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Idiomatic Surrogacy and (Dis)Ability in *Dombey and Son*

Peter J. Capuano

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I. Digital Dombey

To assert that Charles Dickens possessed a mastery of language unique among nineteenth-century novelists for its vernacular inventiveness is hardly controversial. The *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* lists Dickens among its most cited sources (others include the Bible and Shakespeare). Dickens’s use of ordinary, unembellished, and what Anthony Trollope termed vulgarly “ungrammatical” lower-class language sets his novels apart in style and tone from those of his famous peers (249). William Thackeray, the Brontës, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Margaret Oliphant, Thomas Hardy and others – despite their many differences – generally composed their fiction in higher, more formal linguistic registers than Dickens. The difference with Dickens is most likely the result of a complex amalgamation of circumstance and sensibility, but his unusual upbringing is undoubtedly a major factor. His early life experiences gave him access to a range of rhetorical speech that his peers simply did not possess.

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Working as a young boy at Warren's Blacking Factory, regularly visiting his father at the Marshalsea Prison, and later, spending time as a law clerk, a Parliamentary stenographer, and a newspaper editor gave Dickens a broad spectrum of linguistic resources from which to build his fictional idiolect. Garrett Stewart captures this exceptional sense of rhetorical ingenuity in his assessment that "it often seems as if the untapped reserves of the English vernacular were simply lying in wait for Dickens to inherit them – by marrying their riches to his storyteller's instinct" ("Language" 136).

Given Dickens's unparalleled command of the English vernacular, I would like to focus on how one idiomatic figuration that has so far escaped critical attention works to produce meaning in one particular novel: the idiomatic expression "right-hand man" in *Dombey and Son* (1846–48). I concede that this phrase may have escaped critical attention for good reason; it appears only six times in *Dombey and Son* – Dickens's longest novel at 356,610 words. But unlike virtually every other idiom that turns up in Dickens's work, "right-hand man" appears *only* these six times in *Dombey* and never again in his fictional oeuvre (comprised of twenty-one texts).¹

Although Dickens remains unsurpassed in his usage of idiomatic expressions among his Victorian peers, it is important to note that he recycles the ones he does use often throughout his fictional career. Representative examples include the expression "hold your tongue," which he uses multiple times in thirteen texts; "at arm's length" in sixteen texts; "head to foot" in nineteen texts, and so on. The singular usage of the phrase "right-hand man" solely in *Dombey* becomes

1 Since this study is part of a larger project dedicated to investigating the use of body-related idioms amongst nineteenth-century British novelists, I have arrived at Dickens's six usages of the idiom "right-hand man" in his oeuvre through the writing and executing of my own code – written in the open-source programming language R. The following are the Dickens texts I mined and which, for the purposes of this article, I consider his "fictional oeuvre": *American Notes*, "The Battle of Life," *Barnaby Rudge*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, "The Chimes," *David Copperfield*, *Dombey and Son*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Great Expectations*, *Hard Times*, "The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain," *Little Dorrit*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Oliver Twist*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *Sketches by Boz*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Uncommercial Traveller*.

more anomalous when we consider that this is the only Dickensian novel in which a relatively major character – Captain Edward Cuttle – conspicuously (in prose and illustration) has no right hand; he has a hook, along with various other “attachments.” My contention is that this rather obvious impairment paradoxically highlights the multiple meanings cohering around the idiomatic expression “right-hand man,” but, more importantly, that it also informs the subtle ways in which *Dombey and Son* forges the exploration of its deepest and most interrelated themes: succession and surrogacy, pride and pathos, ability and disability. The instances mentioned above are ultimately just numbers, but they give some expanded contextual sense of how rare it was for Dickens to employ the phrase in such a concentrated manner in only one of the twenty-one works. At this essay’s core, though, is a literary-historical and cultural studies argument – not a statistical one. My approach, even as it draws on numerical instantiations as its starting point, is not “truth”-driven, nor is it confirmational; I am far less interested in “proving” anything about *Dombey and Son* than I am in asking new questions about the interrelationship of an overlooked idiom and the novel’s central themes. This necessarily involves a commitment to an open-ended interpretive process, where the role of the data mining is exploratory rather than evidentiary, and where the use of machine-assisted methods fosters provocation rather than proof. For these reasons, the literary and theoretical claims I make in the largest portion of this piece do not necessarily rely on exact frequency counts. Once the finite instances of the “right-hand man” idiom in *Dombey* have been identified, I get on with the more interesting interpretive work of analyzing the important ways in which the idiom is refracted diffusively throughout many other dimensions of the novel. Even so, it is important to understand how the idiosyncratic uniqueness of any phrase achieves its “idiomaticity”; that is, how and when a phrase moves from the literal to the figurative within a given language’s vernacular.

In order to consider how Dickens might have arrived at employing such a phrase as he began sketching out *Dombey* in 1846, it will be helpful to examine the provenance of the idiom. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first usage of the phrase “right-hand man” occurs in a military context in 1626 describing “a soldier holding a position of responsibility or command on the right hand of a

troop of [cavalry] horses.”² It is not until 1739 that the phrase began to acquire its figurative meaning as “a person (esp. a man) who serves as a chief assistant or indispensable helper to another.” But it still remains difficult to gauge how the phrase moves from its first instantiations to its more common usage later in the nineteenth century. For example, the *Hansard Corpus*, which is made up of over seven million Parliamentary speeches by some forty thousand speakers, turns up only two instances of the idiom from 1800 to 1850. It stands to reason, though, that even if MPs were becoming familiar with the idiom, they would most likely refrain from dipping into the colloquial register while trying to persuade their peers. As Dickens himself witnessed of the “parliamentary style” as a reporter, MPs were far more “inclined to speechify” their language (*Sketches* 39, 193). Newspapers, given the expansion of their distribution and readership in the first half of the century, therefore provide a more accurate picture of how the idiom became more popularly used. Manfred Görlach has convincingly proven that journalism, combined with the exponential rise of literacy after 1840, had significant and more or less immediate effects on the spread of the vernacular in standard English (13). Searches through the *British Library Newspapers Digital Archive* and the *British Periodicals* database corroborate Görlach’s claim. The *Newspaper* archive contains over two million pages from forty-eight daily and weekly papers in Britain, while *British Periodicals* contains over six million pages from 460 magazines and journals. The breadth of these sources provides a more comprehensive sense of how and when the phrase “right-hand man” gained traction in contemporary popular usage. The graphs below provide visualizations of the phrase’s rising popularity in the newspaper (**Fig. 1**) and periodical presses (**Fig. 2**), respectively.

2 Though the *OED* does not mention it, there is also a powerful and lasting influence from the multiple “right hand” anthropomorphic phrasings in the Judeo-Christian tradition where Christ appears *dextera domini*, at the right hand of the Lord. For only a few Biblical examples, see Col. 3.1, Rom. 8.34, Heb. 8.1 and 12.2, Acts 2.33, Matt. 22.64, Mark 16.19, Luke 22.69. Dickens was no doubt aware of this Biblical inflection, as he weaves it into the comic preposterousness of Dombey’s myopically selfish worldview presented in ch. 1: “Common abbreviations took new meanings in his eyes, and had sole reference to them. A. D. had no concern with anno Domini, but stood for anno Dombei – and Son” (12; ch. 1).



