

# The Poetics and Erotics of the Dickensian Mouth

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## DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Colette Ramuz, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated. A portion of my previously published research, carried out as part of the research for this thesis, has been integrated into the body of the thesis in a suitably adapted form and this is always clearly stated in the relevant sections.

Signed: Colette Ramuz

Date: 11.02.2021

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## ABSTRACT

Dickens has been called an oral writer for several reasons: the preoccupation with eating and drinking in the novels; the range of voices in his work; the performativity of his own readings; and psychoanalytic approaches to the novels that identify links with Freud's psychosexual 'oral stage'. Scholars have offered compelling assessments of such approaches. Ian Watt's seminal essay, 'Oral Dickens', increased critical interest in the fundamental importance of appetitive drives and their associations with sexuality in the novels. From cannibalism to breast-feeding, scholars have grappled with issues of orality. It is an anomaly, then, that so little attention has been paid to Dickensian mouths as literal, material, metaphoric and metonymic spaces. As a body part it is often dismissed due to a lack of realist description, yet it signifies much more than the stereotypical, physiognomic features of rosy lips or villainous smile. In this thesis, I argue that the poetics and semiotics of the mouth in Dickens's novels encode desire, sexual attraction and agency. Not only an erotogenic organ in its own right, the mouth is a cipher for sexual identity, an axis between the interior and exterior world, and a literal and metaphorical site of consumption. By focusing on readings of Dickens's innovative poetics, the erotics in Dickens's novels can be recovered. My approach involves a reappraisal of Dickens's representations of the mouth to focus on how desire and sexual agency are conveyed in his novels. This new reading shows how oral erotics convey sexualities and sexual agency, which challenge perceptions and understanding of Dickensian representations of desire.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>SBB</i>	<i>Sketches by Boz</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>The Pickwick Papers</i>
<i>OT</i>	<i>Oliver Twist</i>
<i>NN</i>	<i>Nicholas Nickleby</i>
<i>OCS</i>	<i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i>
<i>BR</i>	<i>Barnaby Rudge</i>
<i>MC</i>	<i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i>
<i>DS</i>	<i>Dombey and Son</i>
<i>DC</i>	<i>David Copperfield</i>
<i>BH</i>	<i>Bleak House</i>
<i>LD</i>	<i>Little Dorrit</i>
<i>GE</i>	<i>Great Expectations</i>
<i>OMF</i>	<i>Our Mutual Friend</i>
<i>ED</i>	<i>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</i>



## NOTE ON EDITIONS

For consulting text histories, annotations, and variants, I have used the Oxford Clarendon editions which are available for *David Copperfield*, *Dombey and Son*, *Great Expectations*, *Little Dorrit*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *The Pickwick Papers*. For these titles and Dickens's other works, I have also used the Oxford World's Classics series and Penguin Classics' critical editions, as they are established academic texts and contain useful editorial matter and critical explanatory notes.

## Introduction -The Poetics and Oral Erotics of the Dickensian Mouth

From Carker's glistening teeth to Hortense's 'certain feline mouth', Dickens's mouths, whether idiosyncratic or prosaic, have received little critical attention (*BH*; 187; ch.12).<sup>1</sup> What was considered a 'lower' organ in Victorian discourse remains overlooked in the scholarship of Victorian literature in favour of that higher sense, the ocular.<sup>2</sup> Because eating is necessary to existence, taste is often relegated to the 'lesser categories' of sensory perception and located on an animalistic, primitive level.<sup>3</sup> Yet the mouth is the most intimate of the sensory sites and taste is highly individualistic; not only is the sensing mouth phenomenally subjective but taste requires objects to be brought inside the body. In the process of encountering and learning about the world through sensory perception, vision is often considered the superior cognitive sense, while the mouth's strong links with basic appetitive drives means that it is frequently omitted from discussions about behaviour and the development of knowledge. This oversight is noticeable in the field of Victorian sexuality studies where, with the hegemony of vision, the gaze has been considered the key symbolic phenomenon in representations of desire and sexual attraction.<sup>4</sup> While not denying the force

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by Nicola Bradbury (1853; London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> See David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), p. 5, on cultural value and the senses. See Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 1-7, on how a preoccupation with the written word almost obscures the representation of voices in the nineteenth-century novel.

<sup>3</sup> See Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (London: Cornell University, 2004), on the hierarchy of the senses and philosophies of taste.

<sup>4</sup> The critical dominance of sight and the gaze in analysing Victorian sexuality derives largely from Michel Foucault's theories and the paradigm of surveillance. See for example, Jonathan Carey, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); Carol T. Christ and John O'Jordan, eds, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination* (London: University of California Press, 1995); Kate Flint, *Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Jeremy Tambling, *Dickens, Violence and the Modern State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1995); Dennis W. Allen, *Sexuality in Victorian Fiction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993); John Maynard, *Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, 'Spectacular Women: *The Mysteries of London* and the Female Body', *Victorian Studies*, 40 (1996), 31-64.

of the libidinal gaze, I contest its dominance. In Dickens's work, the eroticised mouth is the key to understanding how desire and sexual attraction pervade the narrative.<sup>5</sup> This thesis explores the semiotics and poetics of the mouth in Dickens's novels, and how the mouth encodes desire, sexual attraction, and agency. The mouth, however, has a long and rich cultural history through its literal, material, and metaphorical properties and I do not propose a single heuristic model.<sup>6</sup> My approach involves a reappraisal of Dickens's representations of the mouth and oral erotics to reveal a new poetics of desire and sexual agency.

Successive layers of connected oral images, sounds, and gestures create patterns of sexuality and sexual agency, which cluster around the Dickensian mouth. Not only an erotogenic organ, the Dickensian mouth is also a cipher for sexual identity, a place of friction, and a metaphorical space through which characters are brought into relation with their environment, with other people and with things. By paying close attention to the figurative abundance and the performative and poetic qualities of his prose, Dickens's fascination with mouths and all things oral is legible.<sup>7</sup> Psychoanalytic, feminist, and Marxist approaches in literary criticism, however, have created a tendency to seek what is hidden in a text, what lies between or beneath the lines. This approach to interpretation, what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus call 'symptomatic reading', often subordinates the surface of a text in an endeavour to unmask 'concealed' meanings.<sup>8</sup> John Carey, for example argues that 'sex in *David Copperfield*, as in other of Dickens's novels, is not banished but driven underground, to emerge in perverted and inhibited forms'.<sup>9</sup> It is a reading that invokes the hermeneutics of

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<sup>5</sup> Although sexual attraction and sexual desire are often used interchangeably, I recognise a cognitive distinction between the terms in that attraction implies an involuntary physical response, whereas desire implies a degree of willingness and element of choice. Thus, David Copperfield is attracted to Uriah Heep but desires Dora Copperfield. These states can be simultaneous and amalgamated: David is both attracted to and desires Steerforth.

<sup>6</sup> I contextualise the cultural history of the mouth in chapter one.

<sup>7</sup> On Dickens's use of blank verse, see Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, 'Dickens's Rhythms', in *Dickens Style*, ed. by Daniel Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 73-92.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*, 108 (2009), 1-21, (p. 1).

<sup>9</sup> John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens's Imagination* (London: Faber, 1973), p. 154.

suspicion, a distrust of the surface where, interpretation ‘is occasioned by a gap between the real meaning of the text and its apparent meaning’.<sup>10</sup> Instead of ‘extricating the true meaning’, I argue that Dickens’s writing does not need ‘translation’ and that we have much to learn about Dickensian sexuality by paying more attention to Dickens’s prose poetics within the surface patterning.<sup>11</sup> This is not a dismissal of depth in his writing but a contention that images of the mouth are signs to be read at the surface of the text and are fundamental to the constitution and development of a character’s sexual identity. That desire reveals a fundamental truth about a subject’s identity is the basis of Foucault’s defining modern concept of sexuality which was embedded, he argues, during the Victorian period.<sup>12</sup> His rejection of the ‘repressive hypothesis’ has been highly influential in endorsing a different way of thinking about representations of Victorian sexuality.<sup>13</sup> After Foucault, sexuality was no longer considered a determinant elemental drive but as a socially constructed ‘fiction’ dependent on social and cultural forces. Foucault calls the body the ‘inscribed surface of events’, a concept which he extends to his archival research, writing that rather than drilling down: ‘what I am looking for are not relations that are secret, hidden, more silent or deeper than the consciousness of men’.<sup>14</sup> Instead, he sought ‘to define the relations on the very surface of discourse’ and ‘to make visible what is invisible only because it’s too much on the

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<sup>10</sup> The ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ is a phrase coined by Paul Ricoeur. See David Stewart, ‘The Hermeneutics of Suspicion’, *Literature and Theology*, 3 (November 1989), 296-307, (p. 296).

<sup>11</sup> Stewart discusses hermeneutics as akin to translating.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, vol. 1, trans. by, Robert Hurley, 6<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Penguin, 1998). In this work, however, the female body is made conspicuous by its absence, a flaw that has generated criticism. Gender blindness is problematic when analysing Dickens’s representations of the gendered mouth, sexual dynamics, and sexual embodiment. See Angela King, ‘The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body’, *International Women’s Studies*, 5 (2004), 29-39, on some of the issues arising from Foucault’s gender-neutral stance.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 10. In the ‘repressive hypothesis’, sex was thought to be concealed and silenced by the invisible forces of Victorian prudery, emerging only in covert ways as Carey contends. Foucault (p. 17) argues that on the contrary there was a ‘veritable discursive explosion’ of sex in the nineteenth century but leaves this vague statement undefined. Foucault’s constructivist account of sexuality denies any biological dimension, but it is a descriptive theory of sexuality, not a scientific one, and has its detractors.

<sup>14</sup> *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961–84*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. John Johnston (New York, 1989), 57–58, (p. 13) cited by Best and Marcus.

surface of things'.<sup>15</sup> In this way, many readers have not recognised Dickens's erotics that are patterned within the prose. When Foucault writes that he is 'bothered by excavations', it speaks to my concern that many readers and scholars, have looked past the surface of the narrative and sought a psychologically concealed, 'interior' form of sexuality in Dickens's novels. Despite these connections, however, I do not use a Foucauldian framework for this enquiry as not only does Dickens represent sexuality as having some essentialist foundations, but also because this thesis is concerned with *the way* in which sexuality is conveyed, that is, in Dickens's prose poetics. I attempt, instead, to recover the erotic in Dickens's representations of orality and show how sexuality and even notions of sexual perversion are increasingly presented as uninhibited and normative.<sup>16</sup> These surface qualities of the Dickensian mouth invite questions about thresholds, ruptures, and transformations, and we should linger over that site and re-observe what happens there.

The rich array of Dickensian mouths generates a whole range of meanings, not just in its performative modes of speaking, whispering, biting, pouting, kissing, and smoking but also in terms of what is put into mouths: apart from the conventional food, drink, cigars and pipes, there are pens, pins, sheets, pillows, aprons, scarves, fur, straw, grass, horsehair, sticks, canes, candles, money, flowers, fingers, thumbs, curls, and, not least, flesh. Reading this list is a reminder of Dickens's extraordinary comic and dramatic inventiveness but also of the representation of the permeability of Dickensian bodies. While the erotic mouth features in the work of other Victorian novelists, oral gestures, and paralinguistics such as gaping mouths, pouting lips, and biting teeth populate Dickens's work far more frequently and

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<sup>15</sup> *Foucault Live*, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Dickens presents sexuality as having some essential or physiological essence in accordance with the physical nature of the human animal. Extensive modern research appears to support Dickens's view that while sexual identity is shaped by social forces, there is also a base level biological component. The influence of varied genetic factors on sexuality includes, for example, markers for homosexuality on chromosome 8. See, for example, A. R. Sanders, E. R. Martin, G. W. Martin and others, eds., 'Genome-wide scan demonstrates significant linkage for male sexual orientation', *Psychological Medicine*, 45 (2015), 1379–1388.

inventively than in any of his contemporaries' work.<sup>17</sup> As an axis between the inside and the outside of the body, the mouth is replete with physical and psychological tension. It is this inside-outside corporeal axis that brings eroticism into his writing.

The Dickensian mouth, however, hides its erotic credentials in plain sight.

Performative oral erotics pervade the texts but reading such implied eroticism requires a level of scrutiny to see how he is 'telling without telling what he's telling'.<sup>18</sup> Henry James, writing about Dickens's last complete novel, labelled him 'the greatest of superficial novelists' because, he claims, 'it is one of the chief conditions of his genius not to see beneath the surface of things'.<sup>19</sup> What James points out is Dickens's ability to load the surface of the body with linguistic meaning.<sup>20</sup> To see the surface truly, 'to reconcile us at once to the commonplace and the odd — these are not minor gifts'.<sup>21</sup> John Ruskin recognises this particular artistry in Dickens's 'superficial' style, when he writes that,

The essential value and truth of Dickens's writings have been unwisely lost sight of by many thoughtful persons merely because he presents his truth with some colour of caricature. Unwisely, because Dickens's caricature, though often gross, is never mistaken. Allowing for his manner of telling them, the things he tells us are always true.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Notably, Charlotte Brontë makes frequent use of the erotic mouth both physiognomically and through its association with sexual nourishment, especially in *Villette*, ed. by Helen M. Cooper (1853; London: Penguin Books, 2004); see Janet Tanke, 'The Hungry Heroine: Food as Erotic Discourse in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*', *CEA Critic*, 69 (2007), 43-53. A simple concordance search shows Dickens refers to mouths 623 times compared to 523 mentions in the nineteenth-century reference corpus as a whole. The case with teeth and lips is even more pronounced. See < <https://clic.bham.ac.uk/concordance?conc-q=mouth%2C%20mouths&conc-subset=all&conc-type=any&corpora=corpus%3ADNov&kwic-span=-5%3A5&kwic-terms=in&kwic-terms=into&table-filter=&table-type=basic> > M. Mahlberg, and others, 'CLiC Dickens: Novel uses of concordances for the integration of corpus stylistics and cognitive poetics' *Corpora*, 11 (2016), 433-463.

<sup>18</sup> For this phrase, I owe thanks to Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (London: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Henry James, *The Nation*, 21 December 1865, pp. 786-787, (p. 787), reviewing *Our Mutual Friend*. < <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=chi.16408985&view=1up&seq=409&size=125&q1=Our%20Mutual%20Friend> > [Accessed 05.10.2020]. See Sean Grass, *Charles Dickens's 'Our Mutual Friend': A Publishing History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Harold Bloom, *Novelists and Novels* (New York: Checkmark, 2007), p. 93, contends that James was 'at his rare worst in summing up Dickens's limitations'.

<sup>21</sup> Bloom, p. 94.

<sup>22</sup> John Ruskin, 'A Note on Hard Times,' *The Dickens Critics*, ed. by George H. Ford and Lauriat Lane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961), pp. 47-48.

Even before considering the mouth's erotic properties, critics who approach Dickens through a realist lens overlook the wealth of meaning in poetics of the mouth.<sup>23</sup> Rarely described in detail, the Dickensian mouth is nonetheless more than a simple emblem by which a character can be identified, or as a physiognomic 'tag', such as rosy lips or a villainous smile.<sup>24</sup> Realism and poetics are not necessarily oppositional but, since Dickens was writing in the period when realism was the major novel form, it is easy to overlook his contributions to the poetic form.<sup>25</sup> Reading *orificially*, however — that is, seeing through the mouth and appreciating its metaphoric and metonymic qualities — reveals that site as a key to erotic knowledge, agency, and desire.<sup>26</sup> In paying attention to the poetics of the mouth and its paradoxically overlooked displays, a Dickensian linguistic knowingness is revealed concerning the mouth's relationship to sexuality. This does not mean that my study is anti-interpretation or that I am suggesting that the narratives can be free from political and critical engagement, but this reappraisal asserts that Dickens's poetics do not function simply as a descriptive backdrop. In valuing surface reading and asserting its importance above theoretical agendas, the text acquires a linguistic agency. Symptomatic and surface reading are not mutually exclusive, but this rebalance shines a light on Dickensian representations of sexual desire that are quite distinct from Freudian psychosexual theories.

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<sup>23</sup> For example, Juliet McMaster, *Dickens the Designer* (Totawa: Barnes and Noble, 1987), p. 42, writes that Dickens 'does not pay much attention to his characters' mouths, at least when in repose'; and Patricia Ingham, *Dickens, Women and Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 25, notes that his language is distinctive for its 'absence of details relating to those animal organs, the mouth and the nose', finding 'the paucity of facial detail represents a significant variation on the developing practice, in novels from 1830 onwards, for more detail to be given and decoded by the narrator'.

<sup>24</sup> I discuss surface reading and the influence of melodrama and the theatre in chapter one.

<sup>25</sup> As Raymond Williams points out, in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 199, the term 'realism' invokes 'almost endless play' with definitions. I use the term loosely aligned with Williams's own definition that realism is a term which describes 'at first an exceptional accuracy of representation, later a commitment to describing **real** events and showing things as they actually exist' [Williams's emphasis]. Dickens's mouths are rarely described with 'exceptional accuracy'.

<sup>26</sup> I borrow the term from Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), p. 3.

While sexual activity was apparently unnarratable in Victorian fiction, sexual desire was everywhere evoked.<sup>27</sup> The need for discretion did not unduly restrain Victorian writers, who devised their own rhetorical outlets. As William A. Cohen argues:

Sexual unspeakability (*sic*) does not function simply as a collection of prohibitions for Victorian writers. Rather, it affords them abundant opportunities to develop an elaborate discourse — richly ambiguous, subtly coded, prolix and polyvalent — that we now recognise and designate by the very term *literary*.<sup>28</sup>

That ‘unspeakability’ was displaced onto an alternative discursive language that included erotic metaphorization of the body. Once that impressionistic mode is recognised, Dickens’s oral erotic metaphors create a striking effect, such as representations of male biters discussed in chapter two and the feline mouth as a symbol of female sexual aggression discussed in chapter four. The protean quality of the Dickensian mouth is part of its sophistication.

Through the fluid properties of his style, such as overlaps, slippages and ambiguities, the Dickensian mouth amasses erotic qualities. Although the meanings embodied in the oral can sometimes seem nebulous and unanchored, patterns of orality in the texts cohere at the membranous, watery mouth, or what Donald Meltzer calls the ‘theatre of the mouth’.<sup>29</sup> Such patterns are evident, for example, in the depiction of the rampantly oral Quilp and in his watery demise when he is swallowed by the Thames in a sensual merging of bodies, man with river (528; ch.67).<sup>30</sup> They are also present in the descriptions of Orlick’s mouth-like marshy den, where only his lurid blue lips are visible and his mouth waters at the thought of

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<sup>27</sup> For a discussion on sexuality as the ‘unnarratable’, see Robyn R. Warhol, ‘Narrating the Unnarratable: Gender and Metonymy in the Victorian Novel’, *Style*, 28, (1994), 74-94.

<sup>28</sup> William A. Cohen, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Donald Meltzer, ‘Concerning the perception of one’s own attributes and its relation to language development’, in *Studies in extended metapsychology: Clinical applications of Bion’s ideas* (Strath Tay: Clunie Press, 1986), pp. 175-86. Meltzer explains the ‘Theatre of the Mouth’ as the site where an infant’s exploratory mouth generates the meaning of inside and outside the body for the infant.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. by Elizabeth M. Brennan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). All further references are to this the text.



consuming Pip (420; ch.53).<sup>31</sup> Both scenes are eroticised through the interplay of oral poetics, as I will show.

Peter Brooks contends that the nineteenth century ‘shedding of reticence about the erotic body’ can be ‘somewhat sly’.<sup>32</sup> In this way, Dickens’s simultaneous depiction and complication of sexual allusions prompts an epistemological ambivalence; the sense of knowing an allusion is sexual yet finding it difficult to pinpoint. But this ambiguity is a creative strength, since narrative teasing allows if not invites a more nuanced reading of Dickensian sexuality. Few of Dickens’s contemporary critics, however, seemed to recognise this relationship between verbal play and the unconscious mind, let alone the links with sexuality, in Dickens’s work. Henry James, George Henry Lewes, and George Eliot contributed to a trend for measuring Dickens’s work pejoratively against conventions of nineteenth-century psychological realism, a trend which increased after his death.<sup>33</sup> But John Bowen rightly contends that Lewes and Eliot, at least, were too constricted in their approach and overlooked what he calls Dickens’s ‘representational radicalism’.<sup>34</sup> It is a form of representation that in its fluidity moves beyond realism, towards modernism, and pre-empt[s] postmodernism; as Bowen argues, it ‘stretch[s] our notions of psychology, aesthetics, and politics alike’.<sup>35</sup> In a similar process of representational innovation, Dickens’s mouths are radical because in exploiting and reconstructing the Victorian coding of the mouth, he is able to explore a spectrum of human sexuality.

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<sup>31</sup> *Great Expectations*, ed. by Margaret Cardwell (1861; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). All further references are to this text.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> See Henry James, *The Nation* (New York), 21 December 1865, 786-7, in *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Philip Collins, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 469-73; George Henry Lewes, John Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens*, in the *Fortnightly Review*, February 1872, xvii, 141-54, in Collins, pp. 569-77; and George Eliot, ‘The Natural History of German Life’, *Westminster Review*, July 1856, lxvi, p. 55, in Collins, p. 343, where she praises Dickens’s faithful ‘external’ depictions of the poor but criticises a perceived lack of psychological characterisation.

<sup>34</sup> John Bowen, *Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> Bowen, *Other Dickens*, p. 29.

One anonymous reviewer did note the significance of Dickens's poetic style.

Acknowledging the innovative nature of this style, the critic described it as a 'peculiarity' and one that 'had not generally been perceived'.<sup>36</sup> But Dickens's poetics were nevertheless recognised as essential to his composition:

The frequency of its occurrence indicates not only a design on the author's part to elevate his style by such means, but a poetic spirit in him, to which some kind of music is necessary as the natural utterance of its better thoughts. But the charm is a concealed charm; the varied harmony has still the look of uniform prose, and therefore steals unobserved into the reader's mind, who is pleased he knows not why.<sup>37</sup>

Dickens's oral erotic code often 'steals unobserved into the reader's mind', albeit not usually to charming effect. Oral erotics are so well integrated into the text that the overall patterning can initially seem to be concealed and not immediately manifest, but this is because such patterns are unexpected; the surface of Dickens's texts is neither superficial nor deceptive, it is just that certain patterns might go unobserved, as the anonymous critic noted.

Apprehending the semiotics and poetics of the Dickensian mouth, therefore, entails some lingering on the page. In slowing down, networks of words can be seen or heard to emerge, so that what might have seemed an obscure oral metaphor becomes illuminated. As Yves Bonnefoy explains,

Why, we might ask, is a certain metaphor 'obscure' in some cases? And why does the relation between the things compared thus escape us, wholly or in part? Is it because some aspect of the poet's knowledge of the objects compared has not been explicated in the text? [...] It's just the opposite. For what the poet hopes for from words is that they might open to that plenitude that descriptions and formulations cannot reach; and if therefore he writes and even publishes, it is because he hopes that the reader will discover in his own experience the things that he, for his part, has felt he could leave unsaid.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> From an unsigned review of *The Cricket on the Hearth*, in *Chambers Edinburgh Journal*, 17 January 1846, n. s. v, 44-8, in Collins, p. 174,

<sup>37</sup> From the unsigned review above, in Collins, p. 175.

<sup>38</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, 'Lifting Our Eyes from the Page', trans. by John Naughton, *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (1990), 794-806, (p. 800).

Bonnefoy's case for reading 'poetically' seems to echo Dickens's hope that readers might interpret metaphors and discover inferences for themselves. When answering Thackeray's criticism of Dickens's ambiguous description of Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), Dickens forcefully explained his preference for using 'unavoidable inference' rather than attempting to prove something 'elaborately by words and deeds'.<sup>39</sup> Concerning the same novel, in 1838 he wrote tetchily to G. H. Lewes that 'if readers cannot detect the point of a passage without having their attention drawn to it by the writer, I would much rather they lost it and looked out for something else'.<sup>40</sup> While Dickens does not explicitly flaunt sexuality, his eroticised mouths disavow ideas that sexuality is always covert in his writing. Dickens's oral erotics, however, demand an active ironic reader to appreciate how he exploits his own position as the perceived master exponent of domesticity and sentiment.<sup>41</sup>

Bowen explores Dickens's style through an astute examination of the ubiquitous Dickensian umbrella.<sup>42</sup> Explaining the umbrella's properties as sharp and probing, but often disguised, he writes that 'like an iceberg or a literary style, most of the point of the umbrella is hidden, something that looks unimportant, but which is invested with a great deal of psychic and textual importance'.<sup>43</sup> In the same way, representations of the mouth might not immediately suggest great significance but, as Bowen observes with umbrellas, their 'marginal, multiple and contradictory qualities' inspire 'remarkable acts'.<sup>44</sup> As with an umbrella, the mouth is often marginalised through its ordinariness and, thus, one must be

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<sup>39</sup> In his essay, 'Going to see a man hanged' (1840), Thackeray claimed that Dickens 'dare not tell the truth concerning such young ladies', referring to Nancy from *Oliver Twist*, in Collins, p. 45. Dickens responded to the criticism in his preface to the third edition to the novel; see *Oliver Twist*, ed. by Kathleen Tillotson (1837-38; Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), p. lxiv.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to G. H. Lewis (?9 June 1838) in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 12 vols, ed. by Madeline House and Graham Storey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965-2002;1965), 1, p. 404.

<sup>41</sup> Anthony Trollope famously satirised Dickens as 'Mr Popular Sentiment' in *The Warden*, ed. by Robin Gilmour, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 131.

<sup>42</sup> John Bowen, 'Dickens's Umbrellas', in *Dickens's Style*, ed. by Daniel Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 26-46.

<sup>43</sup> Bowen, p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> Bowen, p. 29.

alert to recognising its erotic qualities. In seeming mundane, however, much can be done with the mouth; there is narrative wealth in the ordinary for Dickens. And, as with eroticised umbrellas, it is in Dickens's repeated and unexpected conceptions that the mouth's erotic meaning is affirmed. Tamsin Evernden calls this rhetorical strategy 'creative specificity' and argues that, 'select detail, which might also be edited (drawn from an array of choices), results in potent specificity'.<sup>45</sup> She proposes that Dickens's characterisations develop through the 'peculiarity' of each select detail and this, in turn, facilitates the process whereby a character gains 'traction'.<sup>46</sup> In a similar way, I argue that Dickens's erotic mouths gain traction through a process of blending the 'peculiar' with the ordinary, even with the clichéd, at times. This is evident, for example, in his reworking of rosy lips from the suggestion of romanticised objectification to its embodiment of female sexual agency, which I explore in chapter four.

In writing about the Dickensian mouth, I use the terms oral and orality to cover a range of meanings. 'Orality', I use in the sense of 'the quality of being oral or orally communicated' and also in its secondary psychosexual meaning of the 'focusing of sexual energy and feeling on the mouth'.<sup>47</sup> I refer to 'oral' properties in Dickens's novels in the sense of that which is related to the mouth, encompassing wider metaphorical meanings, such as the atmosphere of a warm, dark enclosure suggested by the buccal cavity.<sup>48</sup>

Configurations of the mouth's physical space play an important role in eroticising an atmosphere or environment; Dickens's narrative often returns to those warm, dark, and mouth/womb-like spaces that suggest the comfort and intimacy of flesh.<sup>49</sup> The spatial and

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<sup>45</sup> Tamsin Evernden, 'Dickens and Character: "The Economy of Apprehension"' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2018), p. 13.

<sup>46</sup> Evernden, 'The Economy of Apprehension', p. 13.

<sup>47</sup> From the Oxford English Dictionary: <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/132159?redirectedFrom=orality#eid>.

<sup>48</sup> From the Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/132155?redirectedFrom=oral#eid>.

<sup>49</sup> As noted in chapter one, some Medieval manuscripts show the female mouth directly linked, anatomically, to the womb.

comforting qualities of mouth metaphors are used to striking effect when Quilp chews over his schemes inside the dark damp interior of his den. Quilp relishes his sensuous if squalid experiences in this space. Eventually, however, his senses, converge and conspire against him, so that the haptic becomes confused with the ocular to produce an oral nightmare: through a poetic turning inside-out, in the darkness, Quilp's den seems to merge with the 'wet and clammy' exterior as if it has been swallowed into 'the mouth of some dim, yawning cavern' (527; ch.67). The Dickensian mouth is metamorphic and can turn from warmly sensual and inviting to dangerously violent. It is noticeable, for example, in the relationship between David and Dora Copperfield, where kissing and biting converge to represent their complex sexuality which moves between playful flirtation and predatory incorporation. In Quilp's drowning, the conflation of sensuality and oral violence is foregrounded in sexual imagery that reflects Quilp's persona and, ironically, his demise: his 'plaything' of a body brushes against 'smooth and slippery' surfaces, while fires are 'dancing before his eyes', and the river forces him to 'yield to its own element' (510; ch.67). Through oral-incorporative metaphors, as the river threatens to swallow Quilp's body, Dickens thus eroticises the physicality of the dwarf's death in an ironic end to his sexually voracity. Vomited back onto the shore, the river seems to have chewed Quilp to a carcass as he once chewed ships' carcasses.

The fusion of oral metaphors with symbolic images offers great scope for interrogating ideas about sexuality, sexual agency, and sexual performance. Through the mouth's metamorphic qualities, it can act function synonymously as a symbol of sexual appetite, an invitation to the sexual body, a place of sensual retreat, as metonymic female genitalia and even as a wound in sadomasochistic relationships.<sup>50</sup> Reading this complex

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<sup>50</sup> Psychoanalytic critics have written extensively on sadomasochism in Dickens's novels, some using Deleuze's splitting of sadism from masochism, as two contradictory drives, see Gilles Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty', in *Masochism*, trans. by Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1989), p. 20. Others have argued that sadism and

integration of oral-incorporative imagery and orality reveals a new way of thinking about Dickens's representations of sexuality.

### *The Critical Field*

While Dickens is often characterised as an 'oral' writer, the Dickensian mouth, itself, has received little critical attention.<sup>51</sup> Where the significance of the Dickensian mouth is acknowledged, it is usually limited to its symbolic role in consumption and consumer ideology and to connections with Freud's 'oral stage' of psychosexual development.<sup>52</sup>

Ian Watt's essay 'Oral Dickens' offers a comprehensive survey of Dickens and things oral through a psychoanalytic lens.<sup>53</sup> Watt focuses on the treatment of food and drink, narrative links with Freudian psychoanalysis, and the functions of speech in Dickens's novels. In construing a coherent pattern to Dickens's orality, Watt draws his three strands together through a psychosexual framework. However, he also brings biographical details and claims into play and, while I agree that 'Dickens's whole literary style seems oral', Watt himself confesses that it is not clear 'what critical advantages would accrue if it could be established

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masochism are inextricable, emanating from the same initial primal scene. However, many of these are Freudian readings, which I do not support. I use the term sadomasochism to mean simply receiving or giving pleasure through the infliction of pain.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example: Robert Golding, *Idiolects in Dickens* (London: Macmillan, 1985); George Goodin, *Dickens's Dialogue: Margins of Conversation* (New York: AMS, 2013); Gail Turley Houston, *Consuming Fictions: Gender, Class, and Hunger in Dickens's Novels* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994); Robert E. Lougy, *Inaugural Wounds: The Shaping of Desire in Five Nineteenth-Century English Narratives* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004); Rebekah Scott, 'Snarling Charles: A Saxon Style of Restraint', in *Dickens's Style*, ed. by Daniel Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 176-194; Ian Watt, 'Oral Dickens', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 3 (1974), 165-181. William A. Cohen, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) offers a more complex consideration of Dickens's representation of orality and the orifice metaphor, as discussed in this introduction and referred to in chapters two and three.

<sup>52</sup> Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, ed. by Angela Richards, trans. by James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1977). Freud divided psychosexual development into five stages in childhood: the oral, the anal, the phallic, the latent, and the genital phase.

<sup>53</sup> Ian Watt, 'Oral Dickens', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 3 (1974), 165-181. Dickens's orality, 'the quality of being orally communicated', has been the subject of fine scholarship, in particular Malcolm Andrews, *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves: Dickens and the Public Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Robert Tracy, 'Reading Dickens' Writing', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 11 (1983), 37-59; and Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*. My study is concerned with the material mouth and its metaphors and, in terms of oral communication, sexual paralinguistics rather than Dickens's own oral performances or the relationship between primary orality (person-to-person speech) and writing.

that Dickens was an oral-erotic character'.<sup>54</sup> Rather than attempting to assign motivations for Dickens's oral style, my thesis instead analyses the meanings in poetics and oral erotics; I attempt to interrogate Dickens's language and not to psychoanalyse. Much of Watt's study is illuminating but his conclusions on representations of sexuality are, I believe, hindered by the limitations of Freudian and biographical approaches.<sup>55</sup> These are both approaches where figurative and linguistic implications can be easily overlooked or misconstrued. For example, while Watt points out the weakness in V. S. Pritchett's view that 'oral pleasures were substituted for sexual ones in the Victorian novel', he still finds a 'relative lack of any convincing presentation of sexual love' in Dickens's work.<sup>56</sup> I suggest that in Watt's search for sexual love in Dickens's work he misses the pervasive representations of a much broader sexuality that encompasses a much wider sphere than that of love.

Like Watt, Gail Turley Houston uses a psychoanalytic framework, building on historicist and feminist work on food and the body in her reading of Dickensian sexuality.<sup>57</sup> For Houston, the fetishization of commodities is entangled with the Dickensian body as an object.<sup>58</sup> She offers some sophisticated insights, including her writing on David Copperfield's oral sadism, which inform aspects of my study on violent oral incorporation. However, relying on a Freudian framework leads her to pathologize sexuality, whereas I argue that Dickens's radical endeavour is to portray oral sadism as a natural physiological instinct rather than a deviant impulse of masculine sexuality. Building on John Kucich's theory that Dickens's repressive economy is based on passion, I propose that Dickens's oral erotics are the expression of a visceral sexuality which he seeks to assimilate rather than

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<sup>54</sup> Watt, p. 175.

<sup>55</sup> Additionally, there is little empirical evidence in support of Freud's model of differentiated psychosexual stages and their shaping of character and individual psychology. On the concept of the 'oral personality', see R. F. Bornstein, 'Beyond orality', *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 13 (1996), 177–203.

<sup>56</sup> Watt, quoting Pritchett; 'What replaced the sane eighteenth-century attitude to sex in the comic writings of Dickens? I think probably the stress was put on another hunger — the hunger for food, jollity and good cheer', p. 180.

<sup>57</sup> Houston, *Consuming Fictions*.

<sup>58</sup> Houston, p. 53 and pp. 105-106.

quash.<sup>59</sup> But this concept of sexuality goes beyond metaphors of consumption; I argue that Dickens's oral codes are more sophisticated, incorporating gesture, paralinguistics, metonymy, metaphor and the effects of tone and register.

Writing on the Dickensian subject and material embodiment, Cohen draws out Dickens's fascination with the orifice and the permeable body. Building on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological model to examine sensory experience in Victorian literature, he explores Dickens's use of the keyhole as both a symbolic mouth and a symbolic eye.<sup>60</sup> However, while his sophisticated study informs some of my thinking on embodiment and permeability, his discussion of Dickens has a significant focus on sight and the gaze, including how the keyhole functions as a tool for 'embodied looking'. In my thesis I privilege the mouth, arguing that the mouth and its relationship with the permeable subject are under-researched in Dickens. I consider the notion of permeability in terms of both a symbiotic sexual communion, where oral-assimilation is the key trope, and sexual parasitism, where metaphors of oral-incorporation and violence predominate. These relationships are of central importance in Dickens's *Bildungsromane*, as well as in the development of female agency which is another area that could benefit from more critical attention.

In Dickens's writing, a connection is made between erotic knowledge and the permeable body through tropes of ingestion and biting, oral gestures, and the act of placing objects into the mouth. Making sense of Dickens's permeable bodies as representations of desire is aided by readings not only of concepts of embodiment, but also of the semiotics of the mouth. In other words, understanding is enhanced by thinking about *how* Dickens's poetics transform the mouth into signs of desire. Orifices, gaps, and thresholds on the body

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<sup>59</sup> John Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 201-283. Kucich, p. 203, argues that in Dickens's novels 'passion and repression frequently become interchangeable or reversible signs within a far more complicated conception of human desire that does not respect the "obvious" dichotomies — self-expression versus self-suppression; nature versus culture; vitality versus inhibition — that we continually assign to them'.

<sup>60</sup> Cohen, *Embodied*, pp. 29-37.



become invested with meaning in this semiotic system. As Peter Brooks argues, ‘narrative desire seeks to make such a body semiotic’ and that ‘desire for knowledge of that body and its secrets becomes the desire to master the text’s symbolic system, its key to knowledge, pleasure, and the very creation of significance’.<sup>61</sup> The narrative desire to ‘know’ another body is often a question of how to gain access to that body. Within the Western literary canon, that relationship between sexuality and knowledge, is often expressed through tropes of incorporation and access into the body as a sort of epistemic consumption such as Eve’s consumption of the apple.<sup>62</sup> In the Bible’s ‘The Song of Songs’, the biblical sense of knowledge is synonymous with sexual communion — or conversation, as it was later termed in Victorian legal discourse.<sup>63</sup> The erotic female body in the poem is imagined through the metaphor of a fertile, walled garden filled with luscious fruit, where the beloved is invited to enter and feed.<sup>64</sup> The poem’s recurring images of teeth, tongues, and lips are fundamental to its expression of sexual love, which centre upon the openness of the material body and sensuous orality.<sup>65</sup> In the language of consumption, that sensual material body is evoked as both an object to be consumed and as the curious tasting subject. Dickens, however, reinvigorates the trope through the addition of savage delight and perverse glee, where the danger in appetite is always evident. In *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), for example, he presents a comical but grotesque version with the desirable girl as meat pie: when the fat boy has his meat pie before him, he ‘ogles’ the servant girl Mary and is said to plunge into the pie ‘up to the very ferules of the knife and fork’ before exclaiming on her prettiness (834, 833;

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<sup>61</sup> Brooks, *Body Work*, p. 8.

<sup>62</sup> Eve’s acquisition of knowledge is an act of both consumption and agency. Francis Landy, ‘The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 98 (1979), 513-528, (p. 526), contends that the biblical apple tree is a metaphor for a male lover, further complicating Eve’s act of consumption.

<sup>63</sup> The Song of Solomon 4.2: ‘A garden inclosed [sic] is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed’; and 4.16: ‘Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits’. Conversation (as intercourse) is defined by the *OED* as ‘sexual intercourse or intimacy’.

<<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/40748?rskey=KiG1rV&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>>

<sup>64</sup> The Song of Solomon 6.2.

<sup>65</sup> The Song of Solomon 7.9.

ch.54).<sup>66</sup> Uriah Heep's description of his failed attempt upon Agnes, as plucking a pear 'before it was ripe' is a similarly grotesque and threatening version while he mimes the pear and smacks his lips (495; ch.39). The pleasure of ingestion is further complicated and aligned with ruthless desire by David Copperfield's confession that he is a spider to Dora's fly (593; ch.48).<sup>67</sup> In Dickens, oral erotic metaphors evade the ethereal and insist on flesh and carnality as natural appetite.

In the early novels, *The Pickwick Papers* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), the carnal worlds within evoke the Rabelaisian animated mouth which is central to the carnivalesque tone.<sup>68</sup> Writing on Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin is insistent upon the role of the mouth in perceiving the world:

The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself. Man's awakening conscience could not but concentrate on this moment, could not help borrowing from it a number of substantial images determining its interrelation with the world.<sup>69</sup>

The biting, rending, chewing mouth is a familiar Dickensian image. It epitomises the visceral nature of his representations of passion and reflects a fascination with the eroticised open body. In these two novels, the Rabelaisian inflections, such as upside-down guzzling Quilp and the gorging fat boy (*PP*), distort the make-up of vice to incorporate dark comedy, enhancing Dickens's sexual poetics. Through grotesque realism, sexual appetite is rendered almost but not quite surreal. This device provides an 'anarchical holiday space [...] that Dickens perceived as an opportunity for changing his readers' basic stories about the nature

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<sup>66</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. by James Kinsley (1836-37; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). All further references are to this text.

<sup>67</sup> Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. by Nina Burgis (1850; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). All further references are to this text.

<sup>68</sup> See Mark M. Hennelly, 'Carnavalesque: "Unlawful Games" in *The Old Curiosity Shop*', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 22 (1993), 67-120.

<sup>69</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (1968; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 281, on banquet imagery and the 'open, unfinished nature of the body'.

of reality'.<sup>70</sup> It is also an opportunity for Dickens to engage with the truth about the sexual body; in his writing, sexual desire is neither sublime nor irremediably base but is depicted instead as a complex, natural feeling. In later novels, the exuberance of the satyr's appetite is replaced by less surreal forms inflected with Dickens's symbolic realism where the symbolic and the real coalesce; the biting and pouting mouths have metonymic erotic meaning but also emphasise the material qualities of Dickens's sexual bodies. This rhetorical strategy, where desire and sexuality are rendered through recurring and complex patterns of the mouth and orality, allows him to grapple with bodily nature. In this way, Dickens writes sexual desire as if he 'knows something without bearing the responsibility for knowing it'.<sup>71</sup>

### *Chapter Summaries*

The first chapter of the thesis examines nineteenth-century cultural representations of the mouth and explains the fundamental shift from discourses of oral pathology to psychological and social conceptions of the mouth. This conceptual change illustrates how representations of the mouth are contextually specific and is critical to constructs of the Victorian sexual subject. Examining physiological and philosophical links to Victorian perceptions of the mouth shines a light on the coding of oral erotics. In this way, the chapter reveals how gender plays a crucial role in Victorian oral erotics: metaphors of the masculine mouth, signifying incorporation and visceral sexual appetite, evolve into new and broader expressions of sexual desire while the feminine mouth, in its function as the pre-sexological centre of sexual desire, evolves to encode more complex signs of desire than previously recognised but also of sexual agency. The chapter explains how conceptions of the eroticised female mouth intersect with

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<sup>70</sup> Edwin Eigner, *The Dickens Pantomime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 41. See also, Chris Brooks, *Signs for the Times: Symbolic Realism in the Mid-Victorian World* (1984; Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>71</sup> Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens*, p. 9.

long-held ideas about the permeable female body, particularly, the ‘leaky body’ trope. It is a trope that evokes Medieval and Renaissance discourse, where female orifices in an essentialist reading of the body are marked as problematic. In Victorian discourse, the trope is used as both a warning, in conduct manuals, for example, and as an opportunity to draw attention to the sexual female body.<sup>72</sup>

Masculine aspects of the erotic mouth include images of teeth and biting, which proliferate in Dickens’s novels. The tooth is not only physiological but has social and psychological implications, as a piercing, penetrative body part, as a mark of social class through its physical condition, as a symbol of pain, and as an index of pain and pleasure. Disclosing teeth in art and fiction had meaning that went beyond proffering a broad smile. This chapter calls attention to how Victorian images of teeth often signified mad, bad, facetious, and grotesque adult characters but, more importantly for this study, how they were also associated with masculine, sexually aggressive behaviour. In the mouth’s heterotopic space, teeth are both materially implicated in desire through sexualised biting but also conceptually through the idea of aggression, power, and force. From ancient Greek myth, literary teeth embodied power and were an important symbolic form. In the nineteenth century, that oral symbolism is adapted to reflect new contexts and ideas.

Chapter two concerns the extraordinary phenomenon of Dickensian male biting.<sup>73</sup> I analyse Dickens’s preoccupation with eroticised ingestion, incorporation and biting in *Pickwick Papers*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey and Son*, and *David Copperfield* and consider the depiction of perverse sexuality and its eventual normalisation in the later novels. This chapter builds on John Kucich’s ‘general economy’ of energies where Dickens’s ‘delighted identification with violent forms of desire’ reveals how restraint and

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<sup>72</sup> *Etiquette for Ladies, Being a Manual of Minor Social Ethics and Customary Observances* (Knight & Son, 1857) and *The Young Lady’s Book* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1859).

<sup>73</sup> An earlier, shorter version of this chapter appears in, Colette Ramuz, “‘Shall I bite it?’: Sexuality and the Biting Male in Dickens”, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 51 (2020), 73-94.

passion are not in opposition at all.<sup>74</sup> Violent orality is increasingly normalised by Dickens, as he moves away from the essentialist ‘test’ of primal man versus civilised man. In effect, Dickens aligns perverse desire with conventional tropes of desire to complicate ideas of normative sexuality. Biting is portrayed as both evidence of the materiality of the erotic body and as a symbolic coding of aggressive sexual impulses.

Chapter three analyses the significance of the mouth in two of Dickens’s *Bildungsromane*, *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, to show how Dickens uses the mouth to mediate and explore masculine sexuality. By exploiting the erotogenic qualities of the mouth as a sensual organ, overlaid with oral-incorporative imagery that figures desire, Dickens presents a visceral journey of self-fashioning. The two novels reflect differences in his conceptual framing of the oral to reveal a distinctive notion of male sexual development. The chapter considers how Dickens infuses the narratives with oral images, metaphors, and symbolism and seeks to normalise violent masculine desire.

Chapter four turns to Dickens’s women and the poetics of the female mouth in *Barnaby Rudge*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.<sup>75</sup> The female mouth has a long tradition as a contentious site with pejorative connotations of the leaky abject body, but also in the metonymic features of the female genitalia and sexual consumption. In this sense, I use the orality in a psychosexual, though not Freudian, formulation, to consider Dickens’s reconfiguration of the rosebud mouth with notions of sexual agency tied to young and pretty female characters. I then turn to his use of the feline mouth as a metaphoric representation of the mature, sexually attractive female. Through imagery that centres of the feline mouth the two French women,

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<sup>74</sup> Kucich, *Repression*, pp. 201-203.

<sup>75</sup> A section of this chapter in an earlier version appears in Colette Ramuz, “‘Making a rosebud of her mouth’: Erotics, Semiotics and Agency in the Dickensian Female Mouth’, in *Dickens and Women Re-observed*, ed. by Edward Guiliano (Brighton: Edward Everett Root, 2020), pp. 15-37.

Madame Defarge and Hortense, embody sexual promiscuity and sexual threat to males who come within their hunting ground.

Chapter five continues the focus on the gendered mouth, turning to orality and Dickens's development of female 'small talk', as seen in *The Cricket on the Hearth*, *Dombey and Son*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Our Mutual Friend*. I define small talk as a form of patter and non-verbal communication which characterises the Dickensian eroticised child-woman. That this form of orality plays on smallness is crucial to the construction; Dickens's emotional investment in the figure of the child is transmuted into the eroticisation of the diminutive woman. Her small features and childish behaviour are presented as desirable attributes, but it is her infantilised speech, oral gestures, and paralinguistics that, ironically, suggest sexual agency. With her pouting, whispering, and baby-talk she presents herself as a simple, sensual creature, offering intimacy without a threat. She is, however, a complex creation and becomes increasingly problematic since what Dickens presents as a form of agency traps her in arrested development. The childish woman, distinguished by her infantilised orality, was criticised by some contemporary critics and has been even more so since, but that criticism has tended to overlook not just her agency but her sexual allure.<sup>76</sup> Instead, scholarly work on the representation of female sexuality in Dickens has tended to focus on the 'raging' women: Madame Defarge, Hortense, Miss Wade, and Rosa Dartle.<sup>77</sup> Dickens 'pretty young things', such as Dot Peerybingle and Dora Spenlow, have too often been dismissed as unconvincing

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<sup>76</sup> See Fitzjames Stephen writing on *Little Dorrit* in the *Saturday Review*, 4 July 1857, section iv, p. 15, in Collins, p. 356; and from an unsigned article, 'Two English Novelists: Dickens and Thackeray', *Dublin Review*, April 1871, n.s. section xvi, pp. 315-50, 'Little Dorrit is the dreariest of heroines', in Collins, p. 554. On Dot Peerybingle, an unsigned review in *MacPhail's Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal* February 1846, section i, pp. 71-75, found her characterisation 'truly wretched', in Collins, p. 176; and George Stott, 'Charles Dickens' *Contemporary Review* January 1869, section x, pp. 203-25, found Dot to be 'wearisome by reason of much silliness', in Collins, p. 501. Similarly, Dora Copperfield is described as 'an infliction' by Samuel Philips from 'David Copperfield and Arthur Pendennis', *The Times*, 11 June 1851, p. 8, in Collins, p. 261.

<sup>77</sup> See Barbara Black, 'A Sisterhood of Rage and Beauty: Dickens' Rosa Dartle, Miss Wade, and Madam Defarge', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 26 (1998), 91-106; Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Dent, 1983). Ingham, *Dickens, Women and Language*, pp. 17-38, argues that Dickens's young heroines, whom she terms 'nubile girls', are entirely passive and that metaphors of delicacy deny their sexuality (I discuss this argument in chapter four).

stereotypes, while Amy Dorrit has been categorized as one of Dickens's little-mothers, devoid of sexual attraction.<sup>78</sup> Rereading Dickens's poetics shows a new way of thinking about these characters and how Dickens manipulates the sensual intimacy that came to be associated with the figure of the child in Victorian culture.<sup>79</sup> The erotics of littleness in Victorian culture is exploited *by* these child-women characters to wrest sexual control.

Through these chapters, I trace Dickens's complex patterns of oral erotics, which underwrite his representations of sexual desire and agency. This new approach to reading eroticism in the novels has eluded scholars, ironically because of Dickens's creatively dense style and his authorial interventions. Daniel Tyler writes that 'criticism has frequently disregarded or undervalued his style', where style has been considered 'incidental' and 'cut off from matters of plot and theme and from the deepest interests and values of the fiction'.<sup>80</sup> Michael Slater notes how Dickens's habit of authorial intervention 'constantly dissipates our interest in [a] character so that we overlook the real subtlety with which it is being portrayed'.<sup>81</sup> Through these chapters, I aim to show that paying attention to the subtleties, nuances and meanings in the mouth offers a rereading of Dickensian eroticism.

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<sup>78</sup> See, for example: Lauren Byler, 'Dickens's Little Women; Or, Cute as the Dickens', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 41 (2013), 219-250; Claudia Nelson, *Precocious Children & Childish Adults: Age Inversion in Victorian Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012); Catherine Robson, *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>79</sup> See James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>80</sup> Daniel Tyler, (ed.), *Dickens's Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> Slater, *Dickens and Women*, p. 236.





## Chapter 1 – Representations of the Mouth in Nineteenth-Century Culture

In considering the erotic mouth in a cultural context this chapter raises questions about how the Victorians represented mouths and how Dickens's representations about surface and depth, interior and exterior worlds, boundaries, and subjectivities are distinctive. The mouth is a multifaceted space that must be examined as both a material and a conceptual space to appreciate representations of Victorian oral eroticism. The mouth is a heterotopic phenomenon, a world within a world, both material and immaterial, intense, contradictory, and symbolic, which is critical to its role in representing sexuality and sexual agency.<sup>1</sup> By examining how Dickens's poetics interact with their discursive context, it is possible to recover the erotic complexity of the Dickensian mouth. I am not attempting to uncover hidden meanings but focus instead on a 'navigational process', reading poetics in context and thus attending to the neglected aesthetics of eroticism in the novels.<sup>2</sup> Margaret Cohen describes this contextualising process as reconstructing 'the lost horizon of the poetics that have shaped different kinds of novels' and argues that we should pay more attention to the text's surface.<sup>3</sup> Widening the horizon of expectation of these familiar texts challenges the narratological and binary simplification that has dogged Dickens's representations of sexual desire, from angelic Dora or harridan Madame Defarge, and shapes my study. The concept of surface is critical in assessing Dickens's mouths, since not only is the mouth a rupture on the surface of the contained body, but it is also a visible erotogenic organ where sexual signs are created.

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<sup>1</sup> See Eliza Claudia Filimon, *Heterotopia in Angela Carter's Fiction: Worlds in Collision* (Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2013), on reforming and adapting genres such as fairy tale and gothic horror to defamiliarize and 'relocate' the body in fiction. Dickens's Quilp springs to mind as an embodiment of the heterotopic mouth.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Cohen, 'Narratology in the Archive of Literature', *Representations*, 108 (2009), 51-75, (p. 51).

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, pp. 58 and 55.

The mouth has a long tradition in literature and culture as a sexual sign. While the masculine mouth has been used to represent aggressive forms of desire or grotesque appetites, an open or animated female mouth encoded threatening and problematic sexuality — an idea that persisted into the nineteenth century and beyond.<sup>4</sup> Thinking about mouths in a cultural context evokes historical motifs of male potency, rendered through phallic symbols of hardness and aggression. In Greek mythology, Cadmus sowed the teeth of a slain dragon, which engendered the Spartan warriors, and tales of Hercules were the probable foundation of the belief that virile men grew a third set of teeth.<sup>5</sup> Homer’s idealised teeth represented fences around the mind, and male teeth feature in the Old Testament as symbols of power and a mark of erotic beauty.<sup>6</sup> What is important, for the purposes of this study, is how oral metaphors of male sexuality are conveyed through the material properties of teeth: their hardness, their penetrative function and that they are capable of regeneration, while female sexuality is usually conveyed through the concept of the orifice and the gap.<sup>7</sup> The gap-toothed Wife of Bath is an obvious example. In this symbolic system, connotations of the female orifice are frequently pejorative; the female mouth was considered a fundamental weakness in the body, spawning a complex semiotic of the unruly female body.<sup>8</sup> Medieval

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<sup>4</sup> See Martha Easton, ‘The Wound of Christ, The Mouth of Hell: Appropriations and Inversions of the Female Anatomy in the Later Middle Ages’, in *Tributes to Jonathan J. G. Alexander: The and Meaning of Illuminated Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts, Art and Architecture*, ed. by Susan L’Engle and Gerald B. Guest (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2006), pp. 395-414, for an analysis of how women’s reproductive anatomy became negatively conflated with subjectivity and voice. See also, Gina Barreca, ‘Do Good Girls Laugh with their Mouths Open: Why Making a Joke is Like Making a Pass’ in *They Used to Call Me Snow White but I Drifted: Women’s Strategic Use of Humour* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 39-69.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Samson, *The Immortal Tooth* (London: The Bodley Head, 1939), p. 189.

<sup>6</sup> R. Drew Griffith, ‘A Homeric Metaphor Cluster Describing Teeth, Tongue, and Words’, *The American Journal of Philology*, 116 (1995), 1-5. Biblical references include, Psalms, 57.4, ‘My soul [is] among lions: [and] I lie [even among] them that are set on fire, [even] the sons of men, whose teeth [are] spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword, and in a sexual context, teeth are mentioned repeatedly in the Song of Solomon.

<sup>7</sup> As in adult teeth replacing milk teeth.

<sup>8</sup> In the early 12<sup>th</sup> Century, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), *Causae et Curae*, p. 105, wrote that because the female body is full of windows [orifices], it is more vulnerable to ‘malign blood’ and that ‘the elements are more violent in them [women] than in men, and the humours abound more’, cited in Marie Christine Pouchelle, *The Body and Surgery in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Rosemary Morris (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 247. The female mouth was thought to be in direct connection with the womb, thus women were encouraged to keep their mouth closed during birth for a successful delivery. See also, *Medieval Sexuality: A*

and Renaissance representations of the female mouth consistently associate female orifices with a dangerously leaky body.<sup>9</sup> Fourteenth-century fabliaux equate gaping female mouths and garrulous women with sexual incontinence and predatory lust for younger men.<sup>10</sup> Such oral coding was still influential into the eighteenth century, evident for example in Hogarth's illustrations where the prostitutes and bawds are often depicted with laughing, open mouths [fig. 1.1].<sup>11</sup> At the advent of the nineteenth century, however, oral erotic coding becomes pervasive through the proliferation of print and visual mass culture and through a new focus on the mouth in both scientific and cultural pursuits.

As Dickens was exploring the rich connections between voice, mind, and body, natural philosophers were also newly engaged in trying to understand that organ and its complex relationship with feelings and the emotions.<sup>12</sup> During the early nineteenth century, consciousness was increasingly conceived as profoundly integrated with the material sensing surface of the body.<sup>13</sup> Charles Bell was eminent amongst those anatomists and neurologists engaged in developing theories of the senses and the embodied mind.<sup>14</sup> Bell was noted not

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*Casebook*, ed. by April Harper and Caroline Proctor (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); and Lisa Renée Perfetti, *Women & Laughter in Medieval Comic Literature* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), on the female mouth and misogynist tradition.

<sup>9</sup> See Pouchelle for an examination of the imagery and symbolism of the body in the fourteenth century, and Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), for an introduction into Renaissance representations of the female body.

<sup>10</sup> On the female mouth in fabliaux, see E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1993); Jean de Meun, *Romance of the Rose*, trans. by Charles Dahlberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 230, 'A woman should always laugh with her mouth closed, for the sight of a mouth stretched like a gash across the face is not a pretty one'; and Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* with her metonymic gap-toothed mouth.

<sup>11</sup> On the left of the painting, a black maid puts a finger in her mouth, whilst looking at a pregnant girl in the doorway who carries a song sheet, 'The Black Joke', slang for female genitalia. See Edgar V. Roberts, 'An Unrecorded Meaning of 'Joke' (Or 'Joak') in England', *American Speech*, 37 (1962), 137-140, (p.139). At the centre of the painting, a woman spits gin at another, and one drinks from a punch bowl. Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, ed. by Judith Hawley (1742; Penguin: London, 1999). 'Slipslop' is also significant in the context of loose sexual morals and the 'leaky' female body.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Archibald Alison, *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, 6<sup>th</sup> edn. (London: Longman, 1825); Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (London: Parker, 1855); Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Psychology* (London: Longman, 1855).

<sup>13</sup> Pamela K. Gilbert, *Victorian Skin: Surface, Self, History* (London: Cornell University Press, 2019), offers a fascinating discussion on the philosophical and physiological relationships between skin and self which explains the thinking behind early nineteenth century concepts of embodiment.

<sup>14</sup> Bell's influence is perhaps not as appreciated in literary scholarship as it is in science and art, nor is it well

only for his work on the senses but also for endorsing the role of art and theatre as essential in understanding concepts and the physical mechanics of embodiment. His theories came to inform a wide range of professions and his intricate drawings were used by artists, actors, writers, doctors and surgeons as a means to understand and represent the feeling surfaces of the face.<sup>15</sup> According to Bell, in this mutable surface system, the dynamic mouth is particularly important, not least to his claim that speech is ‘the great mark of distinction between man and brutes’.<sup>16</sup> His appreciation is also aesthetic, evident in his strikingly eloquent descriptions: there is the ‘superior redness and brilliancy’ of the point of the tongue, its ‘elegant arches’ and ‘beautiful’ duct branches.<sup>17</sup> Describing the mouth’s internal structure, he writes that ‘the isthmus of the fauces resembles the arched gateway of a citadel’.<sup>18</sup> To beauty, the mouth is of fundamental importance: ‘a great portion of the beauty of the human face is in the nose and the mouth’, he writes.<sup>19</sup> Such elevated, architectural, and poetic language celebrates the grandeur and beauty of the oral cavity, yet Bell also recognises that the mouth is metamorphic and can convey lust, excessive appetite, and animalistic sexuality. In *Essays on the Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression as Connected with the Fine Arts* (1824), using a physiognomic lens, Bell turns to the brutish mouth and wild laughter of centaurs and satyrs.<sup>20</sup> Here, his language and classical allusions highlight the mouth’s erotic links with virility and fertility; Bell’s language points to the oral incorporative potential of the mouth, with its openness functioning as the sign of the open, sexual body. That the mouth

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known that Darwin acknowledged Bell as a major influence on his work, see Pamela K. Gilbert, pp. 36-38. See also, Dr Robert Bentley Todd, et.al, *The Cyclopaedia of Anatomy and Physiology*, 5 vols (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1859), III, for a treatise on the mouth.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Bell, *The Anatomy and Physiology of the Human Body*, 3 vols (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1829), III; and *Essays on the Anatomy of Expression in Painting* (London: Longmans, 1806), later expanded in 1824 to *Essays on the Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression as Connected with the Fine Arts*, to emphasise the nature and scope of these theoretical discussions..

