoeroticism” of the Jennings plot (234).

23. Michie, 212.

24. Ibid.


27. Sedgwick, Between, 91; emphasis added. Recall that Jenny and Jennings are both physically—visibly—marked as different.

28. Todd, 2.


30. Here, Helena Michie writes specifically of Jenny, although her assessment is applicable to Jennings as well (211).
31. Ibid., 210.
32. Ibid., 211.
34. Dickens, 823, 272. See also Michie, 210.
36. Michie, 211.
39. Sedgwick cites Jean Baker Miller (Toward a New Psychology of Women [Boston: Beacon, 1976], chapter 1), who distinguishes between “temporary” and “permanent” inequality. Miller’s logic—“gender difference marks a structure of permanent inequality, while the relation between adult and child is the prototype of the temporary inequality that in principle—or in ideology—exists only in order to be overcome” (qtd. in Sedgwick, Between, 194)—supports my contention that Jenny’s youthful freakishness is potentially temporary—or at least assimilable—whereas Jennings’s gender “deviance” and racial “difference” preclude his incorporation into the normative.
40. This analysis was suggested to me by Lillian Nayder’s “Agents of Empire in The Woman in White” (in Victorian Newsletter 83 [Spring 1993]): “The growth of the imperial hero, in Collins’s novel [The Woman in White] and in Victorian literature generally, is only made possible by the primitive conditions of the ‘savages,’ since it is measured by the ability to withstand or resist them” (5).
41. Welsh, 224.
43. Ibid., 97.
45. McRuer, 99.
46. Ibid., 84. In his discussion of “flexible bodies,” McRuer cites Emily Martin, Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture from the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS (Boston: Beacon, 1994).
47. McRuer, 92, 96.
48. Ibid., 95.
49. Ibid., emphasis added.
50. “Queers and people with disabilities should insist, inflexibly, that we will not serve as metaphors for each other and will not simply be tolerated, especially when that tolerance is used, paradoxically, to shore up heterosexual, able-bodied perspectives that continue to subordinate queerness and disability” (ibid., 99).

52. Martha Stoddard Holmes, “Queering the Marriage Plot: Wilkie Collins’s The Law and the Lady,” in this volume, 239.

53. Ibid., 240.


55. Stoddard Holmes, 240.

56. Ibid., 239, 248, 240, 246, 250.

57. McRuer, 91.

58. Ibid.

59. This problematic overlap goes uninterpreted by Stoddard Holmes.


61. Ibid.


63. Ibid., 2–6.

64. Ibid., 6.

65. Ibid., 1.


67. Thoms, 154.