Fig. 1. "Right-hand man" appearances in the *British Library Newspapers Digital Archive* (Gale).

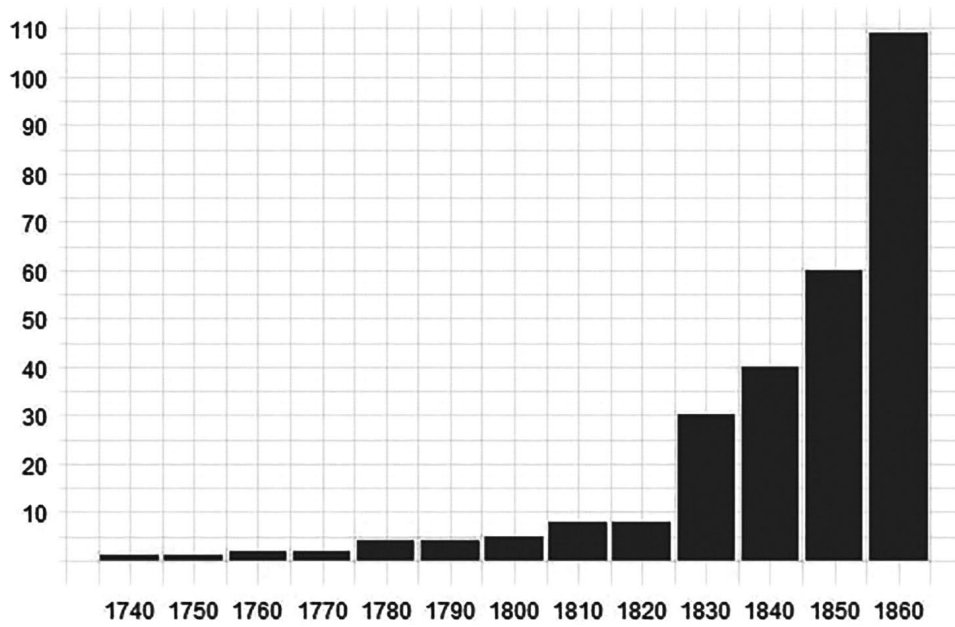


Fig. 2. "Right-hand man" appearances in *British Periodicals* (ProQuest).

The idiom first appears in 1740 – consistent with the year after the *OED* dates its first figurative appearance, and its use in newspapers and periodicals rises very slowly until about 1835, when its usage begins to spike. Although the graphs demonstrate actual occurrences in 1845 (about twenty-five in **Fig. 1**; forty in **Fig. 2**) and show that usage is still *relatively* rare, they nonetheless reveal that the phrase was becoming much more widely used in newspapers and periodicals around the time that Dickens began to compose *Dombey* in 1846. It is also very likely that Dickens was aware of these developments in what he called “newspaper phraseology,” considering that he maintained a keen interest in journalism (editing *The Daily News* – if only for a matter of months – in 1846) and in the periodical press (editing *Bentley’s Miscellany* for three years). In fact, Sally Ledger has connected Dickens’s cultural positioning in Victorian England, for better or for worse, with “what some [Trollope et al.] regarded as his vulgar embrace of the popular,” precisely because of his association with everyday newspaper rhetoric (3).

II. Moving Between the Literal and the Figurative

Perhaps more immediately relevant, the newspaper and periodical archives from about this date (1846) reveal a rise in the use of “right-hand man” in association with military *and* commercial contexts. This is noteworthy because it is within this same movement from the military to commerce that Dickens first employs the phrase in *Dombey*. It occurs in the scene at Leamington where Major Bagstock emphasizes the “availability” of Mr. Dombey to Mrs. Skewton (“Cleopatra”) and, by extension, to her marriage-eligible daughter Edith. In order to convince Skewton that Dombey “is in earnest” about a prospective match with Edith, Bagstock points to the arrival of Carker in Leamington – who is dispatched there presumably to assess the situation for the exceedingly proud “Colossus of commerce”:

“... Dombey’s *right-hand man*, Ma’am,” said the Major, stopping abruptly in a chuckle, and becoming serious, “has arrived.”

“This morning?” said Cleopatra.

“This morning, Ma’am,” returned the Major. “And Dombey’s anxiety for his arrival, Ma’am, is to be referred ... to his desire that what is in the wind should become known to him, without Dombey’s telling and consulting him. For Dombey is as proud, Ma’am,” said the Major, “as Lucifer.”

“A charming quality,” lisped Mrs Skewton; “reminding one of dearest Edith.”

“Well, Ma’am,” said the Major. “I have thrown out hints already, and the *right-hand man* understands ‘em; and I’ll throw out more, before the day is done. ...” (407; ch. 26, italics mine)

Then, as happens so often and so seamlessly in Dickens’s work, the diction of his characters begins to blend with the diction of his narrators. The phenomenon, which Patricia Ingham has appropriately called “the listening narrator,” occurs when the narrator hears and amplifies the characters’ idiosyncratic – and, in this case, idiomatic – way of speaking (128).³

The scene at Leamington is a quintessential example of this character/narrator linguistic nexus. Just a few pages after Major Bagstock dubs “the man with the teeth” Dombey’s “right-hand man,” the narrator recounts how Bagstock leaves Mrs. Skewton upstairs while he descends to rejoin Dombey “and his right-hand man,” Carker. Here is how the narrator describes the scenario just after Bagstock’s introduction (in dialogue) of the idiom:

At length, the Major ... went down stairs to enliven “Dombey” and his *right-hand man*.

Dombey was not yet in the room, but the *right-hand man* was there, and his dental treasures were, as usual, ready for the Major. (410; ch. 26, italics mine)

Though this scene appears twenty-six chapters into the novel, I concur with Alan Horsman’s belief that Major Bagstock’s part in the second marriage “seems to be among the very earliest plans for the novel,

³ Barbara Hardy also refers to this phenomenon as “rhetorical miming” (79).

judging by the presence of the military witness at the marriage ceremony in the [monthly number] cover design" (xxx). This, combined with what we know about the military provenance of the idiom and its concentrated use in the Leamington scene, informs my sense that Dickens, at some level, was able to register the idiom's literal but multiply-valenced applicability for the themes of surrogacy and substitution that he was already exploring from the novel's opening pages when he thought of his principal characters.

Mikhail Bakhtin's heteroglossic notion of how speech operates in the novel genre may help explain the "intentional" complexities involved in this seemingly straightforward scene of dialogue. The listening narrator's commentary with Major Bagstock's dialogue partakes of Bakhtin's formulation that such speech constitutes a special type of "double-voiced discourse":

It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they – as it were – know about each other ..., it is as though they actually hold a conversation with each other. (324)

This conversation between Major Bagstock and the narrator allows Dickens to compact, reiterate, and transfer the meanings of an increasingly popularized idiom within a single important though otherwise unremarkable scene where "the refracted intention of the author" may or may not be wholly conscious. Regardless of intentionality, this "right-hand man" scene is exemplary of the way Bakhtin sees the novel as the place where "material from alien languages" begins to merge with "contemporary topics" and "contemporary consciousness" through a heteroglossic process which is itself characterized by the incorporation of "the lower genres and everyday speech" (363, 372).