<sup>16</sup> Bell, *Essays*, p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> Bell, *Anatomy*, p. 217.

<sup>18</sup> Bell, *Anatomy*, p. 217. The fauces is the arched opening at the back of the mouth, leading to the pharynx.

<sup>19</sup> Bell, *Essays*, p. 102.

<sup>20</sup> Bell, *Essays*, p. 41.

constitutes the seat of beauty yet is also recognised as a sign of the sexual ‘brute’ illustrates Bell’s appreciation for the mouth’s plasticity. His representation of the mouth’s erotic connections to animality is a dimension also apprehended and exploited by Dickens: when Bell asserts that ‘brute-head is often highly beautiful’, it foreshadows Hugh in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841). Hugh, who is ‘so thoroughly savage in [...] looks and gestures’, is referred to several times as both a centaur and a satyr and described as a beautiful physical specimen (173; ch.21);<sup>21</sup>

The light that fell upon this slumbering form, showed it in all its muscular and handsome proportions. It was that of a young man, of a hale and athletic figure, and a giant’s strength, whose sunburnt face and swarthy throat, overgrown with jet black hair, might have served a painter for a model (96-97; ch.11).

Hugh’s mouth is depicted in Knight Browne’s accompanying illustration as classically beautiful with his slightly parted lips signifying a pleasurable state [fig. 1.2].<sup>22</sup> Goldie Morgentaler rightly contends that ‘Dickens is not merely being fanciful when he juxtaposes the three images of Hugh as a perfect specimen for painter, hangman, and dissecting surgeon’ and notes that historically the three activities were linked.<sup>23</sup> Such complexity is a hallmark of Dickens’s oral poetics, evident in the way Hugh’s mouth embodies both the handsome ‘swain’ and the predatory beast; his orality also fluctuates between articulate rebel, salacious rapist, and grunting animal: from his declamatory gallows speech as revolutionary prophet, to the coining of ‘Sweetlips’ in his first sexual attempt on Dolly (172; ch.21), to paralinguistic animal sounds when with ‘much low growling and muttering, [he] went back into his lair’

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, ed. by Clive Hurst (1841; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). All further references are to this text. See Bell, *Essays*, p. 101, on the satyr mouth. In the Greek myth, Nessos the centaur attempts to rape Deianeira, assuring her that a mixture of his blood and semen will act as a love charm. The connections with Hugh’s attacks on Dolly are discussed in chapter four. Satyrs were man-goat companions to Pan the god of fertility, sexually excessive and impulsive.

<sup>22</sup> Bell describes ‘half-opened lips’ as a sign of pleasure in *Essays*, p. 155. I discuss the symbolism of the open mouth later in this chapter.

<sup>23</sup> Goldie Morgentaler, ‘Executing Beauty: Dickens and the Aesthetics of Death’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 30 (2001), 45-57, (p. 51).

(273; ch.34). It is Dickens's complex and fluid manipulation of the coding of the mouth that helps to render his erotics so distinctive. When Hugh describes himself as 'hungry as a ravenous wolf', he demands of his fellow kidnappers, 'which of you was in the larder — come?'. But is it the larder containing the venison-pie or his particular 'larder' which encloses his 'delicate birds', Dolly and Emma (470-71; ch. 59)? Dickens plays with the associations between male libido, bestial nature, and Victorian gentleman throughout his novels even with Hugh, who might at first seem bestial yet delivers a profoundly sympathetic speech at the end of the novel. Dickens's distinctions between man and beast are often blurred, and the beast is by no means the inferior animal.<sup>24</sup>

Observing canine behaviour helped Dickens in his acute understanding of human behaviour and the integration of dogs into the narratives contributes to the shaping of character.<sup>25</sup> Images and metaphors of the canine mouth can signify raw nature and primitive sexual impulses but, given the dog's entrenched position as man's best friend, they are not always derogatory in the same way that the feminised feline is in Victorian discourse. Literary canine coding reflects a metaphorical connection between the Victorian class system and various dog species, relying on an anthropocentric model.<sup>26</sup> Dickens's dogs, however, suggest a less anthropocentric model of human and animal relations and his canine mouths and appetites rarely function as straightforward references to the brutish, primitive male. Miss Mowcher, while 'talking of ladies' and attending to Steerforth's 'rich profusion of brown

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<sup>24</sup> Ivan Kreilkamp, *Minor Creatures: Persons, Animals, and the Victorian Novel* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2018), and Monica Flegel, *Pets and Domesticity in Victorian Literature: Animality, Queer Relations, and the Victorian Family* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> See Beryl Gray, *The Dog in the Dickensian Imagination* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> The British bulldog, for example, was noted as 'a dog of a particular form, remarkable for his courage, and the savage pertinacity with which he provokes and continues the fight. When he has once fastened his bite on his antagonist, he cannot be taken off without much difficulty', by T. Curtis, *The London Encyclopaedia, or, Universal Dictionary of Science, Art, Literature, and Practical Mechanics, Comprising a Popular View of the Present State of Knowledge*, 15 vols (London: Thomas Tegg, 1839), IV, (p. 666). On dogs and Victorian cultural codes see Ivan Kreilkamp, *Minor Creatures*; Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); and *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

hair', calls him her 'tender pupil', 'her sweet pet' but, when responding to his false flattery, she calls him a 'dog' (*DC*; 279-282; ch.22). The conversation, which revolves around sexual artifice and social mischief, locates Steerforth as a sort of dangerous 'companion species' where the dog figures as a domestic companion but also as a sporting bloodhound with its connotations of bloodthirsty appetite. Dickens's canine metaphors are fluid and psychologically complex. Both Murdstone and David Copperfield, for example, are portrayed as biting dogs; this oral-aggressive metaphor presents psychological characteristics, such as anger and sexual anxiety, and locates them on the surface of the body. Murdstone's deep-seated aggression is thus expressed through his surrogate, the 'deep-mouthed' black dog, who arrives to fill a space, the empty kennel within the Copperfield household (37; ch.3). The sense of fear and awe that Murdstone and his symbols invoke in David is commingled with arousal. Such dangerous emotions infiltrate the middle-class home, then, through animal metonymy. This is the subject of Martin A Danahay's compelling study, 'Nature Red in Hoof and Paw', which explores how domestic animals in Victorian paintings 'represent the unsettling eruption of violence into relationships that were supposedly immune from conflict'.<sup>27</sup> Analysing Brown's painting, *Work* (1859-63), Danahay argues that the 'apparently marginal presence' of dogs encodes ideological issues that cannot be explicitly acknowledged.<sup>28</sup> In using animals from the idealised domestic sphere and their links to family intimacy, artists and writers engaged with issues of violence within that apparently sacrosanct sphere. The spectre of rabies and the family dog turning into a raging beast is particularly germane.

A dog's potentially rabid state underlies a coding where masculinity was shaped by gender stereotypes.<sup>29</sup> Despite a gentleman's largely sedentary life, manly ideals were

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<sup>27</sup> Martin A. Danahay, 'Nature Red in Hoof and Paw: Domestic Animals and Violence in Victorian Art', in *Victorian Animal Dreams*, pp. 97-119, (p. 103).

<sup>28</sup> Danahay, p. 103.

<sup>29</sup> See Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, in particular, chapter four, 'Cave Canem', on rabies, pp. 167-202.

embodied by strength and virility; physical prowess was a bodily firmness translated into moral armour and representative of the disciplined impenetrable body.<sup>30</sup> Its opposite form is encapsulated in Uriah Heep, whose slimy undulating body and his mouth ‘open like a post-office’ are aligned with a cowardly and corrupted nature (328; ch.25). Physical manliness intersected with notions of good breeding, with the thoroughbred animal at one end of the spectrum and the ‘brute’ at the other; the brute was a man or a dog lacking in self-control and unable to discipline their appetites.<sup>31</sup> For man and dog, ideally, physical strength was channelled into developing and sustaining a good character and suppressing latent instincts. The rabid dog, then, has connotations that point to the power and threat of unregulated instincts and desires. With its drooling mouth, lolling tongue, and open jaw, a mad dog symbolised an extreme and very visual form of an out-of-control, raging appetite. Its bite was often feared more for the terrible madness it induced than for the inevitable death that followed; to be bitten was a fate worse than death.<sup>32</sup> In Victorian discourse, rabies was strongly associated with inadequate sexual release among dogs and, symbolically, among men.<sup>33</sup> This association between sexual energy and mad dogs provides a compelling reading of an incident in Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849).<sup>34</sup> The eponymous heroine is bitten by a possibly rabid dog, which appears to turn her from an Amazonian presence into a ‘very nervous and

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<sup>30</sup> See Joanne Ella Parsons and Ruth Heholt, *The Victorian Male Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); and John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays on Gender, Family and Empire* (Abingdon: Pearson, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> See also, Keridiana W. Chez, *Victorian Dogs, Victorian Men: Affect and Animals in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), on the relationship between man and dog in the period.

<sup>32</sup> K. Codell Carter, ‘Nineteenth-Century Treatments for Rabies as Reported in *The Lancet*’, *Medical History*, 26 (1982), 67-78, describes the understanding, misunderstanding, and varied treatments for rabies.

<sup>33</sup> See Beth Torgerson, *Reading the Brontë Body: Disease, Desire and the Constraints of Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 49-5. Abnormal sexual behaviour, especially hypersexuality, as a symptom of rabies was not simply a useful Victorian metaphor but has been noted by modern scientific research; see, for example, Zhaoxing Tian, Yingyu Chen, and Wei Yan, ‘Clinical features of rabies patients with abnormal sexual behaviours as the presenting manifestations: a case report and literature review’, *BMC Infect Dis.*, 19 (2019), 1-9.

<sup>34</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, ed. by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).



womanish' and 'childish' female (428-29; ch.5).<sup>35</sup> Through this vector of canine teeth and associated images of biting and drawing blood, allusions to the porous body and intense sexual desire are created. This is not to suggest that all dogs in nineteenth-century fiction are permanently on the verge of biting or, worse, about to descend into a rabid frenzy; many representations of the bond between human and dog are entirely positive. What it does suggest is that in the nineteenth century interspecies relationships offered a means to question and explore both male aggression and male sexuality, a sexuality conveyed through metaphors of oral aggression.<sup>36</sup> This sexual alignment between man and dog produces a more nuanced understanding of Dickens's biting imagery; rather than reading 'animal aggression' as incompatible with human behaviour, male libido is instead described as more authentically physical, and appetite led. Canine metaphors, in general, are an example of Cohen's concept of the 'unspeakable' rendered not just legible but in a 'richly ambiguous, subtly coded' form.<sup>37</sup>

While the canine mouth could represent underlying masculine instability with its latent aggression, the vulpine mouth evokes the fairy-tale lone wolf lying in wait for a Red Riding Hood figure and the image of men 'gaunt as wolves and mad for prey'.<sup>38</sup> Such imagery draws on the controlling power of appetite and how the animalistic self emerges when appetites are restricted or denied. As a motif for anxieties underlying gender stereotypes, the worrying, voracious wolf-figure appears in several Victorian novels to

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<sup>35</sup> Torgerson, p. 50. There is a pertinent correlation with Rosa Dartle, as Shirley is described as having 'lost sleep, appetite, and flesh' and has 'something in that darkening of the face and kindling of that eye which touched as well as alarmed', *Shirley*, pp. 424 and 414.

<sup>36</sup> The pet dog was also used to explore female sexuality, especially the lapdog, which I explore in chapters three and four. See Laura Brown, 'The Lady, the Lapdog, and Literary Alterity', *The Eighteenth Century*, 52 (2011), 31-45.

<sup>37</sup> Cohen, *Embodied*, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. by Patricia Ingham, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (1854-55; London: Penguin, 1995), p. 176. See also, Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, p. 168, on the 'rabies mystique'.

represent the beastly insistent libido of the male.<sup>39</sup> Trollope's Lord de Guest in *The Small House at Allington* (1865) invokes a conceptual wolf when he states that 'most of us have some wolf to gnaw us somewhere; but we are generally gnawed beneath our clothes, so that the world doesn't see'.<sup>40</sup> Dickens, however, turns to the material body with his version of the wolf-figure, which includes Pip, Orlick, and Job Trotter, 'the wolf in the Mulberry Suit' (*PP*; 309; ch.25). Through the emblematic savage wolf, with its legendary voracious taste for human flesh, Dickens presents a physically vital male with the power to ensnare and lure others into its trap. The wolf, although extinct in Britain at the time, bore a close relationship to the domestic dog and was therefore a useful metaphor in probing the boundaries of socialised behaviour against the threat of atavistic bestial instincts. But this figure also signifies animal attraction at work rather than a perverse animalistic difference, which is reinforced by anthropomorphic character traits, especially Dicken's creation of the 'dissembling' wolf.<sup>41</sup> Until Darwin's studies, many natural history and zoological theories of the period were framed by anthropocentrism and emphasised the distance not just between but within species.<sup>42</sup> Dickens's notion of the biting male is also, therefore, a departure from the belief in a distinct separation between humans and animals; by highlighting animalistic behaviour in civilised males, he challenges the idea of human superiority.<sup>43</sup> In these representations, the human male is an animal whose appetites transcend social notions of

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<sup>39</sup> See Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, on the intersection of ideas about animal mating and human gender stereotypes, and shared characteristics. Victorian novels using wolf metaphors include Anthony Trollope's *The Small House at Allington*, ed. by Julian Thompson (1865; London: Penguin, 2005), Gaskell, *North and South*, and Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil: or The Two Nations*, ed. by Sheila M. Smith (1845; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> Trollope, *The Small House at Allington*, p. 641.

<sup>41</sup> See Dickens, 'A Christmas Tree', in *Household Words* (21 December 1850), 289–95, (p. 291): 'Little Red Riding-Hood comes to me one Christmas Eve to give me information of the cruelty and treachery of that dissembling Wolf who ate her grandmother, without making any impression on his appetite, and then ate her, after making that ferocious joke about his teeth'.

<sup>42</sup> *Charles Darwin's 'The Origin of the Species'*, ed. by David Amigoni and Jeff Wallace (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 48–49 on Darwin's belief of the 'Mutual Affinities of Organic Beings'. For Darwin, classification revealed bonds rather than distinctions.

<sup>43</sup> See Kate Flint, 'Origins, Species and *Great Expectations*' in David Amigoni and Jeff Wallace, *Charles Darwin's 'The Origin of the Species'*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 152–73, on this concept.

restraint. Combined with the metaphorical interchangeability of sexual and alimentary appetites, a more complex construction of the biting male emerges. Darwin observed that in the cat, dog, and primate species, biting is both a stage of mating and a method of guarding the mate from rivals. It is a behaviour evident in many of Dickens's male characters: David Copperfield, Uriah Heep, Mr Creakle, Carker, Quilp, Pecksniff, and Jaggers. Biting is a manifestation of an undisciplined mouth, but it is not simply a transgressive act of aggression, it encodes desire and agency. That those characters who are usually considered to revere discipline are also biters, including Creakle, Carker, Pecksniff, and Jaggers, alludes to the fraught line between the desire to satisfy appetites and the need for restraint.<sup>44</sup> The resulting tension endows Dickens's narratives with great sexual energy, which has often been misread as simple aggression. The relationship between the interior and the exterior body, between the individual and the social body; where, how, and what people bite is highly regulated and culturally determined. Dickens seems drawn to breaking those taboos.

### *The Expressive Mouth*

Embracing contemporary anatomical theories within artistic and dramatic practice was not an unusual practice in the nineteenth century, which has implications when thinking about meaning in mouths.<sup>45</sup> Like Dickens, Bell was an ardent theatregoer, which helped to inform

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<sup>44</sup> John Bowen has kindly pointed out the myth of the 'Spartan Boy and the Fox' (mentioned by Flora Finching in chapter 24 of *Little Dorrit*), in which a Spartan boy steals a fox cub and keeps it hidden beneath his robes. The boy eventually dies from fox bites without ever disclosing that he has the cub. His self-discipline is paramount, although, in this case, unlike the threatening characters mentioned above, the boy is one of the bitten not the one of the biters.

<sup>45</sup> See for example, M. Engel, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action*, trans. Henry Siddons, (London: Sherwood, 1820) <<https://archive.org/details/practicalillustr00engluoft/page/n5/mode/2up?q=lips>> [accessed 20 October 2020]; Nathaniel Whittock, *The British Drawing Book: or the art of drawing with accuracy and beauty* (London: Sears, 1845) <<https://archive.org/details/britishdrawingbo00whit/page/n5/mode/2up>> [accessed 20 October 2020]. For more on the connection between art and anatomy, see Martin Kemp, *The Human Animal in Western Art and Science* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

his physiological theories on how emotions are conveyed and how facial expression invokes responses in others.<sup>46</sup> Conversely, writers of acting and drawing manuals shared an interest in physiology, as part of the process of learning how to capture those meaningful expressions.<sup>47</sup> In the following extract, Bell explains a system of reading the expressive mouth by reference to well-known actors of the period:

The excitement of passion will in one man be indicated chiefly by the prevalence of one class of muscles, and in another individual the other class will predominate and give expression. In the Kemble class of features there is a capacity of high excitement; but in that family there never appeared the bloodthirsty expression which Cooke could throw into his face. In the latter the Ringentes [the ‘snarling muscles’] prevailed; and what determined hate he could express, when, combined with the oblique cast of his eyes, he drew up the outer part of the upper lip, and disclosed a sharp angular tooth! And is it not this lateral drawing of the lips, and stretching them upon the closed teeth, that makes the blood start from them in remorseless hate and rancour? But in the cast of Mrs Siddons’s countenance there is a capacity of noble sentiment [...] the animation is in the mobility of the nostril and the swelling of the upper lip, and a mouth capable of expressing whatever is most exalted in human sentiment.<sup>48</sup>

Such anatomical and philosophical writings demonstrate a belief in the significance of the mouth in conveying emotions and in the need to pay attention to oral expression and gesture. With regards to actors, it was not about attempting to capture ‘reality’ but about their ability to convey and to invoke an emotional response. By establishing a set of facial expressions held to be ‘true’, metaphors and symbolism associated with those expressions and gestures became normative, such as the villain’s too-wide smile and the pursed lips of the ‘pure’ woman.<sup>49</sup> Taken in this light, a general category of expression which was intended to

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<sup>46</sup> On the intersection between acting theory and physiological theories of emotion, see Joseph R. Roach, *The Player’s Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985).

<sup>47</sup> See note 45 above.

<sup>48</sup> Bell, *Anatomy of Expression* (1824), pp. 67-68.

<https://archive.org/stream/essaysonanatomy00bellgoog?ref=ol#page/n94/mode/2up/search/Siddons/s> [accessed 19 October 2020]. Ringentes is the term for the ‘snarling muscles’, p. 131.

<sup>49</sup> Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 126. These stereotypical gestures did not mean that all types were identical but that there was an *essential* type with basic recognisable behaviours that carried over from one drama to another, layering on different characteristics as required for the role.

exemplify a trait, an emotion, or physical state, was then used by writers, actors, and artists to depict an individual character. It was a semiotic mode that included voice and oral gestures and permeated cultural life.<sup>50</sup>

In Dickens's writing the mind interconnects with the body's sensory surface, where the mouth acts as a phenomenological hub of taste, pleasure, bodily appetites, and communication. This interaction between mind, body and the metamorphic mouth is important for an understanding of both Dickens's poetics and erotics. Juliet John contends that 'throughout his career, Dickens renders even "private" emotional experience using popular melodrama's impulse towards externalization, within a narrative context'.<sup>51</sup> She argues that the critical trend of reading Dickens's representations of emotion as overly theatrical and insufficiently introspective disavows how emotions were conveyed and the extent of popular culture's influence on narrative form. John argues convincingly that

The melodramatic poetics Dickens employs in his descriptive prose are crucial to a sophisticated understanding of Dickensian character —specifically to comprehension of the 'conjuring trick' which enables Dickens to explore the inner life whilst eschewing subject-centred, psychological, *analyses* of character. In keeping with Dickens's marginalization of the mind, interiority in his novels is expressed in terms of extreme emotional states.<sup>52</sup>

The performative mouth is an essential component of surface effect, not only through voice but through its role in paralinguistic gestures, oral expression, imagery, and symbolism. My point is that Dickens, concurrent with many nineteenth-century theories of physiology and the emotions, decentres the mind and brings the body into alignment. Thus, when writing about sexuality he eschews the notion of a secret, repressed interiority. He privileges instead an integrated system of bodily apprehension and expression. In this way, for example, the representation of David Copperfield's sexuality is informed by, relies upon, and is expressed through eroticised orality rather than through an internalised 'psychology'. As Kucich points

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<sup>50</sup> I examine the semiotics of oral gestures in chapter five.

<sup>51</sup> John, p. 96.

<sup>52</sup> John, p. 104.

out, ‘Dickens always conceives inwardness as inextricable from the ways in which it is consciously or unconsciously presented to others.’<sup>53</sup> Pertinent to presentations of sexual identity by Dickens’s characters is the pseudo-science of physiognomy.

One of the features of Lavater’s physiognomy was that it acknowledged sexuality under the guise of scientific pursuit.<sup>54</sup> His theory divided facial features into three types: the mouth and chin represented the base animalistic sexual self, the nose, and cheeks reflected moral characteristics, and the eyes and forehead signified the intellect.<sup>55</sup> Significantly, despite the mouth’s animalistic associations and its links to the ‘lower’ sense of taste rather than sight, physiognomic theory presents the mouth as the ‘preeminent organ’ of the body: ‘the chief seat of wisdom and folly, power and debility, virtue and vice, beauty and deformity of the human mind, the seat of all love’.<sup>56</sup> This theory endows the mouth with a complex array of signs, but as ‘the organ of animal passion and propensity’, its shape and size were an index of passion: ‘the horizontal width of the lips indicates the permanence of these functions [of embodying passion]; their vertical extent, the intensity’.<sup>57</sup> Passion was further differentiated through a combination of permanent features and impermanent gesture, so that sensuality could be inferred by plump, slightly-parted lips and sometimes by careful glimpses of the teeth, providing they were white and straight; lust, on the other hand, was often denoted by a wide-open mouth and fully visible teeth. Being alert to this facial coding can offer more nuanced readings of the representation of desire in Victorian culture. In examining the signification of irregular female features, Jeanne Fahnestock identifies the imperfect mouth as

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<sup>53</sup> John Kucich, ‘Dickens, in *The Columbia History of the British Novel*, ed. by John Richetti (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 381-406, (p. 399). Quoted by John, *Villains*, p. 7.

<sup>54</sup> Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente*, later translated by Thomas Holcroft in the nineteenth century as *Essays on Physiognomy: Designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind* (1775-1778; London: William Tegg and Co., 1850).

<sup>55</sup> The pocket-book version was based on Lavater’s *Physiognomische Fragmente*. See Sharrona Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>56</sup> Alexander Walker, *Physiognomy founded on Physiology* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1834), p. 247.

<sup>57</sup> Walker, p. 247.

indicative of the trustworthy and pure heroine.<sup>58</sup> Within this coding, its opposite, vermillion, full lips, are an index for the sexually precocious girl or sexually assertive woman. This simple Lavaterian oral coding is noticeable in Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-62), and also in Charlotte Brontë's novels where racialised mouths are particularly unsettling.<sup>59</sup> In Brontë's *The Professor* (1857), male characters detect unruly passion in their adolescent pupils, categorising them through a taxonomy of eroticised, clichéd, and racialised physiognomy: Crimsworth, the schoolteacher, scorns one adolescent girl for 'parting her lips, as full of those of a hot-blooded Maroon', while his employer makes several prurient remarks about other 'roguish' schoolgirls for their 'fascinating' and 'vermillion lips'.<sup>60</sup> By drawing attention to the sexualised mouth, particularly the parting of lips, Brontë deploys a recognized code for sexually assertive young women.<sup>61</sup> The vermillion lips figure arousal while their 'fascination' describes their allure, but the key sign is the act of parting the lips, since it points to sexual agency.

An open mouth was not just vulgar, or even simply an erotic object for the male gaze; it also suggested a sexual invitation.<sup>62</sup> In a yet more salacious context, the phrase 'moist vermillion lips' in conjunction with a hint of the foreign appears frequently in G. W. M. Reynold's formulaic coding of young desirable females.<sup>63</sup> His lurid and highly popular

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<sup>58</sup> Jeanne Fahnestock, 'The Heroine of Irregular Features: Physiognomy and Conventions of Heroine Description', *Victorian Studies*, 24, (1981), 325-350.

<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. by David Skilton (1861-62; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). The complexity of physiognomic racial coding is outside the scope of this study but, see L. M., Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Susan Meyer, *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction* (London: Cornell University Press, 1996); and Graeme Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>60</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor*, ed. by Heather Glen (1857; London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 115, 124.

<sup>61</sup> Carl Plasa, 'Charlotte Brontë's Foreign Bodies: Slavery and Sexuality in *The Professor*', in *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 30 (2000), 1-28.

<sup>62</sup> I discuss conduct manuals and the female mouth in chapter five.

<sup>63</sup> Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, 'Spectacular Women: *The Mysteries of London* and the Female Body', *Victorian Studies*, 40 (1996), 31-64, notes that critics have criticised the narrative's reliance on conventions of soft-core pornography but argues that texts that seek to arouse should not be considered beneath analysis, p. 32. It is worth noting that for Reynolds, sex is not fatal to women, and that the sensual woman is not always foreign. In 'allowing' his English women to assert their sexuality and subsequently prosper, his writing differs from conventional Victorian novels.

*Mysteries of London* (1846), features a high-class prostitute, Diana Arlington, who lacks the ‘inalienable affections which characterise the wife’ and whose mouth signals her sexual availability: ‘Her mouth was small and pouting; but, when she smiled, the parting roses of the lips displayed a set of teeth white as the pearls of the East’.<sup>64</sup> The Eastern reference signalled both an exotic allure and a perceived lack of English moral boundaries. This coding applied equally to Europeans; in the same novel, the ‘ravishing’ Italian, Isabella, is ‘a daughter of the sunny south’ whose ‘moist red lips apart, disclosed thy teeth white as the orient pearl’.<sup>65</sup> Descriptions of a ‘hot-blooded Maroon’ reinforced stereotypes of the less-civilised, over-sexed foreigner.<sup>66</sup> It was a common oral trope, recognisable in Dickens’s *Tattycoram* (*LD*), a dark maid who ‘plucks’ at her lips and whose genealogy is never clarified, although her ‘rich black hair’, passionate nature and ‘full red lips’ allude to foreign heritage and unrestrained passion (214; ch.16). *Tattycoram*’s exotic physical difference is further emphasised through Mr Meagles’s pride in his treasured collection of foreign objects, juxtaposed with his constant objectification of *Tattycoram* as if she were simply another item in his collection.

Reading the phenomenon of the physiognomic mouth and its coding of passion and oral eroticism in Dickens is not always straightforward because of his shifting attitude towards physiognomy.<sup>67</sup> In ‘Our Next-door Neighbour’ (1836), he presents a comic digression on door knockers, seeming to mock physiognomy as a suspect theory: ‘whenever we visit a man for the first time, we contemplate the features of his knocker with the greatest curiosity, for we well know that, between the man and his knocker, there will inevitably be a greater or a lesser degree of resemblance or sympathy (58; ch.7).<sup>68</sup> In *Hunted Down* (1859),

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<sup>64</sup> G. M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London*, (London: George Vickers, 1846), p. 14.

<sup>65</sup> Reynolds, p. 252.

<sup>66</sup> Julia Kuehn, *A Female Poetics of Empire: From Eliot to Wolf* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>67</sup> Maria Teresa Chialant, ‘Physiognomy, Phrenology and Mesmerism: Dickens and the (pseudo) Scientific Discourse’, in *Texts, Contexts and Intertextuality: Dickens as Reader*, ed. by Norbert Lennartz and Dieter Koch (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2014), pp. 235-48.

<sup>68</sup> From Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, ed. by Dennis Walder (1836, 2 vols; London: Penguin, 1995). Thanks to Juliet John for pointing out that Dickens omits the word ‘door’ twice in this quote, which seems to suggest sexual comedy and, given the tone of *Sketches*, is not unlikely.



the protagonist, Mr Sampson, contends that ‘there is nothing truer than physiognomy, taken in conjunction with manner’ (1).<sup>69</sup> Physiognomy’s shortcomings appear to lie in a propensity for poor observations rather than in the theory itself; Sampson considers the face as a ‘page’ on which individual character is written, but he complains that ‘numbers of people accept a few stock commonplace expressions of the face as the whole list of characteristics’ (1). It is a frustration echoed in Dickens’s 1858 ‘Preface to the Cheap Edition’ of *Dombey and Son*:

The faculty (or the habit) of closely and carefully observing the characters of men is a rare one. I have not even found, within my experience, that the faculty (or the habit) of closely or carefully observing so much as the faces of men, is a general one by any means.<sup>70</sup>

What is significant about Dickens and physiognomy is not so much his ambivalence, but the way in which he repeatedly exhorts observers and readers to make more careful readings of both face and page.<sup>71</sup> This might seem pedantic, since novelists have long used physiognomic coding but Dickens’s nuanced mouths deserve more careful attention yet.<sup>72</sup> The prevalence of physiognomic stereotypes in nineteenth-century works of art, drama, and fiction has been well documented.<sup>73</sup> What has not, is how Dickens uses this collective understanding of the mouth’s erotic coding to explore sexuality, including what was conventionally perceived as perverse. Included in the notion of perversity were ideas of what was considered excessive

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<sup>69</sup> Charles Dickens, *Hunted Down: The Detective Stories of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Peter Haining (1859; London: Peter Owen, 2006). See, also, Eike Kronshage, “‘Nothing Truer Than Physiognomy’: Body Semiotics and Agency in Charles Dickens’s ‘Hunted Down’” (1859), *Dickens Studies Annual*, 48 (2017), 167-180, who similarly interprets Dickens’s relationship with physiognomy as an ambivalent one.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Alan Horsman (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), p. 834. All further references are to this text.

<sup>71</sup> See the discussion on character reading by Angelika Zirker, ‘Physiognomy and the Reading of Character in *Our Mutual Friend*’, *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 9 (2011), 379-90.

<sup>72</sup> See Fahnestock on the ubiquity of physiognomic coding.

<sup>73</sup> See Tytler, above, and Lucy Hartley, *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Deborah Vlock, *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), analyses this ‘intergeneric play’, and develops concepts from Martin Meisel and Jurgen Habermas on consumers of popular culture who ‘shared a peculiar conceptual framework, a set of assumptions about human relations and behaviours which derived specifically, if not exclusively, from these three aesthetic forms’ [art, drama, literature], p. 19. I agree with Pamela K. Gilbert that contemporary writing on anatomy and the physiology of emotions and expressions complements these three aesthetic forms.

passion or the too-explicit coding of sexuality. It was a concept of sexuality, however, which acknowledged the idea of sex aside from what was necessary for procreation.<sup>74</sup>

The racialised erotic mouth, with its assumed potential deviancy and its signification of unstable boundaries, was an embodiment of exoticism, cannibalism, savagery, and sex.<sup>75</sup> It both repulsed and attracted Dickens. My research model does not presume to analyse the far-reaching complexities of the racialised mouth, which deserves its own study. However, the racialised mouth does need to be acknowledged for its connections with Dickens's cannibalistic tropes, and with his rendition of sexually assertive foreign women, such as Madame Defarge, Hortense (*BH*), and Helena Landless (*ED*).<sup>76</sup> Allusions to other races drew on stereotypes of the sexually promiscuous 'savage'. Overlaying tropes of oral aggression and bodily incorporation with allusions to primitivism supercharged the mouth as a site of penetration. The metonymic associations were easily exploited by writers and artists with the critical distance afforded by an exotic-orientalist inflection, sometimes forestalling criticism. Gérôme's iconic painting, 'The Slave Market' (1866) [Fig. 1.3], is a case in point: the painting depicts a group of men in Arabic dress, one of whom has inserted two fingers into the mouth of a nude slave girl. Such coding relies on dehumanising the woman and othering the male to allow for fantasies of 'Eastern ways', but is not unusual for the period.<sup>77</sup> The

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<sup>74</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 27-31, discussing the 'slippery' terms of sex, gender, and sexuality demarcates what she calls 'chromosomal sex' the 'minimal raw material' of human sexuality. Everything beyond this, as Foucault assumes, is relational and socially and constructed.

<sup>75</sup> See Cynthia Eagle Russell, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1989), and Patrick Brantlinger, 'Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent', *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 166-203, (p. 47), on Victorian anthropological discourse on the notion of the promiscuous 'savage'.

<sup>76</sup> Studies of racialised tropes of consumption include: Annette Cozzi, 'Blood and Rum: Power and the Racialization of the Victorian Monster', in *The Discourses of Food in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); pp. 127-155, Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race*, Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995); Irvin C. Schick, *The Erotic Margin: Sexuality and Spatiality in Alteritist Discourse* (London: Verso, 1999); and Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion*.

<sup>77</sup> See Julia Kuehn, 'Exotic Harem Paintings: Gender, Documentation, and Imagination', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 32 (2011), 31-63, and Mary Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel* (London: Duke University Press, 2007).

overt sexual metonymy in the painting was shielded by its exoticism, parsed as a representation of a slave buyer checking a slave's teeth, but offering titillation nonetheless.<sup>78</sup> Oriental-exoticism is a complex genre, strongly criticised in Brontë's *Villette* (1853) and satirised by Dickens in *Dombey and Son* (1846-48) through the trope of Cleopatra and her voluptuous mouth and body. Brontë's Lucy Snowe describes Cleopatra as an indolent 'slug' with connotations of the uncontained, moist female body.<sup>79</sup> Dickens's grotesque and cadaverous Mrs Skewton is said to recline 'after the Cleopatra model' under the leering gaze of the Major (285; ch.21). In Dickens's parodic reworking, Mrs Skewton's bared dentures are a coded but pointless sexual invitation to the blue-lipped Major (285; ch.21).<sup>80</sup> The exotic mouth is also a vehicle for encoding homoerotic sexuality. In David Copperfield's nightly trysts with Steerforth, Dickens makes use of the 'oriental' mouth with David's 'Sultana Scheherazade' persona (80; ch.7). Casting David as the exotic female, or as David recalls, 'the being cherished as a kind of plaything', for Steerforth suggests a homoerotic fantasy, especially as race was often gendered as feminine, as a mark of inferiority (81; ch.7).<sup>81</sup> Shared eating and 'storytelling in the dark' allows the two young men to make 'some regular Arabian Nights of it' (79; ch.7).

In David's metamorphosis into the story-telling princess, the playful eroticised mouth is crucial to the performance. Close observation of oral performativity shows how Dickens eroticises the mouth through gesture, voice, and register. Malcolm Andrews points out, 'one

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<sup>78</sup> In an earlier rendition of 1857, the racial differences are less marked with the woman's skin almost as dark as the men. The later painting appears to exploit the white-slave narrative. [https://media.clarkart.edu/1955.53\\_EuroCat.pdf](https://media.clarkart.edu/1955.53_EuroCat.pdf) [accessed 03.11.2020], and Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders*. It was highly unlikely that women would have been allowed access to the exhibition.

<sup>79</sup> Brontë, *Villette*, p. 287.

<sup>80</sup> The Major's blue lips and face reinforce what the servant, Susan Nipper, terms his 'unnatural' colour and are a further allusion to homosexuality with his military nickname, 'Flower'. See Colette Colligan, 'Raising the House Tops: Sexual Surveillance in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846-48)', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 29 (2000), 99-144, (p.116).

<sup>81</sup> See Schick, *The Erotic Margin*, p. 166. Racist discourse was underpinned by scientific theories which argued that women and 'primitives' were a lower class of being. It was not limited to non-European races and included the Irish, for example.

way and another, there was a heightened alertness to the range of speech styles and voices.’<sup>82</sup> Nineteenth-century readers and audiences were very well attuned to voice.<sup>83</sup> Orality, in this sense, extends to the idea of texture, of characters shaping their mouths to form words and paralinguistic sounds. More careful mapping of voice patterns and auralty, especially in the intersection with the visual, shows eroticism on the surface of many Victorian texts. Any exaggeration of this shaping becomes a useful narrative device in depicting sexual desire. Writing on Dickens’s orality, Ivan Kreilkamp argues that ‘the publicity and word of mouth surrounding the publication of *Pickwick Papers* suggested that Dickens’s success relied on a new practice of reading which seemed so excessive in voice and gesture as to strike polite observers as something on the order of an hysterical fit’.<sup>84</sup> In connection with menacing desire, excessive orality is noticeable with Uriah Heep and Carker, for example, with their widening rictus grins conveying duplicity and perverse desires.<sup>85</sup> ‘Through emphasis and linguistic play on oral excess, Dickens develops the symbolic mouth as a source of pleasure and a hub of sexual desire.’

### *The Open Mouth, The Open Body*

Open mouths in Victorian paintings and photography are associated with taboo states: emotional disorder, drunkenness, sensuality, and racialised exoticism.<sup>86</sup> The art historian David Sonstroem, explains that since representations of open mouths or visible teeth are rare in Victorian paintings, they must have particular meaning. The closed mouth in Victorian art

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<sup>82</sup> Andrews, *Dickens and His Performing Selves*, p. 108.

<sup>83</sup> Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*, pp. 2-11, explains how Victorian readers were immersed in ‘vocal culture’.

<sup>84</sup> Kreilkamp, p. 97.

<sup>85</sup> I discuss these two characters in chapter two.

<sup>86</sup> David Sonstroem, ‘Teeth in Victorian Art’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29 (2001), 351-382, (p. 369). Ford Maddox Brown’s depiction of a leering Carlyle in his painting *Work* has been the subject of much critical comment for its unusual depiction of the mouth. See Nicholas Tromans, ‘Drawing Teeth: Reflections on Brown’s Mouths’, *Visual Culture in Britain*, 15 (2014), 299-312.

signifies the normative: discreet, respectful, and controlled; the open mouth marks out the Other: impulsive and subversive. The notion of the immobile mouth as a symbol of gravitas and refinement was further reinforced by Lavater; at the centre of his theories is ‘the closed mouth at the moment of perfect tranquillity’.<sup>87</sup> In opposition to these sublime properties, the open mouth registered deviant states. But pejorative connotations of the open mouth were not a new phenomenon.<sup>88</sup> The mouth as a symbolic repository for sexual taboo and transgression endured into the nineteenth century with, for example, racialised caricatures of the Irish, portrayed with large-lipped open mouths to reinforce a notion of animalistic, ‘primitive’ appetites.<sup>89</sup>

Images of the sexualised open mouth in Victorian art reached new heights, or lows depending on the critic, with the Pre-Raphaelite trend for voluptuous and slightly parted lips. The voluptuous mouth constituted a bold expression of the sexually aroused and available female. Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s portraits of Fanny Cornforth with her full, red lips in paintings, such as *Bocca baciata* [the kissed mouth] (1859), epitomise the form. The erotic emphasis provoked discomfort even in fellow Pre-Raphaelites.<sup>90</sup> Rossetti, himself, warned Boyce, the purchaser of *Bocca*, that the full, parted lips of his portrait were developing a ‘Venetian aspect’.<sup>91</sup> Critics of this and later Rossetti paintings sneered at his so-called ‘Mulatto mouths’.<sup>92</sup> The portrait’s pronounced oral erotics — ‘more stunning than can be decently expressed’ — owe much to that so-called Venetian colouring, which highlights the

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<sup>87</sup> Lavater, 1, p. 10.

<sup>88</sup> In Medieval religious art, barbaric Romans or mocking Jews are often depicted with gaping mouths, embracing atavistic brutality. Most iconic in medieval representations of the mouth is ‘Hell’s Mouth’, the imagined receptacle for sinners — often adulterers.

<sup>89</sup> See Pearl, *About Faces*, on physiognomic representations of race.

<sup>90</sup> See Barrie J. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), for an assessment of the hostile critical responses to Rossetti’s ‘fleshly’ paintings.

<sup>91</sup> The ‘Venetian aspect’: D. G. Rossetti to George Price Boyce, 5 September 1859, *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by William E. Fredeman, 10 vols (2002-15), II, p. 269; and Katherine Hughes, *Victorians Undone: Tales of the Flesh in the Age of Decorum* (London: 4<sup>th</sup> Estate, Harper Collins, 2017), p. 219.

<sup>92</sup> Reference to ‘Mulatto mouths’ cited by Hughes, p. 218; and see William S. Fredeman, ‘A Shadow of Dante: Rossetti in the Final Years’, *Victorian Poetry*, 20 (1982), 217-245, (p. 230).

sensuality of the body and richness of texture, especially the scarlet excess of Fanny's lips.<sup>93</sup> According to Barrie Bullen, their fleshly redness is more specific than the metonymy of female genitalia and 'celebrates fellatio' through the prominence and shaping of Fanny's mouth.<sup>94</sup> Considered the 'worst vice', according to William Holman Hunt, oral sex was often considered a foreign practice, usually French, although it features in many English bawdy songs of the period.<sup>95</sup> Bullen's comment offers an insight into the way an image can appear to portray passive, objectified women but also encodes sexual agency through nuances of oral coding. These images were not just to be gazed upon but were loaded with performative meanings.

The shaping of the mouth constitutes a communicative act, which was exploited in nineteenth-century visual culture and in the literary imagination. Such choreographed expressions extend the scope of the linguistic and bring into consideration what counts as language.<sup>96</sup> Reading the encoded mouth generated a narrative that sidestepped boundaries of propriety and offered new ways of sexual expression. It is evident in Franz-Xaver Winterhalter's portrait, *Queen Victoria* (1843) [fig.1.4]. The portrait, commissioned by Victoria as a gift to her new husband, shows her body arched slightly backwards, her hair cascading over her shoulders, and her lips parted to reveal her teeth. She is reclining on plush red velvet. Possibly modelled on Vigée Le Brun's scandalous self-portrait (1786), which shows smiling parted lips and teeth, Victoria's portrait is markedly different from her others which usually present the more familiar face of the tight-lipped monarch.<sup>97</sup> Her mouth is unnaturally small, yet vibrant, encapsulating the rosebud ideal and, with her flowing hair and

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<sup>93</sup> From Boyce's diaries, p. 89, cited by Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, p. 104.

<sup>94</sup> J. B. Bullen, *Rossetti: Painter, Poet* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2011), p. 124-5. There is also support among scholars for the view that Rossetti preferred this form of sex.

<sup>95</sup> Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, p. 105. On oral sex in bawdy songs, see George Speaight, *Bawdy Songs of the Early Music Hall* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1975), p. 47.

<sup>96</sup> See Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 10-13.

<sup>97</sup> See Colin Jones, *The Smile Revolution in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), on the significance of Le Brun's portrait and the scandal of her parted lips, pp. 1-14, 133-36, 174-77.

relaxed posture, it presents an intimate portrait designed to allure. It was, according to Victoria's journal, 'my darling Albert's favourite picture'.<sup>98</sup> It hung in their private suite and was never shown in her lifetime. What these visual representations highlight is the prevalence of oral erotic coding in a period of conservative morality and where high anxiety circulated around female sexuality. Such anxieties spawned a dark humour, as both narrative relief and distancing device.<sup>99</sup> Female libido was often presented as farcical lusty appetite and through representations of a large slack mouth rendered grotesque. Dickens adapts the form in Miss Miggs, the ludicrous house maid who lusts after Simon Tappertit and often sits with her mouth wide open like a lingering 'basilisk' (*BR*; 406; ch.51).<sup>100</sup> Physiognomically, Miggs's mouth and jaw offer clues to her insatiable sexual appetite, reflected in Knight Browne's illustration, 'Miss Miggs waiting' [fig.1.5]. Her thin lips and protruding lower jaw signify vanity, a 'low state of civilisation' and an 'amatory and determined' nature.<sup>101</sup> Such features were derogatory and sexualised signs and form a coding which attends Miggs throughout the novel, as part of the entrenched misogyny towards the Victorian spinster.<sup>102</sup> Through her mouth she is dehumanised, since not only her speech, but also her libido, is frantically excessive yet she is consigned to permanent celibacy.<sup>103</sup>

Representations of female sexuality often relied on conflating the facial and genital mouth, which provided a plentiful source of bawdy jokes and songs for cock-and-hen clubs

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<sup>98</sup> See Queen Victoria's Journals (2 January 1873), <http://www.queenvictoriasjournals.org/search/displayItemFromId.do?FormatType=fulltextimgsrc&QueryType=articles&ItemID=18730102> [accessed 29.06.2021].

<sup>99</sup> See Malchow on the cannibal joke, where he examines how coarse humour helped to test the boundaries of acceptability and brought the naked body, the mouth, and a taboo act into the popular imagination, pp. 110-123.

<sup>100</sup> Rodney Stenning Edgcombe, 'Sources for the Characterization of Miss Miggs in *Barnaby Rudge*', *Dickens Quarterly*, 32 (2015), argues for Miggs as a version of the gaunt woman in Hogarth's *Morning*, a print from *The Four Times of the Day* (1736). The overall sense is the same.

<sup>101</sup> See Pearl, p. 124, quoting George Jabat's satirical essay on physiognomy, where he referred to prognathism as a link to the 'less evolved' Irish, also linked to Victorian fears of prolific reproduction and over-population.

<sup>102</sup> I discuss Miggs in detail in chapter four.

<sup>103</sup> This misogynistic oral coding is personified in Hans Christian Andersen's 'Aunty Toothache', about an old maid who has turned down marriage, but gains satisfaction from inflicting terrible toothache on her nephew through overfeeding him sweets. Hans Christian Anderson 'Aunty Toothache', (1872) trans. by Jean Hersholt < [https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/AuntyToothache\\_e.html](https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/AuntyToothache_e.html) > [accessed 18.01.2021].

and men-only song-and-supper rooms.<sup>104</sup> Robert Burns and Henry Purcell were among those who collected and edited brazenly vulgar songs about feeding the ‘mouth that cannot bite’.<sup>105</sup> In coarse metonymic slang, the song, ‘A Slashing Rummy Parody on “I won’t be a Nun”’, laments how it is a shame that the ‘mouth should not be fed’ and yet another is entitled, ‘The W-hole of the Ladies’.<sup>106</sup> As Lee Jackson points out, the songs and the venues in which they were sung drew a broad crowd; bawdy entertainment was not a specialist preference.<sup>107</sup> Literary authors, however, could not indulge in this revelry and thus the crude visual imagery of popular bawdy songs was substituted with linguistic play and complex verbal inference. In this way, appetite and eating had its own erotic language, where eroticism could be signalled with or without intention, depending on the animation of the mouth.

Since alimentary hunger is often represented as congruent with sexual appetite, an open animated mouth is easily eroticised, or misread. Nineteenth-century conduct literature directed at young middle-class girls generated a litany of rules for oral etiquette, those modes of eating, drinking, speaking, and gesturing, to avoid projecting the ‘wrong’ image.<sup>108</sup> The literature reinforced the principle that appearing hungry was socially unacceptable and that

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<sup>104</sup> Lee Jackson, *Palaces of Pleasure: From Music Halls to the Seaside to Football, How the Victorians Invented Mass Entertainment* (London: Yale University Press, 2019).

<sup>105</sup> See Speaight, *Bawdy Songs*, p. 9.

<sup>106</sup> The verse is unashamedly sexual:

I’ve got a little Fanny,  
That with hair is overspread,  
And I’m sure it is a shame  
That its mouth should not be fed:  
So I will, &c.

From Speaight, p. 76 and pp. 90-91.

<sup>107</sup> Jackson, pp. 35-36, and n.12, p. 264. See also, P. Bailey, ‘Conspiracies of meaning: music hall and the knowingness of popular culture’, *Past and Present*, 144 (1994), 138-70.

<sup>108</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa* (New York: Plume, 1989), p. 182, and Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973). Amongst the many conduct manuals commenting on ‘oral deportment’ are Henry G. Clarke, *The English Maiden: Her Moral and Domestic Duties* (London: Henry Green Clarke, 1841); *Etiquette for Ladies, Being a Manual of Minor Social Ethics and Customary Observances* (Knight & Son, 1857); *How to Woo; How to Win; and How to Get Married* (Glasgow: W. R. M’Phun, 1856); and *The Young Lady’s Book* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1859).



keeping the mouth closed was both prudent and desirable.<sup>109</sup> In promoting an insensate body, conduct manuals suggested that female desirability was quite the opposite of the physical attractions celebrated in bawdy songs or of anything remotely alluring; this was, then, a complicated model of desirability that focused on ethereal goodness and virginity, yet existed in a Podsnap world of highly coded sexual danger.<sup>110</sup> Ironically, it was that sense of danger which many writers rendered erotic in literature. Middle-class virginity and attraction were enshrined in the pretty, rosebud mouth, the opposite figure to Miggs and one which Mrs General is so keen to cultivate in the Dorrit girls. For a young lady, her mouth was a crucial signifier of class status and modesty and how she comported herself was pivotal to her marriage prospects. However, the denial of physical appetite, which underpinned an idealised incorporeality, was therefore problematic at the dinner table where a balance needed to be struck between the ‘affectation of delicate appetite’ and causing your hostess to think that ‘you despise her fare’.<sup>111</sup> For women, eating did not have one straightforward meaning in genteel society but it did provide an index for commendable carnal denial: ‘it is ill-bred to accept every thing [*sic*] that is offered to you’[...] ‘take such small mouthfuls that you can always be ready for conversation’.<sup>112</sup> Yet, conversation was also regulated and reduced, ‘a well-bred woman finds not the least difficulty in effectually promoting the most elegant and useful conversation without speaking a word’.<sup>113</sup> These social ideals meant that a middle-

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<sup>109</sup> On Victorian attitudes towards female appetites and the ideal of incorporeality, see Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (1982; London: Routledge, 2013); Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwood, 1988); Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973).

<sup>110</sup> Podsnap is a highly anxious father in Charles Dickens *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Michael Cotsell (1865; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), whose mission is to avoid anything that might bring ‘a blush to a young person’s cheek’ (p. 129; ch.11). All further references are to this edition.

<sup>111</sup> See for example, Florence Hartley, *The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness* (Boston: G. W. Cottrell, 1860), p.103; and *Etiquette for Ladies, Being a Manual of Minor Social Ethics and Customary Observances* (London: Knight and Son, 1857).

<sup>112</sup> Hartley, p. 103.

<sup>113</sup> *Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen; or The Principles of True Politeness: to which is added The Ball-Room Manual* (Halifax: Milner and Sowerby, 1862), p. 69.

class young woman's mouth was fraught with both erotic denial and erotic potential, a state exploited by Dickens in his representation of child-women and sexual agency.<sup>114</sup>

Conduct literature and didactic children's stories aimed at girls sought to manage female sexual desire through a regulated euphemistic mouth; bodily orifices were best kept closed and when they were not, something sexual and dangerous was signalled to Victorian observers, readers, and audiences.<sup>115</sup> However, since the mouth was a taboo site, its regulation simply rendered it more potent as an embodiment of desire. Georges Bataille's theory of eroticism depends upon this idea, that desire cannot be separated from taboo and that pleasure arises from breaking taboos.<sup>116</sup> It is a model which resonates with Dickens's own engagement with narrative desire, where he confronts sexual desire and agency through the mouth and especially through the open mouth. Dickens shows how people are drawn to taboo and in a way that can overwhelm and engender fetishism.<sup>117</sup> Thus, while the sexually mature woman was often lampooned, the young girl's mouth was eroticised and fetishized through the metonymy of the rose bud and the cherry. Long a motif of the desirable girl, the nineteenth-century epitome of the cherry lips cliché is, perhaps, John Everett Millais's iconic portrait, 'Cherry Ripe' (1879), which sold more than 600,000 copies [fig.1.6]. The cherries are painted in shadow, off to one side, while the little girl's hands in anachronistic black lacy gloves form a triangular frame highlighting her lap.<sup>118</sup> I am not suggesting that all buyers and

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<sup>114</sup> I discuss Dickens's child-women and sexual agency in chapter five.

<sup>115</sup> See *Etiquette of the Toilet-Table: A Manual of Utility, Elegance, Personal Comfort by an Officer's Widow* (Glasgow: W. R. M'Phun, 1859), *The Girl's Birthday Book* (London: Houlston and Wright, 1860). *The Young Lady's Book* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1859), *Etiquette for Ladies*, (London: Knight & Son, 1857), Henry G. Clarke, *The English Maiden: Her Moral and Domestic Duties*, (London: Henry Green Clarke, 1841).

<sup>116</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. by Mary Dalwood, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Penguin, 2012).

<sup>117</sup> I use the term fetishism in the original and wider meaning of fetish worship which pre-dates Freud and Marx, see William Pietz, 'The Problems of Fetish, I', 3 vols, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 9 (1985), 5-17. Rather than Freud's concept of fetish as a psychosexual displacement, which is usually phallogocentric, fetish for the mouth in Dickens's novels is an obsession for the mouth's sexual properties. Since the mouth is an erotogenic organ in its own right, it is not simply a substitute object. For Freud and Marx, fetishism is also a process of estrangement, embodying a blockage or a refusal to acknowledge a truth, whereas with Dickens, the fetishized mouth is appreciated, if not celebrated, and engenders unity and coming together. Sexual fetishism was first labelled by Alfred Binet in 1887, not by Freud, as obsessive sexual behaviour.

observers were attracted by or even aware of the unsettling associations with child sexuality and female genitalia, but the image offers conflicting and ambiguous signals sufficient to raise allusions with the coding of the desirable young body. It is the same coding that Dickens exploits with the oral erotics of Dora Copperfield, Dot Peerybingle, and Rosa Bud, where young women's mouths encode an unsettling eroticization of the child, rendered through pouting and other paralinguistic signs such as the performative insertion of objects into their mouths.<sup>119</sup>

It is evidence of the complexity of the mouth in Victorian culture that it could signify a disturbing eroticism of the child, sexual purity, sexual availability, and a sort of foreign-inflected sexual aggression. Deviance and a propensity for violence and sadism was often correlated with the French mouth, aligned with a powerful rebellious charisma. Dickens's Rigaud (*LD*), Hortense (*BH*), and Madame Defarge provoke fear and distrust, yet have the power to attract others.<sup>120</sup> It is an idea that Dickens returns to in his compulsion for seeking out what repulses him. Gallic difference and deviance also taint Miss Wade (*LD*) who, while not French, has an affinity with France, entering the novel in Marseille and ending it in Calais, having returned there with Tattycoram in tow. Her unnaturalness is eroticised in the assumption of her 'unsubduable nature', which is made legible through her 'handsome but compressed and even cruel mouth'; the word 'handsome' serving as a link to masculine sexual aggression (38; ch.2). These Frenchwomen are also masculinised in a portrayal of a

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<sup>118</sup> Whether or not Millais intended this semiotic is discussed in Pamela Tamarkin Reis, 'Victorian Centrefold: Another Look at Millais's "Cherry Ripe"', *Victorian Studies*, 35, (1992), 201-205.

<sup>119</sup> The stereotypical pouting, flirtatious heroine/anti-heroine is used extensively in sensation novels; see Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* for 'red and pouting lips' (62; ch.8), 'the pretty pouting mouth' (70; ch.8), and 'the ripe scarlet of the pouting lips' (71; ch. 8). In Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, ed. by Shirley Foster (1848; London: Penguin, 1995), p. 134, female expressions of desire are directly associated with childlike behaviour when Sally Leadbitter teases Mary Barton about her feelings for Carson, "How much, Mary?" "This much" as the children say' (opening her arms very wide). "Nonsense," said Mary, pouting'.

<sup>120</sup> I examine the French female mouth in chapter four.

particular type of powerful sexual agency.<sup>121</sup> The female mouth as a sexual weapon is a radically new representation for Dickens,

While Victorian coding of female sexuality plays on the idea of the erotic space created by the orifice, the hole, and the gap, masculine oral erotics centre on active, often aggressive, tropes of penetration and incorporation. The poetics of savage masculinity create a sense of toxic yet fascinating vitality, rendered through oral sadism. In the early part of the nineteenth century, alongside gothic tales that provoked terror and disgust, a fashion for comedy-cannibalism emerged, loaded with irreverent sexuality.<sup>122</sup> It came to the fore alongside the development of the anatomy class, and the increasing popularity of public anatomy exhibitions; as A. W. Bates observes, ‘in 1828 the word anatomical ‘turned to gold’.<sup>123</sup> Confronting the naked human body reflected and engendered much anxiety about male appetite and the naked female body.<sup>124</sup> As the body was increasingly observed, studied, and objectified in the medical world, the role of the medical student became a familiar figure in popular culture. Dickens’s medical students, Bob Sawyer and Ben Allen in *The Pickwick Papers*, are fine examples: ‘Nothing like dissecting, to give one an appetite’, Bob announces to his friend Ben, as they feast on chicken legs and oysters, both of which items have well-known sexual connotations (447; ch.30).<sup>125</sup> Their gorging, however, is not joyously Rabelaisian but thinly veils predatory lust, or what Pickwick calls ‘animal spirits’, and belies the vicious undertone of their intentions (446; ch.30). Dickens’s medical students

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<sup>121</sup> Black, ‘A Sisterhood of Rage and Beauty.

<sup>122</sup> See Ramuz, “‘Shall I bite it?’”, p. 77. In 1832, for example, an article in *The Lancet* complained that ‘it is disgusting to talk of anatomy as a science, whilst it is cultivated by means which would disgrace a nation of cannibals’, cited by Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race*, p. 110. See note below.

<sup>123</sup> A. W. Bates, ‘Dr Kahn’s Museum: Obscene Anatomy in Victorian London’, *J R Soc Med.* 99, (2006) 618–624, < <https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2017.0079> > [accessed 25 November 2020]

<sup>124</sup> When an ‘anatomical Venus’ model was exhibited at ‘Signor Sarti’s exhibition’, it was recommended by the *Athenaeum* to ‘younger male readers’ wanting to obtain ‘a few general ideas on the subject of anatomy’, cited by Bates, p. 619. It was also noted that ‘coarse expressions and sexual innuendo were as common in the lecture hall as they were in the dissecting room. Indeed, professors used ribald mnemonic verses to tutor their charges in anatomical parts’, quote in Bates, p. 622, from A. Digby, *Making a Medical Living: Doctors and Patients in the English Market for Medicine, 1720–1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>125</sup> Ramuz, “‘Shall I bite it?’”, pp. 77-78.

demonstrate an oral sadism which, when infused with gothic humour, works to deflect anxieties concerning sexuality while simultaneously indulging in them. Similarly, Dickens's tale of Captain Murderer (*UT*) represents the conflated sadistic 'gratification of a cannibal appetite with tender brides', relayed in a grimly comic tone.<sup>126</sup> That the tale thematically conflates cannibalism with rapacious sexual appetite distinguishes it from the nineteenth-century tales of survival cannibalism which fascinated Dickens and others.<sup>127</sup> It recalls instead, Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), a novel characterised by oral violence; the rapist, Lovelace, is described as a 'notorious woman-eater'.<sup>128</sup> Oral-incorporative metaphors also ushered in a pornographic form of sexual violence entwined with sadistic pleasure, notably in G. W. M. Reynolds's 'The Body Snatcher' (1844-45).<sup>129</sup> After using his 'long flexible rod' to pierce the coffin and body of a beautiful sixteen-year-old girl, the so-called 'Resurrection Man' then 'drew it back, put the point to his tongue, and tasted it'.<sup>130</sup> Given that *Mysteries of London* was a best-selling novel, this was not specialist reading. Reynolds's obscene image of tasting generates disgust but so, too, does Dickens's resurrection man, Jerry Cruncher (*ToTC*). With his fingers perpetually coated in rust from grave-robbing exploits, he is said to 'have been sucking the rust off his fingers in his absorption' and to 'have taken quite a lunch of rust off his fingers' (67, 77; ch.3). Although not usually considered a sexual character, Dickens portrays scenes of Cruncher's marital life which suggests some cross-over in respect of his barbarous appetites.

