Introduction

Dickens and Sex

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(Guest Editors)

This collection explores the still underrepresented topics of sex, erotics and desire in the work of Charles Dickens. Contributors draw upon and suggest new points of convergence between a wide range of theoretical perspectives including cultural phenomenology, materialism, new historicism, critical race studies, feminist and queer theory. Analysis of a broad range of Dickens's fiction, journalism and correspondence demonstrates Dickens's sustained commitment to exploring a diverse range of sexual matters throughout his career.

Dickens studies, especially in Britain, remain dominated by a conventional criticism too often reluctant to acknowledge the diversity of this alleged champion of 'respectable' fiction. Despite important interventions, notably from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Joss Lutz Marsh and William A. Cohen, a chimera persists of Dickens as foremost proponent of Victorian ideologies of marriage and domesticity.¹ As Cohen's article for this collection observes, pursuing the sex in Dickens can still appear to some as a perverse reading practice. John Schad's 1996 collection *Dickens Refigured: Bodies, Desires and Other Histories* calls for a 'refigur[ing of] this most central of Victorian authors through attention to all that makes his work so eccentric'.² Schad's too rarely-heeded challenge is taken up variously by the essays in this collection. A number of critical positions are here brought into debate with each other to negotiate the significance and validity of different approaches to Dickens and sex, and nineteenth-century studies more broadly.

As well as offering new readings of Dickens's writings, the articles also explore aspects of the wider political and theoretical investments at play in current critical debates about both Dickens and sexuality. This collection particularly interrogates the ramifications as well as

the limitations of the ‘disciplinary thesis’, an influential critical paradigm derived from new historicism’s engagement with Michel Foucault’s writings on modern modes of subjectification. Recently, various critics have begun to perceive ‘disciplinary’ readings of Dickens’s novels – most prominently carried out by Sedgwick, D.A. Miller and other U.S.-American scholars in the 1980s and 1990s – as increasingly constraining.³ Schad for instance describes them as ‘distanc[ing] and indeed polic[ing] the eccentric or marginal’ in Dickens (1). Whilst some of the articles in this collection acknowledge and continue the intellectual productivity of the disciplinary model, further demonstrating the relevance of constraining strategies in Dickens’s writings, others argue that a departure from this perspective is necessary to open up new critical avenues into Dickens and sex. Others again propose that a compromise between these two positions is necessary to acknowledge both the normalising and the transgressive aspects of Dickens’s work on gender and sexuality.

Moving on from the Foucauldian paradigm, William Cohen’s article ‘Interiors: Sex and the Body in Dickens’ explores the possibilities of a cultural phenomenological approach to *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *David Copperfield*. Drawing attention to the ways in which ‘the experiential dimension of the body’ is configured in these texts, Cohen focuses on keyholes as sites of ‘[e]mbodied acts of looking and listening’ and as sites of ‘intersubjective’ encounters, contacts that are often ‘sexualised’. Vybarr Cregan-Reid’s ‘Bodies, Boundaries and Queer Waters: Drowning and Prosopopœia in Later Dickens’ continues this scrutiny of the erotics of embodiment through a discussion of the trope of drowning in several of Dickens’s works, particularly in *David Copperfield* and *Our Mutual Friend*. Cregan-Reid places Dickens’s fiction and journalism in the context of Victorian legal discourses and an ‘emergent fear of wild live water’. He reads instances of male drowning in Dickens as moments of ‘queer intersubjectivity’ that point to Dickens’s homophobic anxieties and cultural fears of degeneration. In “‘It Is Impossible to Be Gentler’: The Homoerotics of Male Nursing in Dickens’s Fiction’, Holly Furneaux suggests a more positive representation of male same-sex desire by Dickens. Calling for a critical departure from a Sedgwickian paradigm that can only conceptualise queer sexuality in Victorian writing in terms of sexual violence and homophobia, Furneaux discusses the cultural sexualisation of nursing in the nineteenth century and argues

that ‘Dickens deploys this eroticising of nurse/patient roles in *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Great Expectations* to develop more affirmative, tender strategies for articulating desire between men’. Tara Macdonald offers further consideration of the diversity of masculinities represented in Dickens’s fiction in “‘red-headed animal’: Race, Sexuality and Dickens’s Uriah Heep’. MacDonald analyses sexual and class-related anxieties in *David Copperfield*, arguing that these anxieties crystallise in the narrative construction of Uriah Heep as racially ‘other’. She draws on contemporaneous languages of racial stereotyping in Victorian England, suggesting that the codes through which Uriah Heep is represented ‘are similar to anti-Semitic representations of Jews’. In ‘Undertexts and Intertexts: The Women of Urania Cottage, Secrets and *Little Dorrit*’, Jenny Hartley engages with Dickens’s work with prostitutes at his ‘Home for Homeless Women’, investigating his fascination with these women’s (sexual) secrets. Hartley argues that Dickens’s involvement with Urania Cottage was formative for the construction of *Little Dorrit*, a narrative driven by the desire of ‘[k]nowing women’s stories, secreting and mystifying them’. Kristina Aikens looks further at the ‘aberrance’ of Dickens’s women in ‘The Daughter’s Desire in *Dombey and Son*’, refusing to read Florence Dombey as a passive victim of patriarchy and exploring the ways in which the daughter’s desire becomes articulated in the narrative. Through a variety of erotic modes, including incest, Aikens interprets Florence as a sexual agent, arguing that the desires of the sentimental heroine are enacted within the ‘family romance’. Anne Schwan’s ‘The Limits of a Somatics of Resistance: Sexual Performativity and Gender Dissidence in Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*’ also focuses on sexual codifications in this novel. Schwan critically engages with a paradigm shift in nineteenth-century studies towards ‘cultural phenomenology’, the self and interiority and points to the problems and constraints of a critical focus on embodied micropractices. This problematic is explored through a reading of Paul and Edith Dombey as emblems of gender/sexual deviance, whose performative, embodied mode of resistance is limited as it does not entail collective strategies.

This collection aims to demonstrate the fruitfulness of a dialogue between different critical perspectives. We hope that it will generate more debate on the usefulness and limits of the various theoretical paradigms offered in this issue, and on aspects of sexuality, gender and the body in all areas of the life and work of Charles Dickens – and beyond.

Notes

This special edition brings together fully fleshed out versions of insightful and provocative work presented at the conference 'Dickens and Sex', held at the Institute of English Studies, University of London, in March 2004. Our thanks to all participants for contributions to the rich dialogue that is continued in this collection. We are grateful to the Centre for Nineteenth Century Studies at Birkbeck College and the British Association for Victorian Studies (BAVS) for their generous support of the event. Special thanks to Sally Ledger for her untiring intellectual and practical input into this project and to Andrew Maunday for support and vision which has made this collection possible.

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Joss Lutz Marsh, 'Good Mrs Brown's Connections: Sexuality and Story-telling in *Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son*', *ELH* 58 (1991), 405–26; William A. Cohen, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996).

2. 'Introduction', in *Dickens Refigured: Bodies, Desires and Other Histories*, ed. by John Schad (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 1.

3. See D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men*.