The assistance that the Major offers is hardly handled by Bagstock alone, however. Even as he becomes the "right-hand man" for Dombey's social excursion, he himself employs his own "right-hand man": "the dark servant" known only as "the Native" (102; ch. 7;



Fig. 3. "Major Bagstock is delighted to have that opportunity."

303; ch. 20). Because it is the Native who assembles the luggage, arranges the transportation, does the cooking, and even carries messages around to Mrs. Skewton and Edith Granger at Leamington, there is undoubtedly a troubling social and racial power dynamic underwriting Bagstock's ability to *be* a "right-hand man" for Dombey. Perhaps nowhere is this cascading dynamic of hierarchical "right-hand" power more apparent than in Browne's illustration depicting the scene where Bagstock formally introduces Dombey to his future (second) wife and mother in law (Fig. 3). Here, the subordinate hierarchy repeatedly embedded in the idiom could not be more visually explicit in the positioning of the characters. The "right-hand man," Bagstock, stands directly to the right of Dombey, while Bagstock's "right-hand man," the Native, appears directly to his right.

Part of what makes Dickens's idiomatic imagination so remarkable is the way he delights in exploiting the idiomat�icity of an expression by continually alternating between its figurative and literal dimensions. Dombey has Carker not only "always at his elbow" throughout

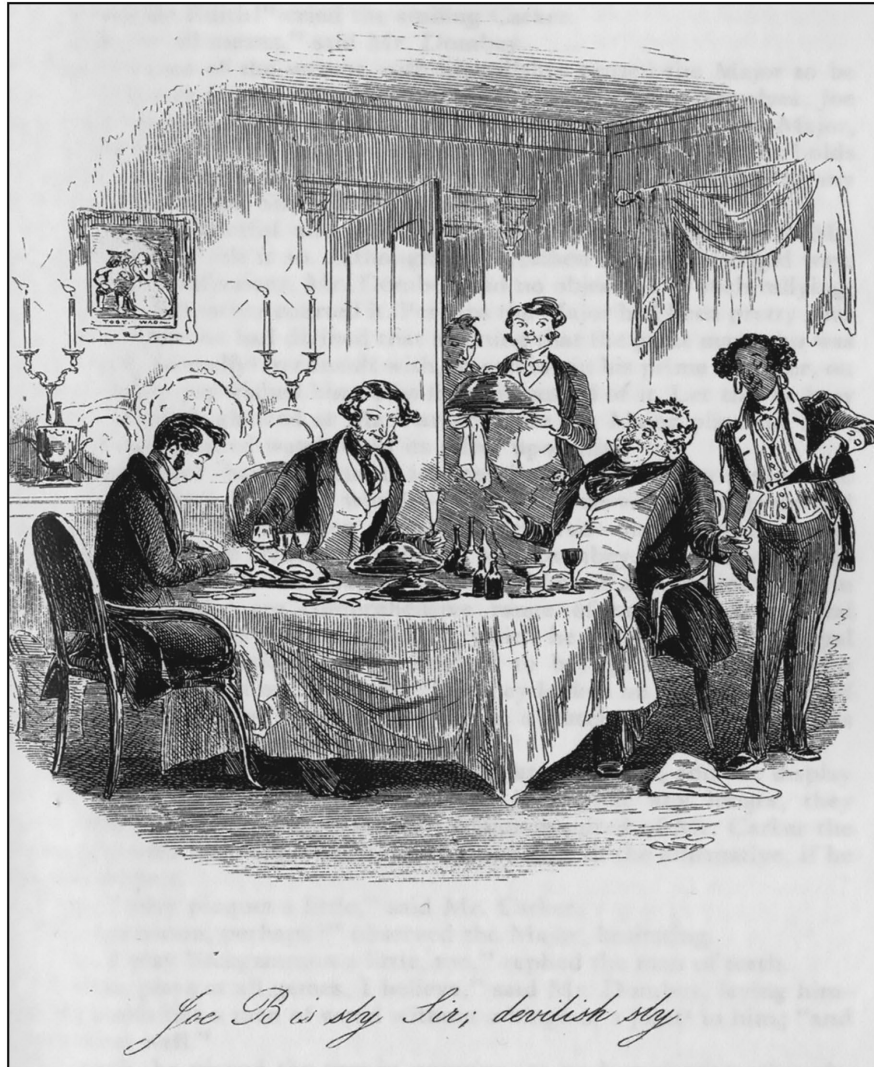


Fig. 4. "Joe B is sly, sir, devilishly sly."

the novel's prose and its illustrations but literally at his *right*-hand elbow (435; ch. 28). For instance, the illustration which appears at the end of the same chapter as the four concentrated prose iterations introducing Carker as Dombey's "right-hand man" shows Carker seated conspicuously at Dombey's right hand (Fig. 4). Here, Carker's right-hand position is emphasized as Bagstock and three other servants appear stacked up on Dombey's left side. Something similar is implied on a far bigger stage later in the novel when Dombey hosts a "housewarming" dinner-party for his business associates. In this instance, the narrator recounts in considerable detail how and where the

guests, including Carker, Cousin Feenix, Edith Dombey, Major Bagstock and Mrs. Sketwon, arrive at their seats during the elaborately choreographed dinner. The description of the seating's specificity is inversely proportionate to one errant guest's obscurity: "When all the rest were got in and were seated, one of these mild men still appeared, in smiling confusion, totally destitute and unprovided for, and, escorted by the butler, made the complete circuit of the table twice before his chair could be found, which it finally was, *on Mrs Dombey's left hand*" (556; ch. 36, italics mine). While it's comical that Dombey's frozen demeanor makes even what is billed as a "housewarming" event inhospitable, it is especially conspicuous that the guest ends up not at Mr. Dombey's right hand – where his "right-hand man," Carker, is always positioned – but rather at *Mrs. Dombey's left*.

These kinds of idiomatic literalizations will become more interesting as they relate to other characters and larger themes but, for now, it is important to mention briefly the two other (for a total of six) instantiations of the idiom in *Dombey*. One occurs when Mr. Morfin pays a visit to the home of Carker's disgraced older brother, John, and his sister, Harriet. Morfin is an underling assistant manager in the commercial hierarchy of Dombey's firm. He is deeply concerned for Harriet Carker's well-being (a concern that will develop into romantic interest), and so he offers his services should she ever decide to terminate her resolution to live in isolation with her brother, saying: "if you should see cause to change your resolution, you will suffer me to be as your right hand [man]. My name shall then be at your service" (521; ch. 33). Morfin's steadfast promise to act as Harriet's "faithful steward" – another figurative collocation of the "right-hand man" idiom – culminates in his marriage to Harriet at the end of the novel (885; ch. 58). The sixth explicit instantiation of the idiom occurs when Solomon Gills leaves the *Wooden Midshipman* to search for the presumably drowned Walter Gay – an event that causes a realignment of the shop's "management." The narrator informs us that Captain Cuttle, unaware of Rob's treachery, installs "the Grinder" to be the second in "command" of shop: Cuttle "had believed in the false Rob ...; he had made a companion of him as the last of the old ship's company; he had taken command of the little *Midshipman* with him a[s] his right-hand [man]" (597; ch. 39). My bracketed insertion of "man" in each of these latter instances reflects my belief that they should be considered as distinctive parts of the way the novel conceives of surrogacy

in terms of “right-hand manness.” And it should be noted, here, that my stance regarding the essential idiomaticity of the expression despite its exact phrasing is bolstered by overwhelming textual evidence culled from Dickens’s entire oeuvre: every other of the 224 instances where the adjectival phrase “right hand” appears in his novels, unlike the two examples above, delineates either literal proprioception (something in the environment’s or a character’s kinesthesiastic place to the right of) or a literal action of a character’s right hand (“holding out a clenched right hand,” etc.).⁴