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<sup>126</sup> Charles Dickens, 'Nurse's Stories', *The Uncommercial Traveller*, ed. by Daniel Tyler (1860-61; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 148-158, (pp. 150 and 152).

<sup>127</sup> On Dickens and survival cannibalism, specifically the Franklin Expedition, see *Household Words*, September 27 (1854), 226-7. In *Household Words*, 30 March 1850, p. 92, a detailed, sensational, and serialised report appeared concerning a Dr Parkman of Boston, whose partially consumed remains were discovered in the rooms of Dr Webster. Dr Parkman was identified by his false teeth still attached to his jaw.

<sup>128</sup> Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa*, ed. by Angus Ross (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 720.

<sup>129</sup> Rosenman, *Spectacular Women*, writes that Reynolds's novel was 'by far the best-selling novel in mid-Victorian England', selling 40,000 copies a week and over a million copies cumulatively before it was issued in bound volumes, p. 31.

<sup>130</sup> Reynolds, p. 127.

Jerry Cruncher, both ‘cannibal’ and wife-beater, reflects the changing character of gothic and comedy-cannibalism and its development into a more realistic portrayal of problematic masculine libido. That is, metaphors of the savage cannibalistic mouth shifted from demonizing the racial Other to portraying the Victorian male in all his guises. Malchow, for example, points out that in *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens moves away from ‘the entertaining medical school prank to corroborate a larger and gravely serious metaphor — of a cannibalistic world in which lawyers, Poor Law guardians, bureaucrats, and the rich, generally, live through the destruction and consumption of others’.<sup>131</sup> Through the same process, the grim humour and ribaldry, which characterised the early-nineteenth-century lusty cannibal and provided a distancing effect, gives way to a sharper focus on explorations of sexuality.<sup>132</sup> In those darker explorations, the mouth remains the key metaphor but there is a distinct change in tone. Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff, the archetypal demon lover, is one such creation; his ‘sharp cannibal teeth’ define his potency and there is nothing intentionally humorous in his characterisation.<sup>133</sup> The figure of the virile cannibal male reaches its apotheosis in *Dracula* (1897), as an example of Victorian literature’s tendency to embody a fear of the Other through negative and racist oral tropes of the greedy Jewish merchant, the starving Irish, and the man-eating woman. Dickens, however, exploits this coding and brings fantasy and phobia together, notably in *Quilp*, *Heep*, and *Orlick*.

Dickens’s poetics bring malign oral erotics firmly into domestic settings, destabilising conventions of the Victorian home and hearth.<sup>134</sup> They are integral to his construction of masculinity, which I argue moves to embrace physiological and emotional drives as a normative facet of masculine behaviour rather than as problematic traits. Opposing pairs such

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<sup>131</sup> Malchow, p. 115.

<sup>132</sup> A Freudian interpretation might read the cannibal humour as not about the cannibal but as a projection of displaced male anxiety and, thus, a way of avoiding issues surrounding sexual drive, see Malchow, p. 122.

<sup>133</sup> Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. by Ian Jack (1847; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 156.

<sup>134</sup> This is true of Heathcliff.

as David and Heep, Pip and Orlick, draw inexorably closer to each other through oral connections. Configuring Victorian manhood in this way admits contradiction into masculine identities with problematic libido at the core.<sup>135</sup> Such tensions are apparent in *Murdstone*, *David Copperfield*, *Heep*, *Orlick*, *Jaggers*, *Headstone*, and others, who reinforce sexual competition through oral-incorporative metaphors. Biting, snarling, growling, and verbal aggression underwrite the sexual predation of the ‘cannibalistic type’, generating a confusion of fear and desire. This effect-affect is manipulated by Dickens in highly charged scenes of biting and penetration, by tooth and by poker. Metaphors of penetration and dental motifs are by no means exclusively male, however, and encompass tropes of the female vampire and the *vagina dentata* motif.<sup>136</sup>

### *The Sexual Coding of Victorian Teeth*

Given that Victorian teeth were not known for their aesthetic perfection, it might seem strange that teeth could function as a cipher for sexuality. What is important in considering teeth and erotics, is an understanding of how the condition of the teeth both hindered and contributed to the communication of desire or sexual availability, thus informing their complex role in oral metaphors.

Victorian teeth were especially prone to decay and without the dental hygiene of the modern world, the pleasure-pain axis of the mouth was heavily weighted towards pain.<sup>137</sup> Yet

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<sup>135</sup> Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 14-15.

<sup>136</sup> *Vagina dentata* derives from folk tales of a woman with a toothed vagina who castrates, injures, or emasculates the male. See Kathryn M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language* (London: Routledge, 1970) and ‘Wanted a Husband’, p. 553.

<sup>137</sup> Cheap, starchy food and poor oral hygiene at all social levels, combined with unregulated dentistry where rotting teeth were often filled with the infection *in situ* and unqualified quacks caused more problems than they solved, led to widespread dental ill health. See Madeleine Mant and Charlotte Roberts, ‘Diet and Dental Caries in Post-Medieval London’, *Int J Historical Archaeology*, 19 (2015), 188–207, which notes how the British doubled their consumption of sugar during the nineteenth century and how even the working classes ‘spent a

the commonality of pain brought the pleasure index into stark relief and kept the physical state of mouth to the fore for much of one's life. The warm sensuality of the mouth with the erotic pleasures of the tongue and lips was frequently compromised by the foulness and excruciating pain of bad teeth. It is hard to underestimate the profound social and personal impact of poor oral health on wellbeing in the nineteenth century. In *The Cyclopaedia of Anatomy and Physiology* (1859), Dr Robert Todd's standard text on the physiology and pathology of the mouth notes a surprising lack of research.<sup>138</sup> He acknowledges, however, that 'the importance of this organ to life, and even when existence is not actually endangered, to the comfort and well-being of the individual, must render any deviation from its healthy and normal condition in the highest interest to the pathologist.'<sup>139</sup> Todd's comment recognises the extent to which the physical condition of the teeth pervaded everyday life.<sup>140</sup>

That the pain caused by bad or false teeth impacted upon personal life and intimacy was well understood, as John Ruskin's diaries and letters illustrate: In August 1866, in great pain after yet another trip to his dentist, Ruskin writes a short, sharp diary entry; 'into town late to Mr. Woodhouse. Religious talk. Teeth horrid'.<sup>141</sup> A letter, which includes his own detailed drawing of his lower jaw, reveals a preoccupation with the state of his teeth:

I am going to break my appointment today, for I am very comfortable just now, and am really afraid of cold or toothache if I come out in this weather: and you will have a good deal to do; for I've been practising with the teeth, and I find my long exposed upper tooth is of hardly any use, and the teeth catch and retain that more than the back ones — on which they grate with a sound of death's head and crossbones, through one's meat — and to my horror, I find that food accumulates more in front from the front teeth not

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large proportion of their income on sugar', p. 201, and < <https://bda.org/museum/the-story-of-dentistry/ancient-modern/development-of-the-profession> > [accessed 19.01.2021].

<sup>138</sup> Todd, et.al, *The Cyclopaedia of Anatomy and Physiology*, III.

<sup>139</sup> Todd, pp. 100-107.

<sup>140</sup> Until the 1850s, the mouth and teeth as subjects of scientific interest were largely neglected and not considered worthy of regulation, evident in the lack of a consolidated, professional body of dentistry until 1858. Claire Wood, *Dickens and the Business of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 146, notes that since teeth do not decompose as quickly as other body parts, they are 'the foundation of modern forensic dentistry, which fundamentally binds our teeth to our identity'. (She considers teeth from the perspective of their commercial value not their sensual and erotic properties.)

<sup>141</sup> *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, ed. by Joan Evans, and J. H. Whitehouse, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–1959), II, p. 603.



being so much used — so that I never could eat before people. My cousin will be with you I hope true to her time — and then you can tell her something about poor wretched me — (Her teeth are not the best of her — I was going to say — more's the pity — but it is not a pity that the rest of her should be better than her teeth). What did you make me all that mahogany bar round my mouth —merely to hold one bit of ivory at  $\alpha$ , for? It's like the chain of the Alps at Turin in summer, when all the snow's gone except a dot on Monte Viso. Ever truly and worriedly yours, J Ruskin.<sup>142</sup>

Ruskin articulates the deep anxiety about the mouth that impacted upon personal interaction, and which is often overlooked by modern scholars and readers. Teeth were a delicate subject, as nineteenth-century dentist, Howard, points out ‘there is respecting the teeth a degree of delicacy generally felt which prevents advice being given even where requisite; and this frequently occurs amongst intimate friends.’<sup>143</sup> It was the intimacy of the mouth as a cavity of pain and pleasure, but also its unavoidable animality, that produced tensions about teeth. These tensions were compounded by the social anxieties which were attendant on ugly teeth and the misplaced associations between bad teeth and the working-class brute.<sup>144</sup>

Expressing psychological and metaphysical pleasure and pain using oral metaphor is, therefore, both artistic and insightful, since the analogies were so well understood. While numerous Victorian cartoons illustrate the torment of rotten teeth, Dickens uses his unique poetics to evoke the reality of intense toothache and align it symbolically with atmospheric setting and the psychological state of the characters. In *Dombey and Son*, by referencing the prevalence of chronic toothache which overwhelms all other senses and feelings, he invokes an unrelenting physical torment: an orally focused pathetic fallacy settles over Paul Dombey's christening, where ‘there was a toothache in everything’ (61; ch.5). Celebrating

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<sup>142</sup> Quoted by M. G. H. Bishop in his article ‘Eminent Victorian Dentistry: John Ruskin and the patient experience of Victorian dentistry’ *British Dental Journal*, 210 (2011), 179–182.

<sup>143</sup> Thomas Howard, *On the Loss of Teeth; and on the Best Way of Restoring Them* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1858), p. 11.

<sup>144</sup> Todd, in *The Cyclopaedia of Anatomy and Physiology*, describes the common Victorian anxiety concerning the prevalence of diseased mouths and rotten teeth: for the lower classes, oral disease was brought about through poor health and vitamin deficiencies and, in the case of the rich, usually through an excess of sugar, alcohol, opium or tobacco.

the birth of the son and heir becomes a morbid, painful trial of the senses, expressed through more orally imagined scenes: inside the icy church, Paul's cries 'rent the air', the curate appears to emit smoke from his mouth and the food is, without exception, cold (59; ch.5). Synthesising oral metaphors of pain and discomfort with the detailed discomforts of the christening, helps to close the gap between experience and interpretation.

Since social conventions expected a closed mouth in addition to the personal embarrassment of terrible teeth, to reveal the teeth had, therefore, very particular meaning. Teeth-baring was eroticised not just through the metaphorical and synecdochic associations of penetration and incorporation, but also because the act of revealing what should be hidden produces the frisson of taboo. As a performative act, it could range from Trollope's use of partially revealed pearly teeth to convey mild feminine flirtation, to aggressively sexual signs, such as Quilp's 'fangs' (27; ch.3). In this way, teeth conveyed lust, as Thackeray shows in *Vanity Fair* (1847-48): Lord Steyne is rendered grotesquely lascivious as his 'two white buck-teeth protruded themselves and glistened savagely in the midst of the grin'.<sup>145</sup> Dickens emphasises this power of display in repeating that Carker 'showed his teeth' several times, adding that they present 'a singularly crouching appearance' as if ready for attack (293-94, 296; ch.22). In Carker's case, the revelation is always cynical, not unlike Barthes description of striptease professionals who 'wrap themselves in a miraculous ease which constantly clothes them, affords them the icy indifference of skilful practitioners haughtily taking refuge in the certitude of their technique'.<sup>146</sup> Carker's confidence, reflected in those glistening teeth, helps to create his strange allure. The erotic tension in baring the teeth lies in 'the reveal', then, and aligns the spectacle with both the idea of 'delicious terror' and Dickens's concept of

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<sup>145</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, ed. by John Sutherland, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 474.

<sup>146</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Striptease' in *Mythologies* (1957; New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), pp. 164-68, (p. 167).

the ‘attraction of repulsion’, as the onlooker finds it hard to look away.<sup>147</sup> Ruskin appears to measure his female cousin by the state of her teeth, drawing his dentist’s attention to them not for their need of treatment but for their unfortunate effect on her looks. On the allure of good teeth, the dentist Thomas Howard writes, ‘where the teeth are good, there is, when speaking, or smiling especially, a fascination present, which prevents further examination of the countenance’.<sup>148</sup> Howard’s observation epitomises the power of Carker’s gleaming teeth.

To be stripped back to the teeth is starkly exemplified in Edgar Allen Poe’s *Berenice* (1835).<sup>149</sup> The tale describes a man’s sexual fetish for his wife’s teeth, which develops soon after he marries his cousin and as a possible response to her sexual maturity.<sup>150</sup> Egaeus’s fetish begins when, slowly parting her shrunken lips, and ‘in a smile of peculiar meaning, *the teeth* of the changed Berenice disclosed themselves slowly’ to his view [original italics] (18). From then on, Egaeus is tormented by ‘the teeth! — the teeth! — they were here, and there, and everywhere’ — real white teeth were beautiful in their rarity, but Poe subverts the ideal into grotesque form to unsex Berenice.<sup>151</sup> Egaeus ‘coveted them so madly’ and shudders as he imagines the teeth with ‘sensitive and sentient power’.<sup>152</sup> Berenice is reduced absolutely to her teeth when Egaeus buries her alive and tears them out through what he calls his ‘monomania’.<sup>153</sup> She is an extraordinary synecdochic creation whose identity is extracted and transmuted into a personified *vagina dentata*.

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<sup>147</sup> Barthes, p. 164. Charles Dickens first used the phrase in ‘Letters on Social Questions: Capital Punishments’, *Daily News*, 28 February 1846, p. 6, from the British Library, Shelfmark:1846-1912 LON LD10 NPL, writing that ‘The attraction of repulsion being as much a law of our moral nature, as gravitation is in the structure of the visible world, operates in no case (I believe) so powerfully, as in this case of the punishment of death’.

<sup>148</sup> Howard, pp. 19-20.

<sup>149</sup> Edgar Allen Poe, ‘Berenice’, in *Edgar Allen Poe: Selected Tales*, ed. by David Van Leer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 13-25.

<sup>150</sup> Kristen Renzi, ‘Hysterical Vocalizations of the Female Body in Edgar Allan Poe’s *Berenice*’, *ESQ*, 58 (2012), 601-40, argues that Berenice’s ‘primary malady’ is sexual maturation — Egaeus claims that ‘he knew her no longer’ after the marriage, p. 610.

<sup>151</sup> Poe, *Berenice*, p. 18.

<sup>152</sup> Poe, *Berenice*, p. 18.

<sup>153</sup> Poe, *Berenice*, p. 18.

The erotics of teeth, as with other parts of the mouth, are gendered in Victorian literature, with female teeth encoding a mark of purity if there is a slight reveal but signalling sexual emasculation if they are too visible. The coding functioned as a material symbol of female eligibility, small, straight, white teeth were the ideal, while ineligibility could be signified by the unmarried woman's bad or missing teeth, as a metaphor for the pain and emptiness of her single status.<sup>154</sup> There is the 'solitary female cousin who was remarkable for nothing but [...] always having the toothache' in Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* (51; ch.4). In Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851), Miss Pole avoids other shoppers not because she is in mourning but because 'the principal feature of which was her being without teeth, and wearing a veil to conceal the deficiency'.<sup>155</sup> That toothache can function as a metaphor for the avoidance of marital intimacy is suggested in *Our Mutual Friend* by Mrs Wilfer's 'mysterious toothache' and her 'having an annual toothache' every wedding anniversary (450, 453; ch. 4).<sup>156</sup> More pathetic intentions are evident in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) when 'she took a handkerchief from her bundle and tied it round her face under her bonnet, covering her chin and half her cheeks and temples, as if she were suffering from toothache [...] and thus insured against aggressive admiration, she went on her uneven way'.<sup>157</sup> In Poe's *Ligeia* (1838), male anxieties concerning the power of the erotic female are conveyed through perverse appetites and oral imagery. Ligeia is 'emaciated' but has, paradoxically, 'the triumph of all things heavenly — the magnificent turn of the short upper lip — the soft, voluptuous slumber of the under—the dimples which sported, and the colour which spoke —

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<sup>154</sup> See note 101 for Andersen's 'Aunty Toothache', the old maid who, having turned down an offer of marriage, convinces her nephew that his poetry makes him as good 'as Dickens', but her teeth 'glistened' slyly as she tells him this. Reminiscing one evening about the loss of her lover and, strangely, the growth of her nephew's teeth, she transforms into 'Madam Toothache' and extracts a Faustian contract with her nephew: his poetry for the removal of his terrible toothache.

<sup>155</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, ed. by Peter Keating (1851; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 189.

<sup>156</sup> Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Michael Cotsell, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (1865; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). All further references are to this edition.

<sup>157</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, ed. by Tim Dolin (1891; London: Penguin, 1998), p. 280.

the teeth glancing back, with a brilliancy almost startling'.<sup>158</sup> As with Berenice, her identity is reduced to a sexual object embodied in her metonymic mouth.

The erotics of male teeth lie in their symbolic power, phallic metonymy, and their direct association with ingestion. Larger male teeth were thought to contribute to the idealised facial characteristics of the attractive man, 'masculinity in the face when the mouth is closed, may be suddenly transformed into femininity, when the mouth is opened, and narrow, delicate teeth are seen. And, on the other hand, a beautiful feminine face may be made hideous by large, square, masculine teeth'.<sup>159</sup> Such beliefs in the solidity and power of the male body, even his teeth, reinforced the idea of rapacious sexual energy, especially when it comes to representations of male biting. An obvious connection to male eroticised biting is in vampirism, but Dickens's biting is not situated in the Gothic where the emphasis is on the blood and horror. In Dickens's novels, the erotics in biting and penetration are highly sophisticated, but are located in ordinary domestic lives; even Quilp's mythic death as a vampire with a stake through his heart, does not eradicate the realist domestic setting of his sexuality, especially when he invades the ladies' tea-party.<sup>160</sup> Vampire metaphors in Dickens more often represent life-sucking people of business, such as Vholes, the bloodless dispassionate lawyer in *Bleak House*. He reflects a parasitic not a symbiotic energy, and his vampirism is almost banal; he is not 'charming, compelling or sexy'.<sup>161</sup> Similarly, masculinised Sally Brass wears a scarf 'like the wing of the fabled vampire' and, despite her sly relationship with Quilp, any sense of sexuality is lost in ruthless business sense (250; ch.33). The key to reading the vampires and the biters is in Dickens's poetics. When teeth are

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<sup>158</sup> Poe, 'Ligeia' in *Edgar Allen Poe: Selected Tales*, ed. by David Van Leer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 26-39, (p. 27).

<sup>159</sup> Anon, *Dental and Oral Science Magazine*, 1 (1878), p. 39.

<sup>160</sup> See Gareth Cordery, 'Quilp, Commerce and Domesticity: Crossing Boundaries in the *Old Curiosity Shop*', *Dickens Quarterly*, 26 (2009), 209-233. While the vampire's victim first appears to waste away, they are eventually rejuvenated by the blood of others.

<sup>161</sup> John Bowen, 'Charles Dickens and the Gothic', in *The Cambridge History of the Gothic*, 2 vols, ed. by Dale Townshend and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), II, pp. 246-264, (p. 256).

closely juxtaposed with flesh alongside metaphors of incorporation and assimilation, it signifies an intimate act full of sexual energy and excitement. Bodily poetics lift the biter from economic consumption into sexual desire. In this way, Dickens uses an ingenious oral figure to describe Heep as dentist for David's tender tooth. Carker's is not unique in Dickens's canon for his active and signifying teeth; Dickensian teeth are depicted as chattering, clenched, compressed, gnashed, grinding, snapping, straining, rattling, bristling, and vibrating. What this means in respect of desire and sexual agency lies in the context and Dickens's poetics, but it is the animation that sparks the allusions.

The mouth in nineteenth-century culture is a unifying symbol, drawing attention to mutuality even in its aggressive forms. Where early representations of the mouth focus on the simplistic metonymy of the bawdy, open body, and rapacious male appetite, the oral gradually comes to embody a more complex, psychological configuration of sexuality. Symbolic oral connections are forged, which open new ways of expressing sexuality and physical desire. The mouth is a means of exploring the world, just as an infant will put things into its mouth, but it is also an organ that conditions psychology and sexuality. What is distinctive about Dickens's representations is the artistic synergy with psychosexuality, created through the cultural meanings in the mouth, teeth, orifice, and the open body.



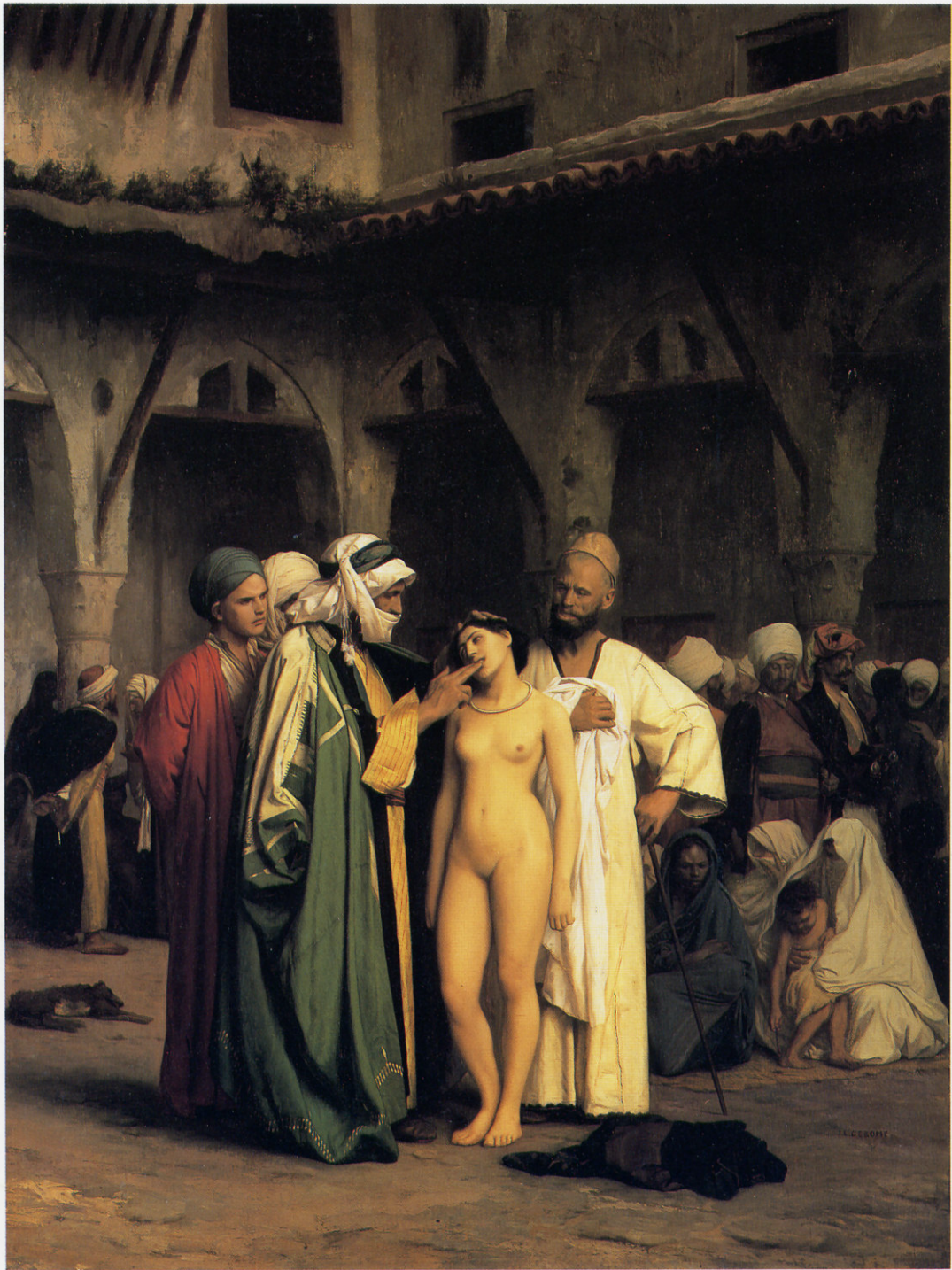
[Fig. 1.] William Hogarth, 'A Rake's Progress', Plate 3, 1735). Reproduced under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.







[Fig. 1.2] 'Hugh Sleeping', with kind permission of David A. Perdue,  
<https://www.charlesdickenspage.com>



[Fig. 1.3] Jean-Léon Gérôme – *The Slave Market*: <http://www.clarkart.edu/Collection/5538>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6199392>



[Fig. 1.4] Franz-Xaver Winterhalter, 'Queen Victoria' (1843), The Royal Collection, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons Creative Commons.



[Fig. 1.5] 'Miggs in the sanctity of her chamber', Phiz – Hablôt Knight Browne, by kind permission of David A. Perdue, The Charles Dickens Page, <https://www.charlesdickenspage.com>



[Fig. 1.6] 'Cherry Ripe' (1879), John Everett Millais.  
Reproduced with Creative Commons Licence.



[Fig. 1.7] 'A dentist looking at the tooth of a very attractive female patient' (undated and unattributed) Coloured-lithograph-Wellcome-Collection.-CC-BY-4.0-e1537127206360.jpg

## Chapter 2 - 'People are prone to bite and biters are sometimes bitten': Biting and the Dickensian Male

This chapter explores the erotic energy in Dickensian mouths through the phenomenon of biting as an expression of masculine sexual desire.<sup>1</sup> Biting punctures the boundary between civility and animality and in Dickens's novels is an expression of sexual and sometimes fetishized behaviour. The act of biting into the flesh of another is an absolute rejection of the norms of social communication and of verbal language; it is a refusal to interact within conventional codes. Controlling the appetite was a hallmark of civilisation, but to go so far as to bite into human flesh represents more than barbarism.<sup>2</sup> It is a universally understood taboo which when transgressed implies a vigorous libido, a sadistic streak, or a calculated strategy to shock the other. It can be sexual or an erotic act, or a combination of impulses.<sup>3</sup> What is radical in Dickens's 'biters' is that they are middle-class male characters who should, according to cultural ideals of the gentlemen, transcend such oral impulses.

For Bataille, while eroticism is human experience at its fullest, there is always a lurking malign element created through the transgression of taboo: 'in that he is an erotic animal, man is a problem for himself. Eroticism is the problematic part of ourselves'.<sup>4</sup> This idea is evident in Dickens's *Bildungsromane*, explored in chapter three, but it also connects with Dickens's representation of biting males. Dickensian biters disturb those ideals of self-

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<sup>1</sup> Sections of this chapter have been previously published as Ramuz, "Shall I bite it?"

<sup>2</sup> On masculine appetites, see Stephen Garton, 'The Scales of Suffering: Love, Death and Victorian Masculinity', *Social History*, 27 (2002), 40-58; and Gwen Hyman, *Making a Man: Gentlemanly Appetites in the Nineteenth-century British Novel* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> 'Sexual' as defined by the *OED*: 'Relating to or tending towards, or involving sexual intercourse, or other forms of intimate physical contact'. I use 'erotic' when pertaining to sexual desire and the suggestion of sexual activity rather than sexual acts themselves.

< <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/view/Entry/177084?redirectedFrom=sexual#eid> > [accessed 03.12.2020]; and 'erotic' as defined by the *OED*: 'Of or pertaining to the passion of love; amatory' < <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/view/Entry/64083?result=1&rskey=pmween&> > [accessed 03.12.2020].

<sup>4</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, p. 273.

containment and autonomy that have been associated with Victorian masculinity and, through penetrating the other, bring bodies closer together.<sup>5</sup> Incorporating another body into the self through biting, creates a violent continuity of bodies—a bodily invasion not a unified connection. The eroticism of the act lies not in the shared pleasure of communication but in ‘the quest for filling oneself with what will bring delight’.<sup>6</sup> In his representations of biting, Dickens shows an acute consciousness of the way in which the body resists self-discipline and containment; that resistance permeates his explorations of masculinity and is not limited to his grotesque or monstrous types.

Biting into another body suggests the realm of animality but it also underlines the human imperative for physical connection and sexual sustenance. While the figure of the savage served as an index against which Victorian progress could be measured, Dickens explores the commonality of sexual desire through the dissonant oral impulses of the gentleman. Working-class cannibal figures such as Jerry Cruncher and Sam Weller are not constructed through the same sort of oral metaphors. Instead, Dickens locates this extreme sexualized behaviour in the sacrosanct space of the middle-class home.<sup>7</sup> More than a failure of self-restraint, Dickens shows biting to be monstrous act, but one committed by men as well as monsters. These particular biters are not Captain Murderer types. Even Quilp, who is half-man half-beast, is located in the domestic world; as Dickens himself was keen to point out, the dwarf is a ‘*dismounted nightmare*’ not a simplistic supernatural one [my italics] (372; ch.49). In the Victorian economy of restraint, desire simply accumulates with ‘interest’,

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<sup>5</sup> See James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995), on the ‘elaborately articulated programme of self-discipline’ as a ‘distinctly masculine attribute’, p.2; and John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-century Britain: Essays on Gender, Family, and Empire* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993); Parsons, ed., *The Victorian Male Body*.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Minguy, ‘Erotic Exuberance: Bataille’s Notion of Eroticism’, *PhænEx*, 12 (2017), 34-52; and see Bataille on the erotics of the ‘continuous body’, pp. 98-99.

<sup>7</sup> Dickens’s contempt for the figure of the ‘Noble Savage’ is explained in his article of the same name *Household Words*, 7 (11 June 1853), 337-39, (p. 73).



rather than being subsumed, until an expenditure of that accumulated desire breaks out in an impulse to bite the object of desire, as Dickens shows with Seth Pecksniff (*MC*).

When unctuous Seth Pecksniff makes his assault upon Mary Graham, it is with ‘a dash of the crocodile’ (49; ch.4). Associated with excessive sexual desire, the parodic crocodile was one of a number of Dickensian metaphorical beasts whose semiotics signify the predatory lusty male. Pecksniff’s name connects him with the animal organs of the nose and mouth or the comical beak to suggest a rooting around for food, contradicting his pretensions to refinement.<sup>8</sup> In *Comic Faith*, Robert Polhemus claims that ‘mouths...are always busy in the oral universe of *Martin Chuzzlewit*’, while Ian Watt describes Pecksniff as a ‘compulsively oral’ character in terms of his greed, his frequent drunkenness, and his verbosity.<sup>9</sup> Exploring this premise further, however, shows that Pecksniff’s orality is also a sexually charged construction. The irony of Pecksniff’s metonymic ‘familiar’, the crocodile, ingeniously combines an excessive libido with a dangerously hypocritical nature.<sup>10</sup> Despite Pecksniff’s frequent crocodile tears, he is not as toothless as he first appears but is in fact cunningly and forcibly libidinous. Pecksniff, as a sly beast lurking beneath social waters, enters the Victorian imagination with all the negative traits of the deviant sexual glutton. Tactile Pecksniff, forever seizing and pressing the hands of friends and relations, spies pretty Mary Graham alone in the garden and launches his offensive by first kissing his *own* hand as if in practice for what is to come.<sup>11</sup> Once Mary is ensnared, he forcibly entwines her fingers

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<sup>8</sup> See Howes, *Sensual Relations*, for a detailed discussion of the nineteenth-century sensual economy. Many nineteenth-century thinkers ranked the senses into a hierarchy, placing sight at the pinnacle, as the ‘civilized sense’ associated with art and literacy, and taste at the bottom associated with eating, drinking and sexuality.

<sup>9</sup> Robert E. Polhemus, *Comic Faith: The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 113; Ian Watt, ‘Oral Dickens’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 3 (1974), 165-181, (p. 168).

<sup>10</sup> Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa Surridge, ‘The Empire Bites Back: The Racialized Crocodile of the Nineteenth Century’, in *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture* ed. by Deborah Deneholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 249-270, (p. 260).

<sup>11</sup> Dickens compares Pecksniff to Cymon, the lecherous, brutish fool in Giovanni Bocaccio, *The Decameron*, ed. by Jonathan Usher, trans. by Guido Waldman (1351; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 317-328, who comes upon a beautiful woman in a wood and despite her protestations, refuses to leave her alone. Cymon

with his in a barely disguised sexual imitation of ‘communion’, to paraphrase Pecksniff (479; ch.30). Tracing ‘the course of one delicate blue vein with his fat thumb’, he slaps then rubs Mary’s hand before holding up her little finger and asking, ‘shall I bite it?’ (483; ch.30). That the encounter with Mary is meant to be read as sexual is implied through Dickens’s description of Pecksniff immediately afterwards: not only is he said to be ‘hot, and pale’ and ‘shrunk and reduced,’ but even his hair is ‘limp’ (417; ch.30).

The encounter is a parody of erotic flirtation but reveals Pecksniff’s sexual predation. It is a confrontation that exposes middle-class anxieties about sexual expression and restraint. Although Pecksniff projects a supreme confidence, his out-of-control eating and drinking, and constant strategizing, expose uneasiness and tension. When Pecksniff holds up Mary’s finger to bite it, he draws attention to the materiality in the pleasure of female body; this is not ineffable desire but physical lust. Scenes of biting or of imagining biting in Dickens’s novels, invoke the body’s dimensionality through penetration and draw attention to flesh. In this way, Mary Graham becomes momentarily embodied despite being more usually considered as the ‘absent centre of almost every male’s sexual desire’.<sup>12</sup> Pecksniff is just one of Dickens’s biting males, ranging from comically grotesque characters in earlier works, such as the ‘fat boy’ in *Pickwick Papers*, and Quilp, to more problematic forms embodied in Jonathan Carker and David Copperfield. Brutish Squeers advises the gentlemanly Nicholas Nickleby thus: ‘Subdue your appetites, my dears and you’ve conquered human nature’, but Dickens returns throughout his work to what happens when men not only succumb but revel in those appetites (58; ch.5).<sup>13</sup>

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becomes refined through love, whereas Pecksniff is incapable of self-improvement. Philip V. Allingham contends that Dickens probably encountered Cymon through Dryden’s ‘Cymon and Iphigenia’ in his *Fables, Ancient and Modern* (1700), rather than directly through Boccaccio’s work.

<sup>12</sup> Houston, *Consuming Fictions*, p. 78.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, ed. by Mark Ford, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (1839; London: Penguin, 2003). All further references are to this edition.





## 2.1 - Patterns of Biting in the Early Novels: 'The Pickwick Papers' and 'The Old Curiosity Shop'

In *Comic Faith*, Robert Polhemus asserts that Dickens 'had an abnormally strong oral fixation' and in analysing how this might shape characterization, Polhemus divides oral characters into 'suckers', the passive dependent types, and 'biters', the aggressively vigorous types.<sup>1</sup> In the comic sphere of *Pickwick Papers*, there are many of these sucker and biter types. However, this taxonomy can oversimplify the oral erotics and sexual coding in the novel. Pickwick might seem to fall into the naive and passive group but on close reading is more closely aligned with the sexual misbehaviour in the novel. Critics, including James Kincaid and Gail Turley Houston, no longer regard Pickwick as absolutely naive but have tended to locate his sexual energy in exuberant infantilism — what Kincaid calls 'full childhood sexuality'.<sup>2</sup> Brian McCuskey rightly identifies the limitations in arguments that locate Pickwick's sexuality in infantile oral drives, as 'Pickwickian regression begins to sound suspiciously like Pickwickian innocence, writ now from a psychoanalytic point of view'.<sup>3</sup> Dickens, too, seems to warn against naive readings in the observation that Sam and Mary's carpet-shaking 'is not half as innocent a thing as it looks' (605; ch.39). The sentiment applies equally to Pickwick himself; the novel sets out to deconstruct middle-class innocence by amplifying Pickwick's naivety as parody and simultaneously bringing him into the orbit of adult male sexuality through the presence of Sam Weller and other servants. As McCuskey argues, the sexual disorder below stairs helps to 'revise the limits of normative middle-class sexuality and thus to resolve the social and sexual conflicts felt by men in the novel'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Polhemus, *Comic Faith*, p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> James Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 237; Houston, *Consuming Fictions*, pp. 24-30.

<sup>3</sup> Brian W. McCuskey, "'Your love-sick Pickwick': the Erotics of Service", *Dickens Studies Annual*, 25 (1996), 245-266, (p. 246).

<sup>4</sup> McCuskey, p. 252.

Through this process, fantasies of middle-class sexual relations are mediated in the mouths of the servant class and lower middle-class aspirants, such as the medical students. Pickwick is well aware of their indecent talk and warns, ‘Hush, hush, gentlemen pray, [...] I hear the ladies’ (448; ch.30).

With an implied male audience for this distinctly homosocial novel, the semiotics of masculine appetites have been well noted. W. H. Auden’s witty essay ‘Dingley Dell and the Fleet’ contends that Pickwick gradually falls from a state of naive grace into a condition of sinful experience but, as later critics such as John Lucas point out, this is not an accidental phenomenon because Pickwick ‘deliberately chooses to enter the fallen world’.<sup>5</sup> Good and evil are not so discretely quarantined from each other in this novel, as Garrett Stewart claims, since the boundaries between the two states are blurred through metaphors of the mouth and consumption.<sup>6</sup> Pickwick takes himself increasingly into the spheres of temptation, from prowling outside a boarding house for young ladies to the fleshly delights of Bath. Pickwick’s habit of intruding into the frequent scenes of intimacy does not, as he claims, ‘remove any slight colouring of impropriety’, but rather highlights the eroticism by aligning him with those biters, Sam Weller, the fat boy, and the medical students (743; ch.48). By connecting this seemingly disparate range of characters through oral impulses and appetites, Dickens presents oral erotics as pervasive masculine pleasures.

Many Pickwickian mouths are invested with a rambunctious Rabelaisian joy in appetites, but the joy is often integrated with a more sadistic and sometimes sinister poetics. Pickwick’s description of the medical students as ‘overflowing’ with ‘animal spirits’ is reinforced by Sam Weller’s observation that Mr. Allen ‘has got a barrel o’ oysters atween his knees, vich he’s a-openin’ like steam’ (446; ch.30). Weller’s idiosyncratic vernacular allows

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<sup>5</sup> W. H. Auden, ‘Dingley Dell and the Fleet’, in *The Dyer’s Hands and Other Essays*, 10th edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 408; and John Lucas, *The Melancholy Man: A Study of Dickens’s Novels*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Abingdon: Routledge 2016), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Garrett Stewart, *Dickens and the Trials of the Imagination* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 89.

for cruder observations than can be permitted of *Pickwick* and signal to the knowing reader a surprising range of sexual allusions. Not only does Sam comment that the two students are smoking cigars — an oral-phallic trope for the predatory Dickensian male — but in specifying the position of the oysters, the association with female genitalia seems likely.<sup>7</sup>

In *Pickwick Papers*, the sexual body is thinly disguised through oral metaphors of taste and consumption. Bob Sawyer is encouraged to pursue Ben Allen's sister, Arabella, romantically. Sawyer is keen but informs Allen that Arabella has already rejected him: 'It happens unfortunately, that the single blemish is a want of taste. She don't like me' (735; ch.48). Dickens hints at deviant appetites, when Allen rejects the very idea of female discrimination and instead attempts to 'feed' his sister to his friend:

'I wish', said Mr. Ben Allen, setting his teeth together, and speaking more like a savage warrior who fed upon raw wolf's flesh which he carved with his fingers, than a peaceable young gentleman who eat minced veal with a knife and fork — 'I wish I knew whether any rascal has been tampering with her' (735; ch.48).

Speaking of his sister as possibly tainted goods reinforces the sense of sexual objectification. In what has been called a 'comedic rewriting of the Fall', Allen reminds Sawyer of his childhood gift to Arabella of 'two caraway-seed biscuits and one sweet apple'.<sup>8</sup> Those fertile offerings of seeds and fruit were, unfortunately for Bob, rejected by Arabella because 'she said I had kept the parcel so long in the pockets of my corduroys, that the apple was unpleasantly warm' (736; ch.48). The students recall sharing the apple themselves, 'in

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<sup>7</sup> The cigar, in Dickens's work, is associated with potent masculinity especially in the characters Rigaud, Steerforth, Bentley Drummle, James Harthouse, Eugene Wrayburn and Henry Gowan who smoke cigars and often indulge in the habit in a suggestive or aggressive manner. Concerning the oyster reference, the opening of oyster shells has long been in use as a metaphor for sexual access to a female and oysters have been considered aphrodisiacs and a symbol of sexual appetite.

<sup>8</sup> Kimberly J. Stern, "'A Want of Taste': Carnivorous Desire in and Sexual Politics in *Pickwick Papers*", *Victorian Review*, 38 (2012), 155-71, p. 164.

alternate bites’, suggesting a symbolic homoerotic consumption (736; ch.48). Holly Furneaux argues convincingly that ‘while Ben and Bob go on to enjoy a long career of shared oral indulgence in a novel which persistently conflates sexual and alimentary appetites, their pleasure in mutually recounting this scene is especially suggestive’.<sup>9</sup> Furneaux identifies a deep somatic intimacy that results from their ‘close mouths and shared saliva’ in ‘readily eating the literal fruit of Bob’s loins’.<sup>10</sup> In this scenario, oral metaphors do not convey a cannibalistic relationship but one that recognises a symbiotic eroticism as they bite together.

Dickens is fascinated by the tensions between consumption and restraint that converge at the mouth. In *Pickwick Papers*, this fraught relationship is explored through the fat boy, an embodiment of indulgence. On his first appearance, his unlimited carnivorous appetite is primarily comedic; whilst unpacking a picnic for Pickwick and his friends, he ‘leered horribly upon the food’ and hung ‘fondly over a capon [...] bestowing an ardent gaze upon its plumpness’ (63; ch.4). But while James Kincaid asserts that ‘laughter in *The Pickwick Papers* rejects all that is predatory and possessive’, I argue that there is a deliberate darkening of the fat boy’s desire towards aggressive sexuality as he matures through the novel.<sup>11</sup> ‘I wants to make your flesh creep’, roars the fat boy as he discloses his voyeuristic secrets to an old woman (119; ch.8). Kincaid points out in a later work that the fat boy seems ‘to be exercising some of the novel’s most pointed erotic impulses’ especially, I argue, in his propensity for voyeurism; he is often to be found spying on love scenes and watches intensely ‘the progress of morsels from the dishes to the mouths of the company, with a kind of dark and gloomy joy’ (419; ch.28).<sup>12</sup> His gloating gaze becomes ‘a semi-cannibalic leer’ when Dickens more clearly aligns biting into food with sexual penetration. When the fat boy

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<sup>9</sup> Holly Furneaux, *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 123.

<sup>10</sup> Furneaux, *Queer Dickens*, p. 123.

<sup>11</sup> Kincaid, *The Rhetoric of Laughter*, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> James R. Kincaid, *Annoying the Victorians* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 31. Although the critical approach in this study is irreverent, it offers germane commentary on *The Pickwick Papers* as a ‘fleshly novel’.



finally registers a pretty girl before him, he plunges his knife deep into his ‘prime’ meat pie and regards her with ‘enough of the cannibal’ in his eyes (833-834; ch.54).

Dickens’s representation of masculine desire and the erotics of biting is framed by comic bodies and appetites but the poetics offer another perspective: the consumption of the female body as meat is a recurrent metaphor linked with middle-class men as mass consumers. *The Swell’s Night Guide* (1841-49) is one of a series of guides for the young man-about-town seeking leisure and pleasure. Reprinted twenty times, this popular title, the ‘Young Man’s Best Companion’, describes itself as a ‘polishing school’ for the uninitiated young man.<sup>13</sup> Aimed at the middle classes and above — the ‘perfumed sprig of nobility, slipped from its parent aristocratic tree’ — the guide declares that ‘the flesh market is here unsurpassed for its choice and delicate variety, from the tender lamb to the most ripened mutton’.<sup>14</sup> The language recalls the ‘strong-minded woman’ in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, who announces that ‘If Mr. George Chuzzlewit has anything to say to *me*...I beg him to speak out, like a man, and; and not to look at me and my daughters as if he could eat us’. Mr. George responds, ‘If I was a cannibal...I think it would occur to me that a lady who has outlived three husbands and suffered so very little from their loss, must be most uncommonly tough’ (55; ch.4).

In Victorian pornographic writing, mutton and lamb were common metaphors that presented the female body as meat. *The Bachelor’s Pocket Book* (1851) includes a section on ‘French Introducing Houses’ and employs the language of the abattoir to describe their sex

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<sup>13</sup> Anonymous, *The Swell’s Night Guide; or a Peep Through the Great Metropolis, Under the Dominion of Nox: Displaying the Various Attractive Places of Amusement by Night* (London: H. Smith, 1849), p. 13.

<<http://www.londonlowlife.amdigital.co.uk/Search/DocumentDetailsSearch.aspx?documentid=19169&prevPos=19169&dt=10230458306159103&previous=0&vpath=SearchResults&pi=1>>[accessed 23.10.2019]. See also *The Swell’s Night Guide Through the Metropolis* (London: H. Smith, 1841) and *The New Swell’s Night Guide*, (London: 1847).

<sup>14</sup> *The Swell’s Night Guide* (1849), p. 14.

workers.<sup>15</sup> A subheading ‘Importers of French Mutton and Lamb’ is followed by a list of available women.<sup>16</sup> More grotesque still, is Miss Audray’s ‘Establishment’, purveyors, according to the pocketbook, in the ‘French flesh market’ and described thus:

This abess [...] does not keep her meat too long on the hooks, though she will have her price; but nothing is allowed to get stale here. You may have your meat dressed to your own liking, and there is no need of cutting twice from one joint; if it suits your taste, you may kill your own lamb or mutton, for her flock is in prime condition and always ready for sticking.<sup>17</sup>

The book was aimed at the growing numbers of bachelor consumers with their disposable income, as were *The Swell’s Guides*, and exemplifies the metaphors of sexual cannibalism to represent a culture of sexual tourism for the middle-class male; the *Pocketbook* reassures that ‘gentleman is here sure to meet with the gentleman, the scholar with the scholar’.<sup>18</sup>

Establishments that were complicit in allowing sexual transactions on the premises included the Argyll Rooms and the Cyder Cellars, both of which were visited by Dickens.<sup>19</sup>

Safe spaces for middle-class sexual indulgence included ‘consorting’ with the servant class, who had dispensation to expend sexual energy with relative freedom. Servant erotics offer alternative readings of middle-class sexual libido, where eating, drinking, and kissing suggest illicit sex.<sup>20</sup> Tupman, in *Pickwick Papers*, lives up to his name which alludes crudely

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Slater, ‘The Bachelor’s Pocket Book for 1851’ in *Sexuality and Victorian Literature*, ed. by Richard Don Cox (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee, 1984), pp. 128-140. Carol J. Adams points out that in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, the Duke refers to his weekly visit to a prostitute as ‘mutton on Friday’, in *The Pornography of Meat* (New York: Lantern Books, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Slater, p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> Slater, as above, p. 137.

<sup>18</sup> *The Swell’s Night Guide*, (1849), p. 15. On guidebooks for bachelors, including *The Swell’s Night Guide*, see Philip Howell, ‘Sex and the city of Bachelors: Sporting Guidebooks and Urban Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America’, *Ecumene*, 8 (2001), 20-50. Howell considers the guidebooks as part of ‘sporting male culture’ and a challenge to ‘simplistic accounts of repressive Victorian sexual attitudes’, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> See Rohan McWilliam, *London’s West End: Creating the Pleasure District*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 132-33. On the clientele of these venues, including the song and supper rooms, cigar and wine rooms, and dance halls, see Jackson, *Palaces of Pleasure*, pp. 35-37 and 95-120. See also, Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens* (London: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 400, commenting on a letter Dickens sent to Wilkie Collins, where Dickens describes ‘the strange places I glide into of nights’. Slater explains that ‘having compared the place to London’s National Argyll Rooms (“virtually a high-class brothel”, according to the Pilgrim editors), Dickens described the women there’, p. 400. The Argyll Rooms are noted in *The Bachelor’s Pocket Book*.

<sup>20</sup> See McCuskey, “Love-sick Pickwick”.

to the sexual act: 'tup' is defined as 'of the ram: To copulate with' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.<sup>21</sup> He is also described as a 'dismounted Bacchus' hinting at his excessive sensual consumption (22; ch.2). Always in search of women but rebuffed by those of his own class, Tupman, lingering behind a door, 'snatches' a kiss from a servant girl (78; ch.5). McCuskey argues that this cross-class lust is 'strangely evacuated of either sexual violence or social oppression', but the girl's need to scratch and push him off shows otherwise.<sup>22</sup>

Pickwick's sexual satisfaction is shown in vicarious encounters: his slow-motion eating is interrupted by news of Rachel's elopement just as he 'had raised his fork to his lips, and was on the very point of opening his mouth for the reception of the piece of beef' (126; ch.9). The association of the girl's elopement and, thus, sexual awakening, with eating the piece of meat seems to imply that Pickwick is a putative 'biter'. This scene is revised for the fat boy, showing a servant's broader scope in metaphors of flesh and penetration. When the boy fails to 'ravish a kiss' from Mary, he eats 'a pound or so of steak' instead (837; ch.54). While the tone might be comic and his demeanour often languid, the fat boy is also described as roaring, leering, grabbing, and masticating, initially at food but increasingly in the presence of attractive females. Equally symbolic is the way in which the fat boy revises the limits of normative middle-class sexuality when he penetrates Pickwick's flesh in an arresting class reversal, thus, testing the boundaries of male libido. The overlapping of homosocial and homoerotic bonds, which is a central element in the novel, is afforded by locating those bonds in a 'socially sanctioned and institutional relation such as the family, or in this case, the master-servant relation'.<sup>23</sup> In the fat boy's urgent desire to communicate (and bond) with Pickwick, the exchange conflates penetrating flesh, whispering in ears, and biting:

'What the devil did you run sharp instruments into Mr. Pickwick's legs for?'

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<sup>21</sup> <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/207495?rskey=TMWFSL&result=2#eid>> [accessed 3 October 2019].

<sup>22</sup> McCuskey, p. 253. Since the essay's publication almost a quarter of a century ago sexual politics have evolved to consider these master-servant encounters from the point of view of those subject to non-consensual sexual intrusions.

<sup>23</sup> McCuskey, p. 263.

enquired Wardle, angrily.

‘He wouldn’t look at me’, replied the boy. ‘I wanted to speak to him’.

‘What did you want to say?’ demanded Wardle, shaking him.

‘Stop’, said Mr. Pickwick; ‘allow me. What did you wish to communicate to me, my poor boy?’

‘I want to whisper to you’, replied the fat boy.

‘You want to bite his ear off, I suppose’, said Wardle (841-42; ch.54)

But the intimacy the boy craves in the wish to touch and whisper to Pickwick is quickly dispelled by Dickens, as Wardle has him ‘taken down stairs’, relocated to a safe distance from the middle-class dining room. At that moment, the heterosexual plot is reasserted with Mr. Winkle, the ‘captive lover’, emerging from the bedroom to greet the astonished diners (842; ch.54). Biting and penetrating male flesh are presented here in a different tone to that which we usually encounter with the creeping rapacious fat boy. He is weeping and the comedy is muted, until Winkle appears, and Dickens modulates the eroticism by reverting to the more familiar comedic form.

In Dickens’s early novels, the depiction of biting into flesh relies on caricature to moderate the allusions to sexual penetration. Sam Weller, on a stroll from his abode at ‘The George and Vulture’ espies a Valentine’s print in a printer’s window, comprising a ‘couple of human hearts skewered together with an arrow, cooking before a cheerful fire, while a male and female cannibal in modern attire [...] were approaching the meal with hungry eyes’ (493; ch.33). Weller’s language is notable for its carnivorous bent; professing a liking for tongue, he declares ‘well that’s a wery good thing when it ‘an’t a woman’s’ (278; ch.19).

In locating rapacious sexuality in comical characters, Dickens probes forms and patterns of sexual desire, but in his next development of oral erotics, sexual biting is made more explicit through the character of Quilp. Instead of the more customary biting into meat pies and the use of meat metaphors for female flesh, Quilp delights in the actual idea of biting into human flesh. But this is often conflated as an example of his monstrosity rather than as an expression of his sexual appetite. Much critical commentary focuses on his supernatural

origins.<sup>24</sup> Reading Quilp's oral disposition when he is in a domestic setting, however, reveals complex characterization and the overt pleasures of biting. His biting habits may appear to be an overwrought Dickensian gesture but compared to Nell's dreamscapes, Quilp's biting sexuality and biting tongue provide a riveting tactility in the material world. When Dickens writes Quilp's sexuality, it is energetic, original, and intense, but located firmly in bedrooms, whether his wife's or Nell's when he colonises her bed. Quilp's animality in the marital bedroom, however, is not a problematic dynamic.

'Pretty little mild-spoken' Mrs. Quilp is said to have allied herself to her husband in 'one of those strange infatuations', but Dickens relates Quilp's wider appeal to the women of the neighbourhood (35; ch.4). Using the language of love, they agree to visit Mrs. Quilp's 'bower' just at a time when Quilp himself might be expected to appear (34; ch.4). Although the language suggests a parody of the romantic young bride, Dickens's poetics point to Quilp's bestial allure and the couple's sexual compatibility. The women have come for titillation and fittingly the talk is of marital relations, with its reference to Mrs. Quilp conducting herself 'in that manner' and with 'no respect for herself' (36; ch.4). But in response to talk of Quilp's marital dominion, Mrs. Quilp, smiling and blushing, offers the pointed riposte: 'if I was to die tomorrow, Quilp could marry anybody he pleased — now that he could, I know!' (36; ch.4). Emphasizing Quilp's sexual credentials she declares that 'the best-looking woman here couldn't refuse him if I was dead, and she was free, and he chose to make love to her' (37; ch.4). Behind the women's feigned indignation there is no real

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<sup>24</sup> On Quilp's origins, see, Toby A. Olshin, "'The Yellow Dwarf' and *The Old Curiosity Shop*", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 25 (1970), 96-99; and Paul Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 125, who argues that 'Punch' is 'by far the most rewarding to consider' as an originating concept for Quilp. Kelly Hager, *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce: The Failed-Marriage Plot and the Novel Tradition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016) argues that the one of the parallels between Quilp and Punch is their sexual power.

dissent; they would ‘*like* to see him dare ... *like* to see the faintest approach to such a thing’ [my italics] (37; ch.4). As in the case of Hugh in *Barnaby Rudge*, the narrative seems to condone Mrs Quilp’s view that her husband is a sexually attractive catch, despite his abuse. It is a problematic construction of female sexuality which Dickens returns to.<sup>25</sup>

As the women talk of the need to tame the ‘symptoms of the tiger’, a euphemism for masculine lust, Quilp makes his dramatic entrance (38-39; ch.4). Quilp’s appetite is orgiastic as he hints ‘with a grin’ at the idea of sexual communion with each of the women: having ‘a score of mothers-in-law at the same time— and what a blessing that would be’ (40; ch.4). Dickens shows how these hints should be understood when Mrs. Jinwin giggles at the idea and reminds him that he is already wedded (40; ch.4). Quilp’s carnivorous appetite is purposely conflated with sexual desire when, looking at his ‘delicious’ wife, he is described as ‘smacking his lips as if this were no figure of speech, and she were actually a sweetmeat’ (41; ch.4). When Quilp threatens that if she ever listens to the women again, he will bite her, it strangely elicits no shriek or visible fear from his wife and there is no exclamation mark in the text to signal the violence or sense of threat (42; ch.5). Reinforcing this reading, Knight Browne’s illustration presents Mrs Quilp lifting her skirt to reveal rather a lot of her ankle as if to suggest her complicity.

Biting is a complex metaphor in the construction of Quilp’s character: he bites his nails and the air, taunts a chained-up dog to bite *him*, and assures a parent ‘I don’t eat babies; I don’t like ‘em’ (168; ch.21). In a scuffle with Dick Swiveller, whom he mistakes for his wife, he ‘bit and hammered away’ until dislodged, and compounds his threat to bite his wife by promising to set his watchdogs to bite her too (109; ch.13, 391; ch.50). In Dickensian poetics, however, this repetitive biting and oral lust, while not entirely normalising the grotesque, create a sense that they are tolerated. Quilp is undoubtedly a brutish character and

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<sup>25</sup> See chapters four and five.

biting symbolises his bestial propensities, but he is also the extreme version of a self-made man; his biting represents a fetish for colonising the female body from Sally Brass to Little Nell. Women seem to recognize this code, even Nell, subconsciously, as she gazes on Quilp lying asleep in her bed, transfixed for a few moments by his wide-open growling mouth (105; ch.12). Within this configuration, Dickens creates a space to present fecund male sexuality in Quilp, whom he calls ‘the lord of creation’ when he ‘blazes away all night’ with Mrs Quilp (42; ch.4).

The oral-phallic power located in Quilp is not exclusive to him but is a phenomenon that circulates among other males in the novel as an expression of excessive libido. Those who cannot bite, like the chained dog he taunts, are simply impotent. The text invites the question of what can be Quilp’s attraction? His overwhelming sexuality not only enthrals females but also has the power to emasculate other men, signified early in the novel by his devouring of ‘the tails of gigantic prawns’ (46; ch.5). A biting power seems to engender an impotent awe in others which, while not exactly condoned, becomes almost acceptable. Jeremy Tambling argues convincingly that Quilp is ‘de-centred, not in control of his own drama’ and ‘we do not need character analyses of him, as though he were reducible to realist explanation’.<sup>26</sup> Kit’s awkwardly grotesque gyrations have more than a little similarity with Quilp’s, but it is the iteration of his ‘uncommonly wide mouth’ which he opens and contorts frequently in Nell’s presence, together with his ‘extraordinary leer’ and habit of gorging on ‘immense mouthful[s]’ that edge him into the category of male biters, despite his apparent lack of savagery (12; ch.1, 90; ch.10). By locating oral excesses in a range of male characters, some of whom are ‘schooled’ by Quilp, Dickens collapses perceived hierarchies and social differences and renders oral excess more commonplace.

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<sup>26</sup> Jeremy Tambling, *Dickens’s Novels as Poetry: Allegory and Literature of the City* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 66-7.

Quilp's urge to bite for pleasure, then, is a shared perversion. As Dick Swiveller's characterization develops, his biting instinct materialises; taking hold of the underage and under-sized Marchioness, Swiveller eats her in metaphorical alternate bites:

Mr. Swiveller, holding the slice of toast or cup of tea in his left hand, and taking a bite or drink as the case might be, constantly kept, in his right hand, one palm of the Marchioness tight locked; and to shake, or even to kiss this imprisoned hand, he would stop every now and then, in the very act of swallowing, with perfect seriousness of intention, and the utmost gravity (507; ch.66).

