Theater Figures

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Allen, Emily.
Theater Figures: The Production of the Nineteenth-Century British Novel.
The Ohio State University Press, 2003.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28456.

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If Sir Walter Scott used the figure of theater, or theatricality, to legitimize a completely different novelistic project from those of Frances Burney and Jane Austen, the ease with which he did so illustrates the ideological flexibility of theater’s tarnished image. While Burney and Austen individually struggled to associate the novelistic with the feminine by disassociating that feminine from the spectacular and the corporeal, Scott handily realigned femininity with theatricality in his attempt to construct a new kind of bourgeois masculinity. Because Scott’s brand of middle-class manhood appropriated the positive emotional qualities that had come to be associated with the female, femininity itself was emptied out of all but its most debased content in a symbolic reversal of fortune. What Scott shared with both Burney and Austen, however, was a common structure; all three novelists cast the figure of performance in an oppositional and apotropaic role, constructing a series of doubles in which the abjected theatrical character allows the novel to ward off the ideological threat of theater and the generic threat of other novelistic forms. Madame Duval’s vulgar materiality props up Evelina’s suffering inwardness and the novel’s claims to middle-class respectability; Fanny Price’s readerly enclosure is likewise purchased by the theatrical exteriority of a Mary Crawford or a Maria Bertram; and Darsie Latimer’s civic masculinity, the hallmark of the Waverley Novels, is secured by the removal of the be-robed Pretender. While this kind of doubling or splitting is by no means peculiar to the novel’s
treatment of theater, or even to the novel, it does take on a particular generic charge in theatrical, or antitheatrical fictions. The theatrical doppelgänger had become such a familiar trope by the mid-nineteenth century that two ostensibly pro-theatrical novels from the 1840s treat doubling not only as a tactic but also as an explicit subject. Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840) surrounds its child heroine with uncanny twins, doubles, and replicas in its apparent lament for the lost theatrical culture of mass popular entertainment, while Geraldine Jewsbury’s *The Half Sisters* (1848) makes doubling a family matter in its self-conscious reversal of the conventional pairing of middle-class heroine and abject actress.

In the admittedly unconventional pairing of these two very different novels, I offer a study in contrasts as a tribute to the topic at hand. And, indeed, the novels appear as oppositional as one could wish: the first, by the most popular male author of the day, takes theatricality as its muse and *modus operandi*, celebrating eccentric play even as it elevates the most conventional of Victorian heroines to the status of feminine ideal; the second, by a female author known at the time for her political essays and for her scandalous first novel, *Zoe*, is anything but playful in its polemical attack on the very feminine ideal embodied by Dickens’s Little Nell. Where Dickens grounds the mimetic world of ludic excess and theatrical transformation in the static body of the sentimental heroine, Jewsbury takes as her heroine a professional actress in an attempt to unsettle the sentimental relations of the middle-class home. What the novels share, however, is a fascination with twins, sisters, and look-a-likes that not only helps them disentangle the feminine ideal from her theatrical relations, but also allows them to work out the strained generic relations between those related forms, the novel and theater, and between competing conceptions of what middle-class fiction should be and do. Both Dickens and Jewsbury, moreover, had an active hand in shaping the early-Victorian literary market and in training the newly literate mass audience that they both inherited from Scott and made (over) for themselves.

I will argue in this chapter that mid-Victorian ideas of domesticity—those represented within novels and those constructed around the reading of novels—had everything to do with that freakish, often abject area outside the charmed domestic circle; however, the domestic is tied to its others not only through a simple logic of opposition and expulsion, but also through a relationship of familiarity and mutual need. This apparently paradoxical double-logic is perhaps best exemplified in Freud’s concept of the uncanny, specifically the way that, in German, the *heimlich* (the homelike) is yoked to its obverse, the *unheimlich* (the unhomelike, or, in English, “the uncanny”). As Freud writes in “The Uncanny,” “The unheimlich is what was once heimisch, familiar”
(245); indeed, the “uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (241). As the repressed has a habit of returning, the unheimlich haunts the heimlich, provoking an unease that, like the nausea and disgust that greet the abject, flows from the indistinction of boundaries. So it is with the figure of theater: although various novels may seek to expel theatrical figures (the Heimlich maneuver of my title), theater continues to figure in the most heimisch of domestic scenarios and in the heart of the domestic novel. The opposite is also true: even what seem like protheatrical novels (those that try to bring the theatrical home to the domestic space) cannot help but make abject those figures that they need to expel in order to define their own gender and generic boundaries. In other words, the psychoanalytical logic of both the abject and the uncanny applies to both the gender and genre troubles of the nineteenth-century domestic novel.

Shopping the Novel

Two apparently contradictory events characterized the literary scene of the early-Victorian period: the explosion of the mass market and the domestication of the novel form and its middle-class reading public. The first of these events led to increased revenues for and intensified competition within an ever-growing literary marketplace. The second created the illusion of a domestic haven that the market could not reach. The “hundreds of thousands—ay, millions!” of readers that Archibald Constable had projected for Scott did materialize, but they did so in a surprisingly unmaterialistic way. Never mind the filthy lucre clutched in their acquisitive palms and greasing printing presses all over England; these millions of readers were not shoppers, but family. The metaphor of the nation as middle-class family reading circle—so different from either the eighteenth century’s republic of letters or the Romantic period’s divided reading publics—did much to cure the alienating image of the “mass” market, and in many ways represents the fulfillment of such fantasies of middle-class reading as we saw in Evelina and Mansfield Park. But even in those early fantasies, the domesticity of reading was undercut by its relation to the market (and to performance), and so it was in the 1840s, all the more clearly.

We can give significant credit for both the explosion and the domestication of the mass market to Charles Dickens’s “invention” of the serial form with his 1836 debut novel, The Pickwick Papers, which was published under the pseudonym “Boz.” While serialization was not exactly new—Scott’s novels had, for
example, been reissued in parts in the 1820s—the runaway success of *The Pickwick Papers* was quite refreshing to its publishers, Chapman and Hall, and led to many more of its kind. Serialization differed in key ways from both the expensive triple-decker format that held sway at the polite lending libraries and from the inexpensive, single-volume reprints that had been popularized to market Scott. Serialization made novel reading cheap (even cheaper than a single volume), long lasting (up to two years to complete a novel in parts), and highly social (as readers discussed the plots as they unfolded). A number of critics have theorized what this shift in publishing practice meant for Victorian readers and Victorian culture at large. Norman Feltes, for example, has influentially discussed the ways in which serialization embodied capitalist economics, while Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund have extended the argument to address how the serial forged an “ideological harmony” with its middle-class readership. According to Hughes and Lund, serial reading speaks to its Victorian audience not only because it chimes with the values of capitalism (investment over time, delayed gratification, etc.), but also because it mirrors and requires key Victorian beliefs: in the narrative of personal development, in the value of patience and loyalty, in the importance of disciplined desire, in the nonreversible narratives of domestic life (courtship, marriage, child rearing, etc.), and in the sure, slow growth of empire and historical progress. Because serial stories took so long in the telling, they became “entwined with the reader’s own sense of lived experience and passing time” and serialized characters “could come to seem part of a reader’s own extended family or circle of friends.” It is notoriously dangerous to speculate about the actual “middle-class reader” or a single “middle-class readership,” but the point is that the metaphor of domestic reading performs the ideological work by which an unwieldy mass readership becomes a fantasized middle-class readership. This fantasy hides the fractures within “the” reading public and “the” nation, making both seem homogenous and whole—an open secret that explains why everyone and no one could claim to be surprised when Wilkie Collins later “discovered” an “Unknown Public” of working-class readers within England’s very middle-class midst. While serialization made fiction available to individual buyers, it also helped group those individuals into a domestic, national, and classed unit—the English middle class. Not surprisingly, the fiction these readers consumed in serialized form was also domesticated. While still popular with readers, Scott’s historical romances gave way to the domestic realism that so many scholars have associated with Victorian England’s “separate spheres” ideology and the middle-class hegemony it brought with it, which depended in large part on the idea of “individual” and “interior” character that novel reading produced and confirmed. As we saw in chapter 1, this psychological subject—the paradox of a
classed individual—represented both the wished-for limit of market culture and the long, penetrative reach of that culture into the domestic and psychological “interiors” of the nation.

If serialization radically changed the experience of reading and the metaphors of readership, however, it worked an equally powerful transformation on the concept of authorship. On the one hand, serialization threatened to make authorship as cheap as it made novels. Writers became akin to intellectual factory workers who wrote on demand, on schedule, and for profit. On the other hand, the “entwining” of serialized fiction with real life forged intimate bonds between readers and the author. As Mary Poovey writes of the changes that turned writers into family relations and commercial machines, “The individualization of the reader and the personalization of the writer of the text were, however, the effects of exactly the opposite formation at the site of the novel’s production. Because of the absolute standardization of the [serial] form . . . the writer was constructed not as an individual . . . but as just one instance of labor, and interchangeable part subject to replacement in case of failure” (104). It was precisely because of this paradox, Poovey argues, that the image of the writer came to perform important ideological work in mid-Victorian England. Because he was beyond commerce and a slave to it, the writer became “a site at which the instabilities implicit in market relations surfaced, only to be variously worked over and sometimes symbolically resolved” (105). Literary work, Poovey writes, “was the work par excellence that denied and exemplified the alienation written into capitalist work” (106).