These six occurrences of the expression also need to be contextualized additionally in terms of their rarity both in Dickens’s fiction and in that of other contemporary novelists. Despite the burgeoning use of the right-hand-man idiom in newspapers, magazines, and journals, novelists still hardly ever employed it in their fictional prose. Dickens does not employ this idiom even a single time outside of *Dombey* in the entirety of his career, and a search through the Chadwyck-Healey database of *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, made up of 250 novels by more than one hundred different British and Irish authors, reveals that the phrase is used in only four other instances – once in a military context in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1848); once in Trollope’s much later *Phineas Redux* (1873); and twice in Dickens’s friend Frederick Marryat’s pre-*Dombeyan Percival Keene* (1842).⁵ In a much larger corpus of 3,719 nineteenth-century novels, the idiom appears in only ninety-seven other books (2.6 percent) – and

4 The sole possible exception to these 224 instances could be the scene in *Little Dorrit* (1855–57) when Mr. Meagles arranges for Daniel Doyce and Arthur Clenham to form a joint business venture, saying that “each of you will be a right hand to the other” (284; bk. 1, ch. 23).

5 The use of computer-assisted research is a flag over contested ground in the humanities. Part of this contestation is well deserved for those who attempt to draw facile and “truthful” connections between numbers and literary meaning. Digital research, practiced without transparency and a careful balance of human interpretation, often presents data as a version of unquestioned and, ultimately, false objectivity. As Lisa Gitelman has recently put it in the title of a book she edits, *“Raw Data” Is an Oxymoron*. Data, no matter how it is derived, always comes to the reader biased or “cooked” in one way or another. Designing and implementing a text-analysis program is necessarily an interpretive act, not just a mechanical one. For this reason, I treat the numerical data from Chadwyck-Healey and other corpuses in this article as only one of many pieces of “distant” evidence. And my larger argument certainly does not depend on numbers. I do not rely on numbers specific to Dickens’s usages of individual idiomatic expressions

even then, it occurs twice in only four of them, and never more than twice. Such rarity provides additional context for the concentration of Dickens's six usages in *Dombey and Son* and it is a provocation to explore a more specific question about the idiom's isolated concentration in only this particular novel.⁶ Dickens's concentrated use of the idiom multiple times in a single novel, especially considering that it was virtually unused in thousands of other nineteenth-century novels, constitutes what the digital humanities scholar Judith Flanders calls a "phraseological peculiarity" (24).⁷ Making sense of this phraseological peculiarity remains the central task of this essay. As we shall see, what might be called "right-hand manness" supersedes the rarity of its numerical instantiation as it comes to pervade almost every aspect of *Dombey*.

Although critics have yet to recognize how this particular idiom functions in *Dombey*, I am in good company when it comes to acknowledging Dickens's broader ability to elevate seemingly insignificant details to the way he organizes the conceptual thematics in his fiction. Many years ago Garrett Stewart convincingly argued that Dickens's "style" often consists of "small moments of almost impossible insight and rightness ... sudden illuminations that take our breath away [which] frequently collapse into a single disclosure the largest themes of their books" (*Trials* xv–xvi). More recently, Daniel Tyler has argued that "Dickens often marshals attributes of his style – his

to "prove" anything about his imaginative craft. Instead, I offer them as points of provocation to start (not end) new conversations about how and why certain idioms' rarity shows up the way it does in Dickens's oeuvre. Dickens's oeuvre may be seen as a good example of what Alison Booth has advocated for in terms of "mid-range" (between "distant" and "close") reading. My method in this regard joins a growing chorus in Digital Humanities scholarship that utilizes the affordances of "minimal computing" without disparagement. See Shore, Allison, and Risam and Gil.

6 The fact that the idiom appears very rarely in a corpus spanning 100 years, of course, does not prove that it was actually rare at that time. Rather it demonstrates that it is rarely present in the novel types which exist in that particular corpus. But it is a corpus that is far, far more representative of the expansive number of Victorian novels than we typically are asked to consider in a strictly "analogue" argument.

7 For a discussion of how data mining that "brings forth idiosyncratic uniqueness" still requires close contextual interpretation and analysis, see Rockwell and Sinclair.

figurative language, his wordplay, his sound effects – to the immediate thematic ends of each fiction” (11). This ability to oscillate seamlessly between the literal and the figurative in various narrative voices – what Peter Brooks has aptly called Dickens’s “quicksilver agility” (44) – is certainly of a piece with how “right-hand manness” operates in *Dombey*. The scene at Leamington where the narrator “listens in” on and repeats Bagstock’s appellation of Carker as Dombey’s “right-hand man” is an as yet unremarked-upon instance of Dickens’s linguistic inventiveness that becomes interwoven with the novel’s larger themes in a process of idiom absorption. The idiom, once articulated, begins to soak into the text’s whole cloth in such a way that its literalization, abstraction, or even its explicit violation emerge as new agents for thematic innovation.

One of the principal ways that “right-hand manness” becomes absorbed in *Dombey* is paradoxically – and therefore all the more powerfully – through the continued presence of a character who, literally speaking, has no right hand: Captain Edward Cuttle. The novel’s first monthly installment, at the start of October of 1846, introduced readers to Cuttle as “a gentleman ... with a hook instead of a hand attached to his right wrist” (55; ch. 4). Captain Cuttle also appears in an outsized share of the novel’s illustrations. This is important because it has been widely acknowledged that *Dombey* stands out among Dickens’s novels as the earliest example of a process of deliberate and successful planning. Dickens clearly imagined Cuttle as a major character from the earliest stages. His single page of notes outlining the major events of the book includes the identification of the following characters, in this order: Mr. Dombey, Paul Dombey (“born, to die”), Florence, Captain Cuttle, Mrs. Chick, Polly Toodle, Miss Tox, Solomon Gills, and Walter Gay (Stone, *Working Notes* 56–57). Sixty years ago, Kathleen Tillotson wrote what is now regarded as a critical consensus: that “with *Dombey* [Dickens] began to write novels founded on a theme, *embodied* in a relation between characters” (159, italics mine).⁸

⁸ Hillary Schor has described this now twenty-first-century critical consensus perhaps most succinctly: “*Dombey and Son* marked a new beginning for Dickens in many ways: it was the first of his novels for which he wrote number plans in advance; the first to use complicated and involved metaphors for itself; the first he spoke of as ‘branching’ off in ways we [now] think of his novels developing ... with newly plotted tightness” (4).