Dickens identifies Dick Swiveller's neighbourhood as 'Drury Lane', not just famous for its theatre venues but as a slum area notorious for lower-class prostitution and under-age girls. He lives above a tobacconist's shop but many of these enterprises were fronts for brothels.<sup>27</sup> Mr. Swiveller, 'the bachelor', is quite possibly situated here to suggest a man familiar with transactional sexual relationships.<sup>28</sup> Homosocial connections based on voracious and shared consumption of the female body are central to the novel; Nell is offered to Dick by her brother Fred, when she will be 'almost' sixteen, and offered again to Dick, by Quilp (63; ch.7). Although this does not contravene the legal age of consent in the period, her small stature, apparent naivety, and the fact that she is referred to as a child, all lend the project a disturbing edge. Male appetite takes easy precedence; even Mr. Brass, who 'seemed to have changed sexes with his sister' understands well the connection between biting and male pleasure (517; ch.66). Forced to drink Quilp's fiery rum in a queer communion, he describes the experience as 'very biting! And yet it's like being tickled — there's a pleasure in it too, sir' (480; ch.62).

Quilp's animality is foregrounded by Dickens, but we should not lose sight of its satirical framing; Quilp is portrayed as too linguistically astute to function merely as a

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<sup>27</sup> See Henry Mayhew, *Mayhew's London Underground*, ed. by Peter Quennell, (1882; London: Century, 1987), p. 113.

<sup>28</sup> The term 'bachelor' could be used to signify a sexually experienced young man (*OED*).



caricatured hungry ogre, or even a dog-like human. John Forster wrote that ‘Dickens’s interest in dogs was inexhaustible’, whilst Percy Fitzgerald described Dickens as ‘the Landseer of fiction’, an epithet Dickens approved of.<sup>29</sup> Yet in *Quilp*, Dickens writes a raging dog right at the heart of the home. When described like a dog with his ‘tongue lolling out’, together with his ‘many horrifying and uncommon acts’ in front of the women, *Quilp* suggests brute sexuality (45; ch.5). *Quilp*’s allure is legible in the mouth, the fulcrum of his libido, energy and authority. In performing a display of his potent orality for the benefit of the women, he dominates the domestic setting with ease. Emphasising the sheer force of his mouth, Dickens writes that *Quilp* ‘bit his fork and spoon until they bent’ (46; ch.5). That biting force extends to his speech. Stewart writes that *Quilp* can be ‘identified by what defunct metaphor (death by mixing) calls a “biting tongue” and Dickens seems implicitly to have reactivated this cliché for the perfect fused image of sarcastic wit and real brutality’.<sup>30</sup> With *Quilp*’s biting threats, he argues that Dickens ‘is invoking the root meaning of sarcasm in “to tear flesh, gnash the teeth”’.<sup>31</sup> It is this fusion of body and voice that underpins *Quilp*’s vitality and affords him the power to control others. When he speaks ‘with the same malice in his eye and the same sarcastic politeness on his tongue’, he is almost invincible (41; ch.4).

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<sup>29</sup> John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 3 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1876), I, p. 191; quoted by Philip Howell in *At Home and Astray: The Domestic Dog in Victorian Britain* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2015), an insightful analysis of the dog’s place in Victorian culture. Howell notes that in 1863, Percy Fitzgerald wrote the first text on Dickens’s love for dogs, aptly named ‘Dickens’s Dogs’ and in 1865 presented Dickens with an Irish bloodhound Sultan, *London Society* 4, (1863), 48-61.

<sup>30</sup> Stewart, *Dickens and the Trials of the Imagination*, p. 92.

<sup>31</sup> Stewart, *Dickens and the Trials of the Imagination*, p. 92, see the *OED*, cf. ‘late Latin *sarcasmus*’ and ‘late Greek σαρκασμός, < σαρκάζειν ‘to tear flesh, gnash the teeth, speak bitterly’ < <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/170938?redirectedFrom=sarcasm#eid>> [accessed 24.01.2021].

## 2.2 Normalising Biting

As Dickens develops his characterisation of the biting male, its comic and fantastical framing dissipates to leave a form of eroticised yet normative biting that inhabits the domestic lives of ordinary characters. In this new dynamic, biting becomes a symbol of complex sexual communication, evident in the characterization of both Carker and David Copperfield. More than an impulsive transgressive act, biting places the erotic mouth at the hub of interpersonal relationships, drawing attention to the erotic meeting of bodies. This new configuration coexists alongside the expression of socially conservative values; the resulting tensions engender an unsettling narrative ambivalence. Dickens's poetics of the mouth often imply a knowing sexualised meaning but since the sexual references are encoded, they sometimes appear complex and shifting. His poetics suggest a kind of unacknowledged erotic knowledge, what Rosemarie Bodenheimer describes as a 'way of knowing and not knowing at the same time'.<sup>32</sup>

Representations of the sexual in Dickens's novels have often been criticised as too muted, too confused, or conversely, too monstrous, but reading the semiotics and poetics of the mouth contradicts this interpretation. As has been noted, 'in a curious way, the suppression of genital sexuality from the notice of the respectable Victorian reading public caused both writers and readers to be preternaturally sensitive to the nuances of sexual expression in every area of social and personal life'.<sup>33</sup> It is commonplace that appetitive images are full of sexual nuance but where Dickens transcends his contemporaries is in the way he incorporates aggression into the dynamic. Eventually, biting is presented as almost a

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<sup>32</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (London: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> *Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins, and the Victorian Sexual System*, ed. by Barickman, Richard, Susan MacDonald and Myra Stark (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

familiar and not uncommon trait, quite removed from the deviant and terrifying cannibal figure of myth and fable that Dickens immersed himself in as a child.<sup>34</sup>

The phenomenon of Dickensian male biting into flesh represents more than simple libidinal urge. Within this semiotic system, the teeth fulfil a synecdochic function, seen in Mr Carker, the business manager in *Dombey and Son*:

Mr. Carker was a gentleman thirty-eight or forty years old, of a florid complexion, and with two unbroken rows of glistening teeth, whose regularity and whiteness were quite distressing. It was impossible to escape the observation of them, for he showed them whenever he spoke; and bore so wide a smile upon his countenance (a smile, however, very rarely, indeed, extending beyond his mouth), that there was something in it like the snarl of a cat (172; ch.13).

In Carker, male biting is 'elevated' from the madness of Quilp to feature in the figure of a gentleman. A ravenous, apparently successful consumer, Carker's teeth glisten and vibrate with their own erotic energy (304; ch.22). Bodenheimer sees Carker 'marked as a villain of melodrama by his white teeth and red hair' but contends that his power is derived from his eyes.<sup>35</sup> While Carker does have a keen gaze, I argue that it is through the lexicon of the mouth and its erotic power that Dickens's creates his iconic villain. In Dickens's oral economy of desire, Carker's display of teeth is exceptional because Victorian conventional etiquette required a firmly closed mouth. Carker's teeth function as the lure for his prey, a sort of physiognomic and erotic trap, where 'it was impossible to escape the observation of them' (172; ch.13). The lure is critical to the phenomenon of sexual fetish since the fetish works by attracting the gaze and provoking curiosity. In Laura Mulvey's ground-breaking essays on fetishism she explains that the fetish 'does not want its forms to be overlooked but to be gloried in'.<sup>36</sup> Carker's teeth are indeed gloried in through the fascinating combination

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<sup>34</sup> Harry Stone, *The Night Side of Dickens: Cannibalism, Passion, Necessity* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994), has written extensively on the ogres of Dickens's childhood reading and his fascination with cannibalism and lurid tales such as Fox's *Book of Martyrs* (see Part 1, pp. 3-268).

<sup>35</sup> Bodenheimer, pp. 107-08.

<sup>36</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. xiv.

of their lustre and materiality as they both ‘dazzle’ and ‘bristle’ so much that ‘people took him for a dentist’ (506; ch.37, and 176; ch.13).

Carker’s bite is a perpetual threat rather than a fully realized act, but it is in suspending his bite, embodied in carefully curated displays of his teeth, where sexual tension arises. This is most noticeable in his pursuit of Edith, where he approaches her ‘more as if he meant to bite her, than to taste the sweets that linger on her lips’ (427; ch.31). That his teeth ‘glisten’ attests not just to their vigour but to arousal through the association of animation and through wetness as a referent for sexual excitation.<sup>37</sup> Like Uriah Heep, Carker presents an almost genderless, fluid, and predatory sexuality. Prefigured by Mrs. Pipchin’s ‘old black cat, who generally lay coiled upon the centre foot of the fender, purring egotistically’, Carker basks at Dombey’s side (107; ch.8). He not only has ‘the snarl of a cat’ but also a voice like a ‘purr’ (172; ch.13; 304; ch.22). Gendering cats as female, irrespective of their actual gender, was common to nineteenth-century discourse on the feline animal and implied a promiscuous and vicious sexuality. Thus, Carker’s latent cat-like bite, symbolized by his prominent teeth, is directed promiscuously at both men and women.

His teeth are a vector of sadistic sexuality, having both power in their ordered brilliance and a piercing sense of direction when he projects his smile towards a victim. The semiotic of the mouth as weapon characterizes his vampiric relationship with Dombey, whom he attempts to bleed dry. To lure the emotionally illiterate Dombey into his sphere of control, Carker ‘continued with a smile, softly laying his velvet hand, as a cat might have laid its sheathed claws, on Mr. Dombey’s arm’ (574; ch.42). Carker’s distorted sexuality is further developed in scenes of homoerotic sexual dominance. It is as if Carker plays with and tests what he believes is his unrivalled sexual power. When Dombey falls from his horse, Carker, ‘with the flush and hurry of this action red upon him...bent over his prostrate chief with

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<sup>37</sup> See LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*, pp. 104-113.

every tooth disclosed' (576; ch.42). The teeth here are rendered phallic, evoking the same sexual threat perceived by Edith when, looking at Carker, she noticed 'the means of mischief vaunted in every tooth' (505; ch.37). His arousal at the idea of the penetrated body is elicited by Dombey's injury from the horse's iron-shod feet. Drawing attention to Carker's flushed face, Dickens writes that as Carker sets off to report Dombey's accident, he rides 'as if he hunted men and women' (636; ch.42).<sup>38</sup> The horse in general and horse-riding in particular were signs of sexual dominance in Victorian iconography and it is worth noting that it is Dombey who falls from his horse, whilst Carker is 'quick of eye, steady of hand and a good horseman' (576; ch.42).

A distinctive form of queer biting infiltrates the narrative with Carker; it is the beginning of an exploration into homoerotic violence, which Dickens returns to in *David Copperfield*. Carker's erotic fantasies of penetration arouse his cat-like indiscriminate promiscuity with suggestions of animality through fangs. We see this when Mr. Toots is attacked by Florence's dog, Diogenes, and falls with the dog's teeth gripping his leg; Carker watches transfixed. Dickens points out that Carker makes no attempt to assist but instead is mounted on his horse at a distance in trance-like observation of bitten Mr. Toots. Carker is stimulated by what he witnesses. When he eventually rides over to Toots, significantly remaining mounted, it is Dickens's description of Carker's smile as 'propitiatory' that is especially compelling. Carker empathises with the dog, transposing Diogenes's teeth onto his own; it is as if he would enjoy biting Toots as much, if not more, than the dog: "If the dog's teeth have entered the leg, Sir—" began Carker, with a display of his own' (310; ch.22). Mr. Toots blushes at the sight of Carker's exposed teeth and piercing attention and hands

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<sup>38</sup> See Elsie B. Michie, 'Horses and Sexual/ Social Dominance', in *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 145-166, for a compelling essay on social and sexual dominance configured through the horse.

Carker his calling card, only wishing that he could signify to Carker that ‘he liked [the bite] very much’ (310; ch.22).

Since Dombey is emotionally naive, he responds to Carker’s grotesque oral charisma in a simplistic manner, recognising only the visual force but not considering his intent. During a business meeting, Dombey senses that in Carker there ‘seemed to lurk a stronger latent sense of power than usual’ (174; ch.13). Dickens describes this power as having great scope through Carker’s network of spies and contacts, which Carker appears to control through a flash of his teeth. His ability to read a situation and assess danger is animalistic in its instinctiveness. In Carker’s natural habitat, the office, this translates to a voracious consumption of words; he reads multiple languages at great speed and has a singular acuity. But orality is Carker’s supreme medium, and his uncanny ability is a sort of hyper-vigilance. That Carker even thinks with his teeth, establishes their potent synecdochic agency. Those teeth do not just mediate, they scout: ‘that passage, which was in a postscript, attracted his attention and his teeth, once more’ (294; ch.22).

Carker self-consciously presents himself to the world as an artful and effortless arrangement, using his unreal teeth as the star attraction of his show. Dickens highlights the irony in pointed descriptions of Carker’s *effortful* attention to appearance, comparing it to sly, feline vanity:

In whose sly look and watchful manner; in whose false mouth, stretched but not laughing; in whose spotless cravat and very whiskers; even in whose silent passing of his soft hand over his white linen and his smooth face; there was something desperately cat-like (234; ch.17).

In Knight Browne’s illustration, ‘Mr. Carker introduces himself to Florence and the Skettles family’, Carker is baring his teeth at Florence. But in the ironically titled ‘Mr. Carker in his hour of triumph’, when Edith punctures Carker’s sexual ego and his fantasy of ‘voluptuous retirement’, the image shows him covering his mouth with his hand in defeat [fig. 2.1].

Reduced from sophisticated gent to mad animal, Dickens writes of Carker that ‘the foam was on his lips’, evoking the sexual coding of rabies (729; ch.54).<sup>39</sup>

Animality also pervades masculine sexuality in *David Copperfield*. Dickens, however, transforms biting from a satirical expression of consumer greed conflated with sexuality to narrate aggressive libido as natural desire.<sup>40</sup> The first autoerotic ‘trial’ for David involves Murdstone’s suspect politics of distance and restraint, which are rendered sexual through the poetics of the crocodile.<sup>41</sup> Signs of eroticised biting are discernible in David’s infancy through the linguistic patterns of prey and metaphors of consumption, which augur Murdstone’s sexually charged arrival. Fowls and geese are ‘menacing and ferocious’, making David ‘shiver’, and later he dreams of lions (12; ch.2). Such images of violent penetration infiltrate the narrative patterns as they invade David’s consciousness to encode his intense eroticised competition with his mother’s lover. Murdstone’s first appearance occurs as David is reading a story of young men thrusting wood down the throats of crocodiles. Noticing how Clara’s face blushes so beautifully when complimented by Murdstone, it is easy to imagine David dreaming of thrusting ‘sharp pieces of timber’ down Murdstone’s throat in response. David also notices how Clara’s kisses take on a new and complicated meaning. As Clara kisses him in front of Murdstone, his rival announces that this is a great privilege, more than a monarch might expect, thus putting a new and high price on David’s cherished oral intimacy (15; ch.2). The price is bartering, David finds, after his strange horse ride with

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<sup>39</sup> A sculpture of a naked Amazonian woman on horseback and brandishing a spear in Carker’s direction is behind Edith [fig. 2.1]. She is in a masculine straddled position, leaning back with arm raised, reflecting Edith’s stance. Edith points scornfully towards Carker’s wide-open legs, whilst he has drawn his hand across his mouth. The sexual iconography is unmistakable.

<sup>40</sup> I use the phrase ‘natural desire’ here to reflect Dickens’s conception of David’s ‘natural impulses’ In the first manuscript of the novel, for example, Dickens created a disagreement between Agnes and David concerning what David calls his ‘natural’ attachment to Steerforth; Agnes declares that ‘it may be only too natural but it is not wise, and not hopeful’, suggesting that it is an undesirable impulse which must be controlled (n.1, p. 313; ch.25). David strongly resists the notion of rationalised emotions.

<sup>41</sup> Leighton ‘The Empire Bites Back’, pp. 249-70, explain how the crocodile, for the Victorians, embodied violent and rapacious sexuality.

Murdstone where he gazes at the man's powerful jaws in awe.<sup>42</sup> Clara's perverse behaviour complicates the maternal bond by introducing a conditional form of intimacy based on exchange value. Yet David seems to understand and plays along with this revised maternal code. It sets the pattern of David's susceptibility to the erotic appetites of others, which both attract and repulse him in equal measure. Patterns of compulsive behaviour fascinated Dickens, who wrote of the 'attraction of repulsion' as 'being as much a law of our moral nature, as gravitation is in the structure of the visible world'.<sup>43</sup>

Once Mr. Murdstone installs himself in the home, David is increasingly denied the oral gratification embodied in his mother. David senses that he is being usurped by his rival, yet subconsciously draws closer to him. Finding himself gazing on Murdstone's hirsute masculinity, a psychic intimacy develops between them that mimics the sterile exchange of vampirism. Murdstone threatens David with drawing blood, promising to 'conquer that fellow; and if it were to cost him all the blood he had, I should do it'. Yet, it is David who is the first to penetrate flesh (50; ch.4). James Twitchell argues that there is a 'distinct level of homosexuality carried in the [vampire] myth that is often reflected in literary treatment' and describes the male bite as 'sex without mention'.<sup>44</sup> In the drawing of blood a revitalised, material expression of male sexuality emerges in the novels. The sense of liquidity reflects anxieties about an infectious spreading sexuality, a sort of circulating errant libido that characterizes David's relationships with Steerforth, Heep, and Dora.

The cataclysmic bite into Murdstone's flesh marks a loss of innocence for David and his transmutation from the 'sort of boy I used to be, before I bit Mr. Murdstone' (61; ch.5). It represents an initiation, following which David is sent away to school and embodied in his

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<sup>42</sup> In Victorian fiction, the horse is a sign of vigorous male sexuality, see Elsie B. Michie, pp. 145-166.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Dickens first used the phrase in 'Letters on Social Questions: Capital Punishments', *Daily News*, 28 February 1846, p. 6. From the British Library, Shelfmark:1846-1912 LON LD10 NPL.

<sup>44</sup> James B. Twitchell, *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature* (Duke University Press, 1981), p. 134.



own fetish when he is made to wear the sign 'He Bites' upon his back. Reduced to a pronoun, David fears he will be subsumed by the metaphor, 'I positively began to have a dread of myself, as a kind of wild boy who did bite' (68; ch.5). The biting impulse engenders a strangely arousing panic in David, as he recalls the bite with horror but also that he was 'hot, and torn, and sore' and in a feverish wickedness (50; ch.4). This confusion of feeling accompanies Dickens's representations of oral sadism of biting and characterises David's interactions with Mr Creakle. David notes Creakle's 'fiery' face, but the most striking impression is that Creakle 'had no voice' which only made his face angrier and his veins thicker, thus reinforcing his bestiality by removing articulacy (70; ch.6). That Creakle declares he is 'famous for biting' is made clear when he produces his 'sharp tooth':

He then showed me the cane, and asked me what I thought of *that*, for a tooth? Was it a sharp tooth, hey? Was it a double tooth, hey? Had it a deep prong, hey? Did it bite, hey? Did it bite? At every question he gave me a fleshy cut with it that made me writhe (77; ch.7).

Creakle cuts into the boys constantly for the 'satisfaction of a craving appetite' and because he could not 'resist a chubby boy' (77; ch.7). Yet while his behaviour is monstrous, he is a schoolmaster who commands some respect, not a supernatural beast. David writes that in his fear, he becomes 'morbidly attracted' to Creakle's countenance in 'dread desire' to know what would happen next (77; ch.7). When another boy is flogged, David describes how 'we laugh at it, — miserable little dogs, we laugh' (77-78; ch.7). Creakle's sadistic 'biting' creates a complicit audience in the schoolroom.

While the narrative works hard to normalise David's biting as a sympathetic expression of exuberant passion, it is one that must be contained for successful entrance to the ranks of gentility. This conflict infiltrates David's self-fashioning and his projection of who he wants to be, complicating his romance with Dora in the process. Having 'dined off Dora, entirely', he bites the key to his carpet bag to suppress his libido — the key has long

been a phallic symbol to the corresponding female lock (334; ch.26). David's attraction to Dora has been characterised as charming romance but oral poetics show an erotic physicality. From his position as a rival to Jip, the snapping lapdog, another triangular relationship emerges, which incorporates the sexual coding of the lapdog. Laura Brown writes of the 'misplaced intimacy' of the lapdog substitute for a human but argues that sexual innuendo is 'difficult to apply' in Dora's case.<sup>45</sup> She argues that 'the suggestion of a deviant sexuality does not seem to illuminate' Dora's character, but I contend that critics have often overlooked Dora's sexuality and, further, there does not need to be a suggestion of deviance to imply a sexual connection.<sup>46</sup> What has not been recognised here, is not only Dora's sexuality but the powerful link between Jip and David's incarnations as a dog: from Murdstone calling him an obstinate dog, to David's sign around his neck, to fellow schoolboys patting him and calling him Towser. David recalls of Murdstone's orders that, 'he obeyed like a dog' as he does with Dora, who effectively commands two rival dogs (103; ch.8). Drawing affinities between David and dogs opens a space for Dickens to present a pain-pleasure dimension of sexual desire. After Jip bites into David's floral gift to Dora, David wishes that he were the 'bitten' gift, if only to attract Dora's compassion/passion, 'if Jip had laid hold of me. I wished he had!' (411; ch.33).

Dickens's poetics of the dog and other fanged animals are not about pitching a primal, atavistic sexuality against the concept of the Victorian gent but to explore masculine animal instincts.<sup>47</sup> The binary logic of man/ animal and human /inhuman has been taken up by Deleuze and Guattari. Although their concept of becoming-animal is now questioned by Animal Studies critics, it is still useful to consider their theory that the productive force of sexuality is situated in aspects of animality. In 'Becoming-Animal', Deleuze identifies that

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<sup>45</sup> Brown, 'The Lady, the Lapdog, and Literary Alterity', p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> See chapter four on Dora and the erotics of the rosebud mouth.

<sup>47</sup> Dickens comments, satirically, writing of a 'mere gent (which I take to be the lowest form of civilisation)' in *Household Words*, 7 (11 June 1853), p. 337.

one of the main problems besetting natural history was the drive to describe things in terms of difference rather than filiation.<sup>48</sup> These relationships of difference are drawn by what he terms analogies of proportionality, which operate as categories of living things seen exclusively in relation to the human male. The animal, Deleuze argues, must be considered as an integral part of a 'series-structure' rather than a hierarchical one. In this fluid system, each 'term', that is animal, man, or woman, 'plays the role of a possible transformer of the libido (metamorphosis)'.<sup>49</sup> What is emphasised in this argument is the mutability and power of the living active thing, and an end to the idea of a man as the exceptional being.

When cornered by David, Heep abandons his 'umbleness' to remind him, using the familiar dog metaphor, that 'we understand each other, you and me. There's no love between us. You were always a puppy with a proud stomach, from your first coming here; and you envy me my rise, do you?' (639; ch.52). While David attempts to disown his animality, Heep inhabits his own without self-conflict. To David's frustration, Heep repeatedly outflanks David's attempts at forging an absolute difference between the two; a sense of their opposition is crucial to David's selfhood, since it underwrites all his ideals. In this way, David's confusion of desire is especially tortuous in his relationship with Uriah Heep, whose grotesque features include his enormous 'post-office' mouth. Aged only fifteen at their first meeting, Uriah makes a stunning impression and lures David into indulging his appetite for sensual excess. David registers the effect, confessing to 'immediately feeling myself attracted towards Uriah Heep, who had a sort of fascination for me' (243;16). Engulfed in his mouth fetish, David even imagines himself as 'a tender young tooth' confronted by Heep the dentist (219; ch.17).

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<sup>48</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi, (1987; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 273.

<sup>49</sup> Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 275.

Heep's open sexuality is symbolized by his gaping mouth which David frequently scrutinises, noting at one point that 'I never saw his mouth so wide, or the creases in his cheeks so deep...all the time writhing modestly' (218; ch.17). That his writhing is modest, yet his mouth is so wide, suggests that Heep has carefully constructed this eroticised display in what he calls the 'fulness of my art', which has such a memorable effect on David (489-90; ch.39). As Heep grabs David's hand with his 'damp, fishy fingers' and explains his origins, it occurs to David for the first time that he 'had seen the harvest, but had never thought of the seed' (490; ch.39). This is typical of David's frequent disavowal of origins that do not comply with his curated projections of self. So consumed with his own history, he fails to read others correctly and thus allows them more power than he ought; Heep confirms this result with his boast: 'Master Copperfield, but I've got a little power!' (491; ch.39). David is presented in constant danger of losing his competitive edge and struggles against Heep's all-consuming appetites and somatic magnetism. In this way, he fails to account for their similarities.

That both men display the same sexual impulses is legible in the poetics of eating females. Their distorted appetites merge in a series of exchanges where rapacious males appear ready to dine off young women. Uriah Heep taunts David with his metaphorical preparations for eating 'my Agnes':

'I say! I suppose', with a jerk, 'you have sometimes plucked a pear before it was ripe, Master Copperfield?'

'I suppose I have', I replied.

'I did that last night', said Uriah; 'but it'll ripen yet! It only wants attending to. I can wait!'

Profuse in his farewells, he got down again as the coachman got up. For anything I know, he was eating something to keep the raw morning air out; but, he made motions with his mouth as if the pear were ripe already, and he were smacking his lips over it. (495; ch.39).

David's disgust at Heep's oral menace is ironic given his similar preoccupation with consuming Dora. When he recalls 'I dined off Dora, entirely', it evokes Heep's appetite and the need to consume lovers (399; ch.26). Later that same evening, David describes how Dora

presents him with her 'delicious hand' (401; ch.26). Such an oral connection between the two men draws them closer.

Although neither David nor Heep bite one another, they are well-matched vampiric enemies, each attempting to subdue the other through acts of violent penetration, notably when David dreams of 'running him through' with 'a red-hot poker' (328; ch.25). Heep's vampiric guise is imagined just as sadistically, and homoerotically by David, as he describes himself as the 'corkscrew' to his 'tender young cork' (219; ch.17). The repeated image of David as 'tender' signals his vulnerability to Heep's penetrating power, complicated by metaphors of swallowing and orality that pervade many of David's relationships. Dickens presents Heep as an all-consuming threat, even to David's linguistic skill which is the source of his success, since he looms over David like 'a great vulture gorging himself on every syllable that I said to Agnes' (329; ch.26). As their fortunes diverge, however David begins to disassociate from his own vampire metonymy, while Heep's is foregrounded. Mrs Heep perceives 'a wasting and a wearing of him' of her son and David observes that Heep is like a great bat 'hanging over the whole house' (487, 488; ch.39).

The semiotics of Heep's vampiric mouth seem to erode the human and Dickens eventually relocates Heep from society to prison but, like the vampire, Heep cannot be killed off and resurfaces as a prison guide. David, however, is permitted to break out of his self-perpetuating libidinous cycle by his marriage to Agnes, as though in deferred obedience. In *Eating Their Words*, Kristen Guest writes that 'among mainstream Victorian writers, none exemplified the two-fold fear of being consumed and the fear of consuming another like Charles Dickens'.<sup>50</sup> Such fear is contiguous with a fear of sexuality but, through the poetics of the mouth, Dickens negotiates the expression of male sexuality with increasing confidence

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<sup>50</sup> Kristen Guest, *Eating Their Words: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Cultural Identity* (London: SUNY Press, 2001), p. 111.

and maturity. When married to Dora, David's sexuality is still described as 'biting', but what is noteworthy is his self-conscious acknowledgement of the need to overcome *predatory* desires. As the spider to Dora's fly, as he wrongly perceives her, David admits that rather than changing Dora he must try to change himself or, 'I must degenerate into the spider again, and be for ever lying in wait' (593; ch.48). It is a sinister image of masculinity, repeated in the later novel, *Great Expectations*, where Jaggers, and then Pip, refer to Bentley Drummle as 'the Spider, doggedly watching Estella' (307; ch.19). Only when David suppresses his oral appetite, assisted by his marriage to Agnes whom he persists in representing as asexual, does he consider himself a successful gentleman. Unlike Pecksniff, then, David seeks to echo Cymon, the lecher in *The Decameron*, who is refined and rescued through love.<sup>51</sup> This configuration suggests a literary evolution from the indiscriminate lust of early works into directed desire, structured by intentionality and pointing to the erotic worth of the object of desire rather than basic greed. It also suggests a projection of redemption and the endorsement of disavowal by Dickens.

The visceral and brutish action implicit in the act of biting, and specifically of tearing with the teeth, is directly associated with sexual violence in *Hard Times* (1854). Tom Gradgrind's perverse relationship with his sister Louisa is fully realised when he plucks Bounderby's rosebuds to pieces. The rosebud is a symbol of the virginal girl, and in this case Bounderby's very young wife, Louisa, but Tom 'took to biting the rosebuds now, and tearing them away from his teeth' (178; ch.7).<sup>52</sup> Even Harthouse is disgusted by the implications and calls him a dog. In this extraordinary image of Tom tearing at dozens of rosebuds with his teeth, his name, 'Gradgrind', reinforces the poetics of grinding teeth against the tenderness of the rosebud. It is also the closest Dickens comes to presenting Tom as Louisa's pimp, in her

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<sup>51</sup> See note 3.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed. by Kate Flint (1854; London: Penguin, 1995). All further references are to this text.

configuration as a torn bud while Tom rails against her for not extracting money from Bounderby. The hint of prostitution is reinforced by Tom's boast that Louisa only married Bounderby for his sake. In Tom's sexual economy, that she could 'easily' acquire the money he desperately needs but sits like a stone is 'unnatural conduct' (178; ch.7). His continuing to chew on the rosebuds accentuates that he will not willingly relinquish his incestuous hold over Louisa.

Oral metaphors implicit in the grinding of Gradgrinds are reworked in strikingly visceral poetics to invoke the sexual revulsion Louisa feels towards Bounderby's sexual predation. Speaking of Louisa and Tom's forbidden trip to the circus, Gradgrind senior observes of Bounderby that 'you are always so interested in my young people - particularly in Louisa' (25; ch.4). Louisa's apparently vulgar curiosity in her 'peeping' at the circus is decried by Bounderby as 'a cursed bad thing for a girl like Louisa', suggesting that there are two sorts of knowledge for a girl: Gradgrind's facts, which are commendable, and the knowledge of life outside the family, which is not (25; ch.4). In advocating Louisa's social and personal ignorance and keeping her as 'his pet', Bounderby then allows himself to intrude into the children's study and extract a kiss from her, which he assumes will be barely noticed (27; ch.4). Dickens draws attention to Bounderby's insincerity when the circus performer, Mr Childers, punctures Bounderby's excessive and false orality, declaring 'You give it mouth enough, you do; but give it mouth in your own building at least' (39; ch.6). Louisa also recognises his false narrative, despite her youth, exposing the dangers in the construction of an alternative history and the connection between knowing and not knowing. In a violent foreshadowing, Louisa rubs the spot on her face to a 'burning red', causing Tom to remonstrate sulkily that 'you'll rub a hole in your face' (27-28; ch.4). Her response that Tom may cut out the piece with his penknife not only aligns him with Bounderby in the

sexual violence inflicted upon her body; it also suggests that Tom instigates the actual wounding of her body. The imagery of the orifice bloodied by male violence is hard to avoid.

The violence implicit in biting is not avoided by Dickens, but presented in certain eroticized relationships, as normative sexual intimacy. Biting as an expression of sexual desire does not have its own teleology, however, and is either neutralised by Dickens through companionate marriage or the biting subject is neutralised, often through a violent death or incarceration. Having invested in the phenomenon of biting, as both a material expression of libido and as a metaphor, he then seems to take flight from his construction as if it has become too freighted with taboo, transgression, and the unsayable. It is, however, a critical Dickensian construction that is symptomatic of how desire resists repression.<sup>53</sup> The act of biting transfers abstract desire and longing to the sphere of the body through an intimate violent act and one that Dickens seems to normalise as a stage in the maturing male. By paying close attention to the semiotics of biting, a vigorous desiring male emerges and inhabits the domestic spaces of the Victorian world. Whilst not exactly advocating a sensory revolution, Dickens recognises the social and corporeal primacy of taste and touch and their place in stimulating the development of the self. From Quilp's rapacious biting to Carker's fluid sexuality, the male bite represents Dickens's developing exploration of the centrality of the mouth to Dickensian sexual relations. Through this oral fixation and biting, Dickens presents a pattern of masculine sexuality that reflects a maturing exploration and perspective. Collapsing the boundaries between cannibal and middle-class male, and later, between vampire and gentleman, allows for Dickensian poetics to touch on private fantasies and admit covert unconventional desires.

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<sup>53</sup> Although often associated with Freudian psychosexual theories, the concept of repressed passion featured in literature long before Freud appropriated the term, as in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. I do not subscribe to an exclusive psychoanalytic appropriation of the word and use it in its meaning as the action of restraining an emotion or physiological urge. See the *OED*, definition 1, < <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/view/Entry/163030?redirectedFrom=repression&>>





[Figure 2.1] *Mr. Carker in his Hour of Triumph*, Phiz (Hablot K. Browne) 1846, *Dombey and Son*, (ch.54). Image, scan and text by kind permission of Philip V. Allingham.  
<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/phiz/dombey/36c.html>



### Chapter 3 - 'Give it Mouth!': Oral Erotics and the Shaping of the Male in Dickensian Bildungsroman

In *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861), Dickens's poetics of the mouth present erotic appetites often characterised by their malignancy. These two semi-autobiographical *Bildungsromane* are suffused with images of harmful alimental, emotional, and sexual hunger, where personal trials are often expressed as profoundly oral experiences.<sup>1</sup> I do not mean oral in the vocal sense but in the sense that David and Pip seem to encounter the world through the mouth. Within this configuration, the mouth is a metaphor for desire and a cipher for problematic intimacy and sexuality. This chapter is an examination of how the poetics and semiotics of the Dickensian mouth encode sexual subjectivity and how that sexuality deviates from perceived Victorian norms.

In this chapter, I want to explore how the formation of self in a *Bildungsroman* framework is depicted as a fundamentally oral process. Analysing the significance of the mouth in these two novels focuses critical attention on how consciousness and the subjective experiences of David and of Pip are dominated by oral-incorporative impulses. Shaped by oral perception, Dickens's *Bildungsromane* are imagined through the poetics of the mouth. As narratives, they reflect a cultural preoccupation with consumption and the role of the body in the process of individuation. Finely tuned and multi-sensory, the hard and penetrative barrier of the teeth exist alongside the warmth and softness of the mouth's interior and reflect the conflicted process of growth for David and Pip. But the mouth seems germane to the form itself: it is a space of exploration, a hub of phenomenological experience and interiority, and it brings the body into social relationships. From the metaphor of the mouth as a womb, to the

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<sup>1</sup> See Florian Schweizer, 'The *Bildungsroman*' in *Charles Dickens in Context*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 132-137, for a discussion of the debate concerning Dickens, the *Bildungsroman* form, and its semi-autobiographical nature.

black hole of the grave, the imaginary mouth symbolises a life journey. The dynamics of the mouth with its constant seeking out, reflect the energy of the *Bildungsroman*, while the individual's developing voice helps to carve out a space for the self in society; in this way, the mouth is critical to the creation of the subject.

David and Pip describe childhoods suffused with images of food and consuming, but they also share a way of perceiving experience and memory through forms of orality. That is, taste, sound, and speech infiltrate their experiences and memories.<sup>2</sup> David's earliest memories of Peggotty and his mother are food-related, as are Pip's; however, his sensory recollection of 'bolting furtive gooseberries' is quite different from Pip's tar-water punishment for bolting *his* food (*DC*, 11; ch.2; *GE*, 12; ch.2). The warmth and solidity of Peggotty's 'cheeks and arms so hard and red' and her 'nutmeg-grater finger' undergo a metamorphosis in *Great Expectations*, so that Mrs Joe 'had such a prevailing redness of skin that I sometimes used to wonder whether it was possible she washed herself with a nutmeg-grater instead of soap' (*DC*, 24; ch.2; *GE*, 8; ch.1). The transformation is part of the darkening of sensory images and desire in the *bildung* process, expressed in the later novel through the prevalence of orally aggressive metaphors. Such metaphors do contribute to the poetics of *David Copperfield*, but they are balanced by pleasurable oral connections, such as the frequent kissing that is missing from the later novel.<sup>3</sup> The almost constant threat of oral aggression in *Great Expectations* is highlighted from the beginning, when Orlick roars at Pip, 'Give it mouth!' (4; ch.1). His expression also encapsulates the importance of voice in the novel to concepts of subjectivity. As Pip is diminished by Mrs Joe's voice, and later by Miss

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<sup>2</sup> Tracy, 'Reading Dickens' Writing', p. 41, claims that Dickens considered an oral story was more effective than a written one and that the spoken word remained a more powerful memory.

<sup>3</sup> *David Copperfield* mentions kisses and kissing 86 times compared to 18 times in *Great Expectations*, see M. Mahlberg, 'CLiC Dickens' (2016).

Havisham and Estella, he struggles to acknowledge his authentic and sexual self in a society that distorts and is distorted by passion.<sup>4</sup>

For David and Pip, passion works not in opposition to repression, however, but insistently alongside it. As John Kucich argues, 'Dickens's novels stress the hidden similarities of meaning latent in these two terms (repression and violent desire) and then work to promote one as the recognizable sign of the other'.<sup>5</sup> The mouth, as the hub of personal relations, is the central organ of this rhetorical strategy. It is also the hub of the 'nourishing economy' where both characters seek sustenance in violent desires.<sup>6</sup> Within this economy, David and Pip are rarely satisfied yet find it hard to resist the allure of the sadist. Their lack of emotional nourishment causes a constant 'hunger', but it is constantly impressed upon them that their alimental and emotional appetites are excessive and must be curbed to ensure social and personal progress. Mr Wopsle's speech, 'the gluttony of swine', which is directed at Pip who dines off scraps, highlights the disparity between Pip's appetite and what he might reasonably expect (27; ch.4). Efforts to cultivate gentlemanly alimental control and emotional detachment, however, are perpetually hindered by ambivalence, uncertainty, and the force of their 'deviant' tendencies. The opening of *David Copperfield* defines this dilemma for David in his attempt to recall his experiences with a cool detachment; 'Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anyone else, these pages must show', demonstrates not only the praxis of critical distance but also the uncertainty inherent in self-authoring and its misleading voice (1; ch.1).

In cultivating a gentlemanly demeanour, as a prerequisite for entering polite society, male libido was often presented as a 'hindrance' to be overcome.<sup>7</sup> But the imperative to

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<sup>4</sup> Keith Easley, 'Self-Possession in *Great Expectations*', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 39 (2008), 177-122, (p. 181).

<sup>5</sup> John Kucich, 'Repression and Representation' (1996), p. 199.

<sup>6</sup> Houston, *Consuming Fictions*, p. 156.

<sup>7</sup> Female libido was also highly problematic, but women were seen as inherently more moral and having a lower libido (See Cynthia Eagle Russell, *Sexual Science*).

distance oneself from the demands of the body and gain control of primal urges seemed to offer social and personal progress and an escape from man's savage past.<sup>8</sup> What Murdstone calls 'youthful humours' were to be replaced by 'firmness', but such adult stoicism is presented by Dickens as deceptive and contrived (40; ch.4). This model of growth seems to engender a loss of identity rather than a triumph of self-fashioning and the protagonists are therefore right to resist the politics of detachment.<sup>9</sup> When Dickens's critics complain that the novels do not deal effectively with sexuality, they are looking in the wrong places; desire is not a question of interiority for Dickens but a question of surface physicality. Both youthful humours and adult firmness can embody passion. Furthermore, the inability of the characters to reconcile their desires within a conventional moral framework is not a failure of character, but part of Dickens's rhetorical strategy. Through the rich semiotics of the mouth — mutability, intimacy, and sexuality — David and Pip's personal journeys are shown to be shaped by sexually transgressive impulses.

Steven Connor describes the mouth as 'the meeting point of the self and the world. The most important point about the mouth is that it is a place of traffic and rendezvous. It is the bodily place in which the world is entertained — body and world bent and blent together'.<sup>10</sup> Dickensian blending at the mouth is both transgressive and transformative, subverting with the conservative form of the *Bildungsroman*.<sup>11</sup> Where the *Bildungsroman*

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<sup>8</sup> Primitive man was considered a freely sexual animal. From this belief, vigorous sexuality was conflated with a lack of civilisation. See Michael Slater's introduction to Dickens's article 'The Noble Savage', *Household Words*, 11 June (1853), in *Gone Astray and Other Papers from 'Household Words'* (London: J. M. Dent, 1998), p. 141-43. See Peter Melville Logan, *Victorian Fetishism: Intellectuals and Primitives* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), p. 168; and Frederick J. Teggart, *Theory and Processes of History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) on the history of words such as 'primitive', 'savage', and 'civilised'.

<sup>9</sup> See Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 3, where she argues that George Eliot was also suspicious about a detached relation to social life, 'For Eliot, such detachment results variously in distortion, idealisation, or moral insensitivity'.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Connor, *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters and Other Vocalizations* (London: Reaktion, 2014), p. 194.

<sup>11</sup> On the conservative nature of *Bildungsroman*, see Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987); and Richard Salmon, 'The Bildungsroman and Nineteenth-Century British Fiction', in *A History of the Bildungsroman*, ed. by S. Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 57-83.

seeks the reintegration of the individual into society on society's terms, Dickens presents young men integrating oral erotics into their lives and attempting to do so on their terms, as a form of growth. Julia Prewitt Brown argues that the English form's overriding concern is an ethical one, but I argue that in these two novels it is also a fundamentally sexual one.<sup>12</sup>

Although critics have analysed the *Bildungsroman* conflict as a Freudian psychosexual struggle, with David and Pip 'stuck' in a childish oral-stage, I argue that reconsidering Dickens's poetics offers insight into connections between the visual, the aesthetic, the psychological, and the sexual and avoids symptomatic or pathologized readings.<sup>13</sup> Paying attention to the language of whispers, sighs, and kisses, intermingled with ravenous hunger, shows that biting and metaphors of penetration and communion characterise David and Pip's significant relationships.

### 3.1 - The Fetishized Mouth in *David Copperfield*

From the earliest age, David Copperfield revels in his overwhelming drive for physical interaction and an unruly sensual appetite. Through layers of gustatory scenes, David reconstructs a childhood shaped by ingestion and permeated with significant mouths. Such scenes suggest a Rabelaisian linguistic and bodily pleasure in the mouth and challenge

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<sup>12</sup> Julia Prewitt Brown, 'The Moral Scope of the English *Bildungsroman*', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Lisa Rodensky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 663-680.

<sup>13</sup> On approaches that endorse the Freudian oral stage, see, for example, Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (1992); Lynn Cain, *Dickens, Family, Authorship: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Kinship and Creativity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Carolyn Dever, *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Ned Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis* (London: Cornell University Press, 1988); Dianne F. Sadoff, *Monsters of Affection: Dickens, Eliot, & Bronte on Fatherhood* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1982); Houston, *Consuming Fictions*; see *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 138-39, for a concise overview.

narratives of fixity and idealised reserve encoded in the nineteenth-century body.<sup>14</sup> David's appetite for oral encounters such as intimate conversation, shared meals, kissing, and biting is, vigorous and reinforces the sense of his emotional openness and passionate nature. It is first conveyed through descriptions of a bucolic existence of food and eating, which offer what seems to be a simple model of the open fleshly body. Although Rabelaisian pleasure is present in these pre-Murdstone memories, however, joyful orality is, even then, tinged with the anxiety of transgression. His early recollection of the orchard, with its fruit 'riper and richer than fruit has ever been since', is infused with the idea of the forbidden as he bolts 'furtive gooseberries...trying to look unmoved' (13; ch.2). David's confession of a 'furtive' sensuality is entwined with a precocious understanding of his mother's sensual attraction, brought to our attention with the immediacy of the present tense: 'nobody knows better than I do that she likes to look so well' he writes, as he points out her waist and her 'bright curls', the symbols of her sexual attraction (13; ch.2).

Figuring women through images of food is early evidence of David's propensity to incorporate his interpersonal experiences as a form of ingestion. While his external self is barely visible, a complex inner life can be inferred through external sensory incorporation. However, David's awakening conscience, embodied in the mouth, takes on a different tone from Mikhail Bakhtin's rambunctious description. 'Man's encounter with the world in the act of eating', writes Bakhtin, 'is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself'.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, David's oral encounters contain a menacing, eroticised and often sinister component, and he is frequently in danger of being devoured, even offering himself up for the experience. The mouth, as well as being the source of great pleasure, has a destructive aspect in this novel.

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<sup>14</sup> On boundaries and the nineteenth-century body, see *Bodies and Things in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture*, ed. by Katharina Boehm (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Parsons, ed., *The Victorian Male Body*.

<sup>15</sup> Bakhtin, p. 281.



In the process of maturation, David becomes subject to intense and increasingly problematic oral fixations. Drawn towards intimate encounters and susceptible to erotic suggestion, the lure of the mouth for David leads him into false and dangerous relationships, rendering him subject to the perverse appetites of others and unable to confront his own desires. Such acts of repression, Kucich argues, ‘become libidinal acts, forms of luxuriously self-disruptive and autoerotic experience’.<sup>16</sup> When David repeats what he thinks were compliments about his mother, that he heard from Murdstone’s unsavoury friends, she is delighted; his words elicit erotic whispers and kisses that characterise their relationship. Although Murdstone’s uncouth friends are ‘impudent creatures’, Clara is nonetheless eager to hear their compliments (22; ch.2). David innocently reports their rough manners, drinking, and smoking, yet Clara comes to his bedside ‘playfully’, asking him to repeat the words (21; ch. 2). ‘I knew it pleased her’, he recalls:

‘What was it they said Davy? Tell me again. I can’t believe it.’  
 ““Bewitching”” — I began.  
 My mother put her hands upon my lips to stop me.  
 ‘It was never bewitching,’ she said, laughing. ‘It never could have been bewitching, Davy. Now I know it wasn’t!’  
 ‘Yes it was. “Bewitching Mrs Copperfield””, I repeated stoutly. ‘And “pretty.”’  
 ‘No no, it was never pretty. Not pretty,’ interposed my mother, laying her fingers on my lips again (21-22; ch.2).

As mother and son ‘kissed one another over and over’, there was an intensity to their orality that shows a confusion between maternal and erotic love (22; ch.2). For David, kissing is sustenance, but it also comes to symbolise erotic disorder; he describes the sensations as ‘fever of expectation’ or ‘some other great convulsion of nature’ as he kisses his mother freely for the last time, prior to visiting Peggotty’s family (23; ch.2). David observes how the intimate orality that defined his childhood is transferred to Murdstone when Clara signals to Murdstone by pouting for attention in a ‘pettish, wilful manner’ (39; ch.4). Later, when Clara

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<sup>16</sup> Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction*, p. 3.

embraces and whispers to David, she does it secretly ‘as if it were wrong’ (41; ch.4); their eroticised attachment is now considered deviant.

At Miss Murdstone’s arrival, David is in danger of being swallowed up by her tyrannical, masculine will. Her ‘very jail of a bag which hung upon her arm by a heavy chain and shut up like a bite’ is a synecdochic representation of her closed, hard, and not-quite-female body, to which no man will ever gain access (41; ch.4). She is the antithesis of Clara’s capricious, open personality; David recounts that the ‘first remarkable thing I observed in Miss Murdstone was, her being constantly haunted by a suspicion that there was a man on the premises’ and ironically always ‘looking for that man’ (41; ch.4). What David recognises in Miss Murdstone is her complete alienation from sexuality, which she regulates fiercely and grotesquely and sets up as a model of restraint. His attraction to sensual bodies that signify permeability leaves him highly suspicious of anyone who appears too rigid and contained, as with Littimer. Ironically, so like her brother ‘whom she greatly resembled’, Miss Murdstone’s passionate repression only serves to augment Murdstone’s sadistic pleasures, as if the siblings were operating as one fused rapacious body (41; ch.4).

With two vampiric characters ready to suck the life out of him like ‘two snakes on a wretched young bird’, David rightly senses that he will be subsumed by their appetite for domination. Yet, despite the palpable fear, David finds his love rival a ‘very handsome man’ and is lured towards him (19; ch.2). The danger is signalled early on through Murdstone’s great dog, whom he describes as ‘deep mouthed and black-haired like Him — and he was very angry at the sight of me, and sprung out to get at me’ (37; ch.3). The dog’s deep mouth suggests Murdstone’s capacity to consume the family.<sup>17</sup> But, as the dog who has moved into the ‘empty dog kennel’, Murdstone also fills the sexual gap left by David’s father (37; ch.3).

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<sup>17</sup> See Danahay, ‘Nature Red in Hoof and Claw’, on how domestic animals represent ‘the unsettling eruption of violence into relationships that would conventionally have been viewed as sacrosanct in Victorian domestic ideology’, p. 103.

In the erotic triangulation between the three main characters, Clara becomes marginalised as David and Murdstone compete with one another, a battle narrated through the semiotics of the mouth.<sup>18</sup>

Having scrutinised Murdstone's powerful square jaw down to the 'dotted indication of the strong black beard' and watched his mouth for anything that might escape his lips, David begins to fixate on the oral allure of Murdstone (19; ch.2). In deploying these physical codings, Dickens infuses Murdstone's mouth with sexual power. The semiotics of this process, whereby Murdstone's mouth becomes a carrier of erotic signs, aligns with Foucault's argument that:

Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of manoeuvres and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies.<sup>19</sup>

In the later novel, the allure of erotic hyper-masculinity embodied in a strong, hirsute jawline is invoked when Pip notices Jaggers' 'strong black dots where his beard and whiskers would have been if he had let them'; meeting him again as an apprentice it is those 'strong black dots of beard and whisker' about his mouth that are his distinguishing feature (83; ch.11; 135; ch.18). This darkness around the mouth and suggestion of hirsuteness encodes aggressive virility, a coding reinforced by Lavater's physiognomic theories of the mouth.<sup>20</sup> Dickens reproduces this physiognomic image to draw attention to the body's critical surfaces,

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<sup>18</sup> René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and the Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), describes 'mimetic desire' as a dualistic concept of sexual relationships where a woman is always the passive object of desire sought by two male heterosexual rivals, one of whom is imitating the other's desire. It is a constructionist model which has resonance with certain Dickensian characters but is predicated on exaggeration in that Girard posits that *all* desire is mimetic. There are several significant flaws, two of which are that in his theory, an object of desire never has an intrinsic value, and desire always begets male violence. For Girard, value only arises from imitation, thus failing to account for secret desires and the desire for disliked/repulsive objects. His model also fails to account not only for female desire but also the desire of one man to become and/ or possess the other, as is the case with David and Murdstone. Girard's assumption of normative heterosexual desire does not adequately reflect Dickens's much broader conception of erotic desire nor the way in which his female characters are not always objects of competitive desire.

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, p. 103.

<sup>20</sup> Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente*. Dickens mentions Lavater in chapter sixteen of *Our Mutual Friend*.

showing that Murdstone's square jaw is handsome but dangerous and his thin lips signify menace. When face to face with Murdstone, David's heart beats 'fast and high', and the idea of the sensual mouth that once afforded simple pleasures becomes a site of eroticised torment as well as the cause of his disgrace, as he recalls (39; ch.4). Far from curtailing his oral sensibilities, however, David's consequent whipping renders him more susceptible still to erotic encounters. It is as if his sensory perception of pleasure is tainted with an inevitable pain of loss and is felt in the mouth. In this way, the penetration of Murdstone's body is recalled by David as an oral and haptic memory that, years later, sets his 'teeth on edge to think of it' (50; ch. 4).

The mouth, in *David Copperfield*, also represents a metaphorical womb-like space of intimacy and warmth. In the regressive dynamics of the novel, David seeks a sort of fusion with the maternal figure, where boundaries disappear in an 'amniotic embrace' which has a close resemblance to a warm, wet mouth.<sup>21</sup> Reproducing that intimate dark space, a love of 'snug' enclosures crops up regularly in David's narrative, from Peggotty's 'snug' boat, 'the most delicious retreat that the imagination of man could conceive' to the exotic intimacy he shares with Steerforth in 'a snug private apartment, red-curtained and Turkey-carpeted, where the fire burnt bright' (27; ch. 3, 247; ch. 20). The apartment codes sexuality with its oriental textures, its signifying colour and heat; such warm spaces facilitate and engender erotic intimacy and fusion. This is especially true when that space is an actual mouth. Peggotty's communication with David through the keyhole, is rendered through whispers, audible breaths, and kisses. With their lips together at the keyhole, he swallows her words as 'she spoke it for the first time quite down my throat' (52; ch. 4). Peggotty's voice is, thus, projected from her body directly into David's.

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<sup>21</sup> Cain, *Dickens, Family, Authorship*.

In Dickens's writing, the mouth always works in relational connection with the body; it is the transformative agent between breath and matter.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Peggotty's love for David emerges from a corporeal source into ethereal breath, where David inhales it as material, tactile words that 'tickled me a good deal' (52; ch. 4). As they make promises to each other and 'kissed the keyhole with the greatest affection', Peggotty's and David's mouths fuse (53; ch. 4). William Cohen's innovative study of embodied perception argues that David 'encounters the world primarily through his mouth'.<sup>23</sup> In this scene, 'the keyhole enacts a continuity between perception and other forms of bodily ingestion. It signifies and enables not distance but connection between two bodies.'<sup>24</sup> David's early oral experience leaves him receptive to such sensual attachment, a rejection of Murdstone's dogma of detachment. When he is expelled from home, he leaves more vulnerable than ever to his oral sensibility.

Steerforth is David's crucial oral attachment at school, and for life. He makes an immediate physical impression upon David, which is reinforced through eroticised midnight feasts. But David's overwhelming hunger distracts him from Steerforth's malign personality and influence. In overlooking Steerforth's constant transgressions of property, sexuality, and boundaries, Dickens shows how David allows himself to become subsumed by his friend until he is 'steeped' in him, as he also later claims is the case with Dora (404; ch. 33). The metaphor has connotations of liquidity and permeability and suggests a fluidity about David. Before they meet, Dickens alludes to orifices and permeability when the first thing David notices about Steerforth is that he has 'cut his name very deep and very often', like a wound on the playground door (68; ch. 5). From this deep cut on the surface, David imagines Steerforth's voice to be 'rather strong'. It is symbolic of how Steerforth, himself, will cut into David's permeable identity 'very deep and very often'. It is also emblematic of Steerforth's

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<sup>22</sup> See LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*, on the performative voice.

<sup>23</sup> Cohen *Embodied*, p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen, p. 35.

cutting of Rosa Dartle's mouth, leaving a permanent imprint of himself on her skin and psyche, which Rosa longs to transfer to Emily.

Metonymic and actual wounding marks Steerforth's compulsion to penetrate surfaces with eroticised connotations of the opened body and sexual communion. That sense of permeability is figured through the mouth and ingestion. Thus, as soon as they are introduced, Steerforth extracts all of David's money, then suggests the purchase of a bottle of wine for the bedroom, declaring, 'You belong to my bedroom, I find' (73; ch. 6). David confesses to himself that he 'had a secret misgiving [it] was nearly all wrong' but, once the illicit goods are laid out on David's bed in the moonlight, his hand trembles in eroticised anticipation (73; ch. 6). Steerforth and David sit together against his pillow, while the other boys sit below them on the floor:

How well I recollect our sitting there, talking in whispers; or their talking, and my respectfully listening, I ought rather to say; the moonlight falling a little way into the room, through the window, painting a pale window on the floor, and the greater part of us in shadow [...] A certain mysterious feeling, consequent of the darkness, the secrecy [sic] of the revel, and the whisper in which everything was said, steals over me again (73-74; ch. 6).

Their whispering is significant, as it brings breath and bodies intensely together. When Steerforth describes how he could knock out Creakle, it leaves the boys 'breathless' at the thought of his physical prowess (75, ch. 6). 'Half undressed', the proximity of David's body to Steerforth's is made explicit as David even recalls sitting to his left, highlighting their easy intimacy (75; ch. 6).

In these oral encounters, a powerful form of attachment develops through eroticised performance. David's sensuous mouth interchanges with his primal aggressive mouth. He speaks of making 'ravages' on his favourite authors, but it is his feminised orality which 'cemented the intimacy' with Steerforth (79; ch.7). Discourses of same-sex male sexuality underwent a profound cultural shift in the nineteenth century, as Foucault identifies. Previously defined as that pertaining to (illegal) sodomitic acts, same-sex sexuality came to

be viewed instead as an aspect of identity and thus homosexual relationships included those where genital sex was not necessarily involved.<sup>25</sup> Thus, David and Steerforth's relationship's is homoerotic even without explicit sexual contact. It might, however, be tempting to dismiss the erotic aspects of their relationship as a schoolboy crush, as Sedgwick does when she writes that 'David's infatuation with his friend Steerforth, who calls him "Daisy" and treats him like a girl, is simply part of David's education'.<sup>26</sup> Sedgwick's classic study of male relationships was ground-breaking. But she is wrong, I believe, on some fundamental points concerning Dickens's representation of the relationship between David and Steerforth: firstly, David's love for Steerforth is presented as long outlasting infatuation. As a formative sexual experience as well as a romantic one, the effects last long after his schooldays and underpin the flawed model for his later relationships. Sedgwick then argues that 'another, later part [of his education] is the painful learning of how to triangulate from Steerforth onto women, and finally, although incompletely, to hate Steerforth, and grow at his expense'.<sup>27</sup> He never learns, however, to triangulate his passion for Steerforth onto women, and Steerforth remains a unique influence upon him. David's relationships with Emily, Miss Shepherd, Miss Larkins, Dora, and Agnes are presented as falling far short of his overwhelming desire for Steerforth. The very point of Miss Shepherd and Miss Larkins is, surely, for Dickens to show through parody the difference between simple infatuation and the force of his connection with Steerforth. While sexual desire is interchangeable with tropes of hunger in all of David's passionate relationships, his 'sickly, spoony manner' undermines his claim of eternal love

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<sup>25</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 43, 101.

<sup>26</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 176, builds on Foucault's work and on psychoanalytical models to posit that Victorian social culture was built on networks of 'homosocial' bonds, which depended on an assumption that homosexual bonds were taboo. She argues that an unbroken 'continuum between homosocial and homosexual' is 'radically disrupted' and eventually transformed into discontinuous relations between homosocial and homosexual bonds between men. Vincent Newey, 'Dickensian Decadents' in *Romancing Decay: Ideas of Decadence in European Culture*, ed. by Michael St John (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 64-82, makes a similar point to mine in that Sedgwick 'sacrifices the depth of this particular Dickens text to her schematic interest in the narrative of male socialization'.

<sup>27</sup> Sedgwick, *Between Men*, pp. 176-77.

through this sort of comic romance (230; ch. 18). At a dance, he asks for Miss Larkin's camelia flower, then puts it to his lips in a performance of youthful rapture. But this really is a schoolboy crush and after hearing of her marriage, he throws away the flower, finally defeats the butcher's boy in a display of masculine prowess and puts the episode firmly behind him. When Miss Larkin is mentioned again at the end of the novel, she is included in the category of 'idle loves', as is Miss Shepherd (720; ch. 60). His earlier adoration of Miss Shepherd also parodies the conflation of hunger with love when David wonders at his infant gift of twelve brazil nuts: 'They are not expressive of affection, they are difficult to pack into a parcel of any regular shape, they are hard to crack, even in room doors, and they are oily when cracked; yet I feel that they are appropriate to Miss Shepherd' (227; ch. 18). Is she hard to crack open, is she oily, one wonders? Perhaps the nuts are instead a reflection of David, but these options are hardly romantic and certainly not erotic. Finally, contrary to Sedgwick's claim, David never hates Steerforth, instead declaring that his friend has 'no best' and 'no worst' but is 'always equally loved, and cherished in my heart' (373; ch. 29). After Steerforth's death, he recalls that 'I mourned for him who might have won the love and admiration of thousands, as he had won mine long ago' (696; ch. 58).