Perhaps no writer existed on such intimate and familial terms with the Victorian “public” as Charles Dickens, who spoke “for” and “from the hearth”, as D. A. Miller writes (88). He also spoke, quite urgently, to England’s pocketbook, and his twinned commercial and artistic success made him the new king of the literary market and the darling of readers everywhere. For Dickens, as for other Victorian novelists, it was the role of gentleman “author” that helped remove the commercial taint of writing for profit. Robert Patten has shown how Dickens’s early career demonstrates this shift from writer to author. In the two years following *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens successfully negotiated with his new publisher, Richard Bentley, for the things that would “free him from journeyman drudgery” (“From Sketches to *Nickleby,*” 21)—more money, a better contract, and greater control over his copyright. In 1838, the author known as “Boz” unmasked as Charles Dickens, and the final double number of *Nicholas Nickleby* ran with a portrait of the artist as middle-class gentleman (see figure 3). As Patten writes of this portrait by Daniel Maclise, its iconography “became the canonical way of representing the bourgeois writer for the next decade” (31). Completing the frontispiece is an etched facsimile of Dickens's...
handwriting, with the words “Faithfully Yours, Charles Dickens,” cementing what Patten calls “the relationship between the author *in propria persona* and his readers” (32). Although Dickens was able to do *in propria persona* what Scott could only do behind his *authorial* persona, their artistic poses were really quite similar: both consecrated the writer as author and sought to elevate him above commercial trade. The difference is that by making a personal appearance Dickens both forged a more intimate bond with a readership to whom he could truly belong (“Faithfully Yours”) in a sentimental exchange that transcended the market *and* ran the dangerous risk of commodifying himself as product. Indeed, the frontispiece of *Nicholas Nickleby* turns the mark of authenticity *sine qua non*—the “live” signature—into an endlessly reproducible textual artifact (which is quite a switch from Frances Burney and Walter Scott, who both went to great lengths to disguise their own handwriting so
as to separate themselves from the publishing trade). Perhaps this easy transformation to authorial commodity is one reason that Dickens continued to take such an interest in the issues of authorial copyright that were being negotiated in Parliament during the years 1837 to 1841 and which culminated in the 1842 Domestic Copyright Act. Dickens wanted to own, not to be owned.6

Mary Poovey has written of the “individualization” of authorship that it “solved’ the contradiction between the two competing images of the writer—the ‘genius’ and the cog in the capitalist machine—at the same time that it assured the writer a constructive and relatively lucrative social role” (106). Because an author like Dickens could appear both exceptional—as his title as “the Inimitable” suggests—and representative at once, he could come to embody the paradox of the classed individual and to occupy a position both above and inside the market. “Charles Dickens” became both the owner and producer of private intellectual property and the brand name for a kind of fictional, sentimental property common to all. The circulation of Dickensian fiction through the homes of England thus helped to produce not only the full-blown Victorian literary market, but also the idea of a common domesticity that could withstand and cure market fluctuation with its constancy and affection. The individual and psychologized subjects that occupied the domestic space of reading were a guarantee against the market and walking advertisements for its naturalization.

Before going on to consider a Dickens novel that thematizes all of these things (reading, domesticity, sentiment, and the market) through and alongside a persistent theatricality, it is important to remind ourselves what these things have to do with theater. First, theater is frequently represented by the novel as constitutively antagonistic to the novel’s own charmed circle of middle-class domestic reading and true sentiment (as opposed to the false sentiments of play-acting). Second, theater is often linked to the market through metaphors of spectacle and consumption, a coupling that allows the novel to insist upon its own distance from the market. Of course, the novel’s separation from the market is pure fiction, and not only because the novel is a commercial artifact: the novel’s formation of “interior” character actually enables the commercial transformation of society that it appears to resist. As Elaine Hadley writes, that very interiority is itself an effect and an expression of market culture: “Even as relationships became mediated by market transactions, by geographic distance, by the specialization of labor, and by other barriers to physical intimacy, a concomitant alienation arose that was figured as interior and, as the [nineteenth] century progressed, psychological. The outer, visible person appeared to possess little relation to this inner, utterly invisible ‘character’” (84). Hadley argues, moreover, that interior character came to be
understood in contradistinction to theatrical (exterior) character only as the late eighteenth century emerged from what she describes as a “theatricalized society that widely imagined identity in social terms, with comparatively little emphasis on inner-outer paradigms” (84) into a culture of market capitalism that produced and required the inner-outer split of proprietary subjectivity. For Hadley, melodramatic theater and its residual “melodramatic mode” could best resist the classifying imperatives of a market culture, which became most fully entwined with the novel. She writes of the 1830s, “The gradual erection of the generic boundaries between the novel and melodrama at this time seems to constitute another contemporary instance of the principle of classification and its radically transformative demarcations between public and private spheres. Unlike stage melodrama, the novel was deriving its cultural distinctiveness through its association with procedures of privatization” (116). Private property, private space, private reading, and private identity all played into the logic of market culture—and were all defined in contradistinction to the “public” acts of theater by a form that was, in fact, much more deeply implicated than theater in the ways of the market. As D. A. Miller writes of the novel’s scene of private consumption, “There is no doubt that the shift in the dominant literary form from the drama to the novel . . . had to do with the latter’s superior efficacy in producing and providing for privatized subjects” (88). That privatized subject, as Miller has shown, was already riddled through with the public, institutional culture for which it provided an enabling, domesticating mask.

Representations of theater not only help novels construct novelistic, interior space, but they also shield that private space from its own corrupt involvement in the market. The private individual, who, in Miller’s terms, goes to the novel for both creation and recreation, comes away from the encounter with theater’s tainted figure distinct and clean. The abjection with and for which the novel approaches its generic double allows for the working out of a string of “individual” identities: generic, readerly, and authorial. As we will see in The Old Curiosity Shop, a novel given over to weird twins and singular freaks, doubling makes possible the formation of singularity in more ways than one. Through a cascade of theatrical doubles, Dickens works out and through his relationship to theater and to the market—and to the alienating effects of performing authorial identity for a domestic audience.

**Theatrophilia: Dickens and the Limits of Performance**

When Mrs. Jarley, proprietress of “the only stupendous collection of real waxwork in the world” (271), finds she needs to re-tailor her show for an elite girl’s
school, a simple costume change is all it takes to remake identity: "Mr. Pitt in a nightcap and bedgown, and without his boots, represented the poet Cowper with perfect exactness; and Mary Queen of Scots in a dark wig, white shirt-collar, and male attire, was such a complete image of Lord Byron that the young ladies screamed when they saw it" (288). While this comic episode from *The Old Curiosity Shop* illustrates the fluidity of fictional character that so often distinguishes Dickensian theatricality, it also points to an anxiety in the novel over identity and performance. It may seem counterintuitive and even rather dour to propose that the author widely considered the most theatrical of the Victorian period—the author whose works were so frequently adapted for the stage, who himself wrote plays and was the friend of players, who once considered a career as a professional actor (but famously missed his audition), and who is well known for having claimed that "Every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage"—harbored not-so-secret affinities with the century’s antitheatrical front. I do not mean to suggest, however, that *The Old Curiosity Shop* is anything less than a brilliantly theatrical novel. Indeed, the intersections between the theatrical world and the fictional one of Dickens have been extremely well documented, especially in the case of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which provides a novelistic stage for the strange antics of show people and theatrical curiosities. As Paul Schlicke has persuasively argued, the novel commemorates the world of public fairs and popular entertainments that had been slowly dying out for years. As various other critics have demonstrated, the novel also has direct ties to the stage traditions of pantomime and melodrama. But for all its overt theatricality, *The Old Curiosity Shop* exhibits a persistent ambivalence about performance, especially female performance, that warrants an explanation. On what front does the performative world of the waxworks become a chamber of horrors? What does "The Dickens Theatre," to borrow Robert Garis’s phrase, have to fear—or simply to say—about the construction of identity in and through performance?

In some respects, Dickens seems to have anticipated the critique by contemporary performance theory of essentialized identity; his characters are often metamorphic role players with multiple selves, selves that parody the notion of a single, unified core of personality. And twentieth-century critics of Dickens seem to like it this way. Accounts of Dickensian theatricality are with rare exception invested in the idea of a carnivalesque and liberating culture of theater in the novels. For example, Edwin Eigner writes that Dickens adopts the grand confusion of pantomime in order “to provide the anarchical holiday space for the rethinking of ingrained moral and political systems” (41), and William Axton finds that the “grotesque spirit” of Dickens’s theatricality “seeks the subversion of tradition, convention, and customary usage.
Chapter 3

... to create the impression of a world turned upside down” (29). Axton, in fact, claims that the early works rely on the trope of the theatrum mundi to expose nothing less that the “chronic histrionism of middle-class culture” (60). Dickens thus comes across as a kind of Victorian Rabelais, the champion of carnivalesque excess, the king of transformative potential, the enemy of strait-laced convention, and the lover of theaters everywhere.

Two recent studies have challenged the prevailing critical tendency to view Dickensian theatricality as purely joyful and subversive. John Glavin has argued that Dickens’s generally positive relationship to theatricality was soured by his rather hostile relationship to theater itself. As Glavin puts, “Dickens believes, at his most optimistic, in a theatricality that can not only exhibit, but can actually generate the self. (That’s why people get the sense that he loves theatre.) He also believes that theaters kill. (That’s the part people tend to miss.)” (After Dickens, 67). Theaters kill through shame: they exhibit the body as spectacle, rendering it vulnerable and defenseless. As Glavin writes, in terms that chime beautifully with the first chapter of this book, Dickens is a “scopophobe” who “sees looking as only about power. He wants to reveal but not to act, to show but not be seen” (“Dickens and Theater,” 202). Taking us back to the scene of Dickens’s missed theatrical audition, and the earlier and even more famous scene of Dickens’s humiliation in the window at Warren’s Blacking, Glavin argues that Dickens attaches shame to performance and forms his fictions as a defense against that shame. Dickensian theatricality, then, is always double edged, creative yet tinged with the crushing humiliation that kills. As author, Dickens offers up the spectacle of others—others he can hide behind and who will keep his privacy and individuality intact. For the author who appeared in propria persona on the frontispiece of Nicholas Nickleby, however, authorship itself was a public performance, as likely to expose as to hide the authorial self. To return to a phrase from Mansfield Park that now makes the century’s most reluctant fictional character seem like a bizarre kindred spirit to the century’s most public author, Dickens was out, whether he liked it or not.

In terms that anticipate Glavin’s interest in the power dynamics of spectacle, and in keeping with his own interest in the clash between the carceral and the carnivalesque, Joseph Litvak proposes that an economy exists in Dickens’s fiction between “panoptic” and “ludic” theatricalities. For example, the “paranoid” theatricality of a character like Ralph Nickleby balances out the carnivalesque play of the Crummles troupe in Nicholas Nickleby, while Gradgrind’s panopticism exists in dialectical interplay with the ludic sphere of the circus in Hard Times. Litvak’s main interest lies in the ways that these categories collapse into one another, how in novels like Hard Times and Great Expectations the ludic comes to parody the panoptic or just simply becomes it. While this may
sound like the critical equivalent of Mrs. Jarley’s Wax-Works—Mikhail Bakhtin in a skullcap and spectacles is the exact likeness of Michel Foucault—it presents an important rethinking of Dickensian theatricality that demands attention to what Litvak calls “the heterogeneity of [Dickens’s] theatrical ideology and practice” (111).