I wish to consider such embodiment not only in the interplay between the literal and the figurative, but also in its association with important notions of ability and disability. An additional contention of this essay, therefore, is that one of the most significant themes in *Dombey* revolves around the embodied relationship between physically abled but emotionally limited characters and those that are physically disabled but emotionally competent.

If *Dombey* is pride's chief embodiment, as Kate Flint and others maintain (40), Cuttle is the fullest embodiment of its opposite: good-natured humility. This is born out again and again in the radical contrast between the two characters' physical and dispositional representations. Where *Dombey* appears "hard, inflexible, unyielding" (655; ch. 43), "stiff with starch and arrogance" (110; ch. 8), and "unbending [in] form" (469, ch. 30), Cuttle appears with "impenetrable equanimity" (259; ch. 17), with "a lively sense upon him" (265; ch. 17), with "a manner that [is] at once comfortable, easy, and expressive" (260; ch. 17). There is no doubt that Dickens, especially in his early fiction, sentimentally objectifies characters with disabilities, often representing them as helpless, as villains, or as comically incompetent. But as Julia Miele Rodas notes, "disability in Victorian fiction [also] indicates ... a desire to experiment with places and roles" ("Mainstreaming" 373). The opposing descriptions of *Dombey* and Cuttle, like those cited above, are instances where this kind of experimentation emerges. Rodas maintains that the disabled in such cases can "seem to exist, not apart from, but along a continuum with other ostensibly nondisabled characters" ("Tiny Tim" 79–80). In the general descriptions of *Dombey* and Cuttle, though, the continuum appears less homogenous than reversed. *Dombey*'s physical demeanor of inflexibility and stiffness, in comparison with Cuttle's liveliness and comfort, complicates the question of what it means to be abled or disabled in the world of this novel. We know from Dickens's letters that he purposefully conflated notions of able- and disable-bodiedness. He wrote in a letter to Hablot Browne (his illustrator), for example, that Mrs. Skewton should be shown "shoved about in a Bath chair" by an assistant, even though "Nothing [is] the matter with her to prevent from walking" (10 Mar. 1847; *Letters* 5: 34).

Dickens extends this kind of conflation more specifically to *Dombey* and Cuttle. Where *Dombey*'s bodily inclination is to coldness

– bearing a “cold, hard armour of pride” (608; ch. 40), a “cold unfor- giving face” (907; ch. 59), Cuttle’s is to warmth – offering a “manner of warm approval” (260; ch. 17), “assuring [others] warmly” (262; ch. 27). Perhaps Dickens’s most brilliant juxtaposition of these opposing characteristics comes with the first meeting between the two char- acters. Here is the narrator’s description of the ensuing handshake: “[Cuttle] could not refrain from seizing [Dombey’s] right hand in his own solitary left, and while he held it open with his powerful fingers, bringing the hook down upon its palm in a transport of admiration. At this touch of warm feeling and cold iron, Mr Dombey shivered all over” (155; ch. 10). At least a part of the brilliance of this arresting tableau is the way in which it formally, and physically, establishes the paradoxical relationship between what counts as ability and dis- ability in the novel. Dombey “shiver[s] all over” because he does not yet possess the (cap)ability for “warm feeling” that characterizes the entirety of Cuttle’s physical and temperamental disposition from the start. As Dombey is emotionally incapacitated, and therefore in- clined to coldness, he is incapable of registering the “warm feeling” emanating from the captain’s left hand; instead he sees only the ir- regularity of Cuttle’s body and, as a result, feels only the “cold iron” of his prosthetic touch. Quite oppositely, Cuttle’s willingness to use his prosthetic device as if it is endowed with the full capabilities of a fully-functioning human hand importantly reflects his *own* sense of his able-bodiedness which, as we will see, forecasts his ability to become a far better “right-hand man” than the technically abled but emotionally deficient Carker.

III. Dombey and (Dis)Ability

I began by calling attention to how categorically unique Dickens’s use of the idiom is in *Dombey and Son* compared to his larger oeuvre. This uniqueness carries through more specifically to Dickens’s representation of Cuttle’s “normalcy” – perhaps even the “extra- normalcy” – of his actions throughout the novel.⁹ To recognize the

⁹ The pioneering work of Lennard Davis first articulated and historicized how the concepts of “normalcy” in relation to “disability” are themselves constructions which arose out of and were confirmed by the radically changing industrial

importance of Dickens's accomplishment in this regard, though, some additional context is necessary. Lennard Davis has recently argued that the problem with "metamorphiz[ing] disability" is that it creates a process that is "a substitutive one in which you say something is something else" – where "the effect is to distract, to disengage from the original [disabled] subject" ("Seeing" x). This, of course, applies equally to idiomatic expressions. Labelling someone a "right-hand man" necessarily abstracts meaning *away* from the actual body; it avoids, elides, or even erases "seeing the object as in itself it really is," to use Davis's terms (x). At times in *Dombey* this is quite obviously the case. In the same scene, for example, where Dombey "shivers" at the sight and touch of Cuttle's hook, Miss Tox stumbles over how to describe Cuttle to Dombey just prior to their introductory handshake. She eventually settles on an all too familiar ableist description which reduces Cuttle to his "irregularity," wherein she is unable to describe Cuttle with a description that recognizes him beyond the horizon of his impairment: "'The gentleman with the – Instrument,' pursued Miss Tox, glancing at Captain Cuttle ..." (154; ch. 10). Reactions such as Miss Tox's to Cuttle's prosthetic hook encourage the pitiable spectacle of the readerly "stare" that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson attributes to the harmful visual rhetoric of nineteenth-century conceptions of bodily "irregularity" ("Politics" 59).

Dickens often uses disability and disfigurement in adult characters as a visual shorthand for varying levels of villainy, incompetence, or pity (think Grandfather Smallweed or Silas Wegg). We have seen how certain characters in *Dombey* like Miss Tox confirm these kinds of ableist attitudes. But the depictions of Captain Cuttle, himself, stand as notable Dickensian exceptions where Dickens does indeed move beyond Davis's "metaphor of disability." Cuttle's very real disability, far from functioning as a simple trope, metaphor, or idiomatic emblem, compounds his importance and complexity in framing the deepest

conditions of the mid-nineteenth century. *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995) demonstrated how "the word 'normal' as 'constituting, conforming to, not deviating or differing from, the common type or standard, regular, usual' only enter[ed] the English language around 1840" (24). This has a particular resonance for *Dombey* because Dickens was composing the novel during just this era.

themes of *Dombey* insofar as this is a novel about what it means to live fully, generously – and ably – in a world where too many have emotional, moral, and even physical deficiencies.