Shared meals and the disruption of appetite are indexical oral codes for David's passion and are markedly absent from his sisterly love for Agnes. Agnes understands David's oral fixations and excesses, as she demonstrates after David's drunken revelry with Steerforth. In this episode, Dickens's poetics of the mouth are brought to the fore with David feeding off Steerforth's attention, body, and status. In a wild evening of excess appetites, David's oral sensibility is out of control as he attempts to reproduce the ecstasy of illicit schoolboy feasts. It ends when 'only Steerforth was with me, helping me to undress, and where I was by turns telling him that Agnes was my sister, and adjuring him to bring the corkscrew, that I might open another bottle of wine' (310; ch. 24). He wakes full of shame



and remorse and a ‘horror of having committed a thousand offences’, left ambiguously unelaborated.

Unwilling to curb his Steerforth fetish, David is overwhelmed by his appetite for more. But when Steerforth declares to his worldly friends, ‘I hope you have both brought appetites with you’, it seems provocative and suggests his own appetite for David’s undoing (306; ch. 24). The chapter’s title, ‘My First Dissipation’, aptly describes David’s identity dissolving under Steerforth’s will, in opposition to the project of unity in a conventional *Bildungsroman*. This tension between unity and disunity is considered by Franco Moretti, who argues that periods of dissolution in the adolescent’s formation are not about initiation but preserving equilibrium. Writing about *Tom Jones* (1749), he contends that ‘the young hero’s numerous erotic exploits are the very opposite of what we call “experiences”. They are mere digressions.’<sup>28</sup> In *Copperfield*, however, David’s erotic experiences are more formative and influential than a digression, especially where Steerforth is concerned. Steerforth’s imprint upon David revolves around the shared oral pleasures of eating, drinking, and smoking in an adult version of their schoolboy midnight feasts. Dickens’s poetics invoke here the concept of David’s open body and of the temptation of warm, dark, moist spaces. The orifice is figured as a transgressive site; Steerforth’s peer, Markham, calls David a ‘devilish good fellow’ and the evening does indeed turn hellish when they are in a ‘very hot theatre, looking down into a large pit’, comically like the jaws of hell, (309; ch.24). Though ostensibly comic, the scenes of excess have a malevolent thread, echoed in David’s reference to Cassio and Iago in his aborted letter to Agnes. Replying to her request to see him, he experiments with various tones including a quote from *Othello*, ‘how strange it is that a man should put an enemy into his mouth’ (311; ch.25).<sup>29</sup> Although the reference is overtly to the

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<sup>28</sup> Moretti, p. 182.

<sup>29</sup> *Othello* II. iii. 281.

dangers of alcohol, not only does Steerforth embody dangerous intoxicating properties, but the allusion to Steerforth as Iago is significant. In Cassio's speech, the excess drinking reveals 'that the demarcation line between humanity and bestiality could easily be blurred'.<sup>30</sup> David's integrity is compromised by his own 'beastly' behaviour, and he describes himself as a 'beast' for neglecting Agnes in favour of his friend (310; ch.24).

Agnes's warning to David that he has 'a dangerous friend' is unheeded; in a metaphor of incorporation Steerforth is 'fixed in his heart' (314; ch.25). Under her guidance, he admits that Steerforth has 'darkened', but this reinforces the erotic draw. Not only does David resist detachment from his youthful passion, but he also distrusts any suggestion of detaching. By this stage, David perceives Steerforth as an integral part of his own permeable body in a sort of bodily communion that stays with David through his life. Agnes, understanding David's obsession, does not expect that he will or 'can at once, change any sentiment that has become a conviction' (314; ch.25). When David's fixation on eroticised oral connections escalates, it is a sign of his increasingly chaotic sexuality. Agnes, who apprehends David's obsessive thoughts, suggests that she keep a register of his 'violent attachments', but she cannot inhibit his malign visceral attachments to those orally grotesque characters, Rosa Dartle and Uriah Heep (314; ch.25).

Finding a 'tremendous blank', in the place that Agnes his confessor usually inhabits, David turns, astonishingly, to Rosa Dartle to fill the emotional gap:

Her appearance was exactly what I have described it, when I first saw her; but the society of the two ladies was so agreeable, and came so natural to me, that I felt myself falling a little in love with her. I could not help thinking, several times in the course of the evening, and particularly when I walked home at night, what delightful company she would be in Buckingham Street (304; ch.24).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Texts, Contexts and Intertextuality: Dickens as a Reader*, ed. by Norbert Lennartz, Dieter Koch (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht Verlage, 2014), pp. 13-14.

<sup>31</sup> I discuss Rosa Dartle's mouth in chapter four.

In David imagining domestic harmony with Rosa, Dickens shows how the obsessive connection with Steerforth has clouded David's judgement. In contrast to Agnes's natural smile, Rosa's scarred mouth projects a visceral energy and reinforces David's fetish for the mouth. His attraction is rooted in her complex association with Steerforth and underpins their function as interchangeable objects of desire for David. It is another triangulation of desire that seems to be a recurring pattern.<sup>32</sup> This time, David's distorted passion for Steerforth finds an outlet in the fetishization of Rosa's mouth.

For David, the mouth represents a space for self-dissolution, destabilising the boundaries between self and other and providing a chance for metamorphosis through penetrating and merging with the other. Shortly before he meets Rosa, a chance meeting reinvigorates his desire for Steerforth. Watching a performance of *Julius Caesar*, David perceives the actors transforming into 'noble Romans alive before me' and afterwards notes the 'mingled reality and mystery of the whole show, the influence upon me of the poetry, the lights, the music, the company, the smooth stupendous changes of glittering and brilliant scenery, [that] were so dazzling and opened up such illimitable regions of delight' (244; ch.19). It shows not just the overwhelming nature of David's sensual perception but also his tendency to blur boundaries in his pursuit of pleasure. When he notices his own 'noble Roman' in the form of Steerforth, his response is impulsive: 'my old love for him overflowed my breast so freshly and spontaneously, that I went up to him at once, with a fast-beating heart' (245; ch.19). 'Shame' and 'fear' prevent David from grasping Steerforth around the neck, although he cannot let go of his hands (245; ch.19). When David goes to bed, the poetics are overtly erotic: 'here, among pillows enough for six, I soon fell asleep in a blissful condition, and dreamed of ancient Rome, Steerforth, and friendship' (247; ch.19).

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<sup>32</sup> Unlike Girard's triangular schema, this one has a male and female fixated on a male object of desire. It could even be argued that, given David's feminised character, it is actually two female characters competing for a male (also, of course, they are both obsessed with Steerforth well before meeting one another, so this desire is not founded upon imitation).

Sexual poetics seep into the language describing their intimate breakfast. In womb/mouth-like enclosure of their ‘snug private apartment’, the room is red-curtained, the fire is bright (247; ch.20). David is said to be ‘glowing with pleasure’ at Steerforth’s casual remark, ‘I feel as if you were my property’, recalling Steerforth’s earlier remark that David belonged to his bedroom. (248; ch.20). It is hard to avoid the insinuation that this is a sort of sexual initiation, weighted by Steerforth’s strange suggestion that they should ‘go and see the lions for an hour or two — it’s something to have a fresh fellow like you to show them to’, eliciting the sexual connotations of ‘fresh meat’ (248; ch.20). David’s naivety is compounded by Rosa Dartle’s coded sexual knowledge.

The fissure on the surface of her face evokes the bloody wound that David inflicted on Murdstone, bringing him into delinquent alignment with Steerforth. David has taken Steerforth’s ‘fancy’, which echoes his own ‘wild fancy’ for Rosa. Yet, while the description of her mouth is highly detailed and evidence of David’s intense scrutiny, her other features are summarised by a cursory ‘black hair and eager black eyes’ (249; ch.20). Rosa’s vigorous and unpredictable mouth functions as a site of violent communion and a symbol of her sexual past. It is heightened through the image of Steerforth’s penetrating hammer and her soft flesh, where David finds a sexual outlet. It traps him in a spectacle of oral enticement, and he is unable to stop obsessively gazing at her mouth. Badly treated by Steerforth, as all his females are including David as ‘Daisy’, Rosa’s mouth is a repository of his casual violence. Yet it is the violence which embodies a compelling oral energy for David. Perceiving the scar upon her lip as a ‘seam’, David draws attention to the female violated body as one that has been forcibly opened. The scar’s origin is notable for its explicit depiction of the deadly nature of uncontrolled eroticism, but Dickens also emphasises the role it plays in highlighting how people feed off each other. Steerforth attempts to mitigate his own oral-incorporative impulses — his need to consume others — by transmuting Rosa’s scar into a sign of

vampirism, suggesting that she may never rest in a grave and feeds off him constantly (252; ch.20). His self-deluding strategy is reinforced by his comment that she accumulates interest to add to the principal, as if she is building up her stock against him to bleed him dry. In a predatory triangle, while she is said to feed off Steerforth, David is eager to be consumed by either of them.

David's oral fetish becomes fused with Rosa's vampiric allure, and he finds himself transfixed by the 'most susceptible part of her face' (252; ch.20). A metonymic allusion to Rosa's vagina is extended in eroticised poetics, the dark 'streak' lengthening and 'brought to the fire' at Steerforth's instigation and, while David observes her mouth moving in response to Steerforth's stimulation, he simultaneously feeds his own obsession (252; ch.20). When he retires for the night, this ménage à trois of distorted appetites pervades his mind and body. Having wandered around Steerforth's bedroom in an erotic reverie, David merges first with Steerforth, imagining himself throwing the hammer into Rosa's mouth, and then with Rosa with the emphasis on her mouth; as he steals her words, he recalls 'I found that I was uneasily asking all sorts of people in my dreams whether it really was or not' (254; ch.20). His uneasiness at this strange oral seduction illustrates the unresolved erotic tension that underpins this triad. David demonstrates a constant attraction towards this dangerous, enveloping eroticism, which he cannot control.

While the progression of the narrative is overtly driven by memory, with David's urge to be consumed and his impulse to consume others, it is also driven by his oral appetites. In this way, ironically, he often consumes his own memories and purges himself of others to create a complex alternative experience. His mother's death 'seems to have swallowed up all lesser recollections, and to exist alone' (103; ch.9). Yet, it does not quite exist alone since he also claims, 'except that Steerforth was more to be admired than ever, I remember *nothing*' (104; ch.9). David's memory continually returns him to the true object of his desire.

Whereas David desperately seeks Steerforth's affection, his erotic alignment with Heep is more tortuous. Animalistic metonymy foreshadows Uriah Heep's menacing effect on David. At their first meeting, Heep's red-tinged 'cadaverous face' appears from behind a window like a monstrous mirror image of David (187; ch.15). It is followed by their changing places, a doubling effect, so that David then observes Heep from behind glass, breathing into the pony's nostrils in animalistic communion and thus bringing Heep's strangely spellbinding mouth into focus (187-188; ch.15). That David notes how easily the pony is bewitched by Heep's breathy communication, illustrates his susceptibility to the power of oral language beyond the linguistic, that is, paralinguistic sounds and oral gestures, especially his gaping mouth. It is a pattern of erotics associated with David's oral character. Heep's body speaks to David with its extraordinary gestures and bodily orifices, through which Heep seems to leak outwards in an infectious ooze. Malign oral eroticism takes a different form with Uriah Heep. Rather than the loss of innocence and of self, as embodied in both Rosa and Steerforth's mouths, Heep's mouth symbolises a more physical sexuality. David's relationship with tactile Heep is characterised by slimy contact, moist skin, gaping mouths and penetrative images. The effect of Heep's contact with David is to widen the parameters of what constitutes the erotic and the deviant.

Heep mirrors, parodies, and exceeds David's capacity for growth since he has the flair for exploitation that David lacks. Viscous Heep eschews boundaries and yet appears, paradoxically, to have complete self-control. At a darkly humorous picnic, David comments that 'fate had pitted me against this man, and one of us must fall' (413; ch.33). During the picnic heroics, 'Red Whisker' involves himself, expertly, in the preparations for food and drink, much to David's disgust who will not eat what Heep has touched (413; ch.33).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Jeremy Tambling, ed., Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 963, suggests that the name, 'Red Whisker' emphasises Heep's 'excessive virility', as does Tara McDonald, "'red-headed animal': Race, Sexuality and Dickens's Uriah Heep", *Critical Survey*, 17 (2005), 48-62.

Heep's easy control encodes self-discipline, authority, and sexual experience as he takes command of the wine and serves himself the 'majority of a lobster' (413; ch.33). That he eats this aphrodisiacal food at Dora's feet is a deliberate challenge to David.<sup>34</sup> Sexual tension between the two men is legible in the poetics which become comically sexual with 'gushing fountains', the 'oasis in the desert', 'raging' and 'burning', and elaborate, performative kissing of hands (413-414; ch.33). But the sexual threat is more complex than the comedy suggests, since Dickens not only presents a nuanced understanding of the male body through Heep, but also imbues David with the same desires, which Heep displays in caricature. Heep's animated body is a lure to David, who perceives him as variously a fox, an eel, a fish, a frog, a snail, a bat, and a snake. His slippery being represents an astonishingly Ovidian, erotic mutability that foregrounds his fluidity and a sort of wetness that leaks out and onto the other. It brilliantly replicates the wetness and motility of the mouth, so that Heep's melodramatic body encodes one huge, grotesque orifice. Henry Krips, writing about the mechanics of fetish, explains that the lure as a device for attracting the gaze is 'exemplified by animals who, casting off their skin, create a double, a visual stimulation, which deceives their enemies'.<sup>35</sup> Paradoxically, the observer sees through the spectacle of the lure, recognising that something lies beneath, but is continually distracted by the visual stimulation of the lure. In this way, Heep's visually stimulating body, lures David into seeking him out. David's sexual confusion, where he is both attracted and repulsed by Heep 'who had a sort of fascination for me', but cannot conceive why, points to the weighted conceptual relationship between knowledge and sexuality during that period (200; ch.16). Conceptually, as Sedgwick explains, 'knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance, sexual ignorance'.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The science behind 'aphrodisiacal lobster' lies in its magnesium, zinc and protein content which affects libido, hormone production, sperm production and sensitivity to touch.

<sup>35</sup> Henry Krips, *Fetish: An Erotics of Culture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 73.

Like the warm and wet interior of the mouth, Heep's secreting body is a referent for sexual excitation in David. Sitting on a stool, David scrutinises Heep's elevated animated body: his manner of widening his mouth to improbable proportions, the frequent wiping away of moisture from his hands, and the grinding and squeezing (200; ch.16). Like a mouth, Heep is perpetually and thoroughly damp. David notes how 'his hand felt like a fish', when they shake hands in the dark and, later, dreams of being drowned by Heep (202; ch.16). Following Heep up the dark stairway, David feels Heep's hand like a frog in his yet despite the alien sensation he does not let go of it (322; ch.25). Their connection describes the commingling of bodies and the sense that through those broken boundaries, one body penetrates the other. As scholars have noted, the language has many phallic overtones, including Heep's 'snaky undulation', his 'jerk, like a convulsive fish', and his seeming 'to swell and grow before my eyes' (325-326; ch.25).<sup>37</sup> The conflated imagery of bodily orifices is equally remarkable; David's urge to run him through with the poker gets into his 'dozing thoughts', and merges with a picture of Heep,

Lying on his back, with his legs extending to I don't know where, gurglings taking place in his throat, stoppages in his nose, and his mouth open like a post-office. He was so much worse in reality than in my distempered fancy, that afterwards I was attracted to him in very repulsion, and could not help wandering in and out every half hour or so, and taking another look at him (328; ch.25).

Much critical comment has been made on the significance of the poker, but Heep's gaping 'post-office' mouth is also meaningful.<sup>38</sup> Oliver Buckton observes that 'David's narrational monopoly of the psychic realm in this scene parallels Uriah's representational hegemony over the somatic'.<sup>39</sup> This relationship between the narrative of cognition and the narrative of the

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<sup>37</sup> MacDonald, "'red-headed animal'" describes Heep as a 'threatening phallus', p. 58.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Oliver S. Buckton, "'The Reader Whom I Love": Homoerotic Secrets in *David Copperfield*", *ELH*, 64 (1997), 189-222, pp. 210-213; Cohen, 'Interiors: Sex and the Body in Dickens', *Critical Survey*, 17 (2005), 5-19, and *Embodied*, pp. 38-40; Geoffrey Rees, *The Romance of Innocent Sexuality* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), pp. 262-265; and Alexander Welsh, *From Copyright to Copperfield: The Identity of Dickens* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 144-145.

<sup>39</sup> Buckton, p. 211.



somatic is crucial to understanding how Dickens's oral erotics function. As Bodenheimer remarks so eloquently, Dickens 'demands of virtue a kind of innocence, yet he dramatizes a world in which one cannot be suspicious enough; his most virtuous characters often manage to appear innocent while disguising their knowingness as something else'.<sup>40</sup> Where Pickwick disguises his knowingness with comedy, David disguises his through repulsion. That it is a 'kind of innocence', rather than authentic innocence, allows the ingress of transgressive ideas. Buckton contends that the 'narrative immediately attempts to dismiss' the homoeroticism of the scene through the 'homely simile of the post-office'.<sup>41</sup> Yet while the metaphor of the post-office *can* suggest the homely, it also draws attention to Heep's receptive body as if he is awaiting deposits. This is one of those incidences where Dickens appears to disavow the sexual inferences, despite having constructed them through sophisticated poetics, but they linger in the text to form patterns of desire. David cannot account for this strange desire, or what he calls his 'distempered fancy', for Heep and he tries to deflect it through ridicule and revulsion to render it bearable (328; ch.25). The familiar strategy of projection on David's part, as he attempts to avoid uncomfortable truths about himself, underpins his conflicted reaction to Heep but does not erase his feelings.

Physiognomic and aural descriptions shine a light on David's acutely voyeuristic observations of the orifice on Heep's body.<sup>42</sup> Heep's gurglings are grotesque but nonetheless draw David through their horrible uncensored physicality. Rarely acknowledging how erotic allure is at odds with his idealised self-image, David instead interprets his desire for Heep as an infection to be 'purged', and the following morning opens his windows to expel the sense and taste of Uriah (329; ch.25). That his room 'might be aired', suggests a breathing out and

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<sup>40</sup> Bodenheimer, p. 34.

<sup>41</sup> Buckton, p. 211.

<sup>42</sup> See Zirker, 'Physiognomy', p. 379, where she discusses the effects of characters misreading/misinterpreting appearances and argues that while 'appearance is not necessarily reliable, it may hold information about role-playing and manipulation',

expulsion of the man from his metaphorically enclosed mouth-room. Oral-assimilative metaphors that define David's relationships are also figured as a cannibalistic threat from Heep. When David describes Heep as a vulture, his oral appetite is mirrored by Heep 'gorging himself on every syllable' that David utters (329; ch.25). Their oral struggles are not limited to sexual conquest but encompass self-identity. There is a suggestion in Heep's hovering and feeding off David's words, that he somehow feeds off morsels of David himself, the writer-to-be, since the voice is profoundly relational to the body. It is a two-way eroticised traffic, and David dreams of their encounter for many nights afterwards.

Through the poetics of oral eroticism, Dickens shows that David's libido is felt as a consuming force. However, another trope associated with the mouth conveys the sense of a gushing opening on the body from which David's passion overflows both the limits of his body and the framework of self-discipline. These apparently opposing ideas express David's sexual unease as a conflict between the drive to consume and the outpouring of passion. At a point of such unbearable tension, Dora is introduced as a remedial temporary distraction from Steerforth and as a displacement object. David is 'swallowed up in an abyss of love' but this is accompanied by images of release with bursting brandy bottles, his outpourings of 'English versification' and effusive declarations to Dora herself (330; ch.26).

The notion of a feminised, leaky and overflowing body connects David's oral personality with Steerforth and Heep: David recalls how 'my old love for him [Steerforth] overflowed my breast so freshly and spontaneously', while Heep declares 'I have always overflowed towards you [David] since the first moment I had the pleasure of beholding you' (245; ch.19; 326; ch.25).<sup>43</sup> The overflowing body conveys disturbance, but it is a creative

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<sup>43</sup> The concept of the 'excessive' female body that overflows its boundaries is commonplace in Western literary tradition, see for example, Gail Kern Paster, 'Leaky Vessels: The Incontinent Women of City Comedy', *Renaissance Drama*, 19 (1987), 43-65; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1982); and Mary Russo, *The Female Grottesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1994).

disturbance with which Dickens explores energy, sexual aggression, and eroticism. Ambiguous semiotics of the bodily orifice also connect the two men to David through the oral gesture of yawning. Steerforth's lingering yawn as he enquires whether David has a sister, suggests the expanse of his all-consuming needs but also of his sexual capacity. His open-mouthed gesture registers Steerforth's animality, his hunting of easy prey, as he envisages a 'pretty, timid, little bright-eyed sort of a girl' whom he would 'liked to know'; there is an ambiguous inflection in the sexual connotations of knowledge as sexual consummation (76; ch.6). David does not see himself in this scenario but is nonetheless consumed by Steerforth's moonlit face, his 'mind running on him' all night (76; ch.6). Heep's dramatic yawning while Agnes sings for him indicates overfamiliarity, his disdain for social etiquette in this act belying his claims to rigid propriety. Hanging like a 'great bat [s]' over the house describes his vampiric, blood-sucking, and eroticised threat towards Agnes, emphasised through his jerking body and stretched-out neck (488; ch.39). It is a threat in which Heep revels, as he looks at David with the 'carved grin' of a gargoyle. When, finally, David cannot contain his violence against Uriah, it is a distinctly oral encounter and emasculating in its meaning. Striking him hard across the face, Heep loses a tooth (531; ch.42).<sup>44</sup>

For David, the mouth is the most vital component in his disciplinary project to master his heart and conform to gentlemanly ideals. But the suppression of desire is not successful, despite his claims of emotional unity at the end of the novel. In trying to force himself into a repressed state, Dickens shows that David denies his own identity. The conflict between who David is and who he wants to be is veiled by the 'culturally shared platitude of an all-reconciling housekeeper, Agnes'.<sup>45</sup> Biting into Murdstone's flesh as a child suggests that

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<sup>44</sup> McMaster, *Dickens the Designer*, p. 45, notes that 'David's literary hero, Roderick Random, similarly delights in demolishing his rivals' teeth'.

<sup>45</sup> Philip M. Weinstein, *The Semantics of Desire: Changing Models of Identity from Dickens to Joyce* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 37.

David sought to ingest some of Murdstone's power and to physically reverse the pattern of control. Months later, he is satisfied to see the imprint of his oral rage remained on Murdstone's hand (99; ch.8). Much tension in the novel derives from his instinct towards a passionate and aggressive oral mode. David is characterised by incontinent passion almost to the end of the novel when, abruptly, he is portrayed as 'leaping into [his] desired destiny', that of selflessness and self-discipline.<sup>46</sup> But the closure lacks coherence with the careful construction of David up to this point, eliding the issue of his appetites and eliciting Angus Wilson's comment that the ending is 'the most false of all his major books'.<sup>47</sup> In this novel, the erotic mouth has power, while virtue is largely impotent; it is notable that Agnes's mouth is never mentioned.

Through Agnes, David invents a fiction of innocent sexuality for himself, and thus it is critical that her body remains impenetrable and outside of Dickens's oral erotics. Not just David's 'sister', Agnes also functions as the angelic double essential for his heterosexual recovery at the end of the novel.<sup>48</sup> It is a construction that points to David's homoerotic fashioning, where male mouths are open, and bodies are permeated by other men materially and subconsciously. When Heep, with his ripe pear analogy, his erectile body, and smacking lips, suggests a threat to Agnes's impenetrability, David is enraged. But his rage erupts as much because of the threat to Agnes as his heterosexual saviour, as it is to her well-being. In his habitual confusion concerning his attraction-repulsion for Heep, David becomes obsessed with Heep's body and mouth. Many of Heep's actions are read by David through this oral-erotic lens, which is full of vitality and provides a persistent homoerotic cast over their relationship, as it does with Murdstone and Steerforth.

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<sup>46</sup> Weinstein, p. 23.

<sup>47</sup> Angus Wilson, 'Dickens on Children and Childhood', in *Dickens 1970*, ed. by Michael Slater (London: Chapman & Hall, 1970), pp. 195-227, (p. 209).

<sup>48</sup> David refers to Agnes as his sister several times, to various people, including to Agnes herself.

In this novel, porous bodies abound and are made legible through Dickens's poetics of the mouth and orality. But what is distinctive about Dickens's oral erotics and the porous body are that they are not tied to the Western literary tradition of the leaky female body and an opposing hard 'manly' body but are used to explore much broader concepts of sexuality, encompassing homosexuality and non-binary sexuality. Sexual relationships are constantly renegotiated through this model, which Dickens conveys through the liquidity and mutability of the mouth.

### 3.2 - 'With his mouth snarling like a tiger's': Oral Violence and the Erotics of the Mouth in *Great Expectations*

In *Great Expectations*, oral metaphors form the deep structure of the novel to such an extent that it seems as if Pip has been created to be consumed. Those metaphors, which create patterns of hunger and desire, reinforce a cannibalistic and destructive aspect to Pip's experiences rather than pleasure or sensuality. In this novel, the play of appetites is refracted through a much darker lens than that of *Copperfield*, manifesting a malevolence which is integrated into the texture of the novel. A malign eroticism underwrites the narrative as a sort of primal palimpsest. This leaves an ineradicable thread that, unlike David's experience, delineates rather than frustrates Pip's personal journey as he moves from one violent encounter to another. In Pip's attempts to repress his origins, his bid for self-transcendence is always accompanied by the threat of oral violence; Orlick, his villainous double with the tigerish, cannibalistic mouth, lurks on the outskirts only to emerge at the centre when least expected as a stark reminder of what is at stake for Pip.

Oral violence expressed through metaphors of oral assimilation defines Pip's significant relationships. His fantasies of desire, whether they are for affection, success, or

love, are inextricably tied up with pain and form the connective structure of the narrative. Personal bonds formed early with Magwitch and Joe are forged through a shared pain as ‘fellow-sufferers’ so that seeking pleasure, he expects pain (8; ch.2). It is this pattern that results in the eroticization of pain, as the precursor to pleasure, and one that informs his destructive relationship with Estella. Reading the oral semiotics of *Great Expectations* reveals the fundamentally masochistic nature of Pip’s education, at odds with Dickens’s assurances that he was writing an essentially comic novel; writing to Forster, he assured him that ‘you will not have to complain of the want of humour as in the *Tale of Two Cities*...I have made the opening, I hope, in its general effect exceedingly droll’.<sup>49</sup> Metaphors of sinister incorporation and oral aggression were occasionally *indirectly* recognised by some early critics; G. K. Chesterton, for example, observed that in this novel ‘for the first time the hero disappears’ and, in a ‘deadly sense’, its aim is to show that the hero is unheroic.<sup>50</sup> What deserves more critical attention is the way in which the mouth is a key site of identity formation through its function as an eroticised locus of vulnerability and the aggressive transfer of power.

Pip’s development from child to man is embedded in ‘oral metaphorization’; this is a novel of mouths, tongues, teeth, lips, biting and swallowing.<sup>51</sup> From the start, as he ponders on his lost family before Magwitch’s attack, a link between a desire for connection, pain and

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<sup>49</sup> Letter to John Forster [? early October 1860] in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Graham Storey, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-2002; 1997), IX, p. 325. Also see Collins, *Charles Dickens*, p. 427, where Collins explains how at the time of the novel’s publication its ‘drollery’ was ‘much noticed and welcomed with vociferous relief’; see E. S. Dallas, *The Times*, 17 October 1861, p. 6, in Collins, p. 431, stating that while Dallas did not consider the novel to be Dickens’s best work, ‘it is to be ranked among the happiest’. Andrew Sanders, ‘Great Expectations’, in *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by David Paroissien (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), pp. 422-32, (p. 423), quotes Dickens’s letter to Mary Boyle on December 28, 1860, that the early chapters were ‘universally liked’ because the novel ‘opens funnily and with an interest too’. John Forster, *Charles Dickens*, vol. 3, p. 801, explained that Dickens’s ‘grotesque tragi-comic conception’ was Pip’s relationship with Magwitch while the drollery of the opening refers to Pip’s relationship with Joe Gargery.

<sup>50</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Appreciation and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (London: J. M. Dent, 1911), p. 198.

<sup>51</sup> I borrow the phrase from Raymond F. Hilliard, *Ritual Violence and the Maternal in the British Novel, 1740-1820* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2010), p. 68.

imaginative fantasy is created and subsequently reinforced through the imagery of consumption and incorporation; just as the ground has swallowed Pip's family, he is himself in constant danger of being consumed. Pip's 'first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things' mingles all three (3; ch.1).<sup>52</sup> When Pip is presented as an edible object for Magwitch, desire for connection is shown to be more than painful but positively dangerous, collapsing communion into relationships structured by cannibalism.<sup>53</sup>

That the mouth carries such significance in Pip's narrative is shown by Magwitch's first advice to Pip, 'Give it mouth!' (4; ch.1). Oral metaphors of incorporation are evident even in the marshy landscape of the novel's opening scenes. Pip's family have been swallowed into the earth, which is topographically rendered like a mouth with its wet, dark mounds and the watery conduit like a throat leading to the 'savage lair' of the sea (4; ch.1). But this is not a warm sensuous mouth; rather it is a dark and primitive space. Ostensibly an order to speak up, Magwitch's words also suggest encouragement in a primal combat between the eaters and the eaten. In other words, it is advice to eat, or be eaten, an idea that permeates the novel. The convict's chattering teeth, which signal the tearing and ripping of flesh and not just shivering, transform Pip as thinking subject into a material body when Magwitch licks his lips at the sight of his 'fat cheeks' and threatens to feed off them (5; ch.1).<sup>54</sup>

Mouths and oral experiences are critical in the formation of subjectivity in this novel, as this first violent encounter shows. It is the potential in Pip's body, as a vehicle to feed off the society that shunned him, which henceforth satisfies Magwitch's desires. Yet this simultaneously renders Pip an unacknowledged cannibal consumer who feeds off Magwitch's

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<sup>52</sup> Hennessee, 'Gentlemanly Guilt', p. 311.

<sup>53</sup> See James E. Marlow, 'English Cannibalism: Dickens after 1859', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 23, (1983), 647-666, (p. 662), on how Magwitch replicates the 'insatiable gentleman' and an excellent discussion on the 'hunger for security that is English cannibalism'.

<sup>54</sup> See Douglas Steward, 'Anti-Oedipalizing *Great Expectations*: Masochism, Subjectivity, Capitalism', *Literature and Psychology*, 45.3 (1991), 1-16, for a discussion on Pip's 'thingness'.

wealth. Despite Pip's ignorance, the two form a circuitry of cannibalism that perverts Pip's fantasies of success and taints his relationships with others. More macabre images of incorporation are embedded into the opening scene and into the ensuing relationship between Pip and his convict. When Dickens writes that Magwitch was 'eluding the hands of the dead people, stretching up cautiously out of their graves, to get a twist upon his ankle and pull him in', there is a sense of Pip being swallowed up alongside him in the mists, an image that is repeated in his deathly encounter with Orlick near the end of the novel (7; ch.1).

Incorporative imagery emphasises the dangers for Pip, as Magwitch declares that Pip was his particular 'speculation' and though he, himself, is no gentleman, 'I am the owner of such' (319; ch.19). In Magwitch's project, the boundary between convict and gentleman is easily consumed. Claiming filial blood-ties to Pip, the convict places his hand on Pip's shoulder, but Pip's feeling that it is sure to be 'stained with blood' suggests a cannibalistic incorporation (319, ch.19). Recalling his grim, solitary life in Australia, Magwitch reinforces a sense of Pip as a desirable and consumable item through metonymic links to Pip as edible subject-object: 'I drops my knife many a time in that hut when I was eating my dinner or my supper, and I says to myself, 'Here's the boy again, a looking at me whiles I eats and drinks!' (317; ch.19). On meeting schoolboy Pip anonymously, Magwitch describes him as a 'likely young parcel of bones' (77; ch.10). Availing himself of their cannibalistic contract, Magwitch claims even Pip's voice as his own property, insisting that Pip shall read aloud to him. He seals the deal by putting Pip's hands to his lips in a formal oral communion (318; ch. 39).

To foreground Pip's education in the 'rules' of cannibalism and the perverse interweaving of plain and pleasure, Pip's Christmas dinner — the 'plump and juicy' pork — is depicted as interchangeable with Pip himself (27; ch.4). Pumblechook and Wopsle manage to confuse themselves and their appetites in a conversation about Pip who, had he been born a 'Squeaker', would have ended up on the plate in front of them, according to Wopsle (27;



ch.4). Pip, in an unintended ironic revenge, causes Pumblechook's choking fit; with Pumblechook's 'mouth like a fish' and looking 'as if he had just been all but choked', he later chokes on Pip's tar water and brandy concoction (25; ch.4). The image of Pumblechook's grotesque mouth plays on Pip's mind: 'I couldn't keep my eyes off him. Always holding tight by the leg of the table with my hands and feet, I saw the miserable creature finger his glass playfully, take it up, smile, throw his head back, and drink the brandy off' (29; ch. 4). This desire to plug Pumblechook's loquacious and greedy mouth resurfaces when Orlick, Pip's alter-ego, binds Pumblechook during a robbery, beats him and crams his mouth full of flowering annuals (462; ch.57).<sup>55</sup> As Pumblechook is a seedsman, it is perversely fitting to be choked with the fruits of his business.

But in another vicarious retribution for Pip there is a more complex image of Pumblechook reduced to a human vase, his mouth stuffed with bright flowers. It suggests a clownish tone, heightened by Joe's reporting style, but also conveys a grotesque gagging that stops up Pumblechook's breath as well as his cries. Harry Stone argues, convincingly, that Orlick is Pip's 'most terrifying extension' and Pip's silence on hearing of Pumblechook's demise suggests silent assent, lending weight to Stone's theory.<sup>56</sup> There is in addition a notable sinister 'floral' association with Dickens's tale of cannibalistic 'Captain Murderer':

Captain Murderer's mission was matrimony, and the gratification of a cannibal appetite with tender brides. On his marriage morning, he always caused both sides of the way to church to be planted with curious flowers; and when his bride said, 'Dear Captain Murderer, I never saw flowers like these before: what are they called?' he answered, 'They are called Garnish for house-lamb,' and laughed at his ferocious practical joke in in a horrid manner, disquieting the minds of the noble bridal company, with a very sharp row of teeth, then displayed for the first time.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See Julian Moynahan, 'The Hero's Guilt: The Case of *Great Expectations*', in *Great Expectations*, ed. by Edgar Rosenberg (London: Norton Critical Editions, 1999), pp. 654-663, on the violent mirroring of Orlick and Pip.

<sup>56</sup> Harry Stone, 'Fire, Hand, and Gate: Dickens' *Great Expectations*,' *The Kenyon Review*, 24 (1962), 662-91, pp. 669-670.

<sup>57</sup> From Charles Dickens, 'Nurse's Stories' in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, p. 150.

The tale, which he claimed to have heard hundreds of times, intruded often upon Dickens's mind, by his own admission.<sup>58</sup> In the cannibalistic preparation of human meat, there is a symbolic link between Orlick stuffing a floral garnish in Pumblechook's mouth and the seedman's fantasy of Pip as a piglet being prepared for slaughter by the butcher (27; ch.4). Oral aggressive images are not only directed at Pip but also provide a passive form of retribution for him. As Julian Moynahan argues, Orlick is the character who comes 'to define Pip's implicit participation in the acts of violence with which the novel abounds'.<sup>59</sup>

Recalling David and Heep's phallic battle of the apprentices, Orlick lunges at Pip with a red-hot bar when he is denied equal rights with him. The sparks are re-imagined by Pip as his own blood spattered across the anvil. But it is the oral warfare between the two sadists, Orlick and Mrs Joe, and Orlick's politics of restraint, that are significant in their effect on Pip's consciousness and worldly education. Often criticised for stylistic excess, Dickens's oral style can reveal great restraint, as in this scene where it conveys the violence of repression.<sup>60</sup> Insulted by Mrs Joe calling him a 'great idle hulker', Orlick challenges her with 'an ill-favoured grin', his wide coarse smile suggesting a gargoyle-like grotesqueness (113; ch.15).<sup>61</sup> It endows Orlick with a taint of sinister otherness but Dickens establishes an alignment between Orlick and Pip, not just through their work but through their attraction to Biddy, their employment at Satis House, their dislike of Mrs Joe and their ability to show emotional restraint. Pip silently observes how Mrs Joe responds to Orlick's taunting and how she 'performs' a violent outrage: 'true of all the violent women I have ever seen [...] consciously and deliberately took extraordinary pains to force herself' into a passion (114; ch.15). That she 'became blindly furious by regular stages' suggests, however, that it is

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<sup>58</sup> See above

<sup>59</sup> Moynahan, 'The Hero's Guilt', p. 657.

<sup>60</sup> See John Kucich, 'Repression and Representation' (1996).

<sup>61</sup> The open mouth of the architectural gargoyle functioned as a waterspout. The term gargoyle is an anglicization of *gargouille*, old French for throat, the oral connections being particularly relevant in Orlick's case.

actually Orlick who, knowing Mrs Joe's fiery temperament well, orchestrates her fury (114; ch.15). This is a performance that highlights the politics of the mouth and the careful exploitation of oral power. Pip watches with acute attention but no sympathy for Mrs Joe and through Orlick's oral aggression, he partakes vicariously in the humiliation of his sister.

In Dickens's semiotics of the mouth, as a development of the relationship between language and the body, there is a focus on its function as a socially controlled organ; in other words, the politics of the mouth, not simply what comes out of it but also its performativity, are regulated by social convention and hegemony.<sup>62</sup> It is not just verbal language but gestures too that constitute social codes; thus, Orlick's grinning and growling threaten Mrs Joe's superior status as the employer's wife as much as his insulting language does. Her shrieks are not, however, passionate responses, but an additional oral arsenal to her verbal insults, meant to reclaim her authority and demand attention. The energy expended on 'her road to frenzy' are in sharp contrast with Orlick's relative calm (114; ch.15). The journeyman's response might not at first glance suggest restraint as he fantasises about torturing the woman, "“Ah-h-h!” growled the journeyman, between his teeth, “I'd hold you if you was my wife. I'd hold you under the pump, and choke it out of you”” (114; ch.15). His violent fantasy of flooding Mrs Joe's mouth with gushing water — a Dickensian waterboarding — represents the desire to drown her orality, the source of her power, but it also recalls when Pip caused Pumblechook's choking fit on adulterated brandy to the same effect.

The mere suggestion that Mrs Joe could be Orlick's wife adds a layer of social and sexual insult and positions Orlick in the ascendancy. The combination of his clenched teeth and his frequent growling signify an unexpected and calculated restraint. From classical epic verse, the mouth is often figured as a cage for 'winged words' with the teeth acting as a fence

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<sup>62</sup> See Brooks, *Body Work*.

to restrain ill-advised speech.<sup>63</sup> As in the Homeric conceit of teeth forming a barrier against the dangerous mind, Orlick's teeth form a barrier against even worse invective and trap his rage inside his mouth.<sup>64</sup> The metaphor of clenched teeth as a physical barrier to prevent emotional and physical eruption was conventional, and one that Browning, for example, draws upon explicitly in his poem 'Donald'.<sup>65</sup> What is important here is to recognise how orality connects the material and physiological body with emotions. Those clenched teeth express the violent tensions in Orlick's desires.<sup>66</sup> In this way, the mention of Orlick's gritted teeth dramatically reinforces oral penetrative associations, especially since it is juxtaposed with the very idea of Pip's sister as a potential 'Mrs Orlick' (Orlick asserts 'I'd hold you, if you was my wife'). Orlick's frequent growls are a distinguishing feature of his idiolect; not only are they a sign of animalistic inarticulacy, but also of his restraint. They are an important part of Dickensian paralinguistics which enrich characterisation and inform the semiotics of the mouth; Orlick is not a stupid man but a cunning one and his growls are evidence of a reservoir of animal cunning. His anger is not displaced but intensified through this sub-verbal sign, hinting at what could be unleashed by his will. As Rebekah Scott contends, the growl in Dickens does not thwart meaning but is 'to fence in what is best left behind the teeth while at the same time treating one's auditor to more than a little taste of it'.<sup>67</sup> After Orlick's physical attack, Mrs Joe is rendered speechless equating to a consumption of Mrs Joe in so far as she is embodied in her belligerent speech.

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<sup>63</sup> See Griffith, 'A Homeric Metaphor'.

<sup>64</sup> See Donald Lateiner, 'Teeth in Homer', *Liverpool Classical Monthly*, 14 (1989), 18-23.

<sup>65</sup> See Browning's poem 'Donald' (*Jocaseria*, 1883), in *Robert Browning: Selected Poetry*, ed. by Daniel Karlin (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 291:

For, as Homer would say, 'within grate  
Though teeth kept tongue' my whole soul growled  
'Rightly rewarded, — Ingrate!'

Quoted in Scott, 'Snarling Charles', in *Dickens Style*, p. 194, n. 40.

<sup>66</sup> See Lateiner, 'Teeth in Homer', which he describes as an 'odontological essay', p. 18.

<sup>67</sup> Scott, 'Snarling Charles', p. 191.

The semiotics of the Dickensian cannibalistic mouth shape the narrative into an eroticised struggle when Orlick, the ‘tiger crouching to spring’, captures Pip, the ‘wolf’ (424; ch.14). Since breaking bodily boundaries is taboo, the boundary is often a place of continuous erotic tension. In the dark and blurry space of the sluice-house, Dickens depicts a dream state to emphasise the fusion between the two men; with Orlick painting himself as both victim and parody of Pip, the two men merge into one deviant form. Through Pip’s fear and Orlick’s violent desire, their confrontation represents the dissolving of absolute difference that Pip is desperate to maintain, heightened when he imagines that Orlick’s mouth waters for a taste of him (421; ch.14).<sup>68</sup> The predominance of oral imagery in this episode begins with the sluice house described through metaphors of the mouth: it is permeable, no ‘proof against the weather’, and coated with ‘ooze’; it is surrounded by choking vapours and, when the door ‘yielded’, it was dark and moist inside (419; ch.14). Oral metaphors extend into the physical and mental battle. Sensing Orlick’s hot breath, Pip struggles with him in the dark but testing and breaking their boundaries is deeply pleasurable for Orlick, as he shows by prolonging the kidnapping:

I strained my sight upon the sparks that fell among the tinder, and upon which he breathed and breathed, match in hand, but I could only see his lips, and the blue point of the match; even those, but fitfully. The tinder was damp – no wonder there – and one after another the sparks died out. The man was in no hurry [...] His enjoyment of the spectacle I furnished, as he sat with his arms folded on the table, shaking his head at me and hugging himself, had a malignity in it that made me tremble (420; ch.14).

The poetics in the imagery of Orlick’s eerie blue lips, the flying sparks, and the repetition of his ‘breathing and breathing’, show how Pip apprehends Orlick’s perverse desires by these

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<sup>68</sup> See Malchow’s compelling discussion on ‘Deviant Cannibals’ in *Gothic Images of Race*, pp. 96-110. See also, A. W. B. Simpson, *Cannibalism and the Common Law: The Story of the Last Tragic Voyage of the ‘Mignonette’ and the Strange Legal Proceedings to Which it Gave Rise* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), who cites many examples of maritime cannibalisation stories of abused boys, where sodomy and cannibalism are conflated (cited in Malchow); and, C. J. Rawson, ‘Cannibalism and Fiction (II)’, *Genre* 11 (1978) 227-313, on cannibalism, the sexual metaphors and ‘abnormal’ forms of sexual activity.

oral signs (420; ch.14). That Orlick's voice is re-embodied through his lips, heightens the sense of his malign orality. As with Orlick's growls, Pip also understands that Orlick's snarl and his 'suppressed voice' signify restraint and the pleasures of delay since at any point Orlick can release his cannibalistic urges (419; ch.14). To work himself up into this pleasurable state Orlick drinks copiously until it seems to induce his metamorphosis into primal aggression; swallowing slowly to intensify the erotic potential in their combat, he pours the dregs into his hand and licks them up like an animal and in the enactment of his name (426; ch.14). Through this oral gesture, he dramatically reinforces a sense of human nature gone awry. In the commingling of Orlick and Pip, Dickens explores perverse desire, but their eroticised struggle resists homoerotic readings and, instead, desire orbits around competitive heterosexuality with the mouth acting as the place holder for 'sick fancies'.<sup>69</sup>

The mouth often represents the centre of heterosexuality and sociality, where friendships and romance are made but, in this novel, it is also the centre of antisociality, where destructive orality, bestiality, and enemies emerge. Jagers is the apotheosis of this model of orality with his sadistic desire to 'smother, to take in and relish' another's pain.<sup>70</sup> As a locus of antisociality, Jagers lives in the oral world of the courtroom, where the wrong word is a death sentence. He embodies his name: a 'jagger' is a toothed chisel and to jag is 'to pierce with a sharp instrument'; in Jagers' case it is his orality that pierces.<sup>71</sup> Joe Gargery also inhabits an oral world but one that is benign; his orality is used to soothe and engender social relations. Jagers, however, has an 'excess' of masculinity in his 'exceedingly dark complexion' and impressively large head and hands (83; ch.11). He uses his imposing

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<sup>69</sup> Cohen, *Sex Scandal*, p. 54, argues that the physical combat between men in the novel is a 'form of contact too close for comfort' and 'we must recognize a certain ideological resistance in the text to such erotics'. The phrase is used by Miss Havisham (58; ch.8).

<sup>70</sup> See Curt Hartog, 'The Rape of Miss Havisham', *Studies in the Novel*, Autumn 1982, 14 (1982), 248-265, p. 261.

<sup>71</sup> From the *OED*: a 'jagger' is a 'toothed chisel'.

<<https://www-oed-com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/view/Entry/100623?rkey=uWnVQm&result=4#eid>> [accessed: 30.01.2021]

physicality as a complement to the power of his words. A sadistic subjugating power and his habit of biting the side of his finger when faced by adversaries conveys a cannibalistic emasculation. Jaggers, according to Wemmick, had always ‘set a man-trap, and was watching it’, but this trap is oral (198; ch.5). Jaggers has many associations with the oral gothic, including head-hunter of the judiciary with his collection of death masks constituting a cannibalistic trope. Wemmick himself, as Jaggers’ assistant, feeds off the dead, ironically joking of one deceased criminal ‘you liked your bit of game, didn’t you’, while he boasts of the spoils or what he terms ‘portable property’ (201; ch.5). It is a new world in many senses to Pip but a familiar one in terms of sadomasochistic desire and cannibalistic impulses.<sup>72</sup> He observes it particularly when watching Jaggers at work in the courtroom: ‘the magistrates shivered under a single bite of his finger. Thieves and thief-takers hung in dread rapture on his words’. Those words seem to Pip to be ‘grinding the whole place in a mill’ (202; ch.5). Jaggers chews on people, and spits them out, as his wont, yet that ‘dread rapture’ felt by all those around him conveys a sinister eroticism in his oral prowess. As with Pip, others recognise his danger but submit to his sadistic pleasure. Jaggers offers a lesson to Pip that undoes any faith he might have had in institutional integrity or professional ambition. Sadistic pleasure seems to underwrite so many of the power relations in the novel.

In Dickens’s representation of Bentley Drummle, he presents a sexual parasite to devalue the figure of the *born* gentleman. Dickens brings Pip and Drummle together as the two plots of Pip’s *Bildungsroman*, that is, his great social and sexual expectations, begin to converge as he heads towards loss; in a familiar pattern, it is as if Drummle is waiting to swallow up Pip. During a riotous evening spent at the Finches’ drinking club, Pip misinterprets Drummle’s sexual references in a toast to Estella. That Drummle introduces her

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<sup>72</sup> On my use of the term sadomasochism see p. 21, n.50.

name in their company is provocative enough, given that the venue is in the centre of Covent Garden, with its drinking dens and brothels:

‘I know that lady’, said Herbert, across the table, when the toast had been honoured.

‘Do you?’ said Drummle.

‘And so do I’, I added, with a scarlet face.

‘Do you?’ said Drummle. ‘*Oh, Lord!*’ (306; ch.19).

Dickens’s erotic poetics transform Drummle’s sarcastic emphasis into an allusion to sexual knowledge. There is no suggestion that Estella is a ‘fallen woman’, instead, this is a case of Drummle mocking the very idea of Pip having such knowledge. When their sparring reaches its climax in their feud at the Blue Boar, patterns of oral tropes and penetrative objects show how Drummle’s sadism, like Estella’s, allows him to dominate Pip. Drummle appears, unexpectedly, with a toothpick in his hand, an object associated in Dickens’s novels with cannibalistic characters and rapacious appetites.<sup>73</sup> Drummle then blocks Pip from the fire and, in a scene reminiscent of *David and Heep*, Pip has to put his hand ‘behind his legs for the poker’ (353; ch.4). Drummle does not move but, with shoulders squared, Pip ‘poked tremendously’ (353; ch.4). Like Heep, Drummle uses his mouth to communicate disdain and prowess by affecting a yawn and then whistling nonchalantly. That Pip is beneath him in physical, social, and sexual stakes is accentuated when Drummle glances at him in triumph with his ‘great-jowled face’ (354; ch.4). At this point, Drummle takes out a cigar and bites off the end to accentuate Pip’s feelings of emasculation. The final image of Drummle in the scene, is astride his horse with cigar glowing. In pointing out Drummle’s ‘slouching shoulders’ and ‘ragged hair’, Dickens conveys a ruffian who, despite the chasm between their social status, reminds Pip of Orlick (356; ch.4).

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<sup>73</sup> John Chester (*BR*) and Sir Mulberry Hawk (*NN*) carry toothpicks, while for Madame Defarge the toothpick is an emblem of her sexual and social rebellion.



Metaphors of the mouth encompass the spewing and spitting out of unwanted objects and subjects, including Orlick who is spewed out 'from the ooze' like a primitive beast to appear suddenly before Pip and Biddy (130; ch.17). In a similar way, Estella metaphorically spews out Pip as a coarse boy; her mouth, as befits the mouth of the beautiful Victorian girl, should suggest rosy lips and soft kisses, yet releases little but contempt. For abject Pip, however, this merely augments his appetite, and he becomes deeply attached to a masochistic pleasure. Thus, an appetite for Estella entirely consumes docile insufficient Pip who, groomed by his sister's sadism, becomes the second sex in the company of the females of Satis House. Reading the novel, then, as a narrative of hungry and often malign mouths shows how the desire for incorporation into society, into marriage, into family is pervasive.

Cannibalistic Satis House opens briefly and dramatically like a bulimic mouth to consume the common boy, Pip, and disgorge a deluded snob. Before the first meeting, Dickens emphasises Pip's hunger as a literal and metaphorical catalyst; by way of emphasis, Pumblechook offers him only crumbs and watered milk and, while 'gorging and gourmandising', fires arithmetic questions at Pip that prevent him eating anything at all (55; ch.8). Made to play with Estella, Pip is starved further when Miss Havisham orders Estella to 'beggar him' (61; ch. 8). The power struggle between them is repeatedly depicted in scenes of masochistic hunger. To be fed like a dog by Estella, who leaves his food and drink on the cobbles outside Satis House, suggests an ambiguous gustatory trial for Pip which fuses gratification and pain. He later transmutes the humiliation into a grandiose scene of dogs fighting for veal cutlets out of a silver basket: Pip in his dog/ 'savage young wolf' persona, ravenously consumes Estella who is figured as the veal in a silver basket (68; ch.9; 92; ch.11). Pip's oral fantasies, as a symptom of his subjectivity and exacerbated by his experience with cannibalistic adults, rely on scenes of eroticised sadomasochistic consumption. In this sense, the mouth as a site of pleasurable tactility and a repository of

disgust embodies both attraction and repulsion. Contact between two mouths thus expresses a whole range of emotions beyond the often-romanticised Victorian literary kiss.<sup>74</sup>

The kiss makes a sexual frontier of the mouth with its promise of intimacy and entrance into another body, but for Pip it represents a masochistic submission. His first kiss of Estella — not ‘with’ since there is no sense of communion — is preceded by her forceful slap to his face which he submits to with impressive restraint, sealing his mouth against crying, although he cries inwardly (82-83; ch.11). Pip serves himself up to Estella but extracts an addictive pleasure from it. His masochism complements Miss Havisham’s sadomasochistic vision of herself; she is laid out alongside her bridal cake after death as if serving herself up, knowing that ‘sharper teeth than teeth of mice have gnawed’ at her (89; ch.11). This imagined grotesque feast reinforces and taints Pip’s experience of eroticised and perverted forms of consumption; he is subsequently ‘beggared’ and fed like a dog again, when Estella meets him with a ‘bright flush upon her face as though something had happened to delight her’ (93; ch.11). Significantly, Pip has engaged in aggressive physical combat with Herbert Pocket before the fateful kiss and the two events correspond for Pip with feelings of arousal and pain. As William Cohen points out, ‘although in the logic of the novel’s plot, fights interpose at junctures of fierce romantic rivalry, the *narration* of the battles consistently provides the occasion for the playing out of erotic contact, both homo- and heterosexual, between combatants’.<sup>75</sup> The erotic potential in shared and tasted blood, as Pip punches Herbert in the mouth and cutting his hand on Herbert’s teeth, is channelled into the destructive heterosexuality of his relationship with Estella. Pip’s experience at Satis House epitomises oral antisociality in conversational, metaphorical, and physical terms, and so the kiss can only debase him.

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<sup>74</sup> See Elizabeth Gitter, ‘The Victorian Literary Kiss’, *Browning Institute Studies*, ‘Victorian Women and Men’, 13 (1985), pp. 165-180.

<sup>75</sup> Cohen, *Sexual Scandal*, p. 48.

Pip's vulnerability is located at his mouth but masks ravenous desires. As a constantly hungry boy, starved of affection and fed in highly charged scenes of resentment and threatening competition, his appetites are at first suppressed but they are passionately destructive once stimulated. In his craving for Estella, his delusions whet his appetite for wealth and gentlemanly status. Turning his back on his origins, however, becomes overwhelming in his drive to be reconstituted for Estella as a suitable boy. Since Pip is emotionally wedded to Estella, and therefore has no sexual outlet or expectations, his hunger is transmuted into uncontrolled economic consumption and he becomes one of the eaters. Pip's expectation of nourishment from the predatory world of the city is his downfall. No longer committed to appetite suppression, his financial gluttony overflows to almost corrupt Herbert and they commiserate over 'hollower and hollower' breakfasts (274; ch.15). In a scene redolent of his introduction to Magwitch, when Pip's excesses weigh him down, he holds his pageboy aloft in anger at offering him food he cannot afford (274; ch.15). Pip's anger, however, is increasingly self-directed as he despairs of his inability to deny himself the idea of Estella, the most desirable object of all.

A crucial part of Pip's unsentimental education is to learn from Estella the mechanics of extreme emotional suppression but when he feels such acute loss at the announcement of her marriage to Drummle, his metonymic mouth simulates an open wound on the body. The power of his deluded passion is rendered through this wound: 'in what ecstasy of unhappiness I got these broken words out of myself, I don't know. The rhapsody welled up within me, like blood from an inward wound, and gushed out' (363; ch.5). The poetics of ecstatic wounding evoke a re-gendered wedding night, leaving permeable Pip with a broken, bloodied body. It appears that Estella has consumed him not in a predatory fashion but, since Pip is willing, as an expression of total communion. That Pip feels complete union with Estella happens without her consent or even knowledge. As a phenomenological force, Estella inhabits his

perception and experience absolutely, 'in every line', in 'every prospect', and 'every graceful fancy' (362; ch.5). This draws into focus the insistent embodiment of Estella within Pip.

Hilary Schor argues that Pip never sees Estella as an independent subject but as bound to his vision of her: 'the "I" and "You" are always the "I": there is no Estella; and yet there can be a Pip only if he is in love with something he calls Estella'.<sup>76</sup> With Pip, Dickens shows that his daily life not just his love is shaped by his oral-incorporative impulses.

For Pip, oral incorporation is not a sensual assimilation but a masochistic, cannibalistic drive for omnipotent individuation. As he seeks to transcend his origins, however, Dickens shows that Pip's project is thwarted when he submits to Estella's predatory consumption. In this way, ironically, Pip's aspirations stagnate and trap him in stasis. David Copperfield's trajectory is presented more positively; with many of his exchanges, David breaks down bodily boundaries in an oral drive that *could* lead to a sort of 'reformation of the host' in a spiritual and metaphysical regrowth. However, Dickens presents David's desire for erotic fusion as a barrier to his own progress. In each of his personae, he is hostage to his incontinent mouth. Until he can overcome his fixations driven by an oral fetish, he is also destined for stasis as a character. As he fetishizes the mouths of others in his drive for assimilation, the figure of David seems to dissipate within the narrative. Oral eroticism in both novels, then, conveys a malign yet instinctual force. Through the metaphors of the mouth and the mix of oral violence and oral pleasure, Dickens shows how projects of self-creation are often deeply flawed in the youthful journey from great expectations to lost illusions.

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<sup>76</sup> Hilary Schor, "'If He Should Turn to and Beat Her'": Violence, Desire and the Woman's Story in Great Expectations', in Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Janice Carlisle (Boston: St. Martin's, 1996), pp. 541-57, (p. 546).

## Chapter 4 - Agency and The Erotic Female Mouth

Critics have argued that Dickens's descriptions of the female mouth do not tell us very much. Assessments on the paucity of detail conclude that 'the distinguishing characteristic of Dickens' language is the absence of details relating to those animal organs, the mouth and nose, apart from the occasional pouting in Dora Spenlow and Rosa Bud'.<sup>1</sup> Generally, there has been acceptance of the view that Dickens 'does not pay much attention to his characters' mouths'.<sup>2</sup> While Juliet McMaster is right, however, in noting how Dickens's descriptions of Rose Maylie and Agnes Wickfield are a 'flurry' of vague adjectives, they are not definitive of his female characterisation: Dickens's rhetorical strategies are more sophisticated than the descriptions of these two impressionistic angels imply.<sup>3</sup> Examining Dickens's women through a realist lens is a self-limiting exercise and leads back to the shortcomings of stereotypical descriptions — the bright eyes, the ringlets, the 'neat' nose, the cherry lips, and the rosebud mouth which are examined in this chapter.<sup>4</sup> Those rosebud lips seem such a clichéd method of signifying a virginal object of desire that, by the last unfinished novel, the heroine is reduced to the synecdochically named Rosa Bud. Yet in Dickens's writing, the semiotics and signs on the body, integrated within Dickensian poetics, suggest a very different interpretation. This chapter seeks to address the position that Dickens's women are not sexual creatures and do not have sexual agency. It will show how female sexual desire and agency are legible in the Dickensian female mouth and oral erotics. By interrogating Dickens's use of metaphor within his complex poetic patterns, the female mouth emerges as the hub and focal point of desire. This presents not only a richer characterisation and a better

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<sup>1</sup> Ingham, *Dickens, Women and Language*, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> McMaster, *Dickens the Designer* p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> McMaster, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> See Slater, *Dickens and Women*, p. 358, on how Dickens uses the adjective 'neat' to describe women as toys.

understanding of Dickens's conflicted representations of sexual women, but also offers an insight into Dickens's erotic imagination.