Keeping in mind this heterogeneity, what can be said about characters that are neither transgressively ludic nor theatrically panoptic? And what of the less overtly theatrical Dickens who won the hearts of the middle-classes with his sentimental depictions of hearth and home? This is the Dickens so frequently left out of discussions of Dickensian theatricality, discussions that stress the eccentric and the spectacular at the expense of the familiar and domestic. Criticism of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, for example, makes Little Nell the focus of discussion when sentimental politics are in question, but cedes center stage to Daniel Quilp and Dick Swiveller when theatricality is at issue. While Nell is frequently discussed as a fugitive from the novel’s theatricality, she is also a key participant in the novel’s culture of play and performance, since it is the stability of Nell that allows for the transformative pyrotechnics of Dick and Quilp. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens constructs the pure, essentialized female self as an anchor for his otherwise destabilizing notion of performative identity. Although he embraces (gingerly) the theatricality that Nina Auerbach calls “a shadowy doppelgänger to sanctified Victorian culture,” Dickens enshrines the most cherished values of that culture within his child heroine. While theatricality may be at ideological odds with the construction of naturalized female identity, the latter actually enables the former by offering a conservative and stabilizing counterbalance. Indeed the two categories (theater/nature) are mutually enabling and, therefore, rather relentlessly twinned, as well as entwined.

It is important to clarify, in the spirit of abjection with which the novel itself proceeds, what *The Old Curiosity Shop* is not. It is not, for example, some kind of Dickensian reworking of the domestic realism discussed in chapter 1, even though it avails itself of many of the same structures and procedures. *The Old Curiosity Shop* is neither domestic nor particularly realist. The difficulty in discussing Dickens as a “domestic” writer turns out to be very similar to the problem of discussing him as a theatrical one: critical history and intuition say he is so, but Dickens himself spoils the game. This warm and familial author, whose serial fictions knit together the family of England, does not actually appear to *like* the domestic all that much. He most often narrates crises of domesticity—the broken homes, the orphans, the unhappy families, and so forth—that deliver theoretical support to the domestic ideal without offering much in the way of practical representation. Similarly, Dickens is known as
a champion of realism, but his characters are often rather sketchy, and his plots are both spectacular and romantic. The *Old Curiosity Shop* would seem to exemplify all of this, with its picaresque narrative that follows the heroine in her flight from one broken home to another. But for all of its antidomestic and antirealist tendencies, the novel nonetheless paves the way for the space of domestic realism (a space that is always under construction in Dickensian fiction). That this space is a utopic one—glimpsed only at the end of the novel and its allegory of reading—does nothing to detract from its ideological power; if anything, its provisional nature makes the fantasized domestic space all the more able to heal the various ideological and generic contradictions that it is the work of the novel to pursue.

When the narrator of *The Old Curiosity Shop* first encounters Nell Trent, he tellingly comments that “she seemed to exist in a kind of allegory” (56), and indeed the narrative of Nell’s flight across the English countryside fairly begs to be read as allegorizing a particular moment in generic history, when public theatrical entertainments were under siege from middle-class respectability and economic hardship. But neither the siege mentality nor the generic allegory stops there, since Nell herself is under siege from the novel’s many freaks and theatrical curiosities. The thirteen-year-old girl that Quilp dubs “chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell” (125) is in fact a fragile bastion of the Dickensian *heimlich* under attack from the eccentric forces of the Dickensian grotesque. The narrative consistently frames her oppositionally, as in the much-discussed final paragraph of the novel’s first chapter, where the narrator imagines the peacefully and prophetically sleeping Nell surrounded by a host of curiosities in her grandfather’s shop: “I had ever before me the old dark murky rooms—the gaunt suits of mail with their ghostly silent air—the faces all awry, grinning from wood and stone—the dust and rust, and worm that live in wood—and alone in the midst of all this lumber and decay, and ugly age, the beautiful child in her gentle slumber, smiling through her light and sunny dreams” (56). The shop in which Nell slumbers is both a fictionalized example of the exhibition rooms that Richard Altick has documented as a vital part of London popular entertainment and a *mise en abyme* of the fiction that takes its name and its spirit from this strange collection of “curious things” (*The Shows of London*, 420–30). Nell exists amidst these uncanny objects, as she does in the novel, like an awkward visitor, yet she is still the *object* of curiosity, if only because of the striking contrast her normalcy provides to her grotesque surroundings. Where eccentricity rules, in other words, Nell proves the exception. What this exception has to tell us about the novel’s self-allegorizing properties is precisely the expense to be paid for the text’s high-flung theatrics: the price of our admission to the Dickens theater is paid by Nell, who dies for our entertainment.
What I am suggesting about Nell’s much-discussed martyrdom is that she dies for a specific ideal of authenticity (which the novel encodes as *female* authenticity, so that the question of male authenticity is off the table) and that she dies to keep theatricality alive, to center the novel’s chaotic play in her very resistance to performance and to change. Her flight across the pages of the novel can be read as an allegory of this resistance to the transformative nature of theatrical culture: Nell flees the exhibition rooms where she is on exhibition only to find herself among traveling players, circus performers, and waxwork figures. It is only the spectacle of her own death that arrests Nell’s flight and her potential for transformation. Key to this movement from display case to displayed corpse is Nell’s satanic double, the dwarf Quilp, a character direct from pantomime, puppet theater, and freak show, whose many ties to the culture of popular entertainment have been admirably documented. When Nell flees London, she does so to escape the amorous and sadistic clutches of this theatrical twin, and it is Quilp’s absent presence that knits together Nell’s various stops along the way to the churchyard: Codlin and Short’s Punch-and-Judy show, Mr. Vuffin’s freak show, and Mrs. Jarley’s Wax-Works. In the last of these, especially, Nell can never quite shake the threatening image of Quilp, who haunts her imagination and her dreams as she sleeps among the waxwork figures: “She tortured herself—she could not help it—with imagining a resemblance, in some one or other of their death-like faces, to the dwarf, and this fancy would sometimes so gain upon her that she would almost believe he had removed the figure and stood within the clothes” (289). While Nell wants only to keep as much space as possible between herself and Quilp, the narrative brings them together—both literally and, as in this case, *figuratively*—over and over again. Their close association, embodied most sinisterly in Quilp’s suggestion that Nell become “the second Mrs. Quilp” is in a perverse way only natural, because, within the text’s logic of doubling, Nell and Quilp are meant for each other. If Nell and Quilp uneasily coexist, like a cross-gendered, early-Victorian Jekyll and Hyde, their balancing act requires that Nell not only hide from Quilp, but that she negate his sinister play with her own morbid version of antitheatricalism. So Nell shuns the spotlight that Quilp’s strange antics attract, although she is continually drawn into the exhibitionist orbit of her nemesis. From the exhibition rooms in her grandfather’s shop onward, Nell is under the constant threat of display—a threat that is made good when she becomes the guide and chief curiosity at Mrs. Jarley’s Wax-Works, where the pretense to middle-class respectability can hardly mask the spectacular nature of this itinerant entertainment. And while Mrs. Jarley advertises her display as “calm and classical,” with “no low beatings and knockings about, no jokings.
and squeakings like your precious Punches, but always the same, with a con-
stantly unchanging air of coldness and gentility” (272), the very inter-
changeability of her figures belies this claim for stability. Nell finds herself
at the center of a whirlwind of spectacular transformation, and when she is
trotted about in a pony cart to hawk the opening of the exhibition, she her-
self is taken as a central attraction and dubbed “the wax-work child” (308).
How prophetic this reifying appellation actually is becomes clear when Nell
leaves behind the transformative confusion of the waxworks for the stability of
a truly “calm and classical” destination—the graveyard.

Nell’s first job at the graveyard is to lead tours of the cloister and graves, an
activity that perhaps makes the cloister look a bit too much like the waxwork
caravan. But Nell finds her true and final vocation in dying, an action that
removes her permanently from the performative world of players, dwarfs, and
show people. Of course, Nell’s death does render her as a sympathetic spectacle
for friends inside the text and readers outside it, but the spectacle of “dear, gen-
tle, patient, noble Nell” lying in “solemn stillness” like a perfectly preserved
waxwork in fact preserves her from further exploitation or change (654). Death,
that is, fixes Nell in a state of purity and promise, acting as a seal of identity on
this paragon of feminine virtue and self-sacrifice. Indeed, death only literal-
izes Nell’s position in life as angel and exemplar, securing the continuing influ-
ence that Nina Auerbach surely has in mind when she comments that “Nell
dead is Nell alive” (Woman and the Demon, 87). That the reciprocal is also true
suggests both the redundancy of Nell’s death and the logical end of her
blanched-out model of female perfection. As Garrett Stewart remarks, “Her
genius for spirituality is in fact a masochistic scourge, and, sacrificed finally to
no principle higher than her own suicidal goodness, her angelic self-abnegation
becomes its own dead end” (Dickens and the Trials of Imagination, 96). It is pre-
cisely this prepackaged mortality that made Nell a sentimental ideal in the
1840s and a laughing stock by the end of the century. As Algernon Swinburne
writes, “Dickens might as well have fitted her with a pair of wings at once” (30).

By translating Nell into the celestial sphere, Dickens secures a space for the
private-sphere values that his child heroine embodies. Indeed, Nell’s death
works the trick of consecrating her as angelic (“so shall we know the angels in
their majesty”) while retaining her cozy familiarity: “And still her former self
lay there, unaltered in this change. Yes. The old fireside had smiled upon that
same sweet face . . . the same mild lovely look” (654). This “angel in the
house” is then both “mild” and “majestic,” an object of the domesticated sub-
line that is both perfectly ordinary and ideologically enhanced. In this death
that occults death, the insipidly sweet child that has held the place of lack
throughout the novel becomes the marker of an impossible plenitude. She
becomes, in Slavoj Žižek’s terms, a kind of “sublime object of ideology,” the point that holds together an ideological fantasy by covering over the real. Because it masks lack as plenitude, the sublime object is always a site of extreme saturation of meaning and is always represented as something greater than itself (194–95). Little Nell, the novel’s point of goodness, authenticity, and sincerity, becomes ideologically supercharged as she allows the fantasy of an idealized and self-sacrificing femininity to function even, indeed especially, after her death. By superseding the realm of worldly turmoil and theatrical instability, Nell not only vaults into the angelic stratosphere but also gains a special purchase on the lasting influence that the novel associates with its own properties. When, in the final pages of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Kit’s children gather around him and “beg him to tell again that story of good Miss Nell who died,” they model the responses of an avid Victorian readership in an allegory of the novel’s own transmission and of Nell’s position as fictional exemplar: “When they cried to hear [the story], wishing it longer too, he would teach them how she had gone to Heaven, as all good people did; and how, if they were good like her, they might hope to be there too one day” (671).

