“PIP” AND “PROPERTY”: THE (RE)PRODUCTION OF THE SELF IN *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*  

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One of the important perceptions of Dickens’ fiction is of Victorian society as one in which the weak support the strong, the starving underwrite the satiated, the poor prop up the rich, the children sustain the parents—and the female upholds the male. Indeed, the typical Dickensian heroine is a nourishing mother figure who herself is usually motherless. Central to most of Dickens’ novels, this heroine in her self-denial creates for the hero a safe and sacred haven from the rapaciousness of the market. Nevertheless, these same heroines also underwrite the economic ambition they are intended to mediate. As Mary Poovey suggests, in Victorian England the alienation of male labor was made tolerable by representing female work within the domestic sphere as selfless and self-regulating, and therefore not alienated. Hence, it was assumed that the “non-competitive, non-aggressive, and self-sacrificing” private sphere of women domesticated without curbing the “competitive, aggressive, and acquisitive” public sphere of the male dedicated to success and money.

This pattern is borne out in Dickens’ fiction in a number of ways. For example, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Nell’s ascetic control of her body and her maternal care for her grandfather mute but also magnify his grotesque obsession with gambling and wealth. Likewise, Mary Graham’s “self-possession and control over her emotions” tame the senior Martin Chuzzlewit’s selfish materialism, and thus validate his wealth, as she makes him rich in feeling. Herself starved for affection, Florence Dombey becomes a nurturing angel to her financially and emotionally bankrupt father at the same time that she underwrites Walter Gay’s “Dick Whittington” aspirations to marry the daughter and heir and become financially successful.

This pattern culminates in Dickens’ autobiographical novel *David Copperfield*, in which David depends on Agnes to domesticate his “undisciplined heart.” Thus, married to the self-denying Agnes, Copperfield’s self-indulgent actions and thoughts are redeemed. Moreover, in depicting Agnes as a maternal,
self-sacrificing heroine who is the inspiration for himself as aspiring author, David casts a positive aura on his own ambitions that might otherwise be construed as, in his words, “sordid things.” Hence, emphasizing Agnes’ role as amanuensis, literary helpmeet, and Muse, David focuses on his motives as secular prophet and downplays his own profit motive. Indeed, the underside of David’s excessive humility about his own profession is Heep’s aggressive profession of his “humble” aspirations.

Great Expectations, Dickens’ second attempt at a fictional autobiography, is an about-face, for the key women in the protagonist’s life are anything but maternal. In fact, in this late novel, the long suppressed Dickensian female defies her maternal role. Clearly Pip seems doubly bereft of maternal nurture through the death of his mother and the accession to that role by Mrs. Joe. In fact, named after Pip’s mother—and with everything that implies about the senior Georgiana Pirrip’s nurturing abilities—Pip’s sister regrets having to be his second “mother.” Bitter that circumstances have forced her into being the self-denying mother figure, Mrs. Joe physically and emotionally starves her brother, become son. Likewise, she forces him to pay a high price—and that is to be taken literally—for her maternal service(s). With her arsenal of needles and pins sticking to the bodice of her apron, this “all-powerful sister” is literally the bad breast (p. 46). Miss Havisham, whom I will discuss in more detail later, is another surrogate mother to Pip. Not the “fairest godmother” Pip thinks she is, Miss Havisham manipulates Pip in order to enslave him emotionally in the same way that she forms her adopted daughter, Estella, in order to cannibalize her (p. 183).

Certainly Dickens sets Biddy up as a potential wife and mother figure for Pip, but here again a contrast with David Copperfield is enlightening. In David Copperfield Dickens describes David’s romantic love for Agnes as the culmination of a ragged young boy finding his way home to his mother. Similarly, Pip romantically sees himself as “one who was toiling home bare-foot from distant travel, and whose wanderings had lasted many years,” and he hopes that Biddy can receive him “like a forgiven child (and indeed I am as sorry, Biddy, and have as much need of a hushing voice and a soothing hand)” (pp. 486, 481). But in a surprising scene, Dickens denies his hero the self-denying heroine. Indeed, Biddy will not be the mother figure—the good breast—for Pip, for she rather abruptly “baffles” Pip’s plans by marrying Joe (p. 487). Nevertheless, she remains a touchstone for the hero’s romantic intentions. For instance, pointedly questioning why he would love someone who calls him coarse and common, Biddy asks Pip if he wants to be a gentleman, “to spite her [Estella] or to gain her over?” Pip responds that he doesn’t know, to which Biddy replies: “if it is to spite her . . . I should think . . . that might be better and more independently done by caring nothing for her words. And if it is to gain her over, I should think . . . she was not worth gaining over” (p. 156).

Thus, true to her name, Biddy is something of a hen pecker, but her catechisms of Pip are incisive and just. One wonders, then, why neither Pip nor
Dickens is capable of taking her sensible advice. But, in fact, with Estella Dickens seems ready to delineate a very different kind of woman, for, considering her predecessors, the ingénue Estella is an astonishing Dickensian heroine. Like Nell, Mary Graham, Florence, Agnes, Esther, and Little Dorrit, she is without a nourishing mother figure, but in this novel the lack of a loving mother results in the creation of a “Tartar,” Herbert Pocket’s epithet for Estella (p. 200). Furthermore, as Estella tells Miss Havisham,

Mother by adoption, I have said that I owe everything to you. All I possess is freely yours. All that you have given me, is at your command to have again. Beyond that, I have nothing. And if you ask me to give you what you never gave me, my gratitude and duty cannot do impossibilities (p. 323).