Since female sexuality was 'unnarratable' in the nineteenth-century novel, Helena Michie argues that Victorian fiction represents the female body through the synecdoche of parts, turning body parts into fetishes in the process.<sup>5</sup> In this way, Dickens fetishizes the female mouth not only to present the physicality of the female body as an object of desire, but also to express an extratextual abstract concept of sexual agency. Oral poetics are of central importance in narratives that seek to engage with ideas concerning female sexuality.<sup>6</sup> Those poetics of the mouth intersect with metonymic patterns of oral erotics and offer a new reading of characters who have often been categorised as stereotypes or grotesque caricatures. Natalie McKnight, writing on gender in Dickens, contends that:

It is easy to overemphasize Dickens's reliance on Victorian gender stereotypes, but to do so is to miss the richness of his fictional characterizations. Does Dickens rely on gender stereotypes? Certainly. Does he reveal the contradictions and the tensions in these stereotypes? Absolutely. Does he transcend the gender stereotypes? Almost always.<sup>7</sup>

Patricia Ingham similarly disputes that Dickens's stereotypes are fixed or wooden constructions, arguing that they are never truly fixed because the language that creates them is fluid and relative to context.<sup>8</sup> Once we move away from questions of realism or stereotypes, we see that Dickens's fusion of standard and non-standard forms creates a different sort of characterisation. Taking female cultural stereotypes and symbolic images, Dickens reimagines them to create highly original characters who are more complex than has often been acknowledged. In this way, he creates sexually assertive mature women in the

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<sup>5</sup> Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*, p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> The unnarratable is a phrase coined by Gerald Prince, 'The Disnarrated', *Style* 22 (1988), 1-8, and defined as 'that which cannot be narrated or is not worth narrating [...] because it transgresses a law (social, authorial, generic, formal)', p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Natalie McKnight, 'Dickens and Gender', in *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by David Paroissien (Chichester: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 186-198, (p. 197).

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Ingham, *Dickens, Women and Language*, p. 3.

Frenchwomen, Hortense (*BH*) and Madame Defarge, through the bold and inventive poetics of the feline mouth.<sup>9</sup> With the same artistic flair, he takes the conventional cherry lips and rosebud mouth and invests objects of desire with sexual agency. This agency is limited but important in understanding his representation of female sexuality.

#### 4.1 - Cherry Lips

The cherry and cherry lips are laden with the metonymic inference of virginity. In replicating the colour and texture of the mouth and of female sexual anatomy, associations of ripeness conceptualise what Ingham terms the ‘nubile girl’ as a sweet, fleshy object.<sup>10</sup> That it was a pervasive and sexualised metaphor is epitomised in John Everett Millais’s iconic portrait ‘Cherry Ripe’ (1879).<sup>11</sup> The title alludes to the Thomas Campion poem (1617) of the same name, which imagines a young girl’s lips as cherries that cannot be kissed until the girl has declared them ripe. This metonymic connection, which suggests the sexual maturing of the nubile girl, underpins Dickens’s poetics of the cherry to suggest the young girl as luscious fruit. Rather than simple suggestions of sweetness and attractive, blooming health, however, he foregrounds a more sexualised intense pinkness with the imagery of flesh and juxtaposes it with male aggression; in *Edwin Drood* (1870), John Jasper alludes to Rosa Bud when he remarks that ‘a man need only pluck the golden fruit that hangs ripe on the tree for him’ (58; ch.8).<sup>12</sup> Shielding impropriety, in *Barnaby Rudge* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the cherry

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<sup>9</sup> Feline imagery is also used to describe the complex sexuality of Rosa Dartle and Carker, but in this chapter I focus on the Frenchwomen. Dickens uses cultural stereotypes to push the boundaries of female sexuality further, without the danger of impugning the ‘Englishwoman’.

<sup>10</sup> The phrase was coined by Ingham, *Dickens, Women and Language*, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> The portrait was created as a print for the centrefold in the 1880 Christmas Annual of *The Graphic* and sold more than 600,000 reproductions. See chapter one on Millais’s portrait.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, ed. by Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). All further references are to this text.

metonym is overlaid with a deceptive comic inflection to create Dolly Varden and Charity/Cherry Pecksniff.

Roman Jakobson's writing on metonymy and poetics is useful in understanding Dickens's techniques for writing sexuality through orality.<sup>13</sup> Jakobson writes that 'the supremacy of the poetic function over the referential function does not obliterate the reference but make it ambiguous. The double-sensed message finds correspondence in a split addresser, in a split addressee, as well as in a split reference'.<sup>14</sup> It is this splitting in the poetics of Dickens's metonymy that allows Dolly to be read as an innocent coquette, naive to Hugh's designs, but also through the iteration of metonymic cherry lips, as a female with sexual awareness and desires, who reads his behaviour astutely. The same applies to Nell, who is infantilised in her delicacy but sexualised through Quilp's projection of arousal onto 'chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell' (82; ch.9). Since Dickens has made it clear that Nell is *not* chubby, but tiny and pale as Quilp himself observes, 'so small, so compact, so beautifully modelled, so fair, with such blue veins and such little feet, and such winning ways', the alternative metonymic inference is that she is sexualised by Quilp into the body of an aroused woman (82; ch.9). It is a poetic device foregrounded by the erotic innuendo of Quilp's remark, 'what a nice kiss that was — just upon the rosy part' (82; ch.9). Jakobson's contention that 'poetics makes a verbal message a work of art' is evident in Dickens's presentation of female sexuality.<sup>15</sup>

*Barnaby Rudge*, Natalie McKnight argues, is 'the most erotic Dickens novel' and that 'Dolly Varden is the very embodiment of a cherry; "dimpled and fresh", "so rosy", "so

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<sup>13</sup> See Roman Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics', *Style in Language*, ed. by Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), pp. 350-377.

<sup>14</sup> Jakobson, p. 85.

<sup>15</sup> Jakobson, p. 1.



plump””; Dolly is so relentlessly pink.<sup>16</sup> In the description of Dolly in the woods, Dickens paints her as an eroticised Little Red Riding Hood, focusing on her ‘animated pinkness’:

As to Dolly, there she was again, the very pink and pattern of good looks, in a smart little cherry-coloured mantle, with a hood of the same drawn over her head, and upon the top of that hood, a little straw hat trimmed with cherry-coloured ribbons, and worn the merest trifle on one side—just enough in short to make it the wickedest and most provoking head-dress that ever malicious milliner devised. And not to speak of the manner in which these cherry-coloured decorations brightened her eyes, or vied with her lips, or shed a new bloom on her face, she wore such a cruel little muff, and such a heart-rending pair of shoes (160; ch.19).

Ironically, despite the careful detailing of Dolly’s outfit, she is reduced to a synecdochic cherry. That the ensemble is both wicked and provoking is more unsettling still, as Dickens presents edible Dolly. It is compounded as McKnight argues, because Dickens was well aware of the metaphorical use of ‘muff’ and that it makes more sense than the literal meaning in the context.<sup>17</sup> But Dolly is a discordant, complex characterisation since she is presented as fluctuating between an object of desire and a girl with erotic agency through the eyes of a male writer. Dolly is described as teasing and withholding her favours, with the ‘cruel’ muff accentuating her sexual agency. Emphasising her erotic qualities, the ribbons seem to merge with her body as they tremble when she unexpectedly encounters Joe. Dickens cannot resist playing on the sexual allusions; Mrs Varden is said to describe Joe, who is gazing in awe at Dolly, as ‘like a pump’ — presumably about to gush forth at any moment — and, on hearing this, Dolly is said to blush so hard that the cherry-coloured hood appears pale (162; ch.19). Through the poetics of pinkness, Dickens draws the narratorial gaze to Dolly’s ‘ripe’ body.

The salacious edge is heightened when wolfish Hugh accosts Dolly in the woods, where Dickens presents Dolly’s lips and mouth as essential cyphers for her state of arousal. ‘Hugh the Maypole’ is said to force his way into her path and from there, the language

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<sup>16</sup> Natalie McKnight, ‘The Erotics of *Barnaby Rudge*’, in *Dickens, Sexuality and Gender*, ed. by Lillian Nayder (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 285-98, (p. 285).

<sup>17</sup> McKnight, (2016), p. 288.

becomes saturated with references to her lips and her orality. Although she is completely still as they gaze upon each other, Hugh points out that Dolly is panting; ‘why do you spend so much breath in avoiding me’ he asks, then leans over her so that she can feel *his* ‘breath upon her forehead’ (172; ch.21). Her sexuality coheres in her lips; Hugh ‘renames her Sweetlips’ and inflicts a kiss upon them as a ‘fine’ (172-173; ch.21). When Dolly cries out, she does so ‘in an ecstasy’ [sic] (173; ch.21). Hugh and Dolly’s coded communication evokes theatrical modes with Dolly performing the coquette role and Hugh as the virile seducer. Her cherry-coloured ribbons are described as ‘crushed’ and her hat ‘out of shape’, suggesting that more than Dolly’s fashionable accessories have been violated (173; ch.21). Hugh’s threat is conflated by Dickens into something much closer to an arousing sexual encounter, but it is female arousal as imagined by both a Victorian male author and male illustrator and is problematic as the later attempted rape scene bears out.

Although shaken, Dolly’s reactions complicate the encounter with her implied attraction to Hugh, the ‘tall, dark figure’ of a ‘handsome satyr’ (180; ch.22). Dolly, however, while giddy ‘has no notion of being carried by storm’ and, as the narrator points out, aims to make her own choices (255; ch.31). Her sense of agency and sexual self-awareness is emphasised in illustrations of this scene in the woods, where she peers archly over her shoulder at Hugh and looks distinctly less than frightened. When she looks at the stars in a ‘manner so bewitching, *she* knew it!’ (179; ch.22). Dickens is keen to emphasise Dolly’s awareness of her effect on men and how ‘curious’ it is that ‘she looked so innocent and unconscious when she turned her eyes on Joe, that it was quite provoking’ (179; ch.22). The idea that Dolly performs innocence yet signals sexuality with her mouth, is a troubling motif underlying all her encounters. I am not suggesting that Dickens is portraying Dolly as cynically manipulative, but that he inflects her innocence with her developing knowledge of her attractions and how they offer both some agency but also peril. While Dickens endows

Dolly with some agency, it is hijacked by male desire into coquettish provocation. The closure of the narrative brings the closure of her sexuality, which is sublimated into socially acceptable domesticity and companionate marriage. This decline begins when she is kidnapped in a disquieting replication of an eighteenth-century seduction-rape plot. Dolly's power and polish wane after this event, along with her exotic allure and her cherry-lips disappear from the text.

Although Dickens presents Dolly as a sexually desirable young woman, initially, she resists that objectivity through her voice and action. It is Dolly who chooses Joe as her husband and when Simon Tappertit attempts to take her, she fights him off. More importantly, Dickens shows that Dolly is fully aware of the situation: 'it was sufficiently evident both to Emma and to the locksmith's daughter herself, that she, Dolly, was the great object of attraction; [...] it was not very difficult to foresee whose prize she would become' (565; ch.71). Dolly is also aware of what is intended should the men 'indulge in the softer passion' (565; ch.71) Dickens's ironically sensual euphemism disturbs, given the violence and the threat of rape. When Hugh addresses Dolly as 'you, so bright-eyed, and cherry-lipped' it draws attention to the redness of her lips but also alludes to ripeness as a metaphor for sexual maturity (471; ch.59). Her self-awareness, however, is increasingly eroded through objectification. By intensifying the oral coding, Dolly's portrayal descends into what Ingham terms 'ghost pornography' and threatens any sense of agency.<sup>18</sup>

Poor Dolly! Do what she would, she only looked the better for it, and tempted them the more. When her eyes flashed angrily, and her ripe lips parted, to give her rapid breathing vent, who could resist it [...] who could be insensible to the little winning pettishness which now and then displayed itself even in the sincerity and earnestness of her grief? (475; ch.59).

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<sup>18</sup> Ingham, *Dickens, Women and Language*, p. 37.

Dickens's disconcertingly lecherous language transmutes her agency — her 'winning pettishness' — into a sexual provocation. Against a backdrop of sexual assault, he foregrounds Dolly's parted 'ripe lips' in what might be Hugh's fantasy of her arousal but the direct address points away from Hugh and towards the writer (565; ch.71). By inserting himself into the narrative action, the narrator seems to betray Dolly's quest to assert herself. Gradually, within Hugh's cellar, Dolly's charms are contained and, as Dickens phrases it, the 'down upon fruit' disappears (566; ch.71). Dickens has taken Dolly and Hugh as far as he dares, and not long after, Hugh's Sweetlips becomes Mrs Joe Willet.

In placing Dolly with Emma and the improbable Miggs into Hugh's makeshift harem, Dickens circulates the anxieties of the riot around Dolly's body. This central narrative motif of the disruptive monster with a raging appetite can be read thematically with the body of the mob raging in society and with Dickens's parody of the coquette, Miss Miggs. The counterfeit-coquette, Miggs, functions as a travesty of Dolly's cherry-like attractions. She is thin with what Tappertit calls a 'deficiency of outline', 'sharp', 'sour' and 'acid' (183; ch.22; 657; ch.82). Starved of sexual attention, Miggs cannot disguise her appetite, whereas Dolly's is carefully controlled. In Miggs, Dickens takes the language of oral eroticism to a comic but cruel excess, where the stereotypical spinster is brought up close to sexual desire but rejected. Since the 'scraggy' Miggs has been declared unmarriageable, the reader is able 'to follow [her] even into the sanctity of her bedchamber', suggesting that this is too comical to be improper (79; ch.9). Using the metonymy of the female keyhole and the male as key, Miggs declares 'Oh! what a Providence it is that I am bolted in', even though she is not. The suggestion is ambiguous; either she is not a virgin, or she wishes not to be. William Cohen notes that this orifice metaphor is 'not only for looking but for consuming as well'.<sup>19</sup> It is an

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<sup>19</sup> Cohen *Embodied*, p. 32.

expression of bodily penetration and ingestion, recurring frequently in Dickens's work.

Miggs's failed attempt to embody the lock of sexual communion contrasts markedly with Knight Browne's illustration, 'Joe Bids Dolly Good-bye' where Dolly stands in the light of a window under the gaze of Joe, surrounded by multiple keys and open locks [fig. 4.1].

Equidistant between Dolly and Joe, at hip level, is an upright phallic key firmly in a lock, hinting at their future union. On the floor at her feet lies an unlocked chain, suggesting a cast-off chastity belt, with the key to one side, which Dolly indicates with her foot peeking out from under a lifted skirt. Miggs is presented as an embodied keyhole without a key, her prominent hungry jaw and thin lips are an explicitly opposing sign to sexualised cherry lips. In a mirroring effect, Dickens's inverts oral erotics to parody the spinster. Unlike Dolly's 'provocative' panting, which arouses Hugh, Tappertit dislikes Miggs most when she 'panted for breath' (183; ch.22). Through the metaphor of female bodies as food, Miggs is described as 'lamb' by Dennis the hangman alluding to both a lamb to the slaughter and in an ironic reference to mutton (559; ch.70). Dennis thrusts his tongue into his cheek and winks to complete the image.

Having created a bold female in Dolly, who becomes increasingly sexually aware, Dickens ultimately loses confidence in her sexuality. It is as if he has constructed his own artistic dichotomy, which he cannot bring himself to resolve: how can sexual Dolly evolve into married woman and mother? For Dickens, in this early novel, the process is too complex and, instead, he extinguishes Dolly's spark. This disconnect in Dickens's novels, between the sexuality of the eroticised pretty girl and that of mature women or less pretty girls, is more noticeable in the early novels where satire and parody consistently 'neutralise' any sense of sexuality in the 'un-girlish' female.

In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the poetics of the cherry and rosy lips are used parodically to convey sibling rivalry for a husband. 'Playful' Merry is signalled as incontestably attractive

through her rosy lips, whereas Cherry, like Miggs, embodies an ironic opposite signified by her sharp and dripping red nose. Cherry Pecksniff is demoted to an unloved object even by her sister, who addresses her in third person as 'it', rather than use direct address (11; ch.1):

‘Thank you my sweet’, said Merry, pursing up her rosy lips. ‘Much obliged to it for its advice. Oh! Do leave me alone, you monster, do!’ This entreaty was wrung for her by a new proceeding on the part of Mr Jonas, who pulled her down, all breathless as she was, into a seat beside him on the sofa, having at the same time Miss Cherry on the other side (287-8; ch.20).

Selecting the diminutive, Cherry, as a substitute for her real name, Chastity, is a fine example of Dickensian irony. The pun is cruelly extended when Cherry is abandoned at the altar and consigned to a state of chastity despite her eagerness for marriage. Her last name, too, has unflattering oral connotations as if, like her father, she is pecking and sniffing for potential suitors. Pecksniff’s attempts to market his daughter to Jonas Chuzzlewit are couched in the terms of ripeness and fruit befitting her ironic name, but not her:

‘How’s Charity?’  
‘Blooming, Mr Jonas, blooming’  
‘And the other one — how’s she?’  
‘Volatile trifler!’ said Mr Pecksniff, fondly musing. ‘She is well — she is well. Roving from parlour to bedroom, Mr Jonas, like the bee’ (262; ch.8).

Pecksniff’s allusion to Merry as a bee presumably making honey in the bedroom is disconcerting but it proves more enticing to Jonas than Cherry’s ‘blooming’ state. Highlighting the mixed messages in this male ‘transaction’, the repetition of ‘blooming’ is not simply an example of Pecksniff’s idiolect but emphasises the fact that Cherry is past her ‘blooming phase’ and is considered relatively old for a bride. Pecksniff feels the need to exaggerate her freshness in the hope of attracting Jonas. By manipulating figurative conventions, Dickens reshapes them to suit the context; he can invoke female sexual autonomy through associated oral erotics, as with Dolly Varden, or subvert the implied meaning for comedic effect, as with the afflicted Cherry Pecksniff. Polhemus writes that

Dickens ‘can imagine sex only as a quick burst of flame that throws people into hideous conjugal postures and leaves them in agony and weakness’.<sup>20</sup> This is true in the representation of Dolly, who is weakened as a character once her eroticism is withdrawn, but Dickens’s imagining of sexual desire is more complicated than quick bursts; his poetics often present a more nuanced and elaborate development of desire.

#### 4.2 - ‘Making a Rosebud of her Mouth’

In Dickensian sexual inference, the rosebud’s symbolic value with its connotations of delicacy, fragrance and beauty is lent to descriptions of young girls; it is evident in Rose Maylie in *Oliver Twist* and Lady Dedlock’s maid Rosa in *Bleak House*. Dickens also valued the long tradition of the rosebud for the metonymic blooming of female sexuality, heightened by its colour of arousal and the suggestion of female sexual arousal and anatomy. Long before Victorian writers exploited the connection between rosebud lips and female sexual anatomy, it was a well-worn euphemism. As Natalie McKnight points out, in her compelling assessment of sexual allusion in *Edwin Drood*, ‘when Robert Herrick exhorted readers to “gather ye rosebuds while ye may”, he wasn’t just talking about picking flowers’.<sup>21</sup> In Dryden’s *The Assignation; or, Love in a Nunnery* (1673), Viola berates her friend through the imagery of the opening rosebud, declaring that ‘you a very forward Rose-bud: you open apace, Gentlewoman’.<sup>22</sup> Tennyson uses similar imagery in *Rosebud*,

The night with sudden odour reele’d,  
The southern stars a music peal’d,

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Polhemus, *Erotic Faith: Being in Love from Jane Austen to D. H. Lawrence* (London: University of Chicago Press), p. 159.

<sup>21</sup> Natalie McKnight, “‘A little humoring of Pussy’s points!’”; or, Sex — The Real Unsolved *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Dickens Quarterly*, 30 (2013), 55-63, (p. 55).

<sup>22</sup> John Dryden, *The Assignation; or, Love in a Nunnery* (London: Newcomb, 1673) <https://archive.org/details/assignationorlov00dryd/page/n5> (p. 6) [accessed 04.08.2021]

Warm beams across the meadow stole;  
For love flew over grove and field,  
Said, "Open rosebud, open, yield"

The Dickensian rosy mouth also encodes the virgin and, paradoxically, the loss of her virginity, but its place in Dickens's idiosyncratic sexual economy offers more than a simplistic emblem for the nubile girl. Intimacy, secrecy, the language of ambiguity, the displays of excess and the performance of protracted eroticism converge at the female mouth. Patricia Ingham argues that Dickens's language insists upon the passivity of the nubile heroine, which is reinforced through images and metaphors of delicacy and an absence of 'bodily contours'.<sup>23</sup> The 'essence' of that passivity, she writes, is 'absence, ignorance, negation of sexuality', where littleness cloaks the asexual implications of 'slight' under reassuring overtones of domesticity'.<sup>24</sup> While I agree that passivity and an absence of body are dominant characteristics of, say, Florence Dombey, Mary Graham, Emma Haredale, and Agnes Wickfield, this is not true of Dora Spenlow, Rosa Bud, or Amy Dorrit; although slight in figure, their physicality is embodied in their mouths. It is their mouths that bring intimate relationships into being and here that a nuanced eroticism resides.

In Juliet John's study of deviant females, what she terms the distortion of the 'raw materials of melodrama — passion, theatricality, and moral polarity/certainty' underlies the poetics of Dickensian female mouth and the semiotics of sexual agency.<sup>25</sup> Rosy lips encode flirtatiousness and oral license in the nubile girl or coquette, not only in her innuendo and repartee but in suggestive and performative physicality. Dickensian interpretations of this type are evident in Dora Spenlow, Dolly Varden, Bella Wilfer, and Rosa Bud. Their inversions, the widow and spinster, Flora Finching and Miggs, provide a fascinating and subversive oral erotic antithesis.

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<sup>23</sup> Ingham, *Dickens, Women and Language*, pp. 18-20.

<sup>24</sup> Ingham, pp. 18-19.

<sup>25</sup> John, *Dickens's Villains*, pp. 205-06.



In *David Copperfield*, the rosy-lipped girl conveys eroticism as control, endowing Dora with an agency that has often been overlooked.<sup>26</sup> Delicate Dora Copperfield has been described as a failed heroine, ‘the fragile wax doll par excellence’.<sup>27</sup> But Dora is anything but waxy and despite David’s frequent efforts, she proves impossible to mould into the ideal housewife or, indeed, any type of housewife. After yet another entreaty by David for her to take up domestic duties, she simply uses her sexuality in a performance of oral erotics to re-establish the foundations of their relationship very much on her terms:

But I haven’t got any strength at all’, said Dora, shaking her curls. ‘Have I, Jip? Oh, do kiss Jip, and be agreeable!’ It was impossible to resist kissing Jip, when she held him up to me for that purpose, putting her own bright, rosy little mouth into kissing form, as she directed the operation, which she insisted should be performed symmetrically, on the centre of his nose. I did as she bade me - rewarding myself afterwards for my obedience - and she charmed me out of my graver character for I don’t know how long (461-462; ch.37).<sup>28</sup>

The irony is striking as Dora claims a lack of strength but proceeds to direct her husband with ease, using her ‘bright, rosy little mouth’. The words, ‘purpose’, ‘directed’, ‘insisted, and ‘bade’, together with ‘rewarding’ David for his obedience, all point to her dominance in a relationship based on sexual bartering. Dickens inserts strangely deviant patterns of behaviour into their intimacy such as when Dora draws on David’s face, first putting his pencil to her ‘rosy lips’ which, he says, delights him (543; ch.44). It is a loaded sign as in trying to distract David from his writing, Dora threatens to swallow his occupation

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<sup>26</sup> Dora and David’s romance has been dismissed as innocent and childlike by, for example, David himself, who calls it his ‘first mistaken impulse’ (567; ch.45) and by critics including, Buckton, “‘The Reader Whom I Love’”, p. 200, who describes the marriage as a ‘symptom of romantic folly’; Richard J. Dunn, *Charles Dickens: ‘David Copperfield’: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.10-11, who writes that Dora’s silliness establishes her ‘ineptitude’ for marriage; Brown, ‘The Lady, the Lapdog, and Literary Alterity’, p. 41, asserts that Dora is ‘too innocent’ to be erotic; and Stone, *The Night Side of Dickens*, p. 353, argues that their passion is ‘foolish and innocent’. Margaret Flanders Darby is an exception, offering an astute reappraisal of Dora in ‘Dora and Doady’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 22 (1993), 155-169.

<sup>27</sup> Catherine Golden, ‘Late Twentieth-Century Readers in Search of a Heroine Angels, Fallen Sisters, and Eccentric Women’, *Modern Language Studies*, 30 (2000), 5-19 (p. 8).

<sup>28</sup>The intimate eroticized relationships between young women and their lapdogs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been the subject of persuasive scholarship, including Brown’s ‘The Lady, the Lapdog, and Literary Alterity’. However, Brown considers Dora too ‘innocent’ for any implied sexual innuendo, whereas I argue to the contrary.

metaphorically by putting the symbol of his trade into her mouth. These shades of fellatio in the act, emphasise the erotic power of Dora's mouth in captivating David. There is 'unavoidable inference' of sexuality, here, in this oral performative play. The 'kissing form' of Dora's inviting mouth evokes theatrical gesture and the 'sensual marketplace' of Victorian theatre.<sup>29</sup> Juliet John argues that nineteenth-century theatre is key to the contextualisation of Dickens's female characters and that characters who deviate from the cultural ideal violate the 'unwritten Victorian code of ideal of femininity'.<sup>30</sup>

Dora's tragedy is that her carefully curated construction of erotic vulnerability is unfortunately matched by her physical vulnerability. It is also problematic that David is an 'active co-creator' in Dora's performance of child bride, contributing to their marital failures.<sup>31</sup> Dickens believed that 'every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage'.<sup>32</sup> Through her excessive oral gesturing — the coyness, the pouting and lisping — the coquette character corroborated those gender codes that aligned pretty females with manipulative and disingenuous behaviour.<sup>33</sup> Theatrical conventions also had an impact on how Victorians read the semiotics of the body in Dickens.<sup>34</sup> Tracy C. Davis explains how the sexualised context of the theatre and the erotic coding of the actress contributed to a shared language of signs for the audience — especially the male audience.<sup>35</sup> Given Dickens's affinity with the theatrical world, it is not surprising that the gestural coding of the desirable girl appears in his work, although it is in a more complicated form than has often been recognised.<sup>36</sup> Dora's depiction is an example of

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<sup>29</sup> Tracy C. Davis, 'The Actress in Victorian Pornography', in *Victorian Scandals: Representations of Gender and Class*, ed. by Kristine Ottesen Garrigan (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), pp. 99-103, (p. 109).

<sup>30</sup> John, 'Seriously Deviant Women', in *Dickens's Villains*, p. 200.

<sup>31</sup> Emma Rayner, 'The Doctor-Coquette Nexus in *Middlemarch*, *Villette*, and *The Woodlanders*', in *Victorian Network*, 8 (2018), 71-92, (p. 74).

<sup>32</sup> Charles Dickens, speech to the Royal General Theatrical Fund, March 29, 1858; cited in Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> See Rayner, 71-92.

<sup>34</sup> See Vlock, *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Culture*, pp. 80-82.

<sup>35</sup> Davis, *The Actress*, pp. 99-133.

<sup>36</sup> Rayner, pp. 72-73.

Dickens reshaping and exploiting the coquette stereotype through nuance to complicate the literary form of the infantilised, desirable girl. It is a matter of not affirming David's biased narration but, instead, of reobserving Dora.

Dora's performative mouth is a site of eroticised resistance, not simply an erotic referent. I am not suggesting here that Dora is able to maintain her control over David, or that her sexuality is sophisticated, but rather that she is not ignorant nor completely innocent of her sexual power. She also resists David's attempts to force his way into her affections by placing the snapping dog between them. But Dora's overt displays of 'captivating' behaviour and her 'childish, winning way' can be construed as erotic play, with a focus on her captivating orality (464, 461; ch.37). Davis explains that for Victorian readers, with the 'long pictorial tradition of inferred sexuality in the subject, the knowing reader [...] sees more than appears to be represented'.<sup>37</sup> When Dora is 'making a rosebud of her mouth', the semiotics of the rosebud mouth are a sign of her erotic hold on David, which is much more complex than the childish romance certain critics have identified.<sup>38</sup> Dora's childishness is an eroticised performance, much the same as Clara Copperfield's artful coyness, whispering, and kissing. As with Clara, Dickens writes an unsettling sexuality into their infantilised behaviour.<sup>39</sup>

With Dickens's female characters, sexuality emerges in a conceptual blending of the material mouth, the rosy lips and fleshy interior, with the abstract orality of consumption, penetration, and feminine paralinguistics. Dora's lips make contact with David's in the flesh, but there is also a sense of an inscrutable female power embodied in her mouth. Dora controls David by delaying the satisfaction of his desire. By offering Jip's nose as a proxy for her

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<sup>37</sup> Davis, p. 109.

<sup>38</sup> In Dinah Maria Mulock Craik, *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1859), p. 160, Dora became the embodiment of hopelessly passive women: 'only picture these poor little silly Doras living, instead of, happily, dying!'. This summation persists amongst contemporary critics; for example, Sarah Bilston, *The Awkward Age: in Women's Popular Fiction, 1850-1900: Girls and the Transition to Womanhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), describes Dora as a model of permanent immaturity', p. 47.

<sup>39</sup> See chapter five on childish orality and sexual agency.

mouth, she knowingly amplifies his desire; what is suspended by her ‘kissing form’, but no kiss, embodies the power and allure of the forbidden (462; ch.37). It is a problematic start to their relationship because their romance is rooted in heightened erotic delay, rendering Dora’s mouth more enticing, yet simultaneously engendering the beginning of resentment in David for what he sees as her power. When he attempts to wrest control, she calls him a ‘naughty Blue Beard’ and kisses him out of this mood (543; ch.44). Ironically, David *is* Dora’s Bluebeard since the marriage ultimately consumes her, acknowledged by David in his grotesque analogy, confessing that he is ‘always playing the spider to Dora’s fly and always pouncing out of my hole to her infinite disturbance’ (593; ch.48).

In Dickens’s oral erotics, he shapes the connection between oral and alimentary drives to express gendered codes of eroticized consumption with men and women devouring and being devoured by one another. As part of this patterning, poetics draw attention to the connections between the actions to consume and to consummate with a focus on tropes of bodily incorporation. These metaphors of sexual incorporation in Dickens’s ‘cannibalistic’ relationships recall his infatuation with Little Red Riding Hood. In a short story, ‘A Christmas Tree’ (1850), he wrote that ‘she was my first love. I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding-Hood, I should have known perfect bliss’.<sup>40</sup> It is not surprising that in a culture where men pursued females, yet consummation was deferred, titillation was implicit in the construction of seemingly naïve fictional heroines such as Dora.

With his Little Red Riding Hood-type characters, who know more than might first appear, Dickens raises questions of female sexual agency and of what might be legitimately explored in Victorian fiction. However, by endowing young women with a sexual self, he creates ‘a crisis in erotic epistemology’ and thereby forces unsatisfactory resolutions.<sup>41</sup> The

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘A Christmas Tree’, *Household Words* (21 December 1850), 289–95, (p. 291).

<sup>41</sup> I borrow the phrase from Richard A. Kaye, *The Flirt’s Tragedy: Desire without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2002), p. 12.

Dickensian home is incompatible with sexually mature married women, as in the case of Dolly whose eroticism is instantly expunged. His infantilised wives, such as Clara Copperfield, Dora, Dot Peerybingle, and Bella Wilfer are problematic constructions and often unfavourably reviewed, in part for this incompatibility.

At the slightest hint of David's attempting to discuss domestic practicalities, Dora senses a cue to contain him: 'she would make her mouth into a bud again, as if she would very much prefer to shut mine with a kiss' (517; ch.41). Like a rosebud, however, Dora cannot remain fresh for ever and her bloom which constituted her 'former appeal', wears off in what David calls 'the intermediate stage' of marriage characterised by regret (593; ch.48). As Houston observes, 'One of the consuming fictions of this text is that David needs an intelligent woman who has no ambition or desires of her own. In essence, the oral David requires a wife who will basically keep her mouth shut'.<sup>42</sup> Young married women in Dickens are usually presented either clinging to their nubile persona or renouncing eroticism to become the good wife. The tension in this stark choice charts its way through David and Dora's relationship with a negative correlation between his increasing regret and her slow expiration.

Dickens's re-envisaging of the rose metaphor includes an exploration into the rosebud's development into a rose with thorns. In Rosa Dartle, Dickens invents a new metonymy for the female mouth and turns the fetishized female mouth into a more perverse vehicle of desire. Whilst Dora's sexuality is benign, contained within the heart of the home, Rosa's is atavistic and always on the brink of eruption. There is nothing rosebud-like about the Medusan Rosa Dartle; her association with the rose is ironic; neither pink nor soft like its petals, she is quite the opposite, thin, dark, and hard like the thorns. Those thorny connotations of the 'dart' in her last name are written across her mouth in her animated scar,

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<sup>42</sup> Houston, p. 116.

the imprint-orifice of a wound inflicted by her beloved Steerforth. Dickens complicates the profile, however, by showing that Rosa was once a beautiful ‘bud’ and retains some of that beauty with her skin like ‘fine porcelain’, and the repetition of her appearance of ‘good looks’ (369; ch.29, 250; ch.20).<sup>43</sup> While her sharpness softens with Steerforth’s attentions to ‘make her smile become quite gentle’, when aroused, the scar transmutes from a white ‘seam’ to dark, swollen flesh with an inference of female genitalia that seems dangerously ‘unavoidable’.<sup>44</sup> The palpable sexual energy is assimilated into a pattern of oral erotics that depict David’s libido. The affinity between her wound and the vagina is reinforced through the contiguity of lips, orifice, sensitivity, and pain. The double narrative of her wound, that is, its narrative function as a collection of sexual signs and its function as a symbol of her past, that is, an historical bodily text of her relationship with Steerforth, speaks volumes to David. Thus, he reads her scarred mouth — what he calls ‘the writing on the wall’ — and deduces *before they have even spoken* that Rosa ‘wished to be married’ [my italics] (249-250; ch.20). The implication is that David perceives an immediate erotic affinity with Rosa whom he deduces is thinking the same thoughts about erotic communion with Steerforth. But rather than an archetypal English rose, Rosa’s obvious desperation for Steerforth puts her into the Victorian literary category of sex-starved spinsters.<sup>45</sup> The spinster, sometimes referred to as an ‘old maid’, was conflated with female celibacy and self-effacement in Victorian literature, whereas Dickens suggests thwarted sexual desire. But unlike Miss Miggs, who is similarly desperate to be taken, there is no comedic softening of Rosa. Her body is described as wasting away, while her passion ‘is killing her by inches’ (685; ch.56). The pathological

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<sup>43</sup> See Black, ‘A Sisterhood of Rage and Beauty.’

<sup>44</sup> See note 35 in the introduction to this thesis on ‘unavoidable inference’.

<sup>45</sup> As Vlock, p. 176, argues, ‘the conflation of female celibacy with physical or verbal grotesqueness is a common device in Victorian literature and journalism’. Dickens goes further and sexualises his spinsters, often through oral signs. See also Bridget Hill, *Women Alone: Spinsters in England, 1660-1850* (Yale, Yale University Press, 2001); and Kay Heath, *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Mid-life in Victorian Britain* (New York: Suny Press, 2009), who writes of the expectation of ‘sexless service’ from spinsters, p. 74.

language inflects Rosa's sexuality with signs of infectious disease, which she transmits to David and yet, he thrives upon the effects.

Through the force of Rosa's spectacular mouth, David's sexual submissiveness is transformed into emasculated subjectivity. Driven by scopophilia, he cannot help 'glancing at the scar with painful interest', noting that it is 'the most susceptible part of her face' (252; ch.20).<sup>46</sup> Rosa's passion invades David's consciousness completely, a state that Dickens fully realises in the 'bedroom scene'. Frequently drawn to bedrooms, David is in a state of heightened consciousness having just inspected Steerforth's room. When he enters his own, he notes the 'fire burning clearly', while Rosa's portrait seems to come alive with passion. The scar is absent from the portrait, yet David projects it not just upon her upper lip, but as a pulsing wound that shows its 'whole extent' (254; ch.20). Kaja Silverman explains how desire can be displaced onto a substitute; it 'involves the repression of the prohibited and hence privileged term, and its replacement at the preconscious level by an uncensored term'.<sup>47</sup> Since displacement can only occur between two things that are similar or contiguous, in effect, desire is 'nothing more than a series of metaphors and metonymies, displacements away from an unconscious point of origin in which one term replaces another which it either resembles or adjoins'.<sup>48</sup> In this way, Rosa's metonymic mouth creates a dialectic of absence and presence. Through this device, Dickens shows how Rosa's fractured desire is embodied as the living wound of her mouth the accessible part of her body and comes 'to stand for the unnameable whole/hole'.<sup>49</sup>

Through a combination of Rosa's inscrutable allure and her animated scar, Dickens foregrounds David's fetish for the mouth and turns it into a repository for Rosa's glowing

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<sup>46</sup> Scopophilia is the sexual stimulation or satisfaction derived principally from looking (*OED*). It differs from voyeurism in that the looking is carried out in a public space, whilst voyeurism is carried out in secret. David indulges in both secret and public gazing.

<sup>47</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 115.

<sup>48</sup> Silverman, p. 115.

<sup>49</sup> From Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*, p. 141.

rage. Her scar functions as an index of arousal, testing the boundaries of sexual repression. Critics, however, have often dismissed Rosa's character as too grotesque — in George Henry Lewes's words, she is a 'monstrous failure'— but it is her resentment not the woman who is monstrous; Dickens emphasises her despair at Steerforth's rejection through her passionate plea, 'who feels for me?' (686; ch.56).<sup>50</sup>

Rosa is thus a reimagined *vagina dentata*, the emasculating folkloric woman with castrating sexual anatomy; the men Rosa encounters always leave diminished, even charismatic Steerforth.<sup>51</sup> And, though Rosa is said to be a victim of a 'wasting fire', she survives Steerforth and is still able to disturb David to the end (250; ch.20). To convey her curious power over men, Dickens shows how Rosa often gains the upper hand in arguments with the gentleman Steerforth, in orality. Her voice is critical in this project. Not only does David notice that she 'insinuated' with 'great power', but she hints at sexual knowledge when making reference to Steerforth's 'wild life' at college (250; ch.20). In a language that David cannot quite comprehend, she draws attention to the shared intimacy between herself and Steerforth when she adds, 'that kind of life was on all hands understood to be — eh' (250; ch.20). Her constant repetitions and indelicate interrogations of David create an intimacy which she controls; he is always aware of a sense of intent in her presence. Such is the power of her orality that she engulfs David into her being. When he cannot sleep after animating her portrait with her erotic scar, it is as if he has incorporated her into his being; her voice simultaneously darts into his consciousness and he finds he is imitating her idiolect, 'uneasily asking all sorts of people in my dreams whether it really was or not...' (254; ch.20). Through her siren-like allure when she sings for David and Steerforth, Dickens portrays a sexualized

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<sup>50</sup> George Henry Lewes, 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism', *Fortnightly Review*, 17 February 1872, in *Charles Dickens: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Stephen Wall (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 198.

<sup>51</sup> *Vagina dentata* refers to Hindu, Shinto, Maori, Jewish, Egyptian, and Slavic ancient folk tales of the toothed vagina. It is a concept also featured in European medieval texts and associates female sexual anatomy with the devil and the mouth of Hell.



communion between Rosa and her men. It is a moment where David and Steerforth become passive screens for Rosa's projection of her desire, in a striking reversal of David's earlier projection onto her portrait. Rosa's sexuality is a formidable engulfing oral force.

For many readers, Rosa Bud might seem an unwelcome return to the rosy-lipped coquette, but Dickens endows her with an unexpected agency. In *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the rosebud metonym reaches an epitome with Rosa Bud, yet she defies masculine control, dispenses with her unloved fiancé, develops a deep intimacy with another woman, and an attraction for a sunburnt sailor. An apparent *ingénue*, she is, however, much more knowing than is usually recognised. Rosa Bud, also called Rosebud or Pussy by her fiancé and friends, seems to embody those pet names. Both have sexualized double meanings: 'rosebud' with its suggestions of female genitalia and 'pussy' because at a cognitive level it implies playfulness and promiscuity, while at a metonymic level it alludes to female sexual anatomy.<sup>52</sup> While Rosa/Pussy is described as the 'pet pupil' and 'wonderfully pretty, wonderfully childish', Dickens repeatedly accentuates the conscious ambiguity in the name 'Pussy' (16; ch.3).<sup>53</sup> It is Edwin who uses the term most frequently, and perhaps most suggestively when he announces 'Pussy, Jack, and many of 'em', clarifying as an afterthought, 'Happy Returns, I mean' (9; ch.2). When Mr Grewgious shames Edwin out of ever using it again, demanding, 'do you keep a cat down there?', Edwin blushes, showing that he understands the impropriety (92; ch.11).

Rosa Bud is one of the most sensual of Dickens's female characters. With both men and women drawn to her lips, the frequent kissing, and her love of exotic foods, her eroticism permeates her environment and radiates around her. The force of her attractiveness is all-encompassing and presented by Dickens as 'animal magnetism' (15; ch.3). The sense of

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<sup>52</sup> The *OED* notes that 'pussy' was in use as slang for female genitalia from 1699, < <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/view/Entry/155161?rskey=XjaxWp&result=1#eid> > [accessed 03.08.2021]

<sup>53</sup> McKnight's essay 'Pussy's Points' is compelling on the sexual double meanings, including the lewd connotations in Jasper and Edwin's conversation and references to 'two pairs of nutcrackers', p. 56.

latent sexual attraction is slipped into the description of Rosa's home, ironically called the 'The Nun's House'; Dickens makes an extraordinary comment on innate female desire: speaking of the nunnery, the narrator lists the nuns' physical constraints but the narrator asks, 'whether they were ever walled up alive in odd angles and jutting gables of the building for having some ineradicable leaven of busy Mother Nature in them which has kept the fermenting world alive ever since?' (15; ch.3).<sup>54</sup> This long, unpunctuated sentence is an unusual comment alluding to the unnarratable tension between female sexuality and idealised celibacy. His phrasing, the 'fermenting world', suggests natural sexual appetites effervescing with an inevitable surging. Through the contiguous metaphor 'leaven' and its association with baking bread, the agency of 'Mother Nature' in fermenting desire is linked to the growth of healthy appetites. Both forms of appetite, alimentary and sexual, are presented as innate urges and both are linked to Rosa; not only is she about to be 'walled up alive' in the confines of her marriage settlement, but the depths of her 'sparkling' nature, although not yet moved, are to undergo a change (63; ch.9). Dickens's use of the word 'ineradicable', suggests an essentialist sexual impulse, which keeps the world alive through deep-rooted hunger. This phenomenon underpins major themes in the novel.

Described as 'saucy', Rosa, eats 'Lumps-of-Delight', her Turkish sweets, in front of her unloved fiancé, Edwin, with a tantalizing eroticism (18; ch.3). Having already refused to kiss him because she has an 'acidulated drop' in her mouth, she performs an elaborate sort of striptease under his bemused gaze (20; ch.3).

Rosa [...] after offering some to him (which he indignantly declines) begins to partake of it with great zest: previously taking off and rolling up a pair of little pink gloves, like rose-leaves, and occasionally putting her little pink fingers to her rosy lips, to cleanse them from the Dust of Delight that comes off the Lumps (20; ch.3).

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<sup>54</sup> Dickens's reference to 'Mother Nature' suggests an innate physiological sexual response which contrasts with Foucault's social constructionist model of sexuality. I argue that Dickens wonders whether nuns were 'walled up alive', not whether this impulse exists, especially since he ends the statement on the supposition that Mother Nature has 'kept the world alive ever since'.

Rolling back the pink gloves to reveal pink flesh, and ‘occasionally’ licking her fingers whilst Edwin watches, draws out her performance and constitutes an artful sexuality not usually associated with Dickensian girls.<sup>55</sup> Rosa’s teasing conveys a degree of sexual agency made legible through Dickens’s bodily poetics — the textual patterns, figurative imagery and visual codes — and most especially through the oral erotics that permeate the scene. Rosa’s eroticised display in eating with ‘great zest’ and sucking her fingers evokes *Madame Bovary’s* Emma (1856), on first meeting the young doctor, Charles Bovary.<sup>56</sup> Asked to make bandages for her father’s injury, she proves hopeless at the task. It is a sign of her unfitness for domesticity, as she ‘pricked her fingers in the course of her work, and then proceeded to suck them’ (13; ch.2). Flaubert makes a point that her hands were not beautiful but were too long, they ‘lacked pallor and had ‘bony knuckles’, thus, drawing attention away from her hands and towards her sucking (13; ch.2). This oral focus is reiterated in their next meeting when Emma serves them both curaçao, despite the doctor’s refusal. Pouring only a few drops into her glass, she can only finish it with her tongue. Her display intensifies the erotic:

With her head tilted, lips pouting and neck extended, she laughed to find that she could taste nothing, while, with the tip of her tongue projecting between exquisite teeth, she licked the bottom of the glass with little darling movements (22; ch.3).

This act, with its oral sensuality crystallises her erotic value for the young doctor. In disregard for conventional etiquette, it reveals the sexual woman breaking taboos and enjoying doing so.

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<sup>55</sup> There is a history of gloves as a metaphor for the vagina, which emphasises the sexual aspects of this scene. See, for example, Gordon Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*, 3 vols (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), ii, p. 603. Natalie McKnight makes the case for gloves as a synonym for condoms in the novel in “‘A little humoring of Pussy’s points!’”, p. 57. Within the mischievous tone of this scene, both analogies have resonance.

<sup>56</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, ed. by Mark Overstall, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (1856; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

In the performance of sensual eating, Emma, and Rosa bypass romance to present a ludic sexuality and a bid for agency. While Rosa is often dismissed as one of Dickens's stereotypes, Dickens, instead, uses the stereotype to challenge assumptions about charmingly childish girls.<sup>57</sup> As Peter Orford points out, 'Rosa Bud is one of Dickens's least understood heroines' and too easily dismissed.<sup>58</sup> That Rosa is rendered 'comically conscious' of her beauty in Edwin's painting should not be dismissed as evidence of her vanity, since it demonstrates Edwin's misreading and misrepresentation of her (7; ch.2). Expanding upon the nature of consciousness, Dickens digresses into what he calls the 'two states of consciousness': one of which is a consciousness of erotic desire or 'animal magnetism' that runs a 'separate course' alongside everyday consciousness (15; ch.3).<sup>59</sup> This is an essential consideration in evaluating representations of Rosa's eroticism. While on the one hand she appears as a 'wonderfully childish' schoolgirl, on the other, she presents an eroticised awakening through her sensual appetites and curious consuming (16; ch.3).

Rosa engenders in others the desire to consume, but she often appears one step ahead; her sexual awareness develops alongside her analytical awareness, and she is linguistically astute. What looks like caprice is not innocence; Rosa is aware of her performance and so, too, is Edwin; showing some understanding of her contrary nature and observing her closely, he is disarmed by the 'glimpse of woman's nature in the spoilt child' (22; ch.3). Claiming that she is 'too sticky [sic] to be kissed', she mocks Edwin's ambitions in the East when, blowing a kiss into his hand, she urges him to picture her kiss having exotic properties: 'Now say, what do you see?', she asks, 'I thought all you Egyptian boys could look into a hand and

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<sup>57</sup> Edmund Wilson, 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', in *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (Riverside Press, 1941), pp. 1–104, (p. 101), writes that 'the characters that are healthy, bright and good – Rosa Bud, with her silly name, for example – seem almost as two-dimensional as colo[u]red paper dolls'.

<sup>58</sup> Pete Orford, 'The Unfinished Picture: The Mystery of Rosa Bud', in *Dickens After Dickens*, ed. by Emily Bell (Heslington: White Rose University Press, 2020), pp. 101–116, *JSTOR*.

<sup>59</sup> While Dickens uses Miss Twinkleton to make his points about two states of consciousness, this immediately precedes the introduction of Rosa Bud and 'romantic aspects', p. 15.

see all sorts of phantoms' (23; ch.2). It is as if Rosa is conscious of the power of her kiss and extracts a sort of playful revenge upon Edwin for his lack of respect for it as precious and desirable. Her erotic play, however, is not directed at Edwin and not intended for his benefit, unlike Dora's erotic gestures towards David. Rosa's oral erotics imply, instead, that she is a young woman, beginning to understand her allure and seeking to control its power, limited though that is.

Rosa's mouth is the medium for reading the tortured relationship with John Jasper, which becomes apparent during his 'virtual' assault in the piano-playing scene. Standing next to him at the piano, Rosa is referred to as 'a heedless little creature apt to go wrong' but this is an ingenious use of free indirect speech showing just how unaware Jasper is of Rosa's aptitude for self-protection (51; ch.7). While she sings, Jasper follows her lips 'most attentively' and, as he watches 'the pretty lips', he 'ever and again hinted the one note, as though it were a low whisper from himself' (51; ch.7). The 'one note' signifies Jasper's one desire communicated through a whisper. But Dickens animates Rosa's agency when she removes herself from Jasper's gaze and collapses into Helena Landless's arms. Rosa's rejection of Jasper for a woman, 'almost of the gipsy type' and 'untamed', points to her appetite for exoticized romance (44: ch.6). Helena's orality complements and augments Rosa's; showing 'the daring of a man', Helena is remarkable for having tried to bite off her own hair, aligning her with a masculine biting force (49; ch.7). To emphasise the erotic intimacy between them, Helena is said to lean over Rosa and place 'one hand upon her rosy mouth', as if she were touching that treasured site in pleasure and simultaneously protecting it from Jasper's gaze (51; ch.7).

Although Rosa is clearly virginal, her complex characterisation shows that she may be innocent but is not ignorant of sexuality. She is both knowing and unknowing, as in Dickens's 'two states of consciousness' (15; ch.3). Rosemarie Bodenheimer writes of this

Dickensian linguistic technique as ‘self-recognition projected outwards, a way of knowing and not knowing at the same time’.<sup>60</sup> The language between Rosa and Helena hints at clandestine female knowledge, evoking Mother Nature and The Nun’s House. When asked by Helena if she has been ‘threatened in some dark way’, Rosa’s response is enigmatic: ‘he has never spoken to me about — that’ (53; ch.7). She also admits that when Jasper ‘watched my lips so closely as I was singing, besides feeling terrified I felt ashamed and passionately hurt. It was as if he kissed me and I couldn’t bear it, but cried out’ (54; ch.7). Described as the ‘spirit of rosy youth’ while ‘so many pretty girls are kissing Rosa’, oral eroticism is heightened by the image of ‘sly faces carved on spout and gable peeping at her’ (113; ch.13). This scopophilic gazing on the mouths of young girls is made sinister through the suggestion of illicit observation with the anthropomorphic ‘sly’ and ‘peeping’ gargoyles.<sup>61</sup> In this tale of surveillance, the gargoyles perhaps foreshadow Jasper’s voyeurism and his habit of ‘closely watching’ her ‘forming her lips’ (169; ch.19). With Jasper’s focus on her mouth and Rosa’s sense of danger, Dickens seems to invest the relationship with the same dynamics evident between Dolly and Hugh, but Rosa’s characterisation takes another direction.

Rosa’s mouth nurtures transgressive female desire and this seemingly silly schoolgirl upsets convention by resisting oppressive masculinity and following her desires. Her sensual attraction to the east contrasts with Edwin’s attraction to its economic potential; she consumes the East in a different sort of way.<sup>62</sup> Ironically like Jasper’s opium addiction, her appetites are based around a perceived Oriental physical indulgence. L. Parramore argues that writers often turned to the East as ‘a source of inspiration and philosophical illumination that

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<sup>60</sup> See Bodenheimer, p. 36.

<sup>61</sup> Scopophilia is defined by the *OED* as ‘sexual stimulation or satisfaction derived principally from looking’, <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/172997?redirectedFrom=scopophilia#eid>> [accessed 16.06.2021]

<sup>62</sup> See Maria Fleischhack, *Narrating Ancient Egypt: The Representation of Ancient Egypt in Nineteenth-Century and Early-Twentieth-Century Fantastic Fiction* (Frankfurt: Lang, 2015); and L. Parramore, *Reading the Sphinx: Ancient Egypt in Nineteenth-Century Literary Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

could not be accessed through the modern industrial realm'.<sup>63</sup> Here, Dickens turns to the East to extend the scope of Rosa's sexuality, suggesting a place where she can indulge her growing appetites. The East as a place of sexual fantasy crops up in a strange short story by Dickens, 'The Ghost in Master B's Room' (1859), where the narrator recalls that 'the proposition was, that we should have a Seraglio', and then a 'Caliph' to enforce a 'right of kissing' (278, 282).<sup>64</sup> The story is a fantasy of sexual power among children, where 'Miss Pipson' was to be 'inveigled by a merchant, brought to me veiled, and purchased as a slave' (279). In this exoticized sphere, which Dickens transposes onto Cloisterham, Rosa is, therefore, open not only to the seductive attractions of Helena Landless, but also to Dickens's version of Sinbad the Sailor, Tartar the 'sunburnt sailor' (189; ch.12). He represents the proliferating East; his exotic excesses reside in the semantics of fecundity and consumption. When Jasper traps Rosa in the Rose Garden it terrifies her, but Tartar's garden is a pleasure garden. Described as 'the country of the magic bean-stalk', it is here that Rosa finds a sensual environment to her own taste (189; ch.12). Margaret Flanders Darby is right in arguing that Dickens's women have been read unimaginatively and that 'Dickens's characterization of Rosa throughout the novel brings sex to a level of emphasis and near explicitness that is unprecedented in his work'.<sup>65</sup> Rosa's oral appetites are anticipated by Tartar and her delight at the 'glittering, tropical' offerings, signals an English rose eager for the sensuality that she, and Dickens, associate with the East. Her effortless assimilation into the exoticism and sexuality of the Orient is foreshadowed in chapter three, when she performs a parody of an odalisque in an Arabian harem. Described as 'a charming little apparition, with its face concealed by a little silk apron thrown over its head, [who] glides into the parlour' she is

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<sup>63</sup> Parramore, p. 69.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Dickens, 'The Ghost in Master B's Room', in *Ghost Stories*, ed. by David Stuart Davies (1859; London: Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>65</sup> Margaret Flanders Darby, 'Rosa Bud Grows Out from Under Her Little Silk Apron', *Dickens Quarterly*, 33 (2016), 55-64, (p. 56).

seductively veiled and moves languorously into Edwin's view (17; ch.3). Female sexual agency is embodied in an appetite for the East, releasing Rosa from the vaults of Cloisterham into an exotic world where gender-fluid love seems a possibility.

### 4.3 - 'A Certain Feline Mouth'

Perhaps the most surprising representation of the animalistic mouth in Victorian culture and specifically in Dickens's writing is the feline mouth, which was negatively gendered in strikingly sexual terms.<sup>66</sup> The history of the cat as an innately sexual animal is ancient, associated with Egyptian mythology and European folklore. Perceptions of the cat in the Victorian period were influenced by Buffon's best-selling *Histoire Naturelle* (1749-1788), which reinforced a pejorative link between the feline and the female.<sup>67</sup> Rather than the cat's qualities as soft, sleek, and graceful — pertaining to feminine ideals — there was a belief that a cat's undesirable cunning, stealth, and independence were peculiarly female faults along with an innate promiscuity. According to Buffon, a cat's perverse libido was unmistakable; the female cat forced herself onto unwilling males, 'she invites it, calls for it, announces her desires by her piercing cries, or rather, the excess of her needs'.<sup>68</sup> In a similar vein, Toussenel, in *Zoologie Passionelle* (1852), describes the cat as having a distinctively

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<sup>66</sup> See Sarah Amato, *Beastly Possessions: Animals in Victorian Consumer Culture* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2015), for an illuminating assessment of gendered depictions of cats and their place in Victorian culture.

<sup>67</sup> See Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Pet-keeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 117-118. Kete discusses Buffon's negative opinion of cats in *Histoire Naturelle by le Comte de Buffon* (1749-1788) and offers a compelling argument that Buffon's hatred of cats was responsible for much of the subsequent prejudice against these animals. According to Kete, Buffon's text sold over 20,000 copies (p. 117). Kete, (p. 164, n.5), cites the publishing history and circulation of Buffon's *Histoire* as it appears in Emile Revel, *Leconte de Lisle animalier et le goût de la zoologie en France au XIXème siècle* (Marseille, 1942), p. 41.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted by Kete, p. 118.



feminine sensibility but one that is symbolic of the prostitute: ‘a beast [. . .] so supple, gracious and electric — which makes night out of day and scandalizes honest people with the noise of its amorous orgies, could have but one analogue’ he writes.<sup>69</sup> Victorian animal discourse reinforced a perception that the cat was a furtive and opportunistic animal, too promiscuous and disloyal to be fully welcomed into the family home.<sup>70</sup> In ‘Shy Neighbourhoods’ (*UT*), Dickens, himself, considers the feline ‘tribe’ to have a ‘strong tendency to relapse into barbarism’, associated with sexual transgression (101). Local women are compared to cats staggering about in gutters, spitting and scratching, with their propensity ‘to increase their families (an event of frequent recurrence)’ (101). The feline mouth is a recurrent loaded motif in Dickens’s writing, associated with a sadistic libido of both sexes but also with female sexual agency. Wilkie Collins, in *Armadale* (1864-66), similarly draws a strong connection between women and feline promiscuity, both generally: ‘some women have cats’ tails as well as cats’ faces’ (525; ch.10) and specifically in Miss Gwilt, as she ‘went on her way with a dainty and indolent deliberation, as a cat goes on her way when she has exhausted the enjoyment of frightening a mouse’ (457; ch.7).<sup>71</sup> It is also notable that the ‘mouse’, Mr Bashford, has brilliant white, false teeth. Surrogate animals allowed for the expression of human sexuality through evolving oral erotics. This technique owed much to artistic and dramatic representations as well as literary forms together with an understanding of how the mouth embodied feelings, emotions, and instinctual drives.<sup>72</sup>

Using metaphors of the feline mouth, Dickens presents female sexual agency, and fetishizes the tigerish, biting, man-eating female. The figure of the cat lent itself well as a

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<sup>69</sup> Alphonse Toussenel, *Passional Zoology; or, Spirit of the Beasts of France*, trans. by M. Edgeworth Lazarus (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1852), p. 124. <https://archive.org/details/passionalzoology00tous/page/n13>.

<sup>70</sup> Amato, ‘Fallen Felines’, pp. 56-73.

<sup>71</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, ed. by Catherine Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>72</sup> See Antonia Losano, ‘Performing Animals /Performing Humanity’, in *Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture: Contexts for Criticism*, ed. by Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 129-46.

signifier for female sexuality; there were the ludic and anatomical references in the form of ‘pussy-related’ metaphors and metonymy, but also the nineteenth-century associations of the feline with beauty, slyness, and female promiscuity. Locating female sexual maturity in the body of the French woman created a useful distance from the ‘English woman’ and allowed greater scope to explore mature sexuality. Dickens develops the representations of sexuality in Hortense and Madame Defarge by conflating oral erotics with feline signifiers, while exploiting the popular stereotypes of bold French women who ‘are not to be put down, or kept in the back-ground’.<sup>73</sup> This sense of independence is rendered through speech patterns and the poetics of the feline mouth.