While this scene of familial reading is clearly the ideological endpoint of the novel, it is also something of a potential embarrassment, as it is yet another scene of consumption in which Nell is offered up as material for an admiring audience. After all, Nell has all along been the chief commodity for sale in *The Old Curiosity Shop*—the main point at which the reader’s investment in the text (curiosity) is paid back, with interest. Nell’s life (and more particularly her death) as fictional character is explicitly structured by the laws of supply and demand: the laws that make Mrs. Jarley withdraw Nell from circulation lest she become “too cheap” to attract paying customers; the laws that brought the *Shop*’s serial readers back every week for more of Little Nell’s suffering; the laws that prompted John Ruskin to comment that she “was simply killed for the market, as a butcher kills a lamb” (275). (As a flash forward to the 1860s, which is really a flashback to this book’s introduction, we might recall that *The Mask* parodied Dickens as a murderer-for-profit, who before plunging a giant pen into the chest of his hapless character tells him, “Similarly, did I kill little Nell” [17].) What supposedly washes the blood of the market from this scene of reading, however, are the sentimental tears of the represented and hoped-for readers, whose affective engagement with Little Nell transcends mere curiosity and invests her instead with the sentimental value that denies commercial exchange. In the emotionally charged tale, Nell becomes the extremely private property of absorptive reading—the property that cements familial relations by denying exchange relations. Nell’s story and image can continue to circulate, because they can appear to do so to each Victorian family.
The demanded repetition of sentimental narrative (“tell again that story of good Miss Nell”) manages to occult the logic of supply and demand: Nell’s story is always ready to be retold and renewed—never reproduced—and it accrues value in the repetition. In a world of disposable commodities, narrative is the emotional property that can be enjoyed over and over again. What we see enacted in this scene of reading, then, is our own act of consumption made, like Nell herself, pure and eternal. As Garrett Stewart writes, “The scene of the tale’s habitual retelling, rather than introducing a microcosm of the novel as executed narrative, provides a final rehearsal of its effect, its affect, as familial ritual: the Victorian novel in its calculated rereadability” (Dear Reader, 201).

There is, however, a problem with this fantasy of purified consumption—a problem even beyond the fact that it takes place around a brutalizing narrative that verges on child pornography: in order to live and die as a narrative paragon, Nell herself has to be a bit of a freak. Her very singularity, the thing that removes her from the world of spectacular transformation and consumption all around her, is the very thing that makes her into a narrative curiosity. As Hilary Schor writes in a reading of Nell as one of Dickens’s “uncanny” daughters, she “reminds us of the showman-like qualities of Dickens’s early fiction. . . . What Dickens is showing off here is, in the Marchioness’s eloquent phraseology, the heroine who is ‘such a one-er,’ both ‘a wonder’ (and a cause of wonder in others) and a unique (one of a kind) spectacle in herself” (37). It is Nell’s freakishness, even more than her angelic goodness, that allows her to embody the Shop itself. As Schor writes, Nell “stands in place of the whole novel” (42). This equation between Shop and female goods would be less of a difficulty for the novel and its author were it not for the way that Nell’s position as “Inimitable” replicates Dickens’s own position as individuated author. As the true proprietor of The Old Curiosity Shop, Dickens cannot afford to make himself “too cheap,” even as he invites the masses to come and have a look. Freakish Nell, the Dickens Show’s main attraction, becomes an uncanny double for the author-as-commodity, and her apotheosis works to redeem his alienation. This connection helps to explain why Nell is so caught up with the discursive mechanisms of the story itself, and why it is that Dickens should be so keen to remove her from spectacular circulation. At the same time, the spectacular female body redirects the audience’s gaze from the spectacle of male authorship. The exhibition of Little Nell is one way that Dickens instructs us to pay no attention to the singular man behind the curtain.

If Dickens martyrs Nell to a final vision of the Victorian family brought together over the narrative of sentimental death, and if her martyrdom draws the limelight away from Dickens, it is instructive to watch how Dickens
dispatches the other characters in the novel, those who double Nell, and frequently double the author himself. For example, the novel can be seen to make a very unwilling sacrifice out of Nell’s (and Dickens’s) demonic double, Quilp, whose death by drowning drains The Old Curiosity Shop of its most sinister theatricality. In the vacated places of Quilp and Nell, the text offers the domestic union of their stand-ins: Dick Swiveller, the fanciful clown who turns Quilp’s dark theatricality into buoyant play as effortlessly as he turns gin and water into rosy wine, and the Marchioness, the tiny urchin who becomes the novel’s heroine in Nell’s stead. The success story of this role-playing pair redeems theatricality for the private sphere, domesticating theatrical play in the happiest of marriages. But if this marital closure is made possible by the joint deaths of Nell and Quilp, it is also enabled by the abjection of yet another of the novel’s many doubles: Miss Sally Brass, the jailor and parent of the Marchioness. Like Quilp, her one-time paramour and the presumed father of her child, the Amazonian Miss Brass is one of the novel’s key grotesques. But where the fun and fun-loving Quilp ultimately steals the show, Sally is merely a sideshow freak, a rather monstrous offspring of the novel’s propensity to produce twins. Indeed, what makes Sally so monstrous is precisely her uncanny resemblance to her brother Sampson, a resemblance that makes the Brasses seem more like a hybrid pair than a set of contrasting doubles along the lines of Quilp and Nell. Sally’s gender hybridity, a kind of garbled echo of the novel’s treatment of costumed play and character reversal, not only mocks the process of twinning upon which Nell’s success depends but also constructs Sally as the grotesque underbelly of Nell’s ideal femininity.

While Quilp is Nell’s polar opposite, then, Miss Brass is the frightful composite that shadows and besmirches the image of Nell’s unalloyed purity and female goodness. Although Sally and Nell never meet, their narratives intersect at a variety of oblique angles: Sally is the mother of Nell’s small surrogate, the Marchioness; she is, or was, the lover of Nell’s nemesis and would-be lover, Quilp; and she becomes the mother-in-law of the character first intended to marry Nell, Dick Swiveller. All of this connects Sally and Nell by only the most tenuous of relations, especially given that Sally’s parentage of the Marchioness was expunged from the galley proofs of the published novel. But any sort of connection between these two characters is quite the last thing this novel would be prepared to admit, since Sally’s kinship would hardly be kind to Nell. If she is to be read against the novel’s female paragon, then, Sally Brass must be considered for the negative example that she provides: where Nell is the Victorian dream of a familiar and familial heroine, Sally is an uncanny and antidomestic nightmare.
Chapter 3

As the novel’s bad dream of gender aberration, Sally Brass does not appear in the novel until well after Nell is safely out of London. Indeed, Sally and her brother Sampson make their first appearance in the chapter immediately following Nell’s brief apprenticeship at the waxworks, as is only appropriate for two characters who appear to be fugitives from Mrs. Jarley’s collection that have somehow infiltrated the novel proper. Like the waxen figures that require only a new wig and the odd bit of lace to change characters, Sally and Sampson are differentiated by virtue of wardrobe, as the two are, at least in those body parts available for scrutiny, physically identical. “So exact was the likeness between them,” we are told, “that had it consorted with Miss Brass’s maiden modesty and gentle womanhood to have assumed her brother’s clothes in a frolic and sat down beside him, it would have been difficult for the oldest friend of the family to determine which was Sampson and which Sally, especially as the lady carried upon her upper lip certain reddish demonstrations, which, if the imagination had been assisted by her attire, might have been mistaken for a beard” (321). The coupling of Sally’s masculine characteristics—extreme height, deep voice, and hairy visage—with her quasi-feminine costume mark this “amazon of common law” as a monstrosity. And while Sally is not one of the text’s most theatrical characters per se, she is certainly a grotesque spectacle worthy of inclusion in Mr. Vuffin’s troupe of freaks.

One of the most curious encounters in the novel occurs when Sally’s one-woman freak show is attended by the novel’s most comic performer, Dick Swiveller. As his name suggests, Mr. Swiveller is no stranger to imaginative transformations, but the hybrid form of Sally surprises and disgusts him. Dick cannot take his eyes off of this uncanny spectacle. He is turned to stone, rigidified by the sight of the phallic woman who fascinates and controls his gaze. So he stands “in a state of utter stupefaction, staring with all his might at the beauteous Sally, as if she had been some curious animal whose like had never lived” (327). Gazing at “that strange monster” and “rooted to the spot,” Dick finds himself unable to complete his task of transcription. Rendered “powerless” by the sight of this Medusa, the character who most clearly stands for Dickens himself can write no more than six words at a time. While Sally noisily scribbles away “like a steam-engine” in a blatant theft of authorial prerogative, Dick feels “strange influences creeping over him—horrible desires to annihilate this Sally Brass—mysterious promptings to knock her head-dress off and try how she looked without it” (328). Unable to wield that better-known phallic signifier, the pen, Dick arms himself with a “large, dark, shining ruler” and resorts to a fevered, masturbatory rubbing of the nose and finally to a bold flourishing of the ruler about Sally’s head in an imaginative
beheading of the monster. This frantic reaction—a comically exaggerated enactment of phallic mastery that seems perfect for a character about whom, as John Glavin writes, “His name says it all, if you’re willing to be vulgar” (After Dickens, 119)—stages the decapitation of the Medusa that for Freud was “the castration of castration.”

The very thought of it calms Dick’s agitation, “Until his applications with the ruler became less fierce and frequent, and he could even write as many as half-a-dozen consecutive lines without having recourse to it,—which was a great victory” (329).

Dick’s “victory” over the horrifying spectacle of Sally Brass is both an imaginative triumph over the unsexed woman who stops both Dick and Dickens dead in their tracks and a fantasized removal of the ambiguity that Sally embodies. If this makes the crafty con-artist Dick Swiveller sound too much like the forces of the law from which he is on the lam, it is perhaps because Sally represents an extreme case, the limit-case for this novel’s taste for “curiosity.” In a novel where doubling runs rampant, Sally and her brother represent the sinister ramifications such twinning holds for the idea of discrete character—as Sally has it, “My brother and I are just the same” (602). His sister’s excessive masculinity, for example, apparently saps every trace of virility from Sampson, as if there were only so much of any one quality to go around between them: “In his deep debasement [Brass] really seemed to have changed sexes with his sister, and to have made over to her any spark of manliness he might have possessed” (608–9). Like a set of Siamese twins who share a single economy, Sally and Sampson demonstrate the interdependence of doubles, something that is as true of the novel’s main performers, Quilp and Nell, as it is of this sideshow pair. No wonder Dick finds Sally so extremely uncanny, as there is something suspiciously familiar about her familial relationship. As the unheimlich is always the heimlich returned in another shape, Sally and Sampson’s twinning represents a sinister reworking of the novel’s structural logic of comic doubling: Dick and Quilp, Quilp and Nell, Nell and the Marchioness.