Situating Victorian disability as a relational category in *Fictions of Affliction* (2004), Martha Stoddard Holmes argues that some novels “posit an emotional exchange system in which currents of feeling, stimulated by the presence of a corporeally ‘different’ body, connect people who are not disabled to people who are” (29). It is in this way that Captain Cuttle operates as a fulcrum of filial surrogacy – a kind of parental “right-hand man” – to those like Walter Gay and Florence Dombey who have lost the “blood” element of direct family relation. We witness this acutely in Cuttle’s deft preparation of meals for both of them. Early in the novel, Cuttle prepares a dinner for Walter Gay consisting of “loin of mutton, porter, and some smoking hot potatoes, which he had cooked himself.” The narrator tells us matter-of-factly that, “He unscrewed his hook at dinner-time, and screwed a knife into its wooden socket, instead, with which he had already begun to peel one of these potatoes for Walter” (138; ch. 9). Cuttle’s resourcefulness reaches even greater heights while cooking for Florence at the Wooden Midshipman – her surrogate home – after she has been brutally disowned by her father:

The Captain had spread the cloth with great care, and was making some egg-sauce in a little saucepan: basting the fowl from time to time during the process with a strong interest, as it turned and browned on a string before the fire. Having propped Florence up with cushions on the sofa, ... the Captain pursued his cooking with extraordinary skill, making hot gravy in a second little saucepan, boiling a handful of potatoes in a third, never forgetting the egg-sauce in the first, and making an impartial round of basting and stirring with the most useful of spoons every minute. Besides these cares, the Captain had to keep his eye on a diminutive frying-pan, in which some sausages were hissing and bubbling in a most musical manner

The dinner being at length quite ready, Captain Cuttle dished and served it up, with no less dexterity than he had cooked it. He then ... wheeled the table close against

Florence on the sofa, said grace, unscrewed his hook, screwed his fork into its place, and did the honours of the table. (737; ch. 49)

The final lines of this passage remind the reader that the Captain accomplishes all of these culinary tasks with one hand and a set of prosthetics. Perhaps more significantly, Dickens has Cuttle do so with a warmth, cheerfulness, and general demeanor which focuses on, rather than erases, his competencies. The narrator does not elide but, in fact, emphasizes Cuttle's prosthetics. This makes space for an idea that highlights the possibilities of an alternative relationship between physicality and inner "character" – one where the "regular" or "irregular" features of the body simply and without fanfare take their place alongside other aspects of identity. Such a presentation nonetheless ironically situates Cuttle in striking contrast to the able-bodied characters like Dombey who desperately need "right-hand men" or those operating as "right-hand men" like Carker who have such grave emotional and moral shortcomings. In characteristically Dickensian form, the irony is also embedded in the referential rhetoric attached to characters' names: D-om-b-e-y – an anagram of "embody" – may be the "Head of the Firm," but he has no heart and fails miserably as the "Head of the Home-Department"; Captain "Cuttle" may have a hand "cut off," but he manages his role as a "right-hand man" (to Florence, Solomon, Walter) far more competently than "Carker the [actual] Manager" – who is the explicit and official "right-hand man" to Dombey ("Carker the Manager" appears thirty-six times in the novel). This raises the possibility that Dickens conceived of the name "Cuttle" not in terms of lack, but rather in terms of abundant competence. After all, the cuttlefish is an *eight*-limbed mollusk.

Herbert Sussman and Gerhard Joseph come closest to my formulation when they assert that Cuttle's hook is "both 'iron' and 'hand' ... a synecdochic 'helping hand,' however mechanical" (620). Yet there was a historical "prosthetic precedent" for Cuttle's singular optimism and for his varied use of multiple appendages. After losing his right arm in the Battle of Vittoria (1813), Captain George Webb Derenzy published *Enchiridion: or A Hand for the One-Handed* (1822) – a text that was well-circulated in England through the 1830s as the nation confronted waves of disabled veterans returning home from

the Napoleonic Wars. As Sue Zemka has observed, Derenzy's book is "a testimony to his adaptation." He states once (and in no detail) in the opening dedication to his book that he lost most of his right arm at war (Derenzy iv), but his brief "confession of helplessness prefaces a manual replete with [a] cheerful description" of the multiple ways in which he successfully *uses* his right "hand" (Zemka). Derenzy's sanguine characterization of his use of the multiple attachments ensures that "the overall tone [of the book] is one of satisfaction with the can-do ingenuity of the device" (Zemka). This same sense of unconscious capability is lent to Cuttle both in Dickens's prose and in Browne's illustrations, such as *The shadow in the little parlor* (Fig. 5), which is immediately preceded by the following description: "The Captain, *without knowing what he did*, had cut a slice of bread from the loaf, and put it on his hook (which was his usual toasting-fork), on which he now held it to the fire" (748; ch. 49, italics mine). Such illustrations and prose descriptions of Cuttle's prosthetic hand (or knife or fork) are decidedly not the pitiable spectacles of readerly stare that Garland-Thompson rightfully warns against. Instead, they focus on an unconscious and prosthetically-symmetrical body that does not need or require "repair." Cuttle's ability to *be* a right-hand man despite not *having* a right hand emphasizes a sense of competence that depends not on the binary limitations of ability and disability, but rather on the way we experience our bodies as both features and extensions of our deeper selves.

Indeed, we witness Cuttle's deepest (cheerfully proficient) self when he attends to the physically and emotionally scarred Florence at the *Wooden Midshipman* after she has been mercilessly cast out of her father's home. Dickens's description of Cuttle's actions at this pivotal stage in the novel "overflo[w] with compassion and gentleness" (725; ch. 48), but also with a powerful and practical physical competence:

Finding [Florence] insensible ... Captain Cuttle snatched from his breakfast-table, a basin of cold water, and sprinkled some upon her face. Yielding to the urgency of the case, the Captain then ... relieved her of her bonnet, moistened her lips and forehead, put back her hair, covered her feet with his own coat which he pulled off for the purpose, patted her hand ... (724; ch. 48)



Fig. 5. *The Shadow in the Little Parlour.*

Even more impressive is how the narrator describes Cuttle's use of "his one hand and his hook with the greatest dexterity" as he transforms the upper chamber of the *Wooden Midshipman* into a convalescent room:

[T]he Captain ... converted the bed into a couch, by covering it all over with a clean white drapery. By a similar contrivance, the Captain converted the little dressing-table into a species of altar, on which he set forth two silver

teaspoons, a flower-pot, a telescope, his celebrated watch, a pocket-comb, and a song-book, as a small collection of rarities, that made a choice appearance. Having darkened the window, and straightened the pieces of carpet on the floor, the Captain surveyed these preparations with great delight, and descended to the little parlour again, to bring Florence to her bower.

... and the Captain *carried her up out of hand*, laid her down, and covered her with a great watch-coat. (728; ch. 48, italics mine)

The point is not that Cuttle performs all of these tasks with only one hand and his hook. Rather, it's that Dickens repeatedly emphasizes Cuttle's capacity to be so much more than a fragmented body. And this is crucial because a legacy of *Dombey* criticism has treated Cuttle as fundamentally *lacking* many qualities, especially normative masculinity.

Robert Newsom, in "Embodying *Dombey*: Whole and in Part" (1989), considers whether Cuttle is a "model androgyne" (210) and Gillian Gane, in "The Hat, the Hook, the Eyes, the Teeth: Captain Cuttle, Mr. Carker, and Literacy" (1996), as her title suggests, analyzes prosthetic masculinity through the lens of reading proficiency. More recently, Rosemary Coleman, in "How *Dombey and Son* Thinks About Masculinities" (2014), sees the text as a laboratory "to solve the enigma of masculinity" and, in so doing, concludes that the novel "is unable to conceive of [even] ... *one whole man*" (126–27, italics original). But if we think of Cuttle's deep concern for Florence's well being as situated at the intersection of gender and disability studies, it becomes possible to recognize how "disabled" men may successfully access alternative notions of masculinity and embodiment. It is hard to imagine Captain Cuttle as ever being less than an earnest, cheerful, and caring person, but it is possible that the loss of his hand at sea heightened, rather than diminished, these qualities. So Cuttle's disability is not so much softened by a fragmented feminization of it. Instead, it becomes recrafted in a way that resembles Holly Furneaux's notion of "reparative masculinity" (214).