In a feline metaphorical chain, Dickens links his socially and sexually unruly women, Rosa Dartle, Hortense, Madame Defarge, and Helena Landless with a primal appetite to consume patriarchal males. The two French women are described as handsome rather than pretty, as are Rosa Dartle and Helena Landless, and are distinguished by their eroticized conflicts. Emphasising the attraction and repulsion of the feline French woman, Dickens qualifies the representation of her beauty through her ‘excessive’ mouth, writing that she ‘would be handsome but for a certain feline mouth’ (187; ch.12). Accentuating her alien force, the use of ‘handsome’ connects her with a masculinized and attractive strength. Such a combination of beauty, strength and promiscuity represents a new and higher level of sexual tension in Dickens’s novels. Hortense’s jaws are said to be ‘too eager’, signifying a cannibalistic desire to consume her rivals and lovers, including the pretty maid Rosa (187; ch.12). The real threat and sexual energy in Hortense’s jaws, however, the *vagina dentata* trope, is directed at Tulkinghorn’s masculinity. His portmanteau name combines the menace of the similar sounding words like hulking and bulking and the sexual connotations of the

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<sup>73</sup> Edmund Saul Dixon, ‘The Rights of French Women’, *Household Words*, 5 (1852) p. 220. <<http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-v/page-220.html>>

horn as a phallic symbol. Such menace is pitched against Hortense's eroticised menace and their clash feels inevitable. Like Buffon's female cat who forces herself on a reluctant male, Tulkinghorn complains of a 'lady's visits against his desire' but his threat to imprison her simply provokes a 'tigerish expansion' of her mouth (667; ch.42). Through the power of the Frenchwoman, Dickens shows an adroitness for exploring sexual politics in a way that is not encountered in his earlier novels. Hortense's self-appointed cat-like license to roam free and her unrestrained speech puncture Tulkinghorn's equanimity and his obsession for control. For him, Hortense is 'that feline personage', foregrounding her wild, sly nature but his thoughts run on to all sexual women, including Lady Dedlock, as he complains that 'these women were created to give trouble' (664; ch.42). In her impressive physicality, she is said 'to go about like a very neat she-wolf imperfectly tamed' (187; ch.12). The lupine metaphor has complex and ambiguous implications at a cognitive level; 'vixen' 'fox' and 'she-wolf' are almost always derogatory towards females. While Stone discusses Dickens's fascination with the male wolf, especially his love of *Little Red Riding Hood*, he does not mention Dickens's conception of the female wolf-figure.<sup>74</sup> The image of the female lupine signifies that the female is cunning, intelligent, and not easily tamed. As prey, she would require an experienced hunter. Conversely, as with the feline metaphor of the tigress, there is a strong implication of the sexually active powerful female with the potential to consume men. The

Between Hortense and her two male opponents a series of menacing eroticized pursuits develop. Perceived traits of these animal are then mapped onto stereotypes of female sexual behaviour and provides a patterning that reinforces characterisation.

Sexual politics in Dickens are often rendered through consumption but it is usually the female in danger of being consumed; Dickensian desire is rarely presented as the foundation of a mutually dependent relationship. With Hortense's eager jaws, however,

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<sup>74</sup> Stone, *The Night Side of Dickens*, pp. 20-23.

Dickens reverses the dynamics. This reveals a darker construction in female oral erotics and marks the emergence of the sexually mature Dickensian female character.<sup>75</sup> Threatening feline orality works alongside Hortense's metaphorical form in the body of an actual cat, Krook's cantankerous 'Lady Jane'. The name was a euphemism for female genitals from around 1850, but it is the linguistic connections to Hortense that are particularly relevant.<sup>76</sup> Not only are Hortense and Lady Jane described as 'tigerish' but, in the presence of Tulkinghorn and Bucket, their mouths widen in menace: Lady Jane 'expands her wicked mouth and snarls at him [Tulkinghorn]', later spitting at him with 'a tiger snarl from ear to ear' (164; ch.10); Hortense repeatedly presents a tigerish expansion of her mouth in her erotic confrontation with Bucket (636; ch.39). Through Lady Jane, an insidious link with perverse female sexuality connects to feline Hortense when the cat indulges in sensualised, illicit consumption. As the 'sly' and 'greedy' Lady Jane leaves Nemo's room after his death, she is described as 'winding her lithe tail and licking her lips' as if she has consumed a part of him (171; ch.11). It creates a semiotic connection between the feline figure, Nemo, and

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<sup>75</sup> The dynamic is echoed in Angela Carter's poem, 'Unicorn', especially Part C, stanzas 5 and 6:

I have sharp teeth inside my mouth,  
 Inside my dark red lips,  
 And lacquer slickly hides the claws  
 In my red fingertips.

So I conceal my armoury.  
 Yours is all on view.  
 You think you are possessing me-  
 But I've got my teeth in you.

From *Unicorn: The Poetry of Angela Carter*, ed. by Rosemary Hill (London: Profile Books, 2015), pp. 5-6.

<sup>76</sup> See *Slang and Its Analogues Past and Present*, ed. by John S. Farmer and W. E. Henley, 7 vols (published for subscribers only, 1890-1904), IV, (1896), p. 150, <<https://archive.org/details/slanganditsanal02henlgoog/page/n6/mode/2up?q=Lady+Jane>> [accessed 01.06.2021]; and Eric Partridge, *A dictionary of slang and unconventional English*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., rev. (London: Routledge, 1938), p. 466. Partridge, p. 463, also notes that the expressions 'knot with the tongue that cannot be untied' and 'untied with the teeth' were colloquial terms for marriage until the mid-nineteenth century, whence they became dialect.

Lady Dedlock. Since the illicit letters between the two lovers are found in Lady Jane's bed, as Virginia Blain points out, it reinforces the sexual allusions.<sup>77</sup> The feline figure in Dickens symbolises the power to infiltrate a community slyly, yet with an aggressive sexuality that manages to challenge all forms of authority and decorum. The feline is the worst sort of 'servant', totally unlike the loyal and obedient canine, yet with its unpredictability and lack of concern for social niceties, there lies a certain excitement and fascinating allure.

The relationship between the apparently sexless Inspector Bucket and the intensely sexual Hortense is one of Dickens's least predictable and most gripping. While both characters seem to circulate at the margins of society, embroiled in secrets and pursuits, Bucket's laconic persona appears in contradiction to Hortense's raw energy. Yet, through her oral eroticism — the 'eager' jaw, the provocative language, and the feline mouth — she has a cumulative entrancing effect on him. When Bucket captures his 'tiger', they indulge in mock lover's language with an ease that suggests it is a familiar register. Referring to each other as 'my angel' and 'darling' precedes Bucket's attempt at symbolic phallic dominance as he 'shakes the finger at her' and makes no demonstration 'except with the finger' (831; ch.54). Through the emphasis on Bucket's stabbing finger and Hortense's animated mouth, the two appear to engage in competitive sexualized play, each trying to dominate the other but aroused by the fight, which in Hortense's case is a fight to the death.

The repetition of the phrase 'that tigerish expansion of the mouth' signifies Hortense's erotic power and aroused state, as the presence of an impassive Englishman seems to evoke a sense of carnality in the Frenchwoman. For a character previously portrayed as almost asexual, Bucket's power becomes quite phallic; in warming to his triumph of detection, he bends towards Hortense 'in some excitement — for him' and waves his finger

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<sup>77</sup> Virginia Blain, 'Double Vision and the Double Standard in *Bleak House*: A Feminist Perspective' in *Modern Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p. 149.

again, several times in danger, perhaps, of having it bitten by her eager jaws' (833; ch.54). The tagged clarification, 'for him', is significant in reading Hortense's effect on Bucket: that he is enjoying the encounter with Hortense is highlighted by Dickens's pause to clarify that Bucket is *unusually* excited. This is not the character he first appeared to be which is reinforced by his subsequent prolonged recounting of his discoveries to draw out the moment of Hortense's eroticized capture. His intended audience, a silent and diminished Sir Leicester Dedlock, might as well not be there.

To underscore Hortense's effect on Bucket and the type of woman she represents — one with sexual agency — Dickens situates Hortense and Bucket's wife in neighbouring bedrooms, with Bucket in the middle. In bed with his wife, with Hortense in the adjoining bedroom, Bucket explains his investigation to his wife. He ensures Mrs Bucket's silence, however, not by placing a hand across her mouth but by stuffing the bed sheet into it (833; ch.54). This extraordinary Dickensian image implies that Bucket has relegated his wife to the quotidian domestic sphere. Barred from the sensuality of the bedroom, her mouth as the centre of female desire is shut up with a domestic item; Mrs. Bucket must consume the marital sheet, whilst Hortense is free to engage in erotic badinage with another woman's husband. The implications reinforce Hortense's malevolence but also her influence.

Dickens clearly relishes the sexual conversion of Bucket, which he develops through a combination of bawdy humour, Ovidian parody and oral erotics. As Bucket concludes his detective's account in Sir Leicester's library, his mind is filled with the female form to the extent that he speaks of Lady Dedlock rising out of the ocean like Venus, presumably naked (836; ch.54).<sup>78</sup> Emboldened by the capture of his prey and now handcuffed together with Hortense, he repeatedly calls the Frenchwoman 'my angel' and 'darling', both of which are

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<sup>78</sup> Tulkinghorn is referred to as an oyster which is metaphorically associated with arousal but, in his case, he does not allow himself to be prised open but is 'an oyster of the old school whom nobody can open' and an 'unopenable oyster' (158, 161; ch.10).

too improper and too intimate to be merely comedic. A perverse intimacy develops as if there is no one else in the room, though Sir Leicester Dedlock remains as a silent, voyeuristic presence. Hortense, envisioned with her mouth ‘panting tigress-like’, declares she would like to kiss Mrs. Bucket (837; ch.54). But when Bucket corrects her with, ‘you’d *bite* her, I suspect’, it suggests a shared understanding which acknowledges her carnal and oral impulses (837; ch.54). Hortense, figured as a female vampire, not only complements her characterisation but also a central motif of the novel, where boundaries are broken, and victims sucked dry. Hortense has penetrated the Bucket household and, as Nina Auerbach contends in her writing on *Carmilla* (1872), the female vampire in the house ‘performs: she arouses, she pervades, she offers a sharing self’.<sup>79</sup> The slippery nature of Hortense, which recalls Heep’s mobility, is evident when she attempts to elude Bucket’s grasp and he attempts to contain her. It renders her even more compelling and accentuates the erotics of the scene. It is hard to avoid the sense that Bucket enjoys this conversation at least as much as capturing the culprit:

‘Bless you, darling’, says Mr Bucket, with the greatest composure; ‘I’m fully prepared to hear that. Your sex have such a surprising animosity against one another, when you do differ. You don’t mind me half so much, do you’ [. . .] ‘Let me put your shawl tidy. I’ve been a lady’s maid to a good many before now. Anything wanting to the bonnet?’ (837; ch.54).

Even principled Inspector Bucket realizes the implied impropriety in his relationship with Hortense; as he threatens to tie her ankles and directs her to take his arm, he assures her, and himself, ‘I’m a married man, you know’ (834; ch.54). There is an element of dark sexual comedy discernible here, as if Dickens’s is enjoying the repartee. In embodying a dangerous foreign mouth, Hortense forces a fissure in male networks of control. Although Bucket

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<sup>79</sup> Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 8. On the connection between the two authors, Barbara T. Gates, *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 109, writes that Dickens was fascinated by the (earlier) work of Le Fanu and the two corresponded about mesmerism.

strives to reassert his phallic dominance, she continues to challenge him with her eroticised language and feline unpredictability.

In mediating this eroticized exchange through Hortense's feline mouth and Bucket's vigorous finger, Dickens parodies a sexualized encounter between two adults, confirmed at the closure. As their private intimacy is about to end with her public incarceration, Hortense prepares for her ignominious departure by admiring herself in the mirror and then snapping her teeth together 'as if her mouth closed with a spring' (837; ch.54). This seems to signify the end of Hortense's increasingly overt sexuality, but Dickens presents another extraordinary image as if to show that Bucket is not quite ready to renounce his newfound excitement. Bucket's manner of removing Hortense from the room evokes the earlier allusion to Venus, the goddess of love. Handcuffed to Hortense, Bucket is described as 'enfolding and pervading her like a cloud and hovering away with her as if he were a homely Jupiter and she the object of his affections' (837; ch.54). The king of the Gods and serial adulterer Jupiter, who lusted after the nymph Io, captured, and seduced her whilst disguised as a dark cloud, thereby concealing himself from his jealous wife [fig. 4.2].<sup>80</sup> Mercury, the messenger, represented by Sir Leicester's footman, perhaps, is recruited by Jupiter to distract the observer, Argos, by boring him to sleep. After Hortense and Bucket leave the library, Sir Leicester appears to be in a trance-like state and has not noticed their departure.

Representing Hortense as the nymph Io captured in the arms of Bucket doubtless has a comical quality, but it also raises an intriguing allusion. Dickens had an antipathy for classical learning but a fondness for classical myth as a source of burlesque. Carefully selected classical names and allusions feature in many of his novels but the burlesque has a

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<sup>80</sup> Correggio's oil painting *Jupiter and Io* (c.1532) is noted for its sensual depiction of the seduction myth. Dickens was familiar with Correggio's work, although there is no evidence that he viewed this painting which has been displayed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna since *circa* 1610, apart from various museum loans. Dickens mentions the artist in *Pictures from Italy*, ed. by Kate Flint (1846; London: Penguin, 1998), p. 67. Forster, *Charles Dickens*, bk. VI, 'Italian Travel' (1844), p. 372, confirms Dickens's admiration for Correggio's work.



darker tone in his later work, such as this, where the figure of Allegory on Tulkinghorn's ceiling is a serious, ominous sign. The classical allusion to Jupiter and Io, then, has a sophisticated and darker aspect than might initially appear. The precision with which it has been worked out suggests a conscious artistic process. Bucket, though comedic in name and voice, is an enigmatic and changeable character. Like Jupiter, he does seem to materialize and disappear at will, disconcerting those around him, and is described, surprisingly, as a 'sparkling stranger' (764; ch.49). By referencing one of Jupiter's many sexual assaults on a nymph as a metaphor for Bucket, the respectable, married man, Dickens implies that the detective is not quite as mechanical as might have been presumed, nor immune to the Frenchwoman's sexuality. This scene gestures towards an open secret; its eroticism is screened behind the humour of a lively exchange and the tension of Bucket's 'catch', but to gloss over the precision in this classical allusion is, using Dickens's phrase, 'to give an audience credit for nothing'.<sup>81</sup> Through the pejorative sexual connotations of the feline mouth, Dickens represents Hortense in possession of an almost untameable sexual energy. Handsome and dangerous, her oral eroticism is rapacious and far removed from the flirtatious and sensualised erotics of Dora and Rosa Bud. That feline jaw embodies a significant departure, then, in Dickens narratives of female desire.

For many critics and readers, the beauty of both Hortense and Madame Defarge has been obscured by a preoccupation with negative female fury yet, in Dickens's novels, female rage is presented as sexually attractive.<sup>82</sup> After his death, illustrations and adaptations consistently represented Madame Defarge as a witch-like harridan, although he was clear that she should be perceived as physically attractive. Michael Slater describes her as a 'grim older' woman

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<sup>81</sup> Phrase used by Dickens in a letter to Wilkie Collins (7<sup>th</sup> January 1860), *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Graham Storey, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-2002, 1997), IX, p. 194, commenting on Collins's manuscript *The Woman in White* and criticising his tendency towards 'forcing of points'.

<sup>82</sup> See Barbara Black, 'A of Rage and Beauty', p. 174.

and groups her with Miss Havisham, despite her relative youth.<sup>83</sup> She has ‘that kind of beauty’, rich dark hair and ‘the supple freedom of a woman who had habitually walked in her girlhood, bare-foot and bare-legged’, a feline image which recalls Hortense’s flagrant barefoot walk in the grass (376; ch.14).<sup>84</sup> In the poetics of ‘bare’ and ‘supple’, the expression of attractive sensuality contrast with the clawing animality to which Thérèse Defarge descends. Her latent darkness evokes Thomas Carlyle’s sphinx:

Nature, like the Sphinx, is of womanly celestial loveliness and tenderness; the face and bosom of a goddess, but ending in claws and the body of a lioness. There is in her a celestial beauty, — which means celestial order, pliancy to wisdom; but there is also a darkness, a ferocity, fatality, which are infernal [...] Answer her riddle, it is well with thee. Answer it not, pass on regarding it not, it will answer itself; the solution is a thing of teeth and claws; Nature is a dumb lioness, deaf to thy pleadings, fiercely devouring.<sup>85</sup>

There is always a sense of feverish excitement around her body; she is said to have weapons concealed beneath her robes, which hints at more than the loaded pistol and the sharpened dagger she carries there. Dickens’s admiration of her character becomes clear through her contradictions and distinctions. He distinguishes Madame Defarge from the common run of French women, such as the rapacious *tricoteuses*, through her intelligence, her uncertain class, her beauty, and by developing a detailed motivation for her hatred. She has the quiet poise and gravity of a respectable woman and earns respect from those around her, yet Madame Defarge’s defining trait is her tigerish animality.

Thérèse Defarge’s sexual allure is signalled as predatory and ultimately malign. Her contradiction is that she is ‘a great woman [...] a strong woman, a grand woman, a frightfully grand woman’, yet she is also ‘such as the world will do well never to breed again’ (193;

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<sup>83</sup> Slater, *Dickens and Women*, p. 277. She is about thirty according to the narrator (35; ch.5).

<sup>84</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. by Richard Maxwell (1859; London: Penguin, 2003). All further references are to this edition.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, ed. Richard D. Altick (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. 13.

ch.16). By writing that Thérèse is disfigured by ‘time’ he recognises that she is a product of her degrading environment but, nonetheless, gradually reduces her human aspects to focus on the beast – her tigerish aspect. It is a function of this complex characterization that just when Thérèse Defarge becomes most ruthless, and bestial even, she is most alluring to men: Jacques Three is ‘rapturous’ about this ‘adorable’ woman and the Juryman observing her walking away is ‘appreciative of her fine figure’ (375; ch.14). The poetics reflect the excitement in the potential of this powerful, sleek, female body. In Barbara Black’s ‘A Sisterhood of Rage and Beauty’, she also detects this strain, seeing in the depiction of Defarge’s body the ‘psychic traces of a male authorial imagination’.<sup>86</sup> Harold Bloom similarly argues that ‘what comes through overwhelmingly is Dickens’s desire for this sadistic woman, which is the secret of our desire for her also’.<sup>87</sup>

Re-observing these two French women through the semiotics of the mouth reveals how Dickens presents the female mouth as a hub of erotic power and the flashpoint for disruption in the novels. Madame Defarge’s orality is phenomenological as well as material; she induces a ‘horrible enjoyment’ in her listeners, which they are said to ‘feel’ rather than hear or see her, engendering a sort of intimate, enveloping thrill (354; ch.12). Hortense’s orality is rendered erotic and provocative through the same linguistic patterning: it is an unmediated and ‘foreign’ orality which destabilises the narrative. Thérèse Defarge’s [d]evolution from working wife to leader of a tribe of Amazonians represents Dickens’s impression of a passionate woman overwhelming her male victims, including her husband, through physicality and daring. Such female passion implies sexual power, expressed through metaphors of a sleek tigress with a desire to consume the male body. When Madame Defarge sits silently, ‘wrapped in fur’ in the wine shop, it is with a ‘watchful eye’ like a large cat

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<sup>86</sup> Black, *A Sisterhood of Rage and Beauty*, p. 5.

<sup>87</sup> Harold Bloom, *Novelists and Novels*, p. 102.

overseeing the pride (35; ch.5). She even describes herself ‘with her teeth set’, as a tiger ‘always ready’ to be let loose (186; ch.16). Through the poetics of the feline mouth, Dickens reinforces a sort of bestial pleasure when the tyrant Foulon is captured, and Madame Defarge is said to play with him as ‘a cat might have done to a mouse’ (234; ch.22). Three repetitions in one short scene of her laying down her knitting to ‘pick her teeth with her toothpick’, emphasise her all-consuming mouth and evoke an image of a satisfied glutton dining off bodies (35; ch.5). That this ‘glutton’ is female shows not only the transgression of conventional gendered behaviour but also a striking warning about unbounded female appetite rendered sexual by her unusual physical force.

The two Frenchwomen’s primal sexuality evokes a sense of virility, rare in Dickensian women. It is through the semiotics of the feline mouth that Dickens draws a distinction between the primal sexuality of these mature, though not old, women and that of his rosy-lipped girls. In the hermeneutics of Dickensian eroticism, the diminutive girls, such as Dora, Rosa, Amy Dorrit and ‘Little Nell’, represent a complex and ambiguous blending of eroticized desirability which is intensified by their aura of youthful purity. This construction of the sexually desirable but virginal young woman complicates representations of physical attraction, especially since ideals of female chastity were conflated with virtue — an absurd notion in the case of Miggs, or Miss Murdstone.<sup>88</sup> Through the juxtaposition of alluringly pretty girls with those parodies of modesty epitomised in Miggs, Dickens exposes deceptive ideals. He also increasingly creates female characters who are conscious of the sexual agency in their orality. The teleology of desire for the Dickensian diminutive (middle-class) girl is not sexual realization but sustained deferral with deferral controlled by female agency.

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<sup>88</sup> See Nancy F. Cott, ‘Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850’, *Signs*, 4 (1978), 219-236; Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Daughters of England, their Position in Society, Character and Responsibilities* (London: Fischer Son & Co., 1843); Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995); Robson, *Men in Wonderland*, on the ‘cult of virginity’, pp. 175-77.

Dickens's characterisation of Hortense and Madame Defarge, however, departs from this dynamic and points towards the sexually active, bold woman.

Reobserving Dickens's women shows how female sexuality in Dickens's novels anticipates Bataille's theory of desire and taboo. Without the taboo of 'unnarratable' sexuality there could be no desire, only romance. 'The final aim of eroticism' argues Bataille, 'is fusion'.<sup>89</sup> It is this sense of fusion through oral consumption that characterizes Dickens's representation of sexual desire and agency. He is renowned for his 'discontinuous' bodies — the dislocated limbs and talking heads — but in his sexual economy continuity and circulation are celebrated through bodies connecting with other bodies through the medium of the erotic mouth. Thus, Bucket's Jupiter-like erotic cloud is said to 'pervade' Hortense so that they are metaphorically one until, like Io, she is punished and ostracised.<sup>90</sup> Dickens takes conventional female metaphors of roses, rosebuds, and felines to create signifiers of transgressive desire. By recalibrating the vehicle of these metaphors, he transforms objectified female characters into subjects with sexual agency.

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<sup>89</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, p. 129.

<sup>90</sup> Io is transformed into a cow after her union with Zeus.



[Fig. 4.1] 'Joe Bids Dolly Goodbye', (note Simon Tappertit's grinning mouth and bared teeth) Hablôt Browne, by kind permission of David A. Perdue, 'The Charles Dickens Page', <<https://www.charlesdickenspage.com/illustrations-barnaby-charles-dickens-barnaby-rudge.html>>.



[Fig. 4.2] 'Jupiter and Io', Antonio Allegri Correggio – circa. 1532–1533, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, reproduced under Creative Commons licence, Wikimedia Commons.





## Chapter 5 – Call Me Baby: Small Talk and Dickens’s Childish Women

In January 1836, Dickens signed off a letter to Catherine Hogarth with the following: ‘God bless you my darling Pig—Long letter mind, believe me Dearest Mouse, Ever Yours most Affecy’.<sup>1</sup> ‘Dearest darling Pig’ occurs in multiple letters. He also addresses Catherine as ‘Darling Tatie’ as a lisping pronunciation of Katie.<sup>2</sup> Before his marriage, he signed off many letters to Catherine with ‘ten thousand kisses’, and millions more written out in numerals across the page. Yet the frequent lisping baby-talk in these early letters — ‘not “coss”, I hope?’ — frames his authoritarian admonishments and persistent warnings to contain her feelings.<sup>3</sup> After their marriage, the pet names and baby-talk disappear from his letters to Catherine. Infantilisation between fictional lovers, however, remained an important part of his writing, especially in his representation of female attractiveness. The literary version of the infantilised female radiates charm and innocence, but her figure is deeply ambiguous, since the construction is ingrained with a complex, often incestuous, eroticism.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter focuses on orality in Dickens’s childish women and explores how their infantilised speech and oral gestures paradoxically create a form of sexual agency. Adult

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<sup>1</sup>Letter to Catherine Hogarth, (21 January 1836), *The Letters of Charles Dicken*, ed. by Madeline House and Graham Storey, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-2002;1965), I, (pp. 118-119).

<sup>2</sup>Letter to Catherine Hogarth, (? October 1835), *Letters of Charles Dickens*, I, (p. 81).

<sup>3</sup>Letter to Catherine Hogarth, (14 December 1835), *Letters of Charles Dickens*, I (pp. 105-106).

<sup>4</sup>On Dickens and incest tropes, see E. Godfrey, *The January-May Marriage, The January–May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (London: Palgrave, 2009). She offers a convincing argument that ‘it would be reductive to state that Dickens moves from an early approval of the incest taboo to a later sanction of incest, but his works reveal his increasing awareness of the light incest sheds on gender and power’, p. 60. She also contends that *Little Dorrit* exemplifies how ‘Dickens often presents not the murdering of father but the marrying of father as a restorative ideal’, p. 59. On father-daughter incest in Dickens’s work, see also Kristina Aikens, ‘The Daughter’s Desire in *Dombey and Son*’, *Critical Survey*, 17 (2005), for a Freudian psycho-biographical approach; Gorham, *The Victorian Girl*, p. 41, who contends that the sexualisation of the Victorian literary daughter worked to ‘transcend some of the problems inherent in portraying the sexuality of the feminine Victorian woman’; Ingham, ‘Nobody’s fault: the scope of the negative in *Little Dorrit*’, in *Dickens Refigured: Bodies, desires and other histories*, ed. by John Schad (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 98-116; Robert Clark ‘Riddling the Family Firm: The Sexual Economy in *Dombey and Son*’, *ELH*, 51 (1984), 69-84; and Nelson, *Precocious Children*, 118-120.

female characters are presented using small talk as a strategy to direct male desire and channel their own while appearing naive and compliant. Small talk is a conscious externalisation of sexuality that functions simultaneously as both an allure and as a sign of desirable innocence. As a narrative tool, it exploits the idea of the female's 'soft persuasive tongue' and endows her with a form of sexual agency.<sup>5</sup> Through childish voices, Dickens, then, constructs a model of the 'powerful weaker sex'.<sup>6</sup> What Dickens also highlights with this form of sexualised interaction is the issue of women's command of language versus language's command of women.<sup>7</sup>

Locating sexual empowerment in the Victorian female mouth, however, is a radical, complex, but flawed narrative endeavour. It is radical because Dickens's childish women not only subvert the conventional image of passive Victorian women, but it also anticipates the erotic power of 'cute' which now pervades many modern cultures.<sup>8</sup> It is, however, flawed because as Schlicke argues, Victorian men 'demanded incompatible qualities in desirable women and had difficulty in adapting their own taste to the recommended domestic ideal'.<sup>9</sup> When, on his marriage to Catherine, Dickens promptly ceased using baby-talk in their letters, it suggests that he felt the childish-woman was no longer an appropriate model for Catherine and had an expectation that she would quickly evolve into sophisticated, maternal competency, completely at odds with her childlike appeal. Dickens, however, was a significant contributor to a culture that promulgated fantasies of girlhood, where littleness

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase 'soft persuasive tongue' is from Charles Reade, *Griffith Gaunt, or Jealousy* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1867), p. 372.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase was coined by Peter Gay, *The Cultivation of Hatred* (London: W. W. Norton, 1993), p. 288.

<sup>7</sup> See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality', in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. by Catherine Belsey (New York: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 81-99.

<sup>8</sup> The 'cute aesthetic' first appeared in 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan and in Europe and North America during the nineteenth century. It is now a rising, global, generating new scholarship in Cute Studies. Dickens's contribution to the aesthetic has not yet been recognised. For an introduction, see Joshua Paul Dale, 'Cute studies: An emerging field', *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, 2, (2016), 5-13.

<sup>9</sup> Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion*, p. 534.

and obvious youthfulness underwrote a model of idealised femininity and eroticism.<sup>10</sup> With their imitation of childishness and physically diminutive stature, these characters are shown to indulge in the comfort of a sensual orality and intimacy that is usually the province of childhood. Such indulgence provided a welcome delay for young women who were not anxious to embrace the constrictions and ‘the fixity of womanhood’ and thus appeared to offer some control over their own needs, but it is limited and short-lived.<sup>11</sup>

Dickens’s childish women are created through the language of littleness, which I term ‘small talk’. It comprises prose poetics which value and eroticise littleness and a form of speech which borrows from the lexical field and paralinguistics of the child, that is, the soft timbre of the voice, whispering, sighing, and high pitch, but it is combined with the knowing rhythms and intonation of the adult. In other words, it is performative, and small talk is, therefore, often supplemented with infantilised oral gestures, such as Bella Wilfer stuffing her curls into her mouth. Within the framing of a non-threatening, naïve and playful orality, the content of speech and its accompanying gestures continually stray into eroticised territory.

Not simply part of the fabrication of childlike demeanour, then, small talk draws attention to the adult female mouth in a problematic erotic entanglement. Contained within the construction of childlike orality are the adult’s knowledge, sensibility, and sexuality. James Kincaid contends that ‘erotic children are manufactured — in the sense that we produce them in our cultural factories, the ones that make meaning for us’.<sup>12</sup> Given that a common critical verdict on at least some of Dickens’s child-women is that they resemble a sort of production-line idealised angel, it might seem that Dickens’s novels resemble cultural

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<sup>10</sup> On the Victorian feminine ideal, see Byler, ‘Dickens’s Little Women’; and Gorham, *The Victorian Girl*; Kincaid, *Child-Loving*; Nelson, *Precocious Children*; Robson, *Men in Wonderland*; Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (London: Smith, 1865); and Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> Kincaid, *Child-Loving*, p. 247.

factories in reproducing those angels. Clara Copperfield, Dora Spenlow, Dot Peerybingle, and Amy Dorrit all seem, in varying degrees, to deserve Betsey Trotwood's epithet that 'you are a very baby', yet paying attention to Dickens's oral poetics reveals the complexities in this phrase (17; ch.1). Byler's compelling reading of the acuteness in Dickens's 'cute' girls, reveals how 'cuteness combines endangerment, cunning, and erotic appeal in a mix that makes it difficult to determine whether vulnerability or shrewdness predominates'.<sup>13</sup> However, where her focus is the aggression embodied in Dickens's cute little girls, I focus on how Dickensian adult females imitate the erotics of cuteness using infantilised orality, and how Dickens presents this as a conscious strategy for female agency and influence.

When those females enact the childish woman, patterns of pouting, lisping, gasping, whispering, and repetitive linguistic self-minimising underscore their performances. Such performances are often recognised, although not explicitly acknowledged, by their lovers and husbands. It is in the *extent* of the childish woman's agency where useful ambiguity resides, opening the way for Dickens's eroticisation of the narrative. I am not suggesting, for example, that Clara Copperfield is able to control Murdstone, but there is a reciprocity in Dickens's patterns of female orality that suggest both parties are aware and make choices based on this childishness. Mary Talbot, writing on gendered articulation, argues that femininity is produced through women's work on their bodies, which resonates with the performance of nineteenth-century representations of child women.<sup>14</sup> Self-minimising language of the child-woman involves their repeated assurances that they are undemanding, infantile but, crucially, desirable. When Clara is admonished by Murdstone, she pleads forgiveness like a child, saying 'I meant to be very good', but when this fails to placate him,

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<sup>13</sup> Byler, p. 231.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Talbot, 'A Synthetic Sisterhood: False Friends in Teenage Magazines', in *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*, ed. by Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 143-68.

she pouts for him instead. It is this act that is the more effective; he draws her to him, whispers in her ear and kisses her (56; ch.4).

The teleology of the child-woman is securing a marriage, but this necessitates combining adult sexual duty with a childlike dependency and an infantile idiolect. Such a combination of expectations also faced the child bride, but young brides did not often feature in middle-class marriages.<sup>15</sup> Fictional child brides are also relatively rare: Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868) features Pompilia who is only thirteen when she marries Guido; and Captain Mayne Reid's *The Child Wife* (1868) is an autobiographical novel of his marriage to a fifteen-year-old girl, whom he began courting when she was only thirteen.<sup>16</sup> The distinction between the very young bride and the adult masquerading as a child is important because it points to an adult female performance, which outwits the male and entrenches her into his perceived needs. This performance, then, offers the childish woman some limited agency in transactions in which women were usually the object of exchange between father and prospective son-in-law. When the relationship between childish woman and her potential husband is female-authored, as with Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, the tendency is for the woman to be clearly portrayed as manipulative and dangerous. Braddon makes the childish construction explicit when she writes that Lady Audley 'looked a childish, helpless, babyfied little creature' and spoke with a 'peculiar childish vivacity'.<sup>17</sup> Not only is 'babyfied' a pointed term, with 'peculiar' drawing even more attention to her inauthentic speech, but moments later Lady Audley drops the façade to adopt an 'entire change of tone'.<sup>18</sup> Her performativity is clearly signalled.

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<sup>15</sup> Since the age of consent was twelve, until it was raised to thirteen in 1878, the child bride was legally permissible but rarely appears in records. See Jenni Calder, *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction*, (London: London University Press, 1976) and Godfrey, *The January–May Marriage*, p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, ed. by Richard D. Altick (1868; London: Smith, 1971); Captain Mayne Reid, *The Child Wife* (1868; London: Routledge, 1905); see also, childish Mary in Braddon, *John Marchmont's Legacy*, ed. by Toru Sasaki and Norman Page (1863; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Eliot's Rosamund Vincey in *Middlemarch*, ed. by David Carroll (1872; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 138.

<sup>18</sup> Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 139

In male-authored texts, however, the childish woman usually inhabits an idealised romantic storyline and Dickens is a key proponent. Whereas Lady Audley's 'bewitching incapacity' to carve a pheasant at the dinner table is short-lived, Dora Copperfield's incapacity at the Copperfield dinner with Traddles is presented as part of her ongoing charm (85; ch.11). Reading Dora's infantilism in this way is highlighted in the 1869 American abridged version of *David Copperfield* entitled, *The Child-Wife*.<sup>19</sup> The Preface explains that 'the character of Dora in this little volume, although so lovable in its simplicity and childishness, teaches the great truth that a character so unformed, fails to satisfy the companion who has higher views of the duties and trials of life'.<sup>20</sup> Yet as Flanders Darby explains, Dora is not as unformed as she might at first seem.<sup>21</sup>

The child-wife and the childish woman are distinct creatures but inhabit the same patriarchal space, where the figure of the 'child' is construed to suit the male. Kincaid notes that it was during the Victorian era when 'the notion that the child was innocent, valuable, and weak became common'.<sup>22</sup> These traits are easily reproduced through the deployment of infantilised speech and gesture, but they are further eroticised through the underlying knowingness of the adult female and awareness of the male, both of whom invest in this dynamic. Dickens demonstrates this when Edwin Drood is 'disarmed by this glimpse of a woman's nature in the spoilt child' (22; ch.3). Kincaid observes that Dickens exploits the 'split' between the sentimentalised child and the reality of abused children, such as Oliver and Nell represent.<sup>23</sup> When Dickens exploits the contradictions in the childish woman, however, eroticism emerges through the fantasy inherent in those contradictions.

Bodenheimer argues that 'for Dickens knowingness is at once corrupt and essential to

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<sup>19</sup> *The Child-Wife: from the 'David Copperfield' of Charles Dickens*, (New York: Redfield, 1869).

<sup>20</sup> *The Child-Wife*, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Darby, 'Dora and Doady'.

<sup>22</sup> Kincaid, *Child-Loving*, p. 72.

<sup>23</sup> Kincaid, *Child-Loving*, p. 74.

survival; the tension between the two is rarely resolved in his art'.<sup>24</sup> This is particularly true of Dickens's childish women.

Ostensibly, male grooming of childish women seemed unremarkable; even in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the family magazine *The Strand* greatly admired *The Child Wife*, noting 'It is the merit of Captain Reid's works that they are all as thoroughly manly, healthy in tone, and good in purpose, as they are entrancing'.<sup>25</sup> Despite the legality of an early marriage, however, it was rare.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, that *The Strand* simply glosses over the anxieties surrounding the young girl's body is made clear when taking into account contemporary writing on the female child in that period. Robson observes that from the 1840s in discourses on child labour, the body of the working-class girl was 'revealed to be disturbingly sexual'.<sup>27</sup> The genuinely shocking details that emerged show how gaps existed in the representations of young females, who often appeared in fiction as a critical component and saviour within male domestic ideology, such as the Single Gentleman's reference to Little Nell as 'the same sweet girl' and 'Good Angel of the race' (*OCS*, 542; ch.69). Kincaid also challenges the concept of the innocent Victorian child, writing that 'this innocent child may be a very late Victorian or, more likely, modern imposition' and reminds the reader that 'one must, at least, somehow account for widespread contradictory images'.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the contentions in the figure of the childish wife are signalled by Dickens when Clara questions Murdstone: 'I thought you were pleased, once, with my being a little inexperienced and girlish, Edward — I am sure you said so' (61; ch.4). Murdstone confirms that he had 'a satisfaction' in 'marrying an inexperienced and artless character, and forming her character'

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<sup>24</sup> Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens*, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Cited by Nelson, *Precocious Children*, p. 128.

<sup>26</sup> Heather Lee Nelson, 'The Law and the Lady: Consent and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature (unpublished doctoral thesis, Purdue University, 2015), at the beginning of the century the average age of a woman at marriage was 23 and 26 by its end, p. 17. See also, Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>27</sup> Robson, *Men in Wonderland*, p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> Kincaid, *Child-Loving*, pp. 73-74.

but once married, the framework changes irrevocably (61; ch.4). The oral erotics of the child woman that help to secure the marriage contract — kissing, sobbing, pouting and childlike register — clash with a contrasting Victorian feminine ideal: that of the capable motherly wife.

When Clara Copperfield and Bella Wilfer continue with their childish behaviour and infantilised speech, even after marriage and implied sexual experience, it is a symptom of wider issues, such as their unwillingness to discard childish freedom and embrace sombre maternity. In attempting to strip the married child-woman of the eroticism with which he has endowed her, Dickens even resorts to portraying the mother *as* a baby with a doll,

It was charming to see Bella contemplating this baby, and finding out her own dimples in that tiny reflection, as if she were looking in the glass without personal vanity. Her cherubic father justly remarked to her husband that the baby seemed to make her younger than before, reminding him of the days when she had a pet doll and used to talk to it as she carried it about (755; ch.12).

Dickens's language reflects the confusion of the ideology of childishness through the spectacle of an actual baby, a childlike woman in 'tiny' reflection, an adult cherub, and a doll. That Bella's father is conflated into the interweaving of marital and fraternal relations is not unusual in Dickens. Incestuous complications abound when the adult female plays the child to a husband-father figure.

Female orality played an important role in the emotional rejuvenation of the Victorian aging male. Deborah Gorham contends that daughters were often taught how to perform as substitute pets for their fathers, offering 'playful affectionate caresses', and obeying commands to soothe the male psyche.<sup>29</sup> Pet Meagles is forced into such role by her father, while Little Dorrit embraces hers. In the debate over women's roles, this eroticised role-

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<sup>29</sup> Gorham, *The Victorian Girl*, pp. 39-41.



playing is evident even in conservative voices such as Sarah Stickney Ellis's *Daughters of England* (1843):

The object of a daughter is to soothe the weary spirit of a father when he returns home from the office or the counting-house, where he has been toiling for her maintenance ...never does a daughter appear to more advantage than when she cheerfully lays aside a fashionable air, and strums over, for more than the hundredth time, some old ditty which her father loves.<sup>30</sup>

The young female as passive antithesis to the toiling active male, was supposed to bring about a balanced and harmonious domesticity through soothing orality. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Doctor Manette's 'black brooding' can only be relieved by Lucie because '*the sound of her voice, the light of her face, the touch of her hand, had a strong beneficial influence with him almost always*' [my italics] (1; ch.4).

In his *Book of Memoranda* (1855), Dickens lists 'the little baby-like married woman' among delightful female types.<sup>31</sup> Through a sympathetic rendering of the aging fatherly and even grandfatherly husband, and coy infantilised women, wide age disparities are repeatedly highlighted, then dismissed as inconsequential. Reinforcing those ideas, Dickens constructs unions which even draw attention to incestuous connotations yet triumphantly vanquish the threat of more youthful males. These relationships, however, embody a complex clash between male grooming and female sexual agency; what looks like the allure of female oral erotics is juxtaposed with patriarchal control.

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<sup>30</sup> Ellis, *Daughters of England*, p. 104-5

<sup>31</sup> *Charles Dickens' Book of Memoranda*, ed. Fred Kaplan (1855; New York: New York Public Library, 1981) p. 22

## 5.1 'I like to act a kind of Play with Baby': The Erotic Mouth and Performing the Childlike Woman in *The Cricket on the Hearth*

*The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845) is a comparatively daring narrative of intergenerational marriage shielded behind comical names, doll's house tropes, and a Good Samaritan framework.<sup>32</sup> The erotic thread running through the thick layer of sentimentalism is signposted by Maclise's highly sensual frontispiece, which caused offence on publication, as 'outrageous and not very decent' and 'scarcely appropriate to a story of an English home'.<sup>33</sup> Standing, incongruously, above the cricket on the hearth is a voluptuous girl, naked apart from a girdle of petals. She poses provocatively and looks down upon middle-aged John the Carrier, whose wife, Mary, has been renamed and miniaturised by him into 'little Dot'. Little Dot confesses that their union might have been 'an ill-assorted marriage, I being such a child' (173). The novel's plot turns on Dot's perceived betrayal of her 'plodding', 'much older' husband for a younger man (173). It is a story that tries to explore the limiting constructs of mid-Victorian marriage conventions by creating harmony out of disparity and discord out of marital norms. Thus, the child-woman makes a good lover out of an ageing husband with the physical evidence of a 'live baby' to drive the point home (169). The overt sensual physicality of their relationship is unusual for Dickens and not obscured but highlighted by her displays of childishness. Dot's performances are arch — or 'high Art' as the narrator tells us — with her 'little figure' complemented by 'coquettish thoughtfulness' and 'half-natural, half-affected' posing (186, 170). Through patterns of oral erotics, her pouting lips signal a

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Cricket on the Hearth: A Fairy Tale of Home*, in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*, ed. by Robert Douglas Fairhurst (1845, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 162-242. All further references are to this edition.

<sup>33</sup> *The Times*, 27 December 1845, p. 6; and *Illustrated London News*, 27 December 1845, p. 406, in Collins, p. 159.

desirable mouth and emphasise not just eroticised childishness but, paradoxically, the fecundity of her body:

‘I wish you wouldn’t call me Dot, John. I don’t like it,’ said Mrs. Peerybingle: pouting in a way that clearly showed she *did* like it, very much.

‘Why what else are you?’ returned John, looking down upon her with a smile, and giving her waist as light a squeeze as his huge hand and arm could give (169).

In the representation of marriage in the novel, Dickens makes explicit the desire for, and the sexual success of, intergenerational relationships. Dot’s childishness is emphasised from the start by establishing her as ‘busy as a child at play at keeping house’ and almost incapable of boiling a kettle; the object becomes mightier than a warship in her tiny hands, offering a ‘monstrous resistance’ to her efforts, which she yet overcomes (171). It seems an absurdly exaggerated metaphor, but it serves a dual purpose; it shows how Dot’s incapacity is purely a performance engineered to appeal but it also positions her as having the force to master the large male body, such as her husband’s, this John ‘so heavy’ (166). John’s markedly limited intellect, described as ‘near a joke’ by one contemporary reviewer, suggests that his juxtaposition with the enormous kettle is not unwarranted.<sup>34</sup> Dickens reiterates that he is ‘slow’ and ‘dull’, and Dot calls him a ‘stupid fellow’ and a ‘dunce’ in jest, but John admits that he was incapable of learning anything at school (169, 171). The constant comparisons confirm the acute differences between them, and that Dot, who clearly manages their marriage, is neither a vulnerable nor a submissive woman.

In the privacy of home and hearth, Dickens presents sensualised intimacy through Dot’s ‘nestling’ into the Carrier’s ‘great rugged figure’ as Tilly, the servant, gazes on voyeuristically with her mouth wide open (170). Catherine Waters observes that the homely childishness of Dot ‘is an important part of the definition of privacy to which the Christmas

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<sup>34</sup> From an unsigned review of *The Cricket on the Hearth*, in *MacPhail’s Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal*, February 1846, 71-5, in Collins, p. 175.

books so clearly dedicate themselves’, but within this framework a potent oral eroticism exists, offering another aspect to the privacy narrative. Not only the ‘domestic Ogre’ Tackleton but the narrator, too, gaze on Dot’s body, face and mouth with a lascivious eye and comment on it unambiguously.<sup>35</sup> Gazing on the eroticised childlike body — ‘child-watching’ — was an entertainment that originated in the theatre, as Anne Varty shows.<sup>36</sup> In the child’s world of make-believe, the adult audience participate as voyeurs; ‘the child’s paradoxical exhibition of absolute sincerity on the stage invited erotic, scopophilic attention. The sexual fetishization of the child actor was a component of its allure’.<sup>37</sup> Dickens’s repeated representation of Dot ‘at play’, within the novel’s framework of toys, simultaneously exploits the idea of her body as erotic spectacle but makes explicit her agency in this playful performance. Her admission to her husband, that ‘I like to act a kind of Play with Baby, and all that: and make believe’, reveals a form of reciprocal arrangement and the pleasure of a shared but discreet awareness of this (234).

Dot’s oral gestures signpost the coding of female lips and their primal role in her sexuality. As Dot investigates the box containing Tackleton’s wedding cake, she is described as ‘screwing up her lips the while with all their little force (they were never made for screwing up; I am clear of that)’ (174). The narrator’s intrusive attestation, ‘I am clear of that’, seems a heavy-handed allusion to Dot’s sexuality and to what her lips were ‘made for’, as are many of the comments on her physicality that connect eroticism with her doll-like demeanour and childish ways. The gesture immediately provokes John’s subconscious reaction, that he ‘might have been thinking of her, or nearly thinking of her, perhaps, as she was in that same school time. He looked upon her with a thoughtful pleasure’ (174). While

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<sup>35</sup> The name ‘Tackleton’ suggests the slang usage ‘tackle’ — male genitals — noted, according to the *OED*. Also noted in Francis Grose, *A classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue*, ed. by Eric Partridge, 3rd edition (1796; London: S. Hooper, High Holborn, 1931), p. 245.

<sup>36</sup> Anne Varty, *Children and Theatre in Victorian Britain: ‘All Work and No Play’* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 9-16.

<sup>37</sup> Varty, p. 14.

John cannot allow himself to acknowledge his child-loving, Dickens infuses the narrative with the erotics of this intergenerational match to portray an idealised physically intimate marriage.<sup>38</sup> Godfrey notes that ‘despite the unspeakable motivations of their desire, the parent-child romance remains a fantasy that both indulge in and both jubilantly fulfil’.<sup>39</sup> Dickens’s version of this fantasy shows a tendency to present the eroticised child-woman ‘playing at house’ and the inversion of appearances adds to the frisson. In this way, Dot takes the lead in the Peerybingle marriage. When the Stranger arrives at this eroticised domestic haven, his raised eyebrows and repeated questions about the baby’s parents are brushed aside with Dot’s childlike ‘breathless’ and ‘shrieking’ talk. Her comment that it ‘may seem impossible to you’ concerning the baby’s rude health could equally apply to the marriage. Such comments, which draw attention to their ‘odd’ marriage and their disparate ages exacerbated by her childishness, pervade the story (177).

As if the Stranger’s insinuations are not enough to highlight the success of the physical side of the marriage, Tackleton, whose name invokes sexual connotations, raises her childishness in a more vulgar tone by admiring Dot as ‘handsomer every day! [...] And younger’ (179). When he takes the Carrier to one side to make lecherous comments concerning his own forthcoming marriage to one of Dot’s schoolfriends, it is clear why *The Times* reviewer might have considered the novel ‘not very decent’. The subtext of Tackleton’s ‘We’re in the same boat, you know’ and ‘a little disparity you know’, while he conspiratorially nudges the Carrier, is implied sex with a young bride. He is anxious, however, that his future bride appears recalcitrant and is not as overtly erotic as Dot. But

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<sup>38</sup> Sylvia Manning, ‘Dickens, January and May’, *Dickensian*, 71 (1975), 67-75, (pp. 68–69), attributes Dickens’s treatment of January-May marriages to his infatuation with Christiana Weller in 1844–45, arguing that ‘it may seem absurd to connect a preoccupation with January and May to the frustrated love of a thirty-two-year-old man’ but contends that ‘It is not a question of actual age, however, but of feeling, and thirty-two-year-old men can feel remarkably old, particularly when confronted with a desirable younger woman who is inaccessible to them’. See also, David Raybin, ‘Chaucer on the Hearth’, *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction*, 49, (2018), 1-25, on the link with Chaucer’s January-May marriage in *The Merchant’s Tale*.

<sup>39</sup> Godfrey, *The January–May Marriage*, p. 67

Tackleton's hope that the Peerybingles' marriage might sanction his, and that some of Dot's whimsical sexuality might transfer to May, is undermined through an ironic pun on her name; the January-May marriage he intends is thus doomed. Dickens writes daringly that if Tackleton had 'sown his discontented oats in his youth', he might have turned out amiable 'for the sake of a little freshness and novelty' (180). This is a key admission in the representation of child women in intergenerational marriages. The allusion to a young girl as 'freshness and novelty' goes to the core of the childish woman who embodies the youthful, sexual transformation the older male craves. Tackleton's salacious tone and comments about Dot's 'compactness' are lost on the Carrier; 'Tea-drinking people', as he terms polite society, recognise the "comfortable appearance" of the Peerybingle couple but 'we know better', he leers (182). What is notable is that Dickens does not retreat from this thread but, instead, uses oral erotics to convey Tackleton's prurient interest in their intimate life with a focus on the pleasures of the pipe:

She was, out and out, the very best filler of a pipe, I should say, in the four quarters of the globe. To see her put that chubby little finger in the bowl, and then blow down the pipe to clear the tube, and, when she had done so, affect to think that there was really something in the tube, and blow a dozen times, and hold it to her eye like a telescope, with a most provoking twist in her capital little face, as she looked down it, was quite a brilliant thing. As to the tobacco, she was the perfect little mistress of the subject; and her lighting of the pipe, with a wisp of paper, when the Carrier had it in his mouth — going so very near his nose, and yet not scorching it — was Art, high Art (186).

Not only is the language gushing and pace rapid, but Dickens also uses the word 'chubby' to describe Dot, as he does in Quilp's description of Little Nell, and 'provoking', evoking Dolly Varden's 'provoking headdress'. That the tone borders on salacious is suggested by the comment that her face has a 'most provoking twist'. When Tackleton gazes on her mouth as she performs this sexualised oral display, the move from private to public spectacle disrupts her performance and she falters; 'during the whole process, Tackleton stood looking on maliciously with the half-closed eye; which, whenever it met hers — or caught it, for it can

hardly be said to have met another eye: rather being a kind of trap to snatch it up — augmented her confusion in a most remarkable degree’ (206-207). As he gazes at her blowing on the pipe, it is Dot’s sexual agency that draws his attention, an aspect he returns to during the conversation with her husband about her supposed infidelity: ‘she made such a show of it’ he asserts (223). Dot’s childlike behaviour seen in a child would be excusable as innocent play, suggested by the many doll tropes, but Tackleton reads it as purely sexual and insinuates as much: for him it is an alluring performance but one that he resents because her knowingness subverts his sexual pursuit of May. It becomes evident when they spar together to the point where he wishes he could have twisted Dot’s neck (204). The violence is shocking and attests to the visceral physicality of the narrative couched in the sentimentality of a Christmas story. It also demonstrates the complexity and ambiguity in Dickens’s construction of child-women. Dot’s sense of agency is not apparent in her school friend May who is distressed by her impending marriage to the much older Tackleton. Yet, the Carrier recalls ‘coy Dot[s], half shrinking from, half yielding to, the pleading of his own rough image’ (186). Dot had to learn to love her husband, she confesses, but Dickens shows that this was achieved through a conscious prolonging of her childhood for her husband’s pleasure, a situation she alludes to several times (235). The slippage between Dot’s childish orality and her older, experienced self is suggested at the opening of the narrative when she struggles through dark and icy conditions to collect water for the kettle and loses her temper. Careful details of her struggle and her adult reactions continually pierce the doll in a doll’s house inflection. The kettle’s own ‘orality’ with its ‘irrepressible gurglings in its throat’, the ‘vocal snorts’ and its ‘burst into a stream of song’, demands that the complexity and disparity of voices should be properly heard, since the mouth brings bodies into relations with both people and things (167).

Recognising disparate voices in a character is key to reading Amy Dorrit, whose childishness, which is enhanced through oral gesture, childlike paralinguistic performance, and self-minimising language, is actually a form of agency. Her artifice is brought into relief in relation to Maggy, the overgrown twenty-eight-year-old *de facto* child with the mind of a ten-year old. In this way, Amy's mouth becomes an essential means by which her body is put into a corporeal relation with others, especially with Arthur. Her diminutive physicality suggests a small mouth and a small appetite, but her deceptively small voice quietly penetrates Arthur Clennam's consciousness and assumes control. Amy eats little but displaces her alimental appetite onto her desire for Clennam. Ironically, while her father's appetite threatens to consume *her*, she is complicit in feeding her food to him in a passive-aggressive form of control. The mouth represents the hub of her relationships and is how she controls the people in her orbit. Analysing the childlike traits and behaviour of Dickens's childish women reveals an ironic space where women, including the unlikely siren Amy, use childlike manipulation to escape the confines of male rhetoric and thus a grasp at agency. In emphasising her infantile linguistic register — her small talk — Dickens brings the female body back into discourse as a subversive challenge to male verbal mastery and men's social and sexual power.

## 5.2 - Orality and the Childish Woman's 'Winning Way' in *Little Dorrit*

The gendering of voice in Victorian literary culture intersects with representations of desire but, with the plurality of Dickensian voices, the variations in how that desire is voiced have not always been recognised. Marked as domestic, romantic, and nurturing, the idealised female voice is presented as quite different from the idealised male voice, associated with



strength, intellectual pursuits, and rational endeavour.<sup>40</sup> Male language was considered logical and articulate, while female language was considered prone to excess and irrationality.<sup>41</sup> However, one of the consequences arising from the marginalisation of female speech is the way women carve out their own styles of language, an innovation which in turn disrupts the flow of masculine speech. This disruption was the subject of frequent warnings in female conduct manuals. The narrator of *Female Excellence* (1838), in a section entitled ‘Government of the Tongue’, advises that ‘it behoves us to set an especial guard on the door of our lips’, to ‘repent of vain or idle words’ and to refrain from immoderate talking’.<sup>42</sup> Stress is placed on the superiority of male talk.

Within this system of social control, Dickens’s female small talk shows how women manipulated hegemonic language codes using sensual, non-threatening language to manipulate their position. Narrative tropes for this type of language include hedging, repetitions, stuttering, and infantilised speech. Jean Carr explores how Dickens’s interest in female voice ‘hovers at the edge of articulation’ and argues that it is a form of ‘experimentation’ and designed to ‘mark breaks in discursive power’.<sup>43</sup> That Dickens is conscious of the limits of his own ‘experiment’ is suggested through his parody of the childish woman, the ‘Infant Phenomenon’, who is a daughter of the Crummles family in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839). This fifteen-year-old actress, stunted by gin, is a knowing child-woman who tames a ‘savage’ through her crude eroticised gestures. The sardonic portrayal of the ‘Infant’ highlights, through Nicholas Nickleby’s disbelief, how unstable boundaries between girl and womanhood require complicity for the charade to work effectively. When

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<sup>40</sup> See *The Feminist Critique of Language*, ed. by Deborah Cameron (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>41</sup> See Norman Page, *Speech in the English Novel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), and Golding, *Idiolects in Dickens*.

<sup>42</sup> *Female Excellence: Hints to Daughters Written by a Mother* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1838), pp. 89-90.

<sup>43</sup> Jean Ferguson Carr, ‘Writing as a Woman: Dickens, *Hard Times* and Feminine Discourse’, in *Charles Dickens* ed. by Steven Connor (Harlow: Longman, 1996), pp. 162-63.

the Infant's father asks Nicholas 'would you like some nice little part with the infant?', the ambiguity in the offer raises the spectre of pimping, female insincerity, and sexual allure of the child-women (289; ch.23).<sup>44</sup> The Infant, however, is virtually silent as a representation of extreme artifice over self, which eradicates her voice.

Julia Kristeva's semiotic theory is useful when thinking about Dickens's small talk; she writes that the 'space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation'.<sup>45</sup> Kristeva's semiotic theory emphasises the instability of language and that it is not just a question of what is said but how it is said. Those fluid forms of language permeate Dickens's novels and are essential in understanding desire in his childish women. *Little Dorrit* exemplifies this creative shaping through the complex idiolects which Dickens uses to present sexuality in the childish woman. In *Little Dorrit*'s first appearance, neither her body nor her face are explicitly acknowledged but they are implicitly acknowledged in detail by forty-year-old bachelor, Arthur Clennam. Described as 'nothing' and a 'whim' by Affery, *Little Dorrit*'s diminutive size paradoxically appears to have a strange effect on Clennam. (40; ch.3).<sup>46</sup> It is Affery's mention of 'another sort of girls [sic] than that about' which introduces 'into the web that his mind was busily weaving, in that old workshop where the loom of his youth had stood, the last thread wanting to the pattern' (40; ch.3). Romance as a thread is a compelling metaphor, given Amy's fine yet powerful tie to him but in Arthur's turn to romance, Dickens also alerts us to the attempt to recapture boyish youth in middle age. Although to Arthur love seems a 'folly', his private thoughts show that he has not quite relinquished the search for 'bright glories of fancy' (40; ch.3). This perhaps explains why Arthur is so attentive to the appearance of age in women as if only a much

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<sup>44</sup> Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*.

<sup>45</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 29.

<sup>46</sup> Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. by Harvey Peter Sucksmith (1857; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979). All further references are to this text.

younger woman can offer him rejuvenation since she represents, as Robson contends, 'a pure point of origin'.<sup>47</sup> In this way, Dickens makes clear, through free indirect discourse, that Clennam ponders Amy's age; her face is not youthful but rather shows signs of aging even 'more than naturally belonged to her utmost years' (52; ch.5). He registers her tiny body: 'She might have passed in the street for little more than half that age' (52; ch.5). While he is attracted to Pet Meagles's infantilised femininity, however, he does not incline romantically towards Amy. Her seduction 'project' to replace her father with her lover is therefore a challenge for her since, ironically, her desire for Arthur is compromised not just by her social position but, ironically, by her extreme diminutiveness.