Dick’s overwhelming desire to “annihilate this Sally Brass” is only a symptom of the novel’s desire to separate its Siamese twins, which it sets about doing by verifying Sally’s status as a female in the most biological way possible. In trying to make the criminal Sally Brass obey the rule of gender, the novel makes her into the exception that proves it; while this child-beating monstrosity turns out to be the mother of her small servant, the Marchioness, her total lack of maternal feeling unsexes her once and for all. So shocking is Sally’s transgression of the supposedly unbreakable laws of maternal instinct that the proof of Sally’s maternity was purged from the text while in galley proofs. All that remains in the originally published version are two rather
broad hints that “the Virgin of Bevis Marks” is, in fact, the mother of the Marchioness.26 In the manuscript, however, Sally boldly declares, “I am her mother. She is my child. There. Now what do you say?” Her listeners are dumbfounded, with the exception of her brother, who strongly asserts his disbelief: “Don’t talk nonsense. Your child! I don’t believe such a thing’s possible. I am sure it isn’t. It couldn’t be.” Sampson’s mind reels from the news because he does not believe his sister to be female in any way that counts. And as we recall Sally beating the starved, incarcerated Marchioness with the flat side of a carving knife, it is hard to think of a less feminine woman in Victorian fiction, not to mention a more monstrous mother.27

While Little Nell embodies the novel’s feminine ideal, Sally inhabits the opposite end of the spectrum: she is the female grotesque to Nell’s (hopefully) cozy familiarity. And, as befits Nell’s figural nemesis, Sally is ushered out of the text at the approach of Nell’s sublime apotheosis, slipping quietly out of the pages of the novel and into urban legend a day before Nell and Quilp simultaneously expire: “Of Sally Brass, conflicting rumours went abroad. Some said with confidence that she had gone down to the docks in male attire, and had become a female sailor; others darkly whispered that she had enlisted as a private in the second regiment of Foot Guards, and had been seen in uniform and on duty” (665). However, she is later suspected to appear in a final, abject incarnation that makes clear the fate of the gender criminal. Indistinguishable from each other at last, the forms of Sally and Sampson are rumored to be seen “in those nights of cold and gloom, when the terrible spectres, who lie at all other times in the obscene hiding places of London, in archways, dark vaults and cellars, venture to creep into the streets; the embodied spirits of Disease, and Vice, and Famine” (665). “To this day,” the narrator ominously adds, “it is said, they sometimes pass, on bad nights, in the same loathsome guise, close at the elbow of the shrinking passenger” (665). If Nell’s spirit lives on to bless and inspire the living, the specter that is Sally thus returns as a curse. As a figure for the abject, Sally exists finally as the deathly obverse of the sublime, the “disregarded offal” of humanity that the novel cannot quite get out of its system.28

Whether or not Sally is completely purged from the novel, however, she performs her narrative role by filling the place of the abject, by propping up the novel’s female ideal by her own despicable example. If, in so doing, she establishes a certain relationship with Nell by exposing the female ideal and the female grotesque as the twin avatars of Victorian femininity—a set of doubles that even Mrs. Jarley might find a costuming challenge—the novel separates these most unidentical twins by elevating Nell to an eternal heaven and fictional afterlife while sending Sally to the muck of an urban hell. While Nell’s heavenly fate is supposedly worth her earthly death, Sally’s fate is clearly
worse than death—and Dickens seems to enjoy it that way, if the sheer excess of his rhetoric is any indication.

With Nell and Quilp and both Brasses out of the picture, the novel turns to the marriage of Dick Swiveller and the Marchioness, who are elevated by deus ex machina to the comfortable status of the bourgeoisie. As role players of the most inventive kind, this pair redeems theatricality from the sadistic glee of Quilp and the freakish demonstrations of Sally Brass, curing it for use in the middle-class home. By learning the ropes of proper feminine behavior at a boarding school for girls, the Marchioness restages her mother’s disruptive gender acts as legitimate domestic theater and revitalizes the role of heroine vacated by Nell—prompting Dick’s frequently quoted remark “that there had been a young lady saving up for him after all” (668). But what allows the Marchioness to become “Mrs. Swiveller,” to share the imaginative mobility of her husband, is precisely Nell’s permanent position as the static ideal that anchors the movement of theatrical play. With Nell as ground, indeed with Nell under ground, the novel can get down to theatrical business, as usual.

Almost. For readers of The Old Curiosity Shop as it was first serialized in Dickens’s weekly magazine, Master Humphrey’s Clock, there was one final spectacular revelation to come: the unmasking of the narrator/author. As this unmasking takes us back to the conditions of the novel’s publication in parts, it is worth setting up the frame in which “the story of good Miss Nell who died” was originally narrated. In April 1840, following the serial publication of Nicholas Nickleby, Dickens began an inexpensive periodical based on the conceit of a private gentlemen’s reading club. Hosted by Master Humphrey, the Clock thematized serial publication as the cozy scene of reading aloud to (male) friends. In his brilliant, extended discussion of the reading dynamics of this narrative setup, Garrett Stewart has shown how this “pseudodomestic scene of narrative consumption” both frames and contains the commercial facts of weekly mass production within “an artifice of parafamilial intimacy” (Dear Reader, 174). The makeup of Humphrey’s group is also strangely patriformal, and Stewart writes of it that “The chief aesthetic appliance of Victorian domesticity, the novel as reading event, is hereby espoused—by this coterie of familyless readers—as their only form of the very domesticity that reading is otherwise meant to replenish rather than replace” (177). Like a weird hybrid of the eighteenth century’s republic of letters and the Victorian domestic circle, this all-male family models the reading public that Dickens figures, again in Stewart’s terms, as “an individuated collective” (175). Nell’s story is narrated to this private reading public by Master Humphrey himself, who opens his Clock with a refusal of readerly curiosity phrased as Dickensian scopophobia: “The reader must not expect to know where I live” (673).
Perhaps not, but we learn something more important about our elusive host than the location of his home: we know where his heart is. At the completion of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Master Humphrey unveils himself as having been a character in his own story—as having appeared, *in propria persona*, in the figure of the single gentleman who tracks Little Nell to her final destination but cannot save her from it. As Humphrey puts it with significant theatrical flourish, “the single gentleman, the nameless actor in this little drama, stands before you now” (680). In the spirit of full sentimental disclosure (“I can never close my lips where I have opened my heart” [679]), Master Humphrey clarifies his private emotional investment in the story. And that investment, once more phrased in theatrical terms, turns out to be our own: “I can look back upon my part in it with a calm, half-smiling pity for myself as for some other man. But I am he indeed; and now the chief sorrows of my life are yours” (680). As Stewart writes of this passage, “It is no small point to be made about Master Humphrey’s final—and, for Dickens, creatively hard-won—investment in the story he narrates that Humphrey has also been assuming all along the audience’s role by *reading that same story*: activating aloud its written text not only for his cronies but also for himself again. He is *your* double as much as the single gentleman’s on one side and Dickens’ on the other” (*Dear Reader*, 198). It seems inevitable that the novel’s tactic of doubling should reach out to (and for) the reader, but it seems odd that Dickens would uncloak his surrogate so explicitly, and in such an explicitly theatrical manner. One way to look at this unlooked-for exposure is to consider how role playing works here—as elsewhere in Dickens—to hide authorial character. So Dickens, for whom *The Old Curiosity Shop* was a famously personal affair in which he worked out his grief over the death of young Mary Hogarth, stages a public act of mourning through which that grief comes to “belong” to his narratorial stand-in and his many sympathetic readers. Dickens, like Master Humphrey, can experience “pity for [himself] as for some other man” (my italics) because the theatrical nature of sympathy (and narrative) allows for the collective ownership of stories and emotions. To return to the terms of chapter 1, putting the story into the possession of a fictional nobody—a man who never gives us more than his one name, Humphrey—makes it available to anybody with the necessary cash and curiosity. The paradox of emotional property in Dickens’s individuated collective is that it can belong to no one and everyone at the same time, which makes good economic sense in a mass-market economy. But it may still seem strange that Dickens should make this nobody, this “nameless actor,” so like himself, as if he were directing our attention to the mystery of his disappearance. (“Look at me! I’m invisible!”) Perhaps we are left with the paradox of what it means
for a character or an author—and especially an author like Dickens—to appear *in propria persona*. The phrase itself reminds us how deeply identity is entwined with both theatricality and property: through it, identity in fact becomes a kind of theatrical property. To appear in your “own” persona (the persona that is exclusively and peculiarly yours) is to appear in the persona you own. But it also suggests that you could appear in someone else’s persona or that someone could appear in yours. The effect is to bracket out the middle term, which leaves persona without proprietorship. In many ways, this is exactly what Dickens is after: character as a theatrical shield for the self. But if all identity is an act, the actor is finally left with nowhere to hide, no home to call his own. The strange spectacle of Master Humphrey’s exposure, then, may be an attempt to rescue authorial authenticity, to gesture to the “real” Dickens behind his characters and to reify the private/public split that makes proprietary subjectivity possible in the first place. The individual is here glimpsed behind the many, in a final image of singularity. Of course, if *The Old Curiosity Shop* as serialized entertainment teaches us anything, it is that the singular requires the plural, that the individual requires the collective, and that the whole requires its (novelistic and theatrical) parts.

**Domestic Histrionics: Geraldine Jewsbury’s The Half Sisters**

If the structural logic of doubling requires paired individuals to be uncannily (dis)similar to one another, then in the celebrity waxworks of Victorian authorship Charles Dickens and Geraldine Jewsbury make a lovely couple. Whereas Dickens was the intimate of Victorian reading audiences—the “singular” gentleman author who became part of the family—Jewsbury was more like the spinster aunt with strong opinions about how the family should be brought up. Whereas Dickens cast himself in the polite authorial role that Poovey calls “the man-of-letters hero” (89), Jewsbury saw herself as an intellectual worker—a woman of letters, but a worker nonetheless. Dickens sought to elevate himself above the mass market that had crowned him king (by domesticating the market and by peddling commodity spectacles other than himself), while Jewsbury thought to enter that market openly, and so as to lead the way for other women. It is worth noting, here, that the “Imitable” Jewsbury proposed to enter the market not as commodity—as women are always in danger of doing—but as a powerful producer of culture who could shape the consuming habits of her middle-class public.