Dickens acknowledges this prospect in the decidedly manual rhetoric he uses to describe how the one-handed "Captain carried

[Florence] up *out of hand*, laid her down, and covered her with a great watch-coat" as he makes a new home for her at the Wooden Midshipman (728; ch. 48, italics mine). Knowing what we do about Dickens's unrivaled penchant for cross-phrase puns and aural syncopations, it also seems likely that Dickens aims to draw the reader's attention in this crucial scene to the relationship between acts performed "*out of hand*" and Cuttle's performance of these very same acts "*without a hand*." Such a tight pun would certainly qualify as one of Dickens's "small moments of almost impossible insight and rightness" (Stewart) precisely because, in Jonathan Culler's formulation, it reveals "unexpected connections, whose suggestiveness shimmers on the borders of concepts" (2). The idiomatic blending of the figurative with the literal that we witness here, where auricular wit manifests itself as the phonematic partaking in the semantic, is an as yet unrecognized characteristic of the "inimitable" Dickensian imagination.

While the cruel Dombey uses his ableism despicably to strike his daughter with such force that "on her breast there was the darkening mark of an angry hand," Captain Cuttle uses his prosthetic hook-hand to minister to Florence's pain and grief with the "sensitivity and sympathy" of genuine human touch (736; ch. 49; 734; ch. 48). The irony, of course, is that the prideful Dombey requires all manner of "right-hand men" (Carker, Morfin, Bagstock, Blimber) and "right-hand women" (Polly Toodle, Mrs. Skewton, Edith, eventually Florence) while Cuttle, the character with no right hand, becomes a "right-hand man" for the novel's most fellow-feeling characters. In this sense, Cuttle is a case study in contrast to Dombey, and the contrast may be observed most starkly in the discrepancy between their participation in and reliance on both figurative and literal "right-hand manness."¹⁰ Dombey's body, an "unbending form" (469; ch. 30) of "cold, hard armour" (608; ch. 40) mirrors his emotional rigidity in a way that limits his able-bodiedness and requires other seemingly abled characters to act as his appendages in

10 Garrett Stewart asserts that the shifting between literal and figurative is "the deepest common denominator of the sylleptic trope in *Dombey and Son*" ("Language" 143). I agree that the shifting between the literal and the figurative registers is crucial to the way this novel works, but I maintain that such shifting works most powerfully – that is to say most thematically – through the focus on the idiomatic expression of "right-hand manness / womanness."

a process of emotional and literal fragmentation. The Captain, with his “cut off” (Cut-tled) body, operates oppositely as a consolidator of the novel’s disparate characters, feelings, and plots. It is an important paradox that the physically-fragmented Cuttle acts as a bodily (and emotional) consolidator in a novel which is seemingly preoccupied with a “particular anxiety about going to pieces or being torn to pieces,” as Carker is by the train in one of its famous scenes (Newson 204). The construction of such opposing forces within Cuttle corroborates Stewart’s more general contention that “characters in Dickens appear as embodied rhetorical strategies” and “in their essence are the contours of the language that generates them” (“Language” 137). Cuttle’s ability to act as a right-hand man is not just an embodied rhetorical strategy, however; he is the central figure and catalyst for an embodied and variously-refracted thematic strategy who helps define what it means to live ably – fully, generously – in a world where so many others have gravely limiting emotional and moral deficiencies.

IV. New Title-Page Vignette “Design”

It is crucial to emphasize that the idiomatic sense of “right-hand manness” does not come prior to meaning, as a mere and isolated linguistic flourish in this first “planned” novel. I have argued that its extreme rarity in Dickens’s oeuvre provides the provocation to look more closely at how this idiom soaks into the fabric of *Dombey’s* imaginative world. We see important evidence of this even at the very “end” of Dickens’s compositional process. The cover design illustration, which appeared on the first number in October 1846 and was repeated through to the final installment in March 1848, allegorically portrays the “pride goeth before the fall” moral of the narrative (Fig. 6). Without explicitly giving the plot away, the cover charts a line of prosperity and promise that runs upward (clockwise) from the left, through precariously balanced ledger books, to the top center where Mr. Dombey sits enthroned on an office chair mounted on an enormous cash box, and down through a tumbling house of cards on the right, finally resting on the slumped shoulders of a physically disabled Dombey who uses crutches to hold himself upright.