In a sophisticated plan, which relies on oral erotics, Little Dorrit appeals to Arthur by presenting herself as a vulnerable young girl. Within this scheme of self-objectification, she simultaneously stage-manages Arthur, feeding him lines, directing his speech, and selecting settings for their private meetings. At those meetings and in her letters to him, her small talk becomes increasingly eroticised. That Arthur is attracted to a small woman is first noted with Minnie Meagles, whose miniaturising name is complemented by her usual moniker, 'Pet'. That love is 'misplaced' he admits to himself, ostensibly because Gowan usurps him in Minnie's affections, but Dickens reiterates Clennam's age as a potential factor: 'he was an older man, who had done with that part of life' (373-374; ch.32). Free indirect discourse suggests that Arthur is disconcerted by their age difference; 'he was twice her age' he repeats to himself in emphatic short sentences (190; ch.16). Yet in coming to his own defence, the possibility of romance lingers: 'Well! He was young in appearance, young in health and strength, young in heart. A man was certainly not old at forty' (190; ch.16). Age difference is mooted and then set aside. Having established Clennam's discomfort about his attraction to a girl half his age, Dickens shows how Amy must work even harder to overcome his

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<sup>47</sup> See Robson, *Men in Wonderland*, p. 6.

reluctance. She begins by positioning herself in person and in her speech as *his* 'poor child', thus assigning him possession [my italics] (184; ch.16). In repeated messages where she names herself as solely his possession, he appears too bewildered to react being smothered under the weight of newly endowed paternity. Robson's argument that 'little girls represent not just the true essence of childhood, but an adult male's best opportunity of reconnecting with his own lost self', is epitomized in Arthur's first vision of Little Dorrit: He thinks of her as the 'dear little creature [who] had influenced his better resolutions' (700; ch.27).<sup>48</sup> Aware that she is an adult, Arthur is unsettled by the combination of her childlike form and complex talk but seems to register, subconsciously, the power in her voice and tiny mouth to affect both his reasoning and emotional responses. Dickens writes that Arthur 'felt from the tone in which she spoke, that she was glancing up at him with those parted lips' (92; ch.9). Amy controls this dynamic by self-staging littleness and erotic vulnerability one moment, with the foregrounding of a childish register, for example, and asserting pragmatism the next when she extracts promises and sends him on errands. Through linguistic self-minimising, that is, repeatedly describing herself as less, little, child, poor, and nobody, Amy constructs the wife Clennam did not know he wanted. Since Arthur does not respond to her love for him in the way she hopes, she builds a child-woman he cannot refuse. To do so she utilises a linguistic fluidity in her ability to change her diction, tone, and authority to suit the context. It is a fluidity that exploits the distinctions and complexity in female orality and its convergence with the cult of the girl child.

When reading Dickensian small talk, a woman's insistence on diminishing her status and presence, renaming herself or allowing herself to be renamed, represents an appeal to her audience. In this way, Amy styles herself as Clennam's 'dear child' and 'poor child' and is thus empowered, as a sort of new relation, to visit Arthur in his lodgings at an hour when no

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<sup>48</sup> Robson, *Men in Wonderland*, p. 3.

respectable girl could (160; ch.14). Dickens exploits the erotic implications of their meeting, which has connotations of incest. Foregrounding her littleness, she announces her arrival: 'I said Little Dorrit, sir, on purpose to prepare you. I knew you must be very much surprised' (160; ch.14). He is soon touching her foot, which passes without awkwardness since she appears so childlike but then, ironically, she professes to be distressed at his 'so often calling her a child' (160; ch.14). It is not surprising that Arthur seems perpetually bewildered by her. Amy attempts to control his understanding of her 'littleness', that is, she is not a child, but childlike, because the distinction is significant. At this point, she settles on the name 'Little Dorrit'. Her deceptions have been well documented including her manipulation of the name.<sup>49</sup>

Little Dorrit's use of a childlike register to suggest that she is powerless and submissive increases her desirability as a diminutive ideal girl, while at the same time her diffuse speech is full of adult direction. Her control of language is fundamental to their relationship, since it is ultimately the only means to induce him to marry, especially since her body, unlike Pet Meagles body, is not presented as sexually attractive to Arthur. His attempts to feed her and 'to put her some wine to her lips' show a conflation of child and woman and simultaneously draws attention to her mouth (163; ch.14). Meanwhile, her confession to 'coming (on purpose) round by where you lived', and that if 'you were alone and I might come upstairs', are unusual admissions for a respectable young woman in this period and hint at her project (163; ch.14). The infantilised discourse prompts him into subconsciously taking on a nurturing role and inhabiting the desirable father-figure role.

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<sup>49</sup> See Janice Carlisle's essay 'Little Dorrit: Necessary Fictions', *Studies in the Novel*, 7 (1975), 195-214, for an insightful argument about deceit in the novel and Amy's central role in this: 'the equivocal nature of her actions qualifies her for the title role in a novel replete with deceptions', p.196; also, Ingham, *Dickens, Women, Language*, p. 122, who notes Amy's 'dedication to deceiving him [Amy's father] and to manipulating others'; and Charlotte Rotkin, *Deception in Dickens' 'Little Dorrit'* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).

Dickens consolidates the change in Arthur's response with Amy's ever more pronounced childish register with hesitations, ellipses, and conditional structures. Repeating 'I wondered' three times in a disjointed stream is broken only by her almost flirtatious behaviour, as she described as 'looking at him in a suppliant way and gradually withdrawing her eyes' (163-164; ch.14). In perpetuating an image of diminutive femininity, Amy's language goes further than the ritual of self-naming. Her idiolect, although not in any sense comic and not, therefore, strictly 'patter', does contain features of patter in that it is repetitive, discontinuous, and prone to emotional excess. Her particular 'self-miniaturising rhetoric' is marked and enhanced by the 'trembling in all her little figure and in her voice' with such movements drawing attention to her body (161; ch.14):<sup>50</sup>

'And what I was going to say, sir, is,' said Little Dorrit, trembling more and more, 'that if I knew him, and I might, I would tell him that he can never, never know how I feel his goodness, and how my poor good father would feel it. And what I was going to say, sir, is, that if I knew him, and I might — but I don't know him and I must not — I know that! — I would tell him that I shall never any more lie down to sleep, without having prayed to Heaven to bless him and reward him. And if I knew him, and I might, I would go down on my knees to him, and take his hand and kiss it and ask not to draw it away, but to leave it — O to leave it for a moment — and let my thankful tears fall on it, for I have no other thanks to give him!' (161; ch.14)

The image has connotations of Mary Magdalene, including the allusions to prostitution which hover in the narrative in the liminal space between thinly clad, Little Dorrit wandering the streets so late at night to visit a single gentleman and assumptions made about other young thinly clad women wandering the streets late at night. The stereotype is reinforced when Amy encounters a young female after leaving Clennam's, whose dress and whose presence alone on the streets at night hint at prostitution. Such a carefully prepared link between his heroine and fallen women is unexpected but it distances her from any true childishness; Little Dorrit

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<sup>50</sup> Byler, 'Dickens's Little Women', p. 224.

has been raised in a prison and knows the dark passages of London well. There is no hint, of course, that she is a prostitute, but the language implies her knowledge of that world.

Amy's strategy of accentuating her childlike vulnerabilities, prompts Clennam to touch her and speak to her in an unconventional manner; two people of the opposite sex would not usually be portrayed so openly and physically intimate without narratorial comment, but her diminutive stature and performance gloss her with innocence and thus sanction this scene. Although Maggy is there, she is a silent presence, not a censoring audience, rather like Sir Leicester during Bucket's eroticised capture of Rosa Dartle. For Arthur, it is 'the tones of her voice' that capture him (161; ch.14). That her presence in his room is conventionally inappropriate is made explicit when he asks why she is out at midnight, addressing her as child although he knows she is a woman: 'what is it that brings you so far through the streets at this late hour, my slight, delicate, child was on his lips again, "Little Dorrit!"' (162; ch.14). When Amy mentions a 'party' at the theatre, the association of the figures of prostitute and the actress arises. Observing Arthur's face, she 'read its expression so plainly', and hurriedly corrects herself, 'Oh no, certainly! I never was at a party in my life', anxious to dispel any suggestion of impropriety (162; ch.14).

Rather than retreating from the allusion, Dickens builds on the suggestion through Arthur's glancing at the shawl she wore, an item associated with the grim stereotype of the street prostitute along with her 'insufficient dress' and 'thin worn shoes' (162; ch.14).<sup>51</sup> Her link with the proliferation of prostitution is expanded in her subsequent encounter with a very young prostitute leading to an ironic confusion over age and morality; while showing that Little Dorrit's appearance on the streets is innocent, unlike the prostitute's, she nonetheless took herself onto the street at night and it adds to the complications surrounding her persona.

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<sup>51</sup> See Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, for a comprehensive analysis of the representation and tropes of the Victorian prostitute. On clothing stereotypes, 'the physical stereotype of the prostitute is activated, but only through minimal signs in the woman's appearance, chiefly through the dark shawl which she pulls tightly round her body', p. 129.

The encounter reveals the complexity in Amy's physicality and orality rather than a simple binary between moral and immoral women. Amy is diminutive in size, yet the woman is described as young, unlike Amy, and is 'far too young' to be on the streets (169; ch.14). By calling her a 'woman' despite her youth, Dickens hints that her worldly experience renders her so rather than her age in years. This configuration demonstrates both the mutability and the confusion concerning the body of the Victorian girl child — a child can be classed as a woman — while the woman, Amy, is perceived as a child. It also demonstrates how eroticism is constructed around the body of the girl and how Amy's orality exploits that dynamic.

The tone of Amy's talk is critical as an index of her child-woman performance, demonstrated through John Chivery's failed marriage proposal. On being rebuffed, Chivery comments on the unexpected register of her voice; he is accustomed to hearing her speak with her usual 'quiet self-command', so unlike the infantilised register she uses when speaking to Arthur (211; ch.18). Little Dorrit's vocal performances, her linguistic strategies, also emerge strongly in her letters through an epistolary voice which, notably, Arthur claims to hear spoken aloud and which reveals a sort of rhetorical coercion. Her first letter displays a bold conversational voice, manipulating the semiotics of 'nothing' (455; ch.4). Writing to Arthur, she tells him how he feels, 'you miss nothing', she declares, then reinforces her identity as 'nothing' with a loaded afterthought, 'unless it should be me' (455; ch.4). Her compulsion to self-negation belies what she achieves. Acting as the messenger between Pet Gowan and Arthur, she places herself firmly between them, writing 'she sent you the message, *by me*' and then puncturing the message with references to 'me' and 'I', as if metamorphosing into Pet's identity (455; ch.4) [my emphasis]. Despite declaring that she will not make him 'uneasy on Mrs Gowan's account', she sets out to do exactly that. Even more surreptitiously, she inserts herself into Pet's place in his heart and mind with the words,



‘if I was Mrs Gowan’ and ‘I should feel for the want of someone who was stedfast [sic] and firm in purpose’, implicitly suggesting Arthur himself and thus drawing him into a union with her (455; ch.4). The entire letter reproduces the breathless vitality and intimacy of Amy’s speech rather than the conventional formality of letter writing between an unmarried man and woman. Signing off with ‘your poor child’, assigns Arthur a paternal role that is difficult to reject, given that he has already initiated an intimacy with her by drying her feet at his fire. She is careful to remind him of this.

In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens explores the idea of the older male father figure romantically attached to a girl half his age, but it is an enterprise beset by contradictions. Clennam is so weak and dreary a hero — ‘for the first time in a book by Dickens perhaps we really do feel that the hero is forty-five’ wrote Chesterton — that his attraction to both girls appears passive.<sup>52</sup> As Kincaid contends, however, the boundaries between the adult and the child became heavily eroticised during the Victorian period, and this includes depictions of father-figures and daughters.<sup>53</sup> Such erotics, that conflate mother-lover-daughter into one body for the desiring male, are often conveyed through oral erotics. Placing female orality in the service of male relations introduces the spectre of incest when eroticised oral relations are patterned on marital intimacy.<sup>54</sup> In this way, William Dorrit urges his daughter to replace his lost wife, desperately wishing that Amy ‘could see me as your mother saw me’, declaring ‘I was young, I was accomplished, I was good looking’ (221; ch.19). Amy accepts his plea, placing his arms around her neck and crying ‘darling of my heart [...] look at me father, kiss

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<sup>52</sup> Chesterton, p. 117. Arthur describes himself as forty, so Chesterton’s ‘forty-five’ is an anomaly.

<sup>53</sup> Kincaid, *Child-Loving*, pp. 62-64.

<sup>54</sup> On Dickens and incestuous relations generally, see Sondra Archimedes, *Gendered Pathologies: The Female Body and Biomedical Discourse in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 51-90. On father-daughter incest in Dickens, see E Godfrey, *The January-May Marriage, (Hard Times)*; Dianne F. Sadoff, ‘Storytelling and the Figure of the Father in *Little Dorrit*’, *PMLA*, 95 (1985), 234-245, for a psychoanalytical (Oedipal) reading of incest and incestual structures of desire in *Little Dorrit*; Amy Sadrin, *Parentage and Inheritance in the Novels of Charles Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 88-90; and Catherine Waters, *Dickens and the Politics of the Family*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

me father!' (221; ch.19). Her language merges daughter and lover into one interchangeable female figure. When Amy, as 'Little Mother', soothes her father through an extreme inversion of breastfeeding, as she 'suckles' him, the incestuous allusions become even more complex as the narrator notes that Little Dorrit 'did much more' than the 'classical daughter' (222; ch.19). The reference to a 'classical daughter' in this scene is usually considered to relate to the Roman legend of Euphrasia, who suckled her imprisoned father, an eroticised image heightened by William Dorrit's insistence that Amy should picture him as a young and handsome suitor. It is equally unsettling when Dickens draws attention to the 'Collegians' who had no idea 'what a serious picture they had in their obscure gallery of the Marshalsea that Sunday-night' (222; ch.19). As a gallery it actively invites scrutiny and a lingering over the suckling image to reinforce the sense of an eroticism in oral exchanges. Amy comforts her father by switching from dutiful child asking for his forgiveness, to mother as she 'talked to him about his wardrobe' and then, finally to lover sitting at his bedside, 'at times softly kissing him with suspended breath, and calling him in a whisper by some endearing name' (224; ch.19). Her mouth is the tool that endows her with a power to placate the male.

Dickens is explicit in showing how Little Dorrit perpetuates childish orality for her own ends. In terms of her worldliness, he points out that Fanny's claim to knowing 'so much more of the world' is a fiction too, and that it was simply quaint family custom to pretend that Amy 'was a plain domestic little creature, without the great and sage experience of the rest' (227; ch.20). As Amy's small talk shows, her worldliness and sexuality exist alongside the performance of diminutive stature and incredible naivety. In Dickens's representations of little women vulnerability is translated into sexual influence and, in those relationships where the male protagonist is weak, into sexual power. In the novel, it is fetishized, not least by Amy herself. Amy's physical smallness is maintained by her extreme restriction of her eating, but it is disingenuous as she herself feels strong; 'I am not delicate, if I look so', she

corrects Pet Meagles (432; ch.1). Her techniques of manipulation through childish speech and her projection of extreme innocence are impressive but not unnoticed. They irritate her more honest sister, Fanny, who complains that ‘it was not a right example, that she should be constantly stooping to be forgiven by a younger sister. And this was the Art of it — that she was always being placed in the position of being forgiven, whether she liked it or not’ (571; ch.14). Ironically, Amy is not young but old in Fanny’s eyes, who complains that she behaves like her ‘prejudiced grandmother’ (228; ch.20).

Other characters also detect Amy’s ‘Art’, just as Arthur instantly detects that she is ‘probably’ twenty-two years old and not a child. Through a combination of childish talk and paralinguistics, Dickens develops Amy’s oral-performative and, as she intensifies her self-fashioned small talk, her audience are increasingly unable to resist her coercive acts. In making herself attractive through the nuances of orality, considerable intellectual effort is required on her part. Although her audience is unfailingly awed by her embodiment of goodness, Little Dorrit’s diligence in maintaining a passive-aggressive service to others is shrouded in ambivalence. Ambivalence characterises Arthur’s relationship with her, too, since for most of the novel her love is unrequited as Amy strives to convert him with all she has the fiction of her self-negating littleness.

In Amy’s second letter to Arthur, through deft linguistic turns she explains his impotence in his relationship with Pet and having admitted to making him ‘a little uncomfortable’, inserts herself into the gap she has created. Opening with an implied criticism, she writes ‘as I said in my last [...] it was best for nobody to write to me’, her tone seems disingenuous (534; ch.11). She taunts him, ‘shall I tell you about the second time I saw her?’, before detailing another distressing anecdote. Interchanging herself with Pet, again, she confesses:

She is so true and so devoted, and knows so completely that all her love and duty are his for ever, that you may be certain she will love him, admire him,

praise him, and conceal all his faults, until she dies. I believe she conceals them, and always will conceal them, even from herself. (536; bk.2, ch.11).

Amy's articulation is more sophisticated here and the usual disjointed syntax is not in evidence. Near the end of the letter, however, she emphatically reverts to her childish idiolect, insisting on her status, 'I have always dreamed of myself as a child' (538; bk.2, ch.11). Arthur has been conditioned to accept her infantilisation, despite all evidence to the contrary. When Arthur is finally made aware of Little Dorrit's love, the narrative works hard to distance him from having played a part in the romance; it is presented as a situation entirely of her making. It is at this point that he takes out the two letters and notices 'there seemed to be a sound in them like the sound of her sweet voice. It fell upon his ear with many tones of tenderness, that were not insusceptible of the new meaning' (711; bk.2, ch.27). Little Dorrit's orality, then, embeds her as an unlikely but resonant siren crucial to the recovery of Arthur's 'youthful hopes' (712; bk.2, ch.27).

Flora Finching is the antithesis of Little Dorrit as the woman who cannot make herself small enough for Arthur's tastes. Her failure is made manifest in her rampant oral appetites and runaway speech; for Flora, words are like objects that flood her mouth and spill out in defiance of bodily boundaries. Often read biographically as Dickens's former love, Maria Beadnell, she represents much more.<sup>55</sup> Flora's body, with its excess gushing womanliness, disrupts ideals of Victorian feminine self-control. Whereas Little Dorrit performs a lack of self-control in her plaintive speeches to Arthur, Flora's overflowing is genuine, written on her body in an excess of curves and years.

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<sup>55</sup> For more on the connection with Maria Beadnell, see Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Minerva, 1991), pp. 138-140, 151-154, 762-9. Ackroyd, p. 767, writes that Georgina Dickens described how Maria (then Mrs Winter) had 'become *very* fat! and quite commonplace' and that Maria herself pointed out in a letter to Dickens that she had become 'toothless, fat, old and ugly'. See also, Jean Ferguson Carr, 'Dickens and Autobiography: A Wild Beast and His Keeper', *ELH*, 52 (1985), 447-469, (pp. 454-460). Margaret Flanders Darby, 'Dickens and Women's Stories: 1845-1848 (Part Two)', *Dickens Quarterly*, 17 (2000), 127-138, (pp. 132-136); Anne Isba, *Dickens's Women: His Great Expectations* (London: Continuum 2011), pp. 25-37; Slater, *Dickens and Women*, pp. 49-76; A. N. Wilson, *The Mystery of Charles Dickens* (London: Atlantic, 2020), pp. 106-110.

Many critics have identified her as grotesque, endorsing Arthur's description of her girlishness as a 'grotesque revival of what he remembered as prettily natural', yet her portrayal is contradictory (147; bk.1, ch.13).<sup>56</sup> In *Vessels of Meaning*, Laura Fasick claims that Flora's love for Arthur is both 'inappropriate and distasteful because it is designed to feed her own appetite for romance' but this seems simply to endorse stereotypical misogyny directed at the mature larger woman.<sup>57</sup> Flora's appetites are overdetermined and have obscured readers' and critics' perceptions alike but, given Flora's similar age and class to Arthur and their shared past, her love for Arthur seems entirely appropriate. Despite Flora's grotesque revival of 'old performances', Arthur admits that there was 'a tender mercy in it' and is struck by the 'certain warmth' of her tone (147, 145; bk.1, ch.13). Woven almost imperceptibly into her artless behaviour and speech, Flora is described as capable of the 'quick perception of a cleverer woman' and is shown to have a kind nature (147; bk.1, ch.13). Her sharp wit is also regularly in evidence, such as her suggestion that 'Little Dorrit' sounds like a 'place in the country with a turnpike, or a favourite pony or a puppy or a bird or something from a seed shop', each item diminishing in size (265; bk.1, ch.23).

In analysing Flora's physical failure to embody the child-woman, it should be recognised that her size changes drastically over the course of the novel. Fasick describes Flora as 'obese', but Browne's illustrations do not bear this out.<sup>58</sup> In the illustration, 'Mr. F.'s Aunt is conducted into Retirement', Flora is tall and plump, her face and the flounces of her dress are angled towards an aging Arthur, who is depicted with an age-appropriate receding hairline. A later illustration, 'Flora's Tour of Inspection', shows a slimmer and significantly

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<sup>56</sup> Slater, *Dickens and Women*, p. 69, calls her a 'grotesque travesty' of past romance; Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 147, describes her as an 'important grotesque figure'. Vlock, p. 102, writes of Flora's 'grotesque and extravagant flirtation'; Isba, *Dickens's Women*, p. 65, writes that she is a 'silly, middle-aged, overblown blossom'.

<sup>57</sup> Laura Fasick, *Vessels of Meaning: Women's Bodies, Gender Norms, and Class Bias from Richardson to Lawrence* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1997), p. 81.

<sup>58</sup> Fasick, p. 81.

shorter Flora alongside an increasingly handsome Clennam. The final illustration, where all three characters are physically recuperated for the Dickensian wedding, shows an elegant Flora, a womanly Amy, and a markedly younger Arthur. Dickens's softening of Flora from the initial 'shattered' object to her 'wonderfully smart' appearance at Arthur's wedding conceals a complex character (164; bk.1, ch.13; 859; bk.2, ch.34). Her size diminishes as an inverse index of Arthur's skewed perception from its origin as a distortion of his nostalgia combined with a desire for tiny child-like women. His gaze functions as a sort of free indirect visual perception, as if through his eyes we see at first a freak rather than a middle-aged woman. However, once the shock wears off, Dickens presents Arthur's slow recognition of a woman who is not grotesque, simply Flora's doomed attempt to project a desirable childlike femininity.

Critics who see Flora as physically grotesque seem to overlook the narrator's affirmation that her physical appearance is not a problem — 'that was not much' — although once a virginal 'lily', she is now a 'peony' but hardly grotesque (143; bk.1, ch.13). Rather than a simple stereotype of the widow, broader implications are implied through Flora's idiolect. Flora pours out the injustices in her life: that Arthur effectively deserted her — he admits she might have been dead 'for anything he knew' — that she only married her husband out of kindness because he threatened suicide, and that women are not permitted to age whereas with 'a gentleman it's so different' (143; bk.1, ch.13). She might represent one of the 'surplus women' of Victorian society, but in Flora's case there is strong narratorial discouragement for her self-mythification as a child-woman and, instead, a call to preserve her 'plain sincerity which became her so much better than her youngest glances' (290; bk.1, ch.23).<sup>59</sup> Flora's idiolect fails the child-woman test through this honesty. Frequent and

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<sup>59</sup> See Kathrin Levitan, 'Redundancy, the 'Surplus Woman' Problem, and the British Census, 1851–1861', *Women's History Review*, 17, (2008), 359-376, DOI: 10.1080/09612020801924449

pertinent criticism of Arthur infiltrates her speech, delivered in a noticeably more lucid, biting form than her attempts at girlish charm. It is an example of the transgressive qualities that Vlock identifies in the patter of single women at the margins of society.<sup>60</sup> It is also another way in which Dickens makes a distinction between the desirable performative talk of infantilised females and the intimidating talk of experienced mature women. Flora's idiosyncratic breathless stream of consciousness, however, splinters away from romantic outpourings towards criticism of Arthur. On his failure to write to her after their forced separation, she declares 'what nonsense not to say it Arthur — Doyce and Clennam — easier and less trying to me than Mr Clennam — when I know it and you know it too and can't deny it' (265; bk. 1, ch.23). Flora's alternative voices reflect Dickens's ambivalence about her eccentricity and a sort of admiration for her refusal to be silent, not unlike Rosa Dartle.

Dickens's ambivalence about Flora is evident in his contradictory representations of her alimantal appetite and sincere passion for Arthur. As Dickens reiterates, Flora's appetites for food and romance are entwined at the mouth, which is always a negative combination for Dickensian women. Her predilection for meat — she confesses going 'backwards and forwards' to the pie shop opposite Arthur's prison — conveys her hunger for physical love, as if she is metaphorically gorging on Arthur's body (794; ch.34). Dickens places her in the pie shop, disappointed by the size of the pie, but undermines the comedy with real pathos when the narrator comments that 'Flora really had tears in her eyes now, and they showed her to great advantage' (794; ch.34). Flora's loquacity is the offspring of her conjoined appetites, a tripartite of excess desire, in her talk, her consumption of food and her romantic notions, representing a surfeit of self. She confesses that she 'cannot overcome it' (793; ch.34). In *Comic Faith*, Robert Polhemus proposes a phenomenological approach to reading Dickens's characters, identifying the emergence of self through the mouth, 'which [is] open to ingest

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<sup>60</sup> Vlock, p. 102.

external nature and to emit personal voice'.<sup>61</sup> It is in this sense that Flora's identity crystallises in her mouth but with a robustness too obviously counter to Arthur's need for childish women. Widowhood and age render Flora's small talk defunct.

Dickens's small talk has little scope regarding the range of women who can utilise it and, ultimately, in the sexual agency it might seem to promise. Through parody, he makes this lack clear with Mrs Skewton's grotesque orality. Positioning her mouth as the main feature of her grotesque body and, through parodic language, Dickens ridicules Mrs Skewton's sexual desire. With her 'false teeth, set off by her false complexion', Dickens invokes the powerful coding of displayed teeth which underscores hypocrisy and sexual greed (283; ch.21). That Mrs Skewton's are displayed in public while she flirts, signifies a sexual greed which extends beyond 'trading' her daughter to Dombey. Dickens mocks the seventy-year-old woman for her frequent childish lipping and mincing sighs (284; ch.21). Mothers who attempt to disavow their sexual experience through performing girlishness are not well liked by Dickens. Child-women with their small talk had an expiry date in the Victorian sexual economy and were rarely endorsed, in literary terms, after marriage. Their too obvious inauthenticity in performance is presented as irritating if not suspicious in a married woman. The failure of Mrs Skewton's childish orality, however, throws men's motivations dangerously into the limelight. What Dickens makes clear here is that what makes one widow ludicrous and another, such as Clara Copperfield or Bella Wilfer, highly desirable is not a matter of female agency. The parameters of the child-woman are strictly regulated so that they operate in a very limited age zone. Small talk has a short life span and a problematic teleology, which contributes to the many difficulties Dickens encounters in trying to control the oral erotics of his last child-woman, Bella Wilfer.

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<sup>61</sup> Polhemus, *Comic Faith*, p. 112.



### 5.3 - 'Brought a baby-Bella home' – Baby Talk in '*Our Mutual Friend*'

While the child-woman exercises some erotic influence, psychological abuse finds a space in the slippage between her knowingness and silence. It is exacerbated through the woman's performance of littleness, which prevents her full participation in any relationship and facilitates her manipulation by men. William Dorrit's 'grooming' of Amy and David Copperfield turning against Dora, his 'spider' to her fly, have been well-documented but, in Dickens's last finished work, more explicit abuse of the child-woman pervades the novel (593; ch.48). In *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), Dickens acknowledges the cost to women in trading social and economic agency for sexual agency. On 'gaining' Murdstone, Clara is forced to trade in the keys to the house for being too pretty and thoughtless yet, as she points out, she managed the house 'very well' before the marriage (60-61; ch.4). She attracted Murdstone through her 'girlish' orality and 'bewitching' behaviour, but it is wrong to think of her as silly or ridiculous, the words she uses to describe Peggotty's initial rejection of Barkis; David recalls that Clara is also 'serious and thoughtful' (122; ch.8). Dickens's narrative resolutions for the child-woman, however, are ambivalent at best.<sup>62</sup>

Through Bella Wilfer, Dickens derides the small talk that he so carefully developed in previous female characters, showing how little agency it really affords and how male complicity is merely a sort of patriarchal entertainment. The change of tone and turn against the oral erotics of the child-woman are emphasised through Bella's mouth as a persistent site of contention. John Harmon turns Bella's small talk against her by forcing her to play at keeping house unnecessarily for his own amusement in a sinister form of bringing 'baby-

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<sup>62</sup> See Margaret Flanders Darby, 'Four Women in *Our Mutual Friend*', *The Dickensian*, 83 (1987), 24-39, for an insightful examination of the ambivalence and development of female characters in the text.

Bella home' (755; ch.12).<sup>63</sup> Dickens, however, appears to lose his commitment to her character, once she has been terminally regressed (777; ch.13).

In *Our Mutual Friend*, the child-woman's mouth gradually loses its sensuousness and tactility to become a rigid thing, its performative feats made obviously inauthentic. With Bella's limited prospects, being 'of commonplace extraction' and having already 'lost' one potential suitor, her beautiful mouth becomes an economic tool in the service of her curls (32; ch.4). Through the novel's metaphors of consumption, Bella is devoured; Dickens writes that on her marriage, the church-porch, 'having swallowed her up for ever and ever, had not in its power to relinquish that young woman' (666; ch.4). The Mrs John Rokesmith who emerges, paradoxically cannot exist, rendering the finite nature of her consumption even more emphatic.

In this novel, Dickens turns against small talk; Bella's oral erotics help attract the man she desires, as they do with Clara and Amy, but those erotics create a fetishization of perpetual childlike gratitude. Bella's vitality is subsumed by an absolute and incredible subservience to Harmon's plotting. Instead of the sentimental cosy littleness of Dot Peerybingle, Dickens reveals women belittled through male scheming: Bella through the oppressive fraud and Miss Peecher through narrative mockery and rejection by Bradley Headstone. There is a sense, early in the novel, that Bella's audacious orality is intensified for the purpose of crushing it later. Her idiolect is characterised at first by a biting wit, which Slater describes as 'refreshingly acerbic', but this register changes dramatically when in the presence of her father and John Harmon.<sup>64</sup>

She is described as an 'operator' who works eroticised yet increasingly aggressive assaults on her father, pulling his hair while he winces, kissing him hard enough to bang his

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<sup>63</sup> Charles Dickens,

<sup>64</sup> Slater, *Dickens and Women*, p. 282.

head repeatedly against the door (320; ch.8). Her language, which shows wit, intelligence and bright ‘verbal leaps’, is juxtaposed with frequent childlike pouting, hair-sucking, and biting to draw attention to her erotic mouth. In the dehumanising process, the contradiction between Bella’s mature language and her immature paralinguistics is gradually eroded along with her vitality and agency. Her transference from father to husband marks the beginning of this disarticulation, as her voice becomes noticeably infantilised and lost in small talk. While her father narrates the story of Bella’s inverted fairy-tale romance — her riches to rags story — she kisses him at each stage and, as ‘her hand gradually stole up his waistcoat’, she buries her face in his neck. John Harmon gazes on silently also in approval of her childlike regression, not to say economic deprivation (608; ch.16).

Bella’s sexual performances, practised on her father, saturate their encounters with an eroticised yet not erotic veneer; their physical intimacy lacks vitality and sincerity and feels merely ornamental and tawdry. But Bella never stops performing, despite being confused by the irreconcilable contradictions in her identity as a child-woman.<sup>65</sup> Raised for marriage and desperate for improved circumstances, she ultimately consumes her own identity in pursuit of another. Recalling Little Dorrit’s trajectory, Bella becomes her own vanishing point in a novel of disappearances. What is surprising is that she is conscious and complicit in the process, excusing herself at one moment by announcing ‘my life and fortunes are so contradictory altogether that what can I expect myself to be!’ and questioning the next ‘why am I always at war with myself?’ (322; ch.8). This is not a novel that explores Bella’s agency; the logic of the narrative demands that what agency she thinks she has will be comprehensively undone.

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<sup>65</sup> Brian Cheadle, ‘Improvising Character in *Our Mutual Friend*’, *Essays in Criticism*, 59 (2009), 211-233, (p. 214), uses the phrase ‘verbal leaps’ when discussing Dickens’s ‘unconscious intent’ in constructing Bella’s language.

That Bella's small talk has a different constitution from that of Dickens's previous child-women is quickly apparent: her littleness is concentrated upon her mouth and orality, not upon her physical size, despite her apparently meagre diet. Bella's oral erotics are presented as an explicit and conscious performance at odds with her status. Speaking of herself as a woman, she hints at sexual awareness when she bemoans 'the idea of being a kind of widow and never having been married!' and she derides Lavinia for her ignorance in such adult matters (38; ch.4). Further, her comment that she has been transformed from girl direct to widow suggests a profound disappointment at missing out on the marital intimacy of the stage in between; she complains about the concomitant loss of economic security separately. Such womanly concerns only accentuate the contrast with the infantilised oral erotics performed on her father. Her repeated pouting and placing a 'handful of brown curls in her mouth' culminate in her biting her own hair (37; ch.4). It is an extraordinary and complex image, where two sexualised metonyms of her 'really fine head of hair' and her 'rosy' mouth are conflated to produce an impulsive, aggressive, and resentful sexuality (42; ch.4). In biting her own hair, even 'stopping to look how much was bitten off', she attempts to dislocate those parts of herself that contribute to her required commodification.<sup>66</sup> The image also foregrounds the two bodily symbols of her virginity — her loose hair and rosy lips — in a confused, resentful display of her attributes. While Bella is conscious of her attractions, she appears to resent them as her only means to security and a way out of her dysfunctional family home. She is subconsciously aware that her very subjectivity must be diminished and enacts a hastening of the inevitable.

On the day of her marriage Bella's orality shows a rare sensual quality as she secretly feeds her father after showering him with kisses:

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<sup>66</sup> See Hilary M. Schor, *Dickens and the Daughter of the House* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 180, on Bella's 'sense of herself as a commodity' and the novel's valuation of her as an object.

Bella tucked her arm in his with a merry noiseless laugh, and they went down to the kitchen on tiptoe; she stopping on every separate stair to put the tip of her forefinger on her rosy lips, and then lay it on his lips, according to her favourite petting way of kissing Pa [...] Bella put another of those finger-seals upon his lips, and then said, kneeling down by him as he sat at table: 'Now, look here, sir. If you keep up to the mark this day, what do you think you deserve?' [...]

'Wasn't it one of those beau-tiful tresses?' With his caressing hand upon her hair.

'Wasn't it too!' returned Bella, pretending to pout (662; ch.4).

In taking the lead in the oral performance, Bella shows an acute awareness of her changing situation but also a reluctance to renounce their intimacy. 'Little Bella' and her father then carry out a mock wedding incantation, in small talk, at her instigation:

'My little Bella,' repeated Pa.

'I am very fond of you.'

'I am very fond of you, my darling,' said Pa.

'You mustn't say anything not dictated to you, sir. You daren't do it in your responses at Church, and you mustn't do it in your responses out of church.'

'I withdraw the darling,' said Pa.

'That's a pious boy! Now again: — You were always—'

'You were always,' repeated Pa (663; ch.4).

There is a sense in this rote schooling that Bella does not approve of her father unilaterally withdrawing the erotic intimacy they share, and she scolds him for being 'pious'. She goes on, however, to dictate that she is a 'troublesome Animal' and muses on her 'stamping and screaming and beating' (663; ch.4). That her anger and physicality are dressed up in cuteness is central to her characterisation; as Byler points out, the earliest definition of 'cute' is 'acute, clever, keen-witted, sharp, shrewd'.<sup>67</sup> Their stichomythic, anaphoric interaction suggests a rhythmic harmony, but it is also an expression of the underlying conflicts and emotional tension implicit in Bella's relationships. As with the earlier counting-house dialogue between lover, father, and daughter, their comedic ripostes do not fully mask the tone of opposition:

'You don't know, Pa', said Bella, 'how ill I have used him!'

'You don't know, sir', said Rokesmith, 'what a heart she has!'

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<sup>67</sup> Byler, p. 225. The definition is from the *OED*, <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46355?rskey=HlBlfB&result=3&isAdvanced=false#eid> [accessed 25.06.2021]

‘You don’t know, Pa’, said Bella, ‘what a shocking creature I was growing, when he saved me from myself!’ (607; ch.16).

Such exchanges, where Dickens presents Bella leading the verbal parrying, point to a pragmatic character with a desire to make her own decisions and exert some control over her future. At the wedding breakfast she joins the three together in another orally binding secret, ‘Bella put her finger on her own lip, and then on Pa’s, then on her own lip again, and then on her husband’s. “Now, we are a partnership of three, dear Pa”’ (668; ch.4).

Unlike Dickens’s other child-women, Bella is always referred to by her father as ‘the lovely woman’, emphasising her adult sexuality. Her womanliness jars with her childishness and, instead of conferring some leverage, her infantilised orality leads to complete dependency on Harmon. It is cemented in the counting house where ‘the three nursery hobgoblins’, Harmon, Bella and Mr Wilfer exchange Bella the ‘sweet commodity’ (603; ch.16; 683; ch.5). On accepting her husband while kissing her father, through this oral exchange, she ‘seemed to shrink to next to nothing in the clasp of his arms’, thus dissolving the ‘splendid female’ she once was (606; ch.16). Her unlikely metamorphosis prompts a fainting fit in her father, as if Dickens acknowledges the improbability of such a diminution. Bella’s weakening characterisation was unpopular with contemporary reviewers, who complained of a resolution ‘roughly torn open’ and ‘an insult to both the reason and conscience of the reader’.<sup>68</sup> It is as if the otherness of Harmon, in the very condition of his identity, swallows the nothingness of Bella.<sup>69</sup>

Bella is a sign of Dickens’s intense cultural and personal anxieties concerning the symbolic female mouth. Often been presented as site of distrust, from the Bible onwards, the female mouth has functioned as a sign of transgression and fraudulent behaviour. That

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<sup>68</sup> From an unsigned review in the *London Review* (28 October 1865), 467-68; and R. H. Hutton, ‘Mr Dickens’s Moral Services to Literature’, *The Spectator*, (17 April 1869), 489-90, in Collins, pp. 456 and 490. Quoted by Sarah Gates, ‘Pious Fraud and Secret Chamber: *Our Mutual Friend* and the Intertextual Marriage Plot’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 46 (2015), 231-252, (p. 231).

<sup>69</sup> See Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens*, p. 123, on male ‘otherness’ and projection.

Bella's mouth is a symbol of female insincerity and calculated flirtatiousness, pales against the calculations of Harmon and Boffin. The injustice of the bride test inflicted upon her lingers in anxieties that saturate the novel's closure. This unreal closure is marked by Bella's now strangely lifeless talk within the equally synthetic Harmon mansion. In the fantastical refurbishment, the language of consumption permeates the scene: the nursery, for example, is said to be 'garnished' and Boffin is said to be 'quenched' (778; ch.13). Bella's plastic oral erotics exist within this curated space to exacerbate the sense of the surreal. No longer an erotic figure, she is subsumed by her actual baby.

By this stage, Bella cannot drink in the wonders of the house, having fully lost her sensory powers and she simply feels faint; the effect is better expressed by the baby, said to be 'screaming among the rainbows' (778; ch.13). Her complex sexual allure foreshadows her downfall as she is transmuted into a permanent symbol of infantilism; having been married on those terms, she feels unable to amend the contract. When she asks why 'old Mr Harmon made such a fool of me', she is told he noticed her as a screaming child and remarked 'That's a nice girl; a *very* nice girl, a promising girl' (42; ch.4). The emphasis evokes the familiar image of the old man child-watching for pleasure and, since old Harmon was a cruel man, there is an even more disquieting notion that she was a girl who required 'taming'. Her wild spirit invades the domestic erotics between father and daughter and is heightened as she wanders barefoot and loose-haired to his side, offering a tress of hair as a piece of herself: 'when your lovely woman marries, you shall have that piece if you like' (616; ch.16); the image of the wild girl who cannot be tamed evokes images of Hortense and Madame Defarge. As Mr Wilfer puts his booted foot next to her 'small white bare foot' before they kiss, this link is reinforced since Dickens utilises the bare foot trope as a sign of adult female sexuality, as he does with Hortense, Madame Defarge, and Little Dorrit.

The turbulence of the Wilfer household might seem able to accommodate Bella's adult sexuality, alongside her child-woman performances, but the intersecting axis is moved dramatically further from womanliness to infantilism from this point. The 'doll in the doll's house' with the 'pet doll' baby has a new and inexhaustible supply of 'dolly speech' (679; ch.5, 755; ch.12). Hilary Schor argues that 'the plot's problem – what it hopes to award her if she passes its moral examination – is to raise Bella from a pet (a doll) into a fully conscious human being', but I argue that the plot moves in the opposite direction: that Bella is conscious of her condition as 'pet' but her womanly vitality and spirit are subsumed by a doll-like fantasy female of Harmon and Boffin's making, which Dickens appears to simultaneously revel in even as it threatens the novel's coherence.<sup>70</sup> Even Bella's pregnancy is couched in childish orality with a clumsy attempt to insist on her sexual innocence despite her pregnancy; the text seems to lose narrative composure with an incongruous image of sailing ships and the bashful use of ellipsis. This narrative condescension is reinforced by Boffin's rhetorical disciplining of Bella, his scornful 'Mew says the cat, Quack-quack says the duck, and Bow-wow-wow says the dog' (777; ch.13). The phrase, which is recalled with a 'burst of sarcastic eloquence', is sufficiently ambivalent to imply that Boffin enjoys the process as much as Harmon does. Boffin's sarcastic repetitions of nursery language three times in quick succession in Bella's presence, seem over-determined and to signal towards the diminished female character who has been tamed into absolute submission as much as the baby.

Disdain for the diminished woman is echoed in the quiet mockery of Miss Peecher, despite her name suggesting a flirtatious coquette (219; ch.1). Described by Charlie Hexam as 'pretty and young, and all that', she is in love with schoolteacher Headstone, so surely a match made in the classroom (401; ch.15). Given Headstone's increasing madness and

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<sup>70</sup> Schor, *Dickens and the Daughter of the House*, p. 181.



violence, however, Miss Peecher's attempt at soothing words are insufficiently attractive.

Described as a buxom authoritarian schoolmistress, Dickens repeatedly foregrounds her lack of 'kittenish' behaviour. Ironically, Dickens's poetics of littleness create a sense of her small-mindedness rather than the diminutive charm of small talk. Embedded in her description is a proliferation of littleness, yet it strongly suggests a sense of her as reduced, exacting, and limiting, supplemented by the sharpness of pins and slate:

Small, shining, neat, methodical, and buxom was Miss Peecher; cherry-cheeked and tuneful of voice. A little pincushion, a little housewife, a little book, a little workbox, a little set of tables and weights and measures, and a little woman, all in one. (219; ch.1).

Despite her attractive voice and the associated 'succulent' metaphors of cherry and peach, in Miss Peecher Dickens has created a woman who is anxious to be consumed but who fails his test through her lack of small talk: she will not pout, whisper, kiss, or exclaim even to please Headstone. When her emotional state is disrupted by the thought of Headstone visiting Lizzie Hexam, she retreats into the security of linguistic certitude:

'When you say *they* say, what do you mean? Part of speech They?'  
Mary Anne hooked her right arm behind her in her left hand, as being under examination, and replied:  
'Personal pronoun.'  
'Person, They?'  
'Third Person.'  
'Number, They?'  
'Plural number.'  
'Then how many do you mean, Mary Anne? Two? Or more?' (220; ch.1).

Miss Peecher's monotonous talk, however, is small only in relation to her capacity to please or communicate with people. In Dickens's construction of little woman and eroticised small talk, he is ruthless with those female characters whom he presents as resistant to performance and participation in the fantasy. The female must not show agency in seduction unless it is through childlike orality, where flirtation and intimacy can be excused as a playful game. Miss Peecher is undermined and made redundant sexually by her verbal proficiency and insistent formality. She ends as the 'widow' without a marriage, as Bella began, inheriting

Headstone's 'decent silver watch' in 'the most protected corner of the little seat in her little porch' (795-796; ch.15).

In this last complete novel, Dickens erases two little women, Bella and Miss Peecher: the first for her powerful sexual agency and the second for unwillingness to perform oral erotics. Both women are intelligent and worldly to an extent but are ultimately divested of influence as they submit to prevailing social codes of passivity. Through oral gestures, Bella's projection of childlike charm and infantile temperament facilitates her exploitation by men and contributes to the dissolution of her autonomy. As Sarah Gates contends, 'the less worthy doll is a merely ornamental (and likely expensive) toy without a life or mind of its own, which is in the possession and subject to the will of the owner of the doll's house'.<sup>71</sup> Bella's earlier attitude to this form of objectivity is clearly derisive ('left to him in a will, like a dozen of spoons'), but her childish orality reflects an increasingly ornamental role (37; ch.4). Her expert small talk and oral gestures ultimately diminish her character development.

'Infancy with her is a disguise'

In 1937, Graham Greene fled England fearing a libel suit for his disparaging review of Shirley Temple in the film *Wee Willie Winkie*.<sup>72</sup> What caused offence was his observation that Temple's 'cute' appeal was actually sexual: 'infancy with her is a disguise [...] her appeal is more secret and more adult'.<sup>73</sup> Pointing out the manner in which the camera lingered over her body and the 'sidelong searching coquetry' of her eyes, he called this

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<sup>71</sup> Gates, pp. 241-42.

<sup>72</sup> See Graham Greene, review of 'Wee Willie Winkie', dir. John Ford (20<sup>th</sup>-Century Fox, 1937) *Night and Day*, 28 October 1937, in *The Graham Greene Film Reader*, ed. by David Parkinson, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), pp. 233-35.

<sup>73</sup> Greene, p. 233.

projection of eroticised childhood, ‘dimpled depravity’.<sup>74</sup> According to Ara Osterweil, Temple’s star value, as with other female child stars, was nurtured on her apparent ability to ‘disavow the threat of adult female sexuality without relinquishing the erotic appeal of her innocence’.<sup>75</sup> The symbolic value of the child-woman enacting the girl, which Dickens exploited, lay in her subjectivity as the ‘meeting-point for subordination and control, marketability and pricelessness, eroticism and innocence’.<sup>76</sup> Greene explained how male admirers’ responses were focused on eroticising the child: her ‘desirable little body, packed with enormous vitality, only because the safety curtain of story and dialogue drops between their intelligence and desire’.<sup>77</sup> He could have been describing Dot Peerybingle under Tackleton’s gaze. The ‘safety curtain’ of story and dialogue for Dickens provided a means to explore the desirability of the arrested adult woman through the story lens and dialogue of childish orality. The centrality of female orality in Victorian literature perpetuated a culture that endorsed the infantilisation of women.<sup>78</sup>

Dickens representations of female sexuality are nuanced, distinctive, and inconsistent but because of the lack of realist description concerning the female body and face, the mouth as a sexual sign in his writing has been overlooked. His innovative reworking of familiar oral metaphors, however, show how erotics are hiding in plain sight. This poetic style can be crowded out for readers and critics by matters of plot and a thematic focus; reading inference

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<sup>74</sup> Greene, p. 234.

<sup>75</sup> Ara Osterweil, ‘Reconstructing Shirley: Pedophilia and Interracial Romance in Hollywood’s Age of Innocence’, *Camera Obscura*, 72, (2009), 1-39, (p. 6).

<sup>76</sup> Leslie Williams, ‘The Look of Little Girls: John Everett Millais and the Victorian Art Market’, in *The Girl’s Own: Cultural Histories of the Anglo-American Girl, 1830-1915*, ed. by Claudia Nelson and Lynne Vallone (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), pp. 124-155, (p. 124).

<sup>77</sup> Greene, p. 234.

<sup>78</sup> Gaylyn Studlar, *Precocious Charms: Stars Performing Girlhood in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (London: University of California Press, 2013), argues that representing girlhood in film ‘came to rely on many visual conventions and sentimental narrative tropes that were ubiquitous in the Victorian period’, p. 139.

and irony is, then, essential to the appreciation of the mouth and its sexual signification. Oral erotics are not overlaid on the text but located in the performative prose itself.

## Afterword

Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899) chronicles the downfall of a San Francisco charlatan dentist who struggles against his 'beast within'.<sup>1</sup> Though poor, McTeague attains some social status through his profession, yet this is not a Jekyll and Hyde characterisation since the rogue dentist does not have a better side but simply a rough and rougher personality. He resembles, instead, a fin-de-siècle Bill Sikes: the brutal McTeague eventually bludgeons his wife Trina to death, followed by a doomed attempt to flee. When the couple first meet in his shabby dentist's parlour, Mc Teague feels it 'would be a pity to disfigure such a pretty mouth'.<sup>2</sup> Trina, however, who is described as diminutive, 'adorable', and 'almost infantile', willingly consents to his treatment and McTeague carries out his first oral assault:

McTeague was every minute obliged to bend closely over her; his hands touched her face, her cheeks, her adorable little chin; her lips pressed against his fingers. She breathed warmly on his forehead and on his eyelids, while the odour of her hair, a charming feminine perfume, sweet, heavy, enervating, came to his nostrils so penetrating, so delicious, that his flesh pricked and tingled with it [...] He drew a short breath through his nose; his jaws suddenly gripped together vice-like.<sup>3</sup>

As Trina returns for more 'bungled' dental work, Norris presents an escalating nightmare of oral violence.<sup>4</sup> Although Mc Teague's impulses are made animalistic through the effect of her 'odour' on his nostrils and jaw, he is at the same time engaged in a skilled and sophisticated, if inexpertly rendered, modern procedure. This juxtaposition combines animalism and civilisation in an oral wreckage, as McTeague gradually 'deconstructs' her mouth. From an almost Rabelaisian exuberance displayed in McTeague's early alimental appetite, his increasingly disturbing orality enters the realm of grotesque realism. The

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<sup>1</sup> *McTeague*, ed. by Kevin Starr (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. xxxiv.

<sup>2</sup> Norris, *McTeague*, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Norris, *McTeague*, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Norris, *McTeague*, p. 26.

impoverished dentist, now evoking Quilp, resorts to biting on Trina's swollen, bruised and purple fingers: 'the fact of the matter was that McTeague, when he had been drinking, used to bite them, crunching and grinding them with his immense teeth, always ingenious enough to remember which were the sorest'.<sup>5</sup> As he feeds off his wife's body, it is said to make him more virile.

That Norris's imagination was fired by reading and studying Dickens is not, perhaps, surprising. Usually considered a naturalist writer, Norris was not in fact committed to naturalism or realism but instead, as James Good observes, identified 'a *naturalistic* Dickens' and used this as a springboard to develop ideas about the human-animal and the consequences of overwhelming appetites.<sup>6</sup> Norris's dentist is an embodiment of an attempt to grasp power, aided by a culture of rampant consumerism and competition. That this convergence of appetite and culture is eroticised evokes Georges Bataille's comment that the mouth is 'the point where the animal begins [...] the most terrifying part'.<sup>7</sup>

Like Dickens, Norris was not content to be constrained by realist conventions, commenting that 'Realism is very excellent as far as it goes, but it goes no further than the Realist himself can actually see'.<sup>8</sup> In this way, he seems to understand the way in which Dickens anticipates the contradictions and ambivalence in modernist literary strategies; this is not just in the 'flowing and mixed substance' of Dickensian poetics, but also because the mouth is possibly the most contrary zone on the body.<sup>9</sup> The mouth embodies intense pleasure, as with the fat boy's combined alimantal and erotic raptures, but it is also a site of

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<sup>5</sup> Norris, *McTeague*, p. 309. Michael D'Alessandro, 'The Mouth Trap: Orality and the Rabelaisian Grotesque in Norris's *McTeague*', *Studies in American Naturalism*, 9 (2014), 1-25, (p. 13), notes that in an early draft of the novel from 1895, Norris specified that 'often these brutalities inflamed [McTeague's] sensual passions', thus providing more explicit links to McTeague's appetite for sexual sadism.

<sup>6</sup> James Good, 'Dickens's *Bleak House* and Norris's *McTeague*', *The Explicator*, 55, (1997), 135-36.

<sup>7</sup> Georges Bataille, 'On the Mouth', *Critical Dictionary, Documents*, 5 (1930) <http://web.archive.org/web/20040414102921/http://website.lineone.net/~d.a.perkins/OGBMOUTH.html> [accessed: 09.02.2021]. Bataille was an influence for Francis when creating his gaping mouth portraits.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Norris, 'A Plea for Romantic Fiction', in '*The Responsibilities of the Novelist and other Literary Essays*' (London: 1903), p. 215.

<sup>9</sup> Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, p. 199, uses the phrase, 'the flowing and mixed substance of Dickens'.

terrible agony, as Rosa Dartle conveys through her wounded lip and ‘wasting’ hunger. As both a gateway and a barrier to the body’s interior, the oral cavity engenders ideas of promise and potential and invokes tensions in its unknowability. It is both highly vulnerable and a symbol of hardness. As an organ of opposing forces and sensibilities, it is also the bodily site where contrasting emotions congregate; the villain’s smile and the lover’s kiss are both played out in this zone. Thus, the Victorian mouth, and especially the Dickensian mouth, is more highly charged than has been recognised.

In Dickens’s novels, the mouth does not offer a single stable meaning but instead represents a place of narrative experiment, from David’s biting impulses to Flora Finching’s energetic streams of consciousness. ‘Naturalistic’ Dickens describes the writer who weaves the detailed accuracy of physicality and bodily sensation with more surreal and fantastical elements to produce new ways of perceiving relationships and desire. Through his novels, Dickens shows that grasping the world begins with the mouth and ends there, with a gasping last breath. What emerges from this study is Dickens’s influence in situating the mouth as the force and driver of eroticised personal relations; his representations of the desiring mouth entwined with issues of agency and selfhood is a concept which becomes the focus of so many future literary creations.<sup>10</sup> From the disembodied mouth of stage and film performances of Samuel Beckett’s *Not I* to the vampiric and transgressive inversions in Angela Carter’s work, the emergence of the modern subject often pivots on the mouth.<sup>11</sup> Yet, surprisingly, the

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<sup>10</sup> On Dickens and modernism see Jay Clayton, *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); *Dickens and Modernity*, ed. by Juliet John (Cambridge: Brewer, 2012); Lyn Pykett, *Charles Dickens* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> The disembodied mouth, although not specified in the 1972 stage script, was a feature of the play’s first performance on 22 November 1972, at the Forum Theatre, Lincoln Center, New York, with Jessica Tandy as the lead, installed inside a black box. Through a slit in the box, a spotlight was directed at her mouth. Her teeth were coated in bright reflective material to further intensify the effect of a disembodied mouth, see James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 592. In Billie Whitelaw’s 1973 Royal Court performance, in addition to being concealed in black drapes, her head was clamped to ensure that her mouth remained in the spotlight, see L. Oppenheim, ed., *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies* (London: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 211, 212. Whitelaw’s performance was filmed in 1975 and released in 1977 (BBC 2, dir., Anthony Page).

mouth is a neglected area in literary studies, while in the art world, the symbolic force of the oral has been long recognised, including Francis Bacon's gaping mouths, Andy Warhol's iconic Pop Art lips, and Sam Taylor-Johnson's images of hysterical laughter and cavernous mouths.<sup>12</sup>

This thesis has attempted to shed light on the significance of the mouth in Victorian culture and specifically on how Dickens uses oral erotics to represent desire and sexual agency. It also sought to establish the Dickensian mouth as an iconic organ and metaphysical space, and to situate Dickens at the vanguard of modernist ideas concerning the permeable subject and transformative erotics. Examining Dickensian poetics reveals an anarchic and erotic energy in his mouths which goes beyond realist tropes and transforms the semantics of orality and the open body. This energy evokes the French phrase, '*croquer la vie à pleines dents*' — to bite into life to the fullest — and seems to epitomise Dickens's representation of oral erotics and desire.<sup>13</sup> From the loose and sometimes chaotic sensuality of the early novels, Dickens gradually moves towards deeper and more distinctive explorations of desire, exploiting the cultural dimensions of the mouth and subverting conventions. Thus, from Quilp's expansive manifestations of desire, Dickens develops a more precise subversion of oral aesthetics and progresses to the eroticised oral double of Pip-Orlick and the allure of Madame Defarge's compelling oral power.

The Dickensian mouth, through a world of play, pleasure and fear, disrupts notions of desire in Victorian culture and literature and speaks to postmodern conceptions of mutability;

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<sup>12</sup> There are many examples in Uta Ruhkamp, ed., *On Everyone's Lips: The Oral Cavity in Art and Culture* (Reutlingen: Haering, 2020), published in conjunction with the art exhibition, 'On Everyone's Lips'; see also, Rina Arya, 'The Animal Surfaces: The Gaping Mouth in Francis Bacon's Work', *Visual Anthropology*, 30 (2017), 328-43; Nicholas Chare, *After Francis Bacon: Synaesthesia and Sex in Paint*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 63-64 and 150-59; Peter Fifield, 'Gaping Mouths and Bulging Bodies: Beckett and Francis Bacon', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 18 (2009), 57-71; *Art Since 1900: modernism antimodernism postmodernism*, ed. by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Thames and Hudson, 2011), p. 240; Jones, *The Smile Revolution; The Uses of Excess in Visual and Material Culture, 1600–2010*, ed. by Julia Skelly (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 213-14; Sonstroem, 'Teeth in Victorian Art'.

<sup>13</sup> Phrase originated in 15<sup>th</sup> Century France, <<https://www.expressions-francaises.fr/>> [accessed 09.02.2021].



as Jay Clayton points out, Dickens's 'disturbingly' mobile nature of desire seems 'almost postmodern'.<sup>14</sup> In this way, the Dickensian mouth, as the axis of relationships, represents an organic view of the world as it continuously seeks out experience. Juliet John argues that this communal drive towards connection 'co-exists and indeed grows out of a very modern sense of instability, mobility and radical uncertainty'.<sup>15</sup> It is an idea shared by this thesis and one imbued with the phenomena of oral erotics. Those erotics play a crucial role when they intersect with the broad spectrum of the oral in Victorian culture. Thinking about the complexity of the oral — the representations and understanding of the mouth — necessarily engenders the idea of numerous thresholds: of existence, of communication, of sensual perception, and of cultural conventions.

The themes explored in this thesis offer an initial analysis of the Dickensian mouth, but they raise more questions about its symbolism. The smile in Dickens's novels, for example, is a remarkable literary device, mentioned more than 1,700 times, and deserves more critical attention in the way that Colin Jones has examined the signification of the eighteenth-century smile to reveal a new appreciation of artistic and literary culture.<sup>16</sup> The open-mouthed smile, as a modern cultural phenomenon, reflects a transformation in the expression of feeling; its roots in Victorian literary culture have not been fully explored. Symbolic implications of teeth in connections with power and violence, similarly, raise more questions, in this instance aligned with Dickens's representations of biting. The nature of oral power has been explored in relation to artistic works, prompting Michel Mettler to observe

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<sup>14</sup> Jay Clayton, 'Dickens and the Genealogy of Postmodernism', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 46 (1991), 181-95, (p. 186).

<sup>15</sup> John, *Dickens and Modernity*, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> From CLiC Dickens, smile, smiles, smiled, and smiling occur 1742 times, almost as many instances as the whole reference corpora, see <https://clic.bham.ac.uk/concordance?conc-q=smile%2C%20smiles%2C%20smiling%2C%20smiled&conc-subset=all&conc-type=any&corpora=corpus%3ADNov&kwic-span=-5%3A5&table-filter=&table-type=basic> [accessed 11.02.2021].

that ‘the terror of power — and not just an enchanting smile — emanates from the teeth’.<sup>17</sup> Describing the mouth as an armed weapon, he invokes Elias Canetti’s comment that ‘smoothness and order, the manifest attributes of teeth, have entered into the very nature of power. They are inseparable from it, and in every manifestation of power, they are the first things established’.<sup>18</sup>

These rich topics suggest potential for further critical enquiries in Dickens Studies to draw attention to the significance and cultural weight of his distinctive oral poetics. In reading those poetics, it is possible to see how Dickens probes and challenges conventions, stereotypes, and clichés to present something extraordinary in the representation of the mouth.

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Mettler, ‘The Anthropological and Cultural Dimensions of the Oral Cavity’, in *On Everyone’s Lips*, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. by Carol Stewart (1960; New York: Farrar, 1973), p. 208.

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