The literary market that Jewsbury entered in the 1840s was one conditioned in many ways by Dickens’s enormous success. During the first full
decade of the Victorian period, the novel finally quit rising and “arrived” as middle-class institution (marked, for example, by the startup of Charles Mudie’s famous “Select Lending Library” in 1842), and the literary market continued to grow, as did the importance of weekly and quarterly reviews designed to guide new readers through an increasing variety of newly published novels. Not unconnectedly, the 1840s also saw the beginning of the long-running, high-profile public debate over women’s roles that the Victorians called “the woman question.” Jewsbury—who in the 1840s began her career as a novelist, an essayist for Douglas Jerrold’s Shilling Magazine, and a book reviewer for the conservative and highly influential weekly, the Athenaeum—was actively involved in all of the above.29 As a writer of fiction, essays, reviews (over 2,300 of them for the Athenaeum), and later as a manuscript reader for the largest publishing house of triple-decker fiction in mid-Victorian Britain, Bentley & Son (the same firm that had published Dickens), Jewsbury saw herself as a public guardian of and a crusader for other women. She wanted to provide middle-class female readers with educational, entertaining, and morally uplifting reading, to protect those same readers from what she saw as morally degrading trash, and through it all to advocate a view of women as rational and independent creatures. (In the contemporary view, rational and independent creatures can make their own choices about what is and is not morally degrading, but Jewsbury saw no conflict of interest in her roles as moral censor and politically motivated artist.) She became somewhat more conservative as she aged, but her feminism was always of a conservative brand, as were her aesthetics. Throughout her long career, which ended only with her death from cancer in 1880, Jewsbury was faithful to the aesthetic ideology of domestic realism: she believed that literature should be realistic (to a point) and clean. While she could approve some moral and sexual mess, as long as it was severely punished (as, for example, in Adam Bede, which Jewsbury reviewed enthusiastically), Jewsbury ultimately preferred morality to reality, and she liked her endings happy.30 As one might imagine, Jewsbury hated the sensational turn of fiction in the 1860s, which I will examine in the next chapter. She waged a war against the likes of Rhoda Broughton and Ouida, whose books she rejected for publication and whom she considered vulgar and dangerous. Jewsbury’s war, however, began much earlier than the 1860s, and in her novels of the 1840s (Zoe and The Half Sisters) she consolidated the literary agenda that she would execute with great ferocity for over thirty years.

To state all of this more simply, Geraldine Jewsbury’s literary agenda was her political agenda. By championing a form of fiction that focused on the everyday and interior lives of women, she hoped to help women lead everyday lives of use and fulfillment. While she shared with more conservative com-
mentators on “the woman question” a belief in the moral superiority of women, she did not share the idea that woman’s place was necessarily in the home. Jewsbury preached the doctrine of work and believed that women could, and should, lead public lives. Just how public those lives might be is put to the test in *The Half Sisters*, her second novel, in which Jewsbury would appear to use the form of domestic realism to turn the logic of domesticity against itself. Because *The Half Sisters* is another (apparently) theatrophilic novel, it makes peculiar sense to consider it alongside *The Old Curiosity Shop—at least for the moment. As with their authors, the contrast between the books is sharp: one treats theater as dangerous play, the other as potentially redemptive women’s work. While Dickens takes cover behind the theatricality he both loves and loathes, ultimately domesticating theatricality in the middle-class married life of Dick Swiveller and the Marchioness, Jewsbury uses it to uncover the most loathsome aspects of domesticity. Display in Dickens tends to embody the most alienating effects of market culture (which is why it needs to be “cured” before it can enter the haven of domestic life), but for Jewsbury, enforced domesticity is itself the most alienating experience for women. Whereas the Victorians (Dickens included) usually align the private sphere with natural femininity and proper domesticity, all the while castigating the model of public femininity they align with both acting and prostitution, Jewsbury portrays role playing as a poisonous side effect of the middle-class wife’s confinement in the home. Victorian ideals of femininity not only place women under house arrest in well-kept parlors and drawing-rooms, but coerce their participation in the normative drama of bourgeois life. In *The Half Sisters*, the middle-class wife becomes a kind of amateur actress, giving a command performance of a narrowly conceived role and maintaining the carefully staged illusion of domestic felicity. The professional actress, on the other hand, offers nothing less than the spectacle of “natural” womanhood; freed by her theatrical roles from the fetters of bourgeois convention, the actress is able to “be herself,” to fulfill her potential through unalienated work. The professional woman thus becomes, paradoxically, the ideal wife and mother, the figure who can redeem the domestic space from her bourgeois sister, or half sister.

Published in two volumes by Dickens’s first publishers, Chapman and Hall, in 1848, *The Half Sisters* self-consciously overturns conventional thinking about middle-class respectability and the Victorian actress. In its depiction of teenage half sisters Bianca and Alice, the novel reads like an imaginative continuation and reworking of Little Nell’s story, a reworking in which Dickens’s sentimental heroine lives out the two narrative options open to her: public display and private ideal. The elder and half-Italian sister, Bianca, joins the circus to support her ailing mother and eventually becomes a famous and well-
respected actress, and the fully English Alice marries a middle-class businessman and becomes a model Victorian woman. While Bianca survives and prospers in the public eye, Alice privately withers and dies. Bianca’s narrative allows us to imagine a scenario in which Little Nell joins Astley’s Circus and becomes the paragon of working women. Alice’s story, on the other hand, lets us picture the child-heroine continuing on her course as feminine ideal, a course that leads just as surely to the graveyard as Little Nell’s actual road to sentimental death. While Dickens tries to preserve his ideal heroine from the ravages of worldly existence, Jewsbury makes clear that that ideal is already compromised from within by its divorce from the real world of work and activity. Far from being the grotesque opposite of the middle-class women, the actress in The Half-Sisters becomes the standard for female conduct and agency.

Jewsbury is able to claim this exalted position for her actress-heroine by explicitly invoking antitheatrical rhetoric and then demonstrating its inapplicability to Bianca. When Conrad Percy, Bianca’s faithless fiancé and the novel’s mouthpiece for antitheatricalism and hyperconventional Victorian morality, denounces Bianca for her immodesty and lack of femininity, we realize that nothing could be further from the truth; she has all of the “modest feminine loathings” that even an Edmund Bertram could desire, and she remains unsullied by her theatrical profession. This is not to say that Jewsbury herself is not at least latently antitheatrical—I will discuss her complicity with the novel’s antitheatrical voice—but that she constructs her heroine to transcend the novel’s antitheatricalism. So, for example, Bianca must overcome her own natural aversion to display in order to embark upon her career. When she first rides in the circus troupe’s advertising parade (and here one recalls Nell advertising the opening of Mrs. Jarley’s Wax-Works from the back of a pony cart), Bianca is “stunned, bewildered, and ashamed of her conspicuous position, and of the wonder and notice [the performers] obtained from the crowd” (30). On the night of her theatrical debut, Bianca experiences the kind of stage fright that would have made Fanny Burney or Fanny Price (and maybe even Dickens) proud: “She stood for the first time before the blinding lights and the oppressive presence of so many hundred human eyes, [and] her whole being seemed turned to stone; she would have run away if she could only have moved. The people applauded her, but that only frightened her more” (32). It is only necessity that drives her to perform: “She felt she must do her work. In a few minutes she became engrossed in what she had to do, and gradually forgot all about her audience” (32). The point is that Bianca’s acting is not a matter of disreputable self-display or commodification but a matter of honest labor: “She had no idea of vanity, or of getting admiration, or of displaying herself in any way; her sole idea of the circus was, that it was the means of
earning a certain number of shillings, on which she might support her mother” (31). Even after she becomes a famous actress, Bianca maintains an aversion to the “tawdry reality” of stage effects; she is ashamed of the “coarse, gaudy, glaring accessories” of her roles, and distances herself from the immoralities of backstage life. “No one,” we are assured, “could loathe the details of her profession more than she did” (145).

As shown in Bianca’s own internalized antitheatricalism, *The Half Sisters* is self-divided at best over its stance on theater. While it clearly discredits the middle-class antitheatricality of Conrad Percy, the text harbors its own doubts over the propriety of acting, doubts that return with great force near the end of the novel in Bianca’s dark twin, the Italian diva La Fornasari. What this self-contradiction demonstrates is the narrative consequence of polemical overexuberance. *The Half Sisters* seeks to endorse careers for women, but goes further than it can support. In its tirade against the tyranny of the private sphere, the novel depicts the most public of professions but ends up ideologically hamstrung by its own middle-class squeamishness. So the novel celebrates Bianca’s professional success, but shies away from the general rabble of the theater. Bianca must be the exception, not the rule.

In raising Bianca above her colleagues, the novel forces her to pull a staggering amount of ideological weight. She becomes not only a theatrical star, but also the savior of her profession, the “priestess” of the theatrical art. As her mentor tells her, “You have it in you to raise [your art] from its meretricious degraded state. It needs to be purified of the sensualism that has defaced it, before it can assume its legitimate rank” (161). Bianca apparently takes these words to heart verbatim, and later declares her goal “to elevate my profession into one of the fine arts,—to see it ennobled, and freed from the meretricious degradation into which it has sunk” (254). While the novel is divided over whether acting is high art or professional labor, one thing is clear: for Bianca, it is a sacred duty. Indeed, the religious zeal with which Bianca pursues her craft suggests the other option that she seriously considers: life as a Catholic nun. But acting allows Bianca to minister both actively and publicly, to avoid the “placid negation” of the cloister. At the same time, and rather miraculously, Bianca’s public career allows her to fulfill the equally sacred private duties of the domestic sphere. The money she earns onstage allows her to make a home for her ailing mother and a haven for other women. (Bianca first shelters a homeless actress and later takes in an orphaned girl who aspires to the operatic stage.) Presiding over her home like a domestic saint, Bianca is every bit the Victorian ideal: the novel stresses her utility, industry, tidiness, thriftiness, and all around homemaking proficiency. Even Bianca’s mentor, an elderly actor, is impressed with the “modesty and propriety” of her domestic arrangements: “It
was what he had hoped, what he had expected to find” (159). Indeed, what else could one expect from such a female paragon? If Bianca is a “genius” in her public role, she is an angel in her private one.