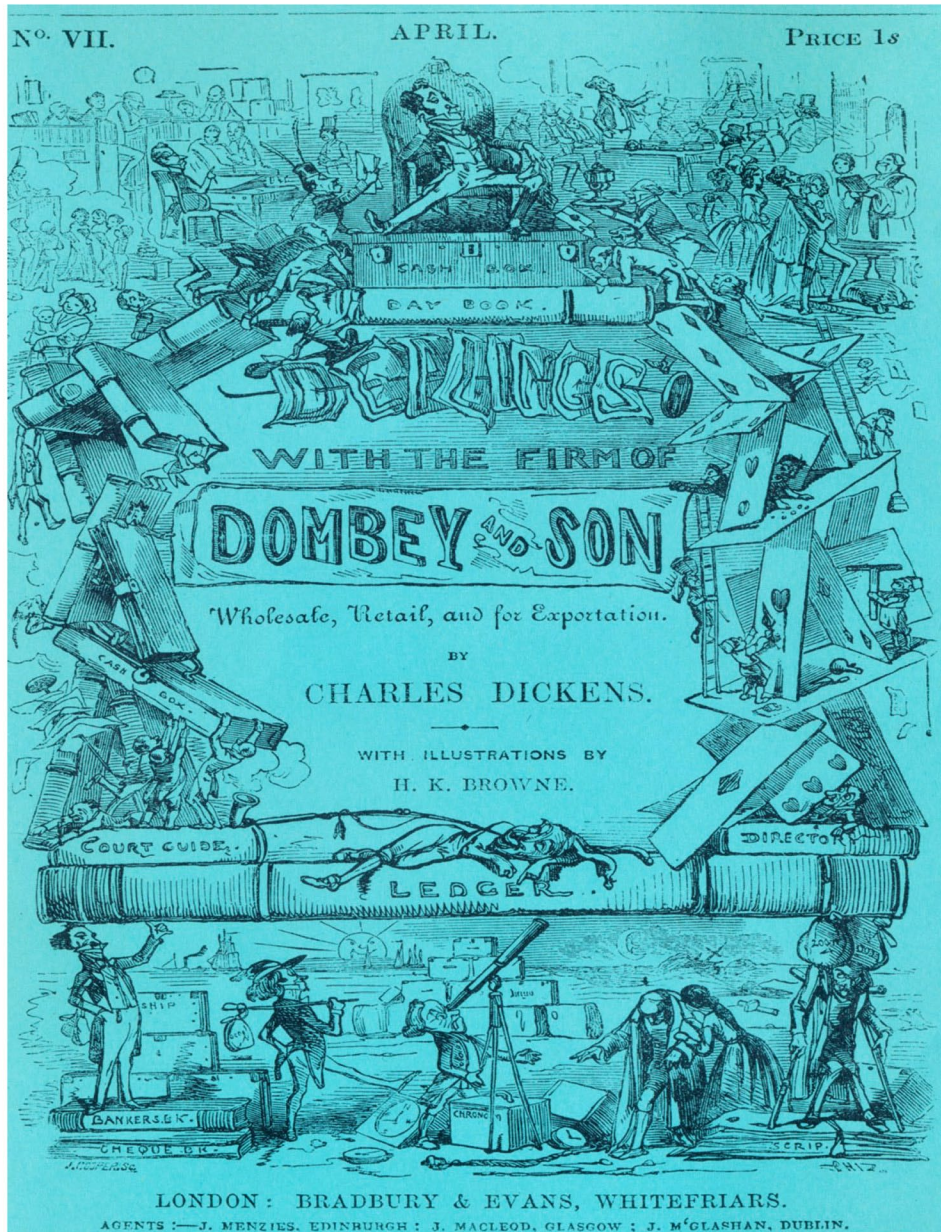


Fig. 6. *Dombey and Son* monthly cover design.

However comfortable *Dombey* readers became seeing this cover design in their nineteen installments over nearly two years, though, Dickens replaced it with a different frontispiece illustration when the novel was issued in book form by Bradbury and Evans in April 1848. And germane for my wider argument, he replaced it with a title-page illustration that features only two people inside the Wooden

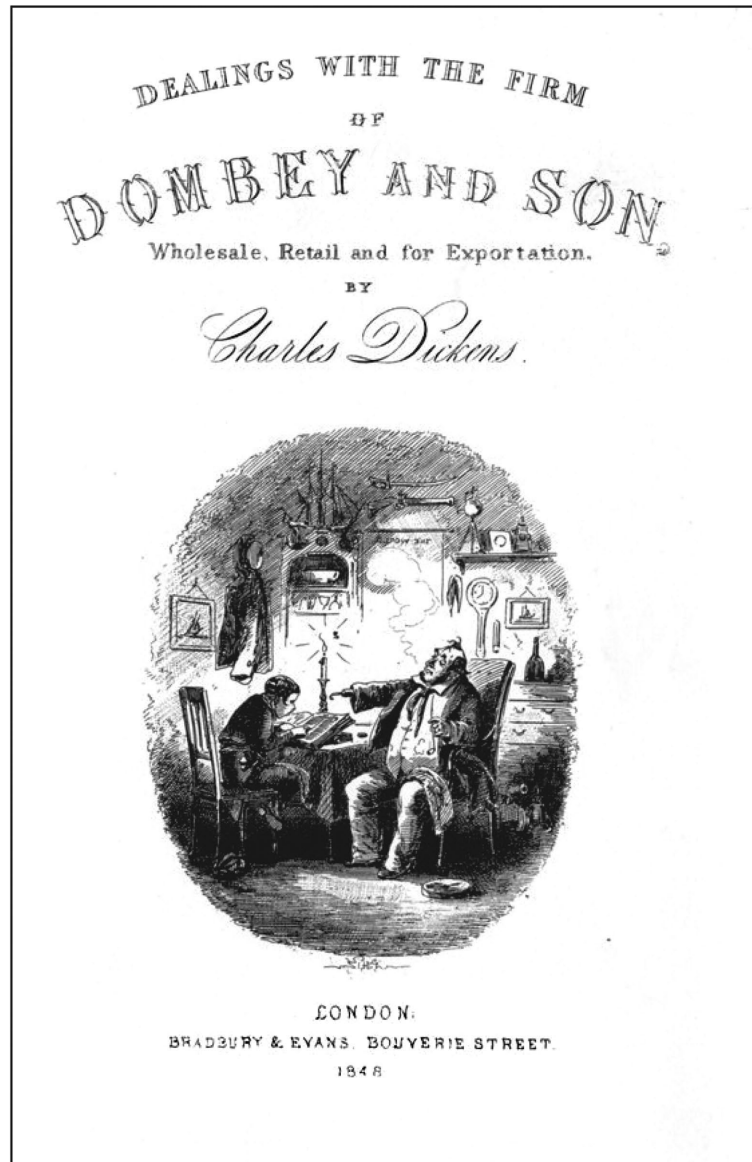


Fig. 7. New title page for *Dombey and Son* book edition, Bradbury and Evans, 1848.

Midshipman: the hook-handed Captain Cuttle and Rob the Grinder (Fig. 7). The decision to replace the cover-design with a title-page illustration that is suggestive of so much literal and figurative “right-handmaness,” of course, does not necessarily “prove” anything about my argument – nor do I desire it to do so. Thankfully, we will never know for certain what the Inimitable was thinking when he made this

substitution. But the central placement of Cuttle on the revised title page should provoke us to ask new questions about how and why Dickens made – consciously or not – the decisions he did in his first “planned” novel. As I have maintained throughout, I think it’s unlikely that mere coincidence could explain Dickens’s first and only use of the “right-hand man” idiom in conjunction with the imaginative invention of a major character who has no right hand; he is just too fastidiously punning an artist for this to be the case. Beyond this, though, I do not make the facile claim that Dickens consciously intended or consciously designed every instantiation of the idiom that I have analyzed simply because critics agree on *Dombey’s* status as his first “planned” novel. What is more likely the (aleatory) case is that Dickens began the imaginative work of the novel with an interest in how substitution, surrogacy, and proxy operate in business and domestic contexts at just the time when an idiomatic phrase which “embodied” these concepts was emerging in the English vernacular. Thus his rare but sustained literal and figurative employment of it throughout the novel may be seen as both creatively opportunistic and structurally dynamic regardless of any specific conscious or unconscious design.

One of the most illuminating recent literary biographers of Dickens, Rosemarie Bodenheimer, shrewdly claims that none of his fiction could be made “without a mysterious interplay between conscious and unconscious energies” (36). I agree, and think that the “mysterious interplay” involving Dickens’s idiomatic energies in *Dombey* is far more interesting than any attempt to pin down exact areas or instances of his lexical intentionality. Perhaps the case that Harry Stone discusses in relation to Dickens’s readers – that “hindsight [and] wisdom ... comes only after we have been made privy to the grand design of the novel” – turns out (and why would it not?) to be true of the author/artist himself (“What’s in a Name” 191).¹¹ Maybe only after the novel’s completion was Dickens himself convinced of the extent

11 Apropos of Dickens’s sometimes obliviousness to seemingly obvious (conscious) intentions, we should recall how he was apparently “much startled” when Forster pointed out that the initials of the eponymous character in *David Copperfield* (1849–50) were “but his own reversed.” “Why else,” he mused about his semi-autobiographical novel, “should I so obstinately have kept to that name once it turned up”?

to which “the grand design of the novel” involved a kind of right-handed surrogacy that Cuttle paradoxically but compellingly embodies better than any other character. These are creative circumstances that, thankfully, remain conclusively indeterminate.

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