In constructing Bianca to combine theatrical stardom with domestic perfection, Jewsbury follows the lead of protheatrical discourses that attempted to legitimate the profession of acting by demonstrating the conventionality and domestication of the Victorian actress. These discourses belong to what Christopher Kent has called the theater’s “successful campaign for the patronage of the middle class” (95), a campaign that began in the 1840s and continued to gain momentum throughout the century. As Mary Jean Corbett remarks of the mid-Victorian actress’s professionalization, success hinged on “adapting the norms of middle-class private-sphere femininity to a new public role” (117). Theatrical stars became as famous for their ideal domestic lives as for their professional roles, and audiences came to demand a consistency of persona, both onstage and off. The top Victorian actresses became not so much performers as static icons; by the late Victorian period, the cult of theatrical personality required that popular actresses “be themselves” rather than their characters. This demand for stable identity, an antiperformative if not purely antitheatrical stress on authenticity, is key to Bianca’s character and to her appeal as an actress. While Bianca has the “mobile temperament” of the “natural actress” (206), her performances are merely expressions of her own true self. As Lord Melton observes, “Something in her voice and manner announces reality. What she utters seems only the shadowing forth of what lies within in greater perfection” (180). Whereas Melton confesses to an “intense dislike” of all “green-room associates,” especially “actress women,” he is immediately drawn to Bianca: “When I see a strong genius bearing that indescribable impress of being a genuine utterance from within, and not a mere artistic display for the sake of personal honour and glory, I can honour it even though it takes the guise of an actress exercising her profession” (180). Bianca’s performance, in other words, delivers true depth rather than surface. Bianca herself transcends what Melton’s sister, Lady Vernon, calls the theater’s “glaring trashy mode of existence” to embody authenticity and truth. Her work is not alienating labor, but self (confirming) expression.

By granting Bianca the depth and genius traditionally associated with male artistry, Jewsbury elevates her heroine above the surface corporeality associated with the body of the actress. (It is in fact the flashy and superficial details of her profession that Bianca abhors.) At the same time, however, Jewsbury stresses Bianca’s mastery of domestic trivia, the “woman’s work” that marks Bianca as an unqualified domestic success. Given the sheer ideological
plenitude of Bianca’s accomplishments, it is a small wonder that her half sister should suffer by comparison. Indeed, Alice is the pallid negation of Bianca’s vigor. Where Bianca is buoyantly purposeful, Alice sinks like a stone “under the weight of a golden leisure, which she had not the energy adequately to employ” (108). Where Bianca is independent and formidable, Alice is spineless: “She had not it in her to stand alone” (187). What Jewsbury clearly intends by making a comparison between the sisters unavoidable is to demonstrate the extent to which Alice’s passivity and helplessness are really a matter of nurture, not nature. Like studies that examine the influence of experience on twins separated at birth, *The Half Sisters* uses the parallel narratives of Bianca and Alice to expose the crippling effects of cultural convention. While Alice lacks Bianca’s natural “genius,” she does have an artistic spark that is systematically extinguished by her mother’s insistence on middle-class conformity. Alice molds herself to the expectations of her class, and in so doing contracts the case of “ennui” that will lead to her intended infidelity with Conrad Percy and her subsequent death.

If Alice is duped by what Jewsbury represents as a middle-class conspiracy against English womanhood, a key conspirator against her is her sinister sister-in-law, Mrs. Lauriston, who instructs Alice in the theatrical art of domestic illusion. While Mrs. Lauriston has all of the vigor and capability of Bianca, her considerable energy is spent directing the spectacle of her own wealth and privilege. Her home is a kind of theatrical showplace, where gorgeous sets provide the backdrop for the inauthentic performances of this domestic prima donna. As she tells Alice, “Woe [to a woman] the instant she really lets [her husband] see or know any thing about her, except just as it suits her that it should be seen and known” (76). While Mrs. Lauriston presents a particularly egregious case of private theatricals, Jewsbury makes it clear that dishonesty is in fact endemic to the middle-class ideal of female behavior:

If all women were not brought up in such unnatural traditions of what is “feminine” and “maiden like,” and “sensitively delicate,” they would not feel it a bounded obligation to tell lies [about their emotions]. But they are crushed down under so many generations of arbitrary rules for the regulation of their manners and conversation; they are from their cradle embedded in such a composite of fictitiously-tinted virtues, and artificial qualities, that even the best and strongest amongst them are not conscious that the physiology of their minds is as warped by the traditions of feminine decorum, as that of their persons is by the stiff corsets, which, until very recently, were *de rigueur* for preventing them “growing out of shape.” (160)
Since Alice is neither the “best” nor the “strongest” of women to begin with, she quickly takes on the “unnatural” shape that is this novel’s version of the female grotesque.

While Jewsbury would have us understand Alice as a victim of the Victorian gender system, Bianca’s anemic English half sister is just as clearly a victim of the novel’s political project: Alice exists only to illustrate the evils of a particular middle-class ideal. For example, when Jewsbury faults Alice for her timidity, the real target is patriarchal convention: “[Alice’s timidity] gave, perhaps a delicacy, and what is called a feminineness to her character, but it made her negative and useless; which, however, most men seem to regard as the peculiar type of womanly perfection” (125). Nowhere is Alice’s position as political sacrifice made clearer than in the novel’s most polemical section, the extended debate between Conrad Percy and Lord Melton over the value of public careers for women. While the debate ostensibly centers on Bianca and the propriety of acting, Conrad’s arguments against actresses are framed in relation to his defense of a particular middle-class ideal. So he claims that Bianca’s career on the stage has “unsexed her, made her neither a man nor a woman” (216), and he repeats the familiar claim that a woman who exhibits her mind and body on the public stage is “little better than a woman of a nameless class” (214). His “dream” woman, on the other hand, “is in all respects the reverse of Bianca” (217): she has “a gentle, graceful timidity keeping down all display of her talents, a sense of propriety keeping her from all eccentric originality . . . [and a] purity and delicacy of mind keeping her from all evil” (218). This “dove-like ideal” is embodied in Alice, to whom Conrad turns after he becomes “thoroughly disgusted with all that was theatrical” (178) and breaks off his engagement to Bianca. In Conrad’s transfer of affection, and in his worship of Alice’s “female perfection,” we have Jewsbury’s condemnation of conventional Victorian attitudes towards women. Conrad’s preference for Alice is revealed not only as conformist and misogynistic, but also as a brand of male egotism. In a sinister twist on the novel’s doubling motif, and in echo of that grand Victorian patriarch, Thomas Carlyle (husband to Jewsbury’s closest friend, Jane Welsh Carlyle), Conrad wants a woman who will make herself into a “beautiful reflex” of his own best qualities. When Lord Melton angrily declares this female ideal “diseased” and deadly, he clearly speaks for Jewsbury. It remains only for Alice to die to prove them both right.

Alice does die and so demonstrates not only the morbidity of her culture’s ideals of female perfection but also the inadequacy of her upbringing and the dangers of female leisure. While she officially dies of hysteria, brought on by the guilt and shame of being discovered by her husband as she prepares to elope with Conrad Percy, Alice is prepared for this death by a lifetime of
miseducation. The very qualities of innocence and timidity that Conrad thinks will make his ideal immune to evil paradoxically leave her without the moral backbone to resist temptation. So, too, her isolation in the domestic sphere and her lack of useful employment breed a killing ennui that makes this delicate middle-class flower long for the escape of romance, a longing that is fed first by a steady diet of novels and later by an extramarital romance. When Conrad declares his love for her with the rhetorical flourish of romantic fiction, Alice accepts him as her real-life hero.

What Jewsbury condemns in Alice’s fiction-inspired fall from grace is not novel reading tout court, but the wrong kind of reading and the wrong kind of novels. Alice reads as a substitute for actual experience, and she begins with the novels of Sarah Stickney Ellis, the conduct-book writer that Jewsbury targets as the mouthpiece of patriarchal convention. While Alice also reads Corinne, the popular Madame de Staël novel about half sisters Corinne and Lucile, which provides the model for Jewsbury’s The Half Sisters, she becomes, as Joanne Wilkes puts it, helplessly “locked in” to the role of the domestic sister. But even modeling herself after Corinne, the more assertive and artistic half sister in de Staël’s novel, would not save Alice, since Corinne dies for love in the sentimental tradition. It is this kind of love, the passion her mother calls “a silly romantic notion only found in novels” (46), that Alice expects from William Bryant, her stolidly middle-class and middle-aged husband. Indeed, Alice accepts Bryant’s marriage proposal immediately after she finishes reading Corinne, having spent the day in a spot called the “Romantic Rocks,” lost in her book and “unconscious” to the rest of the world. Although an unlikely romantic hero, Bryant appeals to the reader in Alice, because his quiet manners require interpretation: “There was a certain mystery about [him]—so much more was implied by his calm speech than the words expressed, and every word of affection seemed an inlet through which she discerned an infinite world of love lying beyond” (68). When Bryant fails to articulate that love so clearly as his young wife would like, however, the mystery fades and Alice turns to more explicitly sentimental texts: novels and, later, the love-struck Conrad, who gives her “a look of passion and despair, such as no woman could misinterpret” (275). But it is for Conrad’s conventionally sentimental language that Alice falls: “All her life her soul had been athirst for words of love; all the words he uttered found an echo in her own soul” (279).

By making the doomed Alice a novel reader, Jewsbury upholds the association between middle-class femininity and private reading that we saw forged in Evelina and Mansfield Park. But, where earlier novels treat the domestic sphere as a kind of charmed circle for the properly decorous heroine, Jewsbury demonstrates the chokehold that such enforced privacy puts on female
vitality. Alice’s extreme interiority, fed by the solitary experience of reading imaginative fiction, places her at a dangerous remove from reality and ensures her final hysterical flight from life into death. Bianca, on the other hand, who in a more traditionally antitheatrical novel would be summarily punished for her public activity, manages to survive her bout with hysterical brain fever precisely because she has a strong connection to the outside world of work and practical necessity. This is not to say that Jewsbury inverts the common dyad of novel-reader and actress to elevate theater at the expense of the novel. Jewsbury has her own reservations about the public venue of the stage. Nor is it to say that Jewsbury has in mind a wholesale transformation of the novel along more rigidly realistic lines. If anything, she endorses a novel that is aggressively utopian, more political essay than believable fiction. What Jewsbury appears to advocate here is a form of romanticized realism, which she later calls the “romance of real life,” in a page taken almost verbatim from Scott’s generic book. Constructing “real” life (which is to say life as it should happen, according to Jewsbury) is the goal of the novel’s twinned fictional and political agendas.

Central as the figure of theater is to this novel’s reconstruction of domestic realism, there turns out to be no place for either theater or theatricality in the romance of real life. While *The Half Sisters* celebrates Bianca’s exceptional career on the stage, it reserves its horror of theatrical women for her Italian double, La Fornasari, the diva whose physical likeness to Bianca is as striking as her personality is different. Where Bianca is modest, La Fornasari is “utterly shameless”; where Bianca is steady and true, La Fornasari is all caprice and performance. Indeed, this “meretricious woman” comes to embody all that is wrong with theater and theatrical display: vulgarity, corporeality, and deceit. It is La Fornasari who originally inspires Conrad’s “disgust with all things theatrical,” and when Melton encounters her late in the novel his response is also one of revulsion: “He saw in La Fornasari a beautiful woman, who at first sight startled him by her resemblance to Bianca; but it produced a singularly unpleasant effect upon him; her bold, insolent, defiant look, for an instant almost shook his faith in Bianca. It did not seem possible for them to be so alike and yet different. Even her singing and acting disgusted him” (340). This “unmentionable woman,” whom Melton finds “perfectly hateful,” causes an abject response so strong as to make Melton’s normally feminist voice almost entirely indistinguishable from Conrad’s antitheatrical misogyny. Even the narrator treats La Fornasari with a vitriolic contempt that partakes of Conrad’s horror of powerful, public women: “She was so largely endowed and organised, that in herself she seemed the epitome of the whole sex; but all her gifts were limited and vulgarised by being centred in herself, and by the total
absence of all elevation of thought or feeling” (345). This diatribe against female vanity and egotism may seem strange coming as it does at the end of a novel about female agency and political sisterhood, but there clearly is no space for this illegitimate sister in the novel’s vision of utopian gender relations. The beautiful but nevertheless abject figure of La Fornasari siphons off the damaging effects of public display to purify the transcendent figure of Bianca, a procedure that makes this theatrical half sister both dangerous and necessary. In what amounts to a recognition of the novel’s plan for La Fornasari, Melton conceives of “an indescribable sort of spite against this woman, for reminding him so disagreeably of Bianca; she seemed an odious libel upon her, both in her life and profession” (350). By raising the possibility of this odious libel, the novel is able to make La Fornasari liable for all the evils of theatrical excess. As Lisa Surridge writes of the rhetorical overkill involved in constructing Bianca’s foil, “Few portraits in Victorian antitheatrical literature are as derogatory as this one” (91).

After the novel dispatches La Fornasari on a search for her illegitimate son—a bizarre narrative excursion that seeks to supply even this monstrous creature with a glimmer of genuine maternal instinct—it turns its attention back to Bianca, who undergoes a transformation that would be worthy of Mrs. Jarley’s Wax-Works if it were not so predictable. With Alice buried underground as she has been buried under middle-class convention throughout the novel, Bianca moves into the domestic sphere with the authority of a rightful owner. Quitting the acting career that she leaves to her abject double, Bianca marries Lord Melton and returns from her theatrical exile to become, officially, the novel’s domestic paragon. While this aristocratic marriage technically elevates her above the problematic station of middle-class wife, Bianca sets up a household that looks suspiciously like a prosperous middle-class home. In the penultimate scene of the novel, Melton reads aloud while Bianca works her crochet by the fireside in such an attitude of domestic contentment that she prompts her husband to confess to being “wonder-struck at the prudence and dexterity to which you have adapted yourself to what must be such a new order of things—the orderliness, the—what shall I say?—house-keeping qualities, which have developed in you are so marvellous, as to make you seem what the Scotch folks would call ‘not canny’” (391). The point is that Bianca is uncannily canny. She is the heimlich answer to this novel’s “woman question,” the savior not only of the house but also of the home. As Dickens’s Marchioness might phrase it, Melton is “one-er struck” by his exceptional wife, but the novel plays down Bianca’s singularity, her difference from other women, by constructing her as both ideal and representative: she is what domestic women everywhere should be. As Judith Rosen puts it, “genius,
finally, gains its legitimacy by renouncing the qualities that made it unique” (29).

If *The Half Sisters* seems to steal its own political thunder by landing its actress-heroine right back in the domestic sphere, it also pulls the rug out from under what Jewsbury considers a particularly damaging formation of the domestic ideal.\(^3^6\) In Bianca’s consecration as angel of the hearth, the novel seeks to transform the Victorian ideal by replacing female passivity and helplessness with capability and chutzpah. Once this replacement is accomplished, the novel can jettison all traces of theater, which it never cared for very much anyway—at least not in its disturbingly spectacular incarnation. With the figure of La Fornasari on hand to absorb not only the downside of theatrical performance but the negative aspects of female professional success, Bianca is free to leave the stage for a home of her own, a home that Jewsbury would like us to see as radically different, if not radical.

In its abrupt domestic closure, *The Half Sisters* demonstrates its own potential for transformation, changing the strange stuff of political critique into the comforting and familiar matter of domestic fiction, and turning its single working woman into a married homemaker, the *mater* of domestic fiction. If this closural metamorphosis makes Jewsbury’s covertly antitheatrical novel sound rather unaccountably like the last scene of a comic pantomime, in which the players are effortlessly transformed by a wave of the fairy wand, it also loosely ties *The Half Sisters* to the final transformation scene of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, in which low theatrical characters are magically transported into respectable middle-class domesticity by a stroke of the authorial pen. While it is not my intention to try, somehow, to turn Jewsbury’s sober political fiction into Dickens’s theatrical *tour de force*, it is perhaps worth the critical stretch to note a significant similarity between them: both novels recoup their theatrical losses in a final celebration of the power of domestic fiction. *The Old Curiosity Shop* ends with an allegory of its own reading, as “the story of good Miss Nell who died” provides the Victorian family circle with domesticating entertainment, and *The Half Sisters* proffers the cozy act of reading aloud as a final seal of Bianca and Melton’s domestic bliss. While both novels are about theater in important ways, they are also, as we have by now come to expect from novels that treat the subject of theater, about the more familiar processes of fiction itself, and they press their home-court advantage to an alle-
gorical victory over the generic field. What both novels, and their novelists, seem concerned about is the sanctity of the house of fiction and the legitimacy of fiction’s extended family. Dickens is rather more gracious about generic family matters than Jewsbury, and he welcomes a spruced-up theatricality into the novel and into the middle-class home, while Jewsbury takes a conventionally inhospitable position and shows theater the door as soon as her heroine is safely over the threshold.

It is telling that in its final scene, after the novel has withdrawn its heroine from the theatrical stage, *The Half Sisters* should stage a final encounter between Bianca and her theatrical past. Staying overnight in Newcastle on her way “home” to Italy on her honeymoon, Bianca runs across a playbill for the circus troupe in which she began her career and she remarks to her husband on what a perfectly circular closure it gives her story: “I have lived out that romance, I am going back to Italy which I had then just left, and here comes Mr. Simpson to witness my exit in the same way as he presided over my entrance on life in England” (394). In case this should all seem too exhibitionist, what with the ringmaster presiding over her entrances and exits, the novel makes it clear that Bianca has superceded her theatrical origins: Bianca refuses to see Mr. Simpson, the circus’s manager, but decides instead to buy him a parting gift. As she explains her decision to Lord Melton, “I know him to be quite capable of exhibiting me in a grand transparency, and getting up a drama on my romance of real life! No, I know him too well to venture to glorify him in any such manner; but, if you will come out with me, after breakfast, we will buy the most sumptuous breastpin to be found, at any jeweller’s in the town—I know his taste—and I will send it as an anonymous tribute to his genius” (395). Rather than let Simpson take financial and theatrical opportunity of her “romance of real life,” Bianca seizes the opportunity to perform a necessary distinction from her former way of life—after all, she knows this man’s (flashy) taste. Now ironized as the inflated self-regard of a circus manager, theatrical “genius” becomes an in-joke for this genius of the home and her titled husband. As she sends the gift from “one who had sincere respect for [Simpson’s] character, and admiration of his genius” Bianca says laughingly to Melton, “I wish I could be by, to see his astonishment . . . I can just fancy him; and then how happily and complacently he will settle down in the conviction, that the dawn of his fame has arisen!” (395). Walking out of the jewelry shop, and the novel, Bianca imagine the spectacle of self-delusion as embodied by the man who first tried to make her into a spectacle. Simpson failed, of course, because Bianca’s “genius” could not be turned into a vulgar market commodity—but Simpson’s apparently can. One shudders to think what Dickens
might have made of this moment, in which the male theatrical “genius,” the master of curiosities, is turned into a spectacular commodity by the female performer that got away.

While on her final shopping spree, Bianca sees Mr. Simpson himself, bringing up the rear of the “grand equestrian procession” (395) in which Bianca made her first appearance. Simpson is not, however, in the “lofty phaeton” of ten years previous, but in “a magnificent private carriage” that Bianca suggests he must have chosen because “it looks more patriarchal” (395). Turning to Melton, Bianca then asks, “Is not our identity a strange thing?” (395). Well—yes—it is, but this seems a peculiar time for Bianca to bring it up. What she means, I think, is that patriarchal identity is a strange thing, with its theatrical props and its public display of private wealth and prestige. (Again, this might make Dickens squirm a bit.) But coming as it does in the closing moments of the novel, as Bianca secures her own identity through voyeuristic means, this comment suggests that identity is not only strange but estranging—or, at the very least, that it requires the act of estrangement in both its distance and alienation. That alienation is either reproduced within the self as the private/public split that confirms the presence of an “interior” self, or it is projected out onto a world of freaks and geeks who are all too ready to provide the same individualizing effect. Singularity is produced as and through difference. So Bianca, once removed from circulation on the theatrical and marital markets, pays off her theatrical relation in a final moment of largesse. She can afford to do so, since it secures her own position on the correct side of commercial exchange and demonstrates her vast holdings of interior real estate in the bargain.

The Dickens of The Old Curiosity Shop pays a higher price, but executes a very similar transaction as the one that closes out The Half Sisters: at the expense of others is the individual purchased. That individual—private, domestic, and bourgeois—is essential to the Victorian’s formation of collective identity (the family, the nation, the reading public), but the true “individual” can be something of a freak, which is why Victorian representations of exceptionality need to be handled so delicately. For “the Inimitable” Dickens, male genius is the obverse of female freakishness, while for Jewsbury—who wanted nothing more than to create a heroine who was perfectly imitable—female genius must be domesticated if the exception is to become the national rule. In both cases, however, fictions of identity (and the identity of fiction) can only be made secure by sacrificing the theatrical doubles that enable and imperil identity formation. In the vexed relation between domesticity and theatricality, in other words, abjection is the price you pay for writing “home.”