Obviously, Miss Havisham uses this child for her own warped purposes, but in producing Estella to take revenge on the men who took public and economic advantage of her private sexual desires, Miss Havisham only succeeds in duplicating the experience for her own adoptive daughter, making her a thing to be bartered in the marriage market.

Moreover, trained in the accomplishments of the ideal Victorian woman, Estella as Dickensian heroine has finally necessarily become what Victorian and Dickensian expectations must naturally—or, rather, unnaturally—result in: she is the nightmare version of the Victorian female bred to have no desires, no appetites, trained to be desired and to be the object of appetite. Clearly Estella views herself as Miss Havisham’s ornamental object, to be dangled before men to tantalize them and break their hearts. Thus, groomed to be the absent center of the Victorian male’s affections, Estella incites obsessive emotional responses in men while she herself is without feelings. Dickens, of course, reviles the kind of system that would create such a creature, yet it is undeniable that his own earlier powerful portrayals of ascetic heroines helped to create this distorted version of the ideal female. Pip’s remark to Estella that “you speak of yourself as if you were some one else,” reveals Dickens’ implicit and incisive awareness of the results of Pip’s—and for that matter, his own—sexual and economic obsessions (p. 286). Indeed, Estella’s self-forgetfulness resonates on the self-forgetfulness of Dickens’ previous heroines, for Estella’s alienation from self is the underside of the earlier Dickensian heroine’s self-denial.

Struggling with his own self-aggrandizing personality, Dickens’ alter-ego, then, comes face to face with a ravishing, sensual, but heartless woman. Pip cannot help but empathize with her, but he also cannot rise above his own rationalization of his desire. If in Dickens’ autobiographical David Copperfield Agnes’ self-denying female economy underwrites David’s self-indulgent, aggressive male economy, we must question what happens in Dickens’ later semi-autobiographical novel when Estella’s warped female economy underlies Pip’s, for like David, Pip places the responsibility for his own character on the woman he loves:
Truly it was impossible to dissociate her [Estella’s] presence from all those wretched hankerings after money and gentility that had disturbed my boyhood—from all those ill-regulated aspirations that had first made me ashamed of home and Joe—

... In a word, it was impossible for me to separate her, in the past or in the present, from the innermost life of my life (p. 257).

The ominous suggestion that Estella made Pip avaricious becomes almost a threat when Pip states to her, “Estella, to the last hour of my life, you cannot choose but remain part of my character, part of the little good in me, part of the evil” (p. 378). In contrast to *David Copperfield*, in which Dickens portrays male ambition as refined by an ascetic female, the reasoning of *Great Expectations* is that, not the devil, but Estella made me do it.

In his study of the Naturalist novel, Mark Seltzer tracks the ways that writers like Frank Norris counter two generative forces, production and reproduction, as signified in the masculine steam machine and the mother. Brilliantly arguing that Naturalist fiction assumes that genetically males live according to a principle of loss and females according to a principle of profit, Seltzer points out that such a discourse posits the contradictory spheres of the public and the private, work and home, the world and family, and the economic and the sexual. Though Seltzer’s focus is on American Naturalist fiction, his contrast of male production and female reproduction is useful in analyzing the meaning of *Great Expectations*, for in this later autobiographical novel Dickens is far more conscious of how economics infiltrate the construction of the self. Indeed, in *Great Expectations* the making of the self rests in the space between the meanings of reproduction and production, the maternal and the material, the home and the market. Thus, perhaps more so than in any other of his novels, in *Great Expectations* Dickens realistically examines the possibility of inhabiting the sphere of reproduction, which in his previous works was that place or person—usually female and maternal—through which the individual is validated as a human being with feelings. To put it more precisely, in Dickens the sphere of reproduction is in essence a kind of actual or metaphorical return to the bosom of the family.

The problem, as Seltzer is so aware in his analysis of the Naturalist novel, is that though the productive and reproductive spheres are separate, they also interpenetrate, for the one sphere produces the goods while the other produces the consumers of those goods. Thus the sphere of production infiltrates that of reproduction, creating the self caught in the cycle of consumption, as the individual becomes a thing, reared to consume and to be consumed. Therefore, in contrast to Dickens’ earlier works, in which he represents the heroine as a haven from aggressive economies, in *Great Expectations* both hero and heroine are constructed, that is, made economically. In fact, Dickens comes to realize that the possibility of escaping the market and effecting a return to the mother is
practically nil. Indeed, Pip’s—and, for that matter, Estella’s—maternal guardians, who are supposed to be their nurturers, end up being their business managers.

That production infiltrates reproduction is apparent in the fact that the Victorians referred to private, sexual matters in rather public, economic terms. For example, the Victorian slang phrase for male orgasm was “to spend.” Therefore, when Victorian men were trained to “save” themselves for marriage it was in both economic and sexual terms: they were required to put off marriage until they had saved enough in the bank to be financially stable; but it was also necessary to put off “spending” in sexual terms. Hence, Samuel Smiles’ blithe assertion that the capitalist is a man “who does not spend all that is earned by work,” but rather a man prepared to deny “present enjoyment for future good,” results in the ludicrous situation that Fraser Harrison describes: “Celibate and capitalist alike resolutely fought off the desire to spend.” Herbert Pocket’s emotional and economic reasoning regarding his engagement to Clara is a fictional example of this Victorian attitude: “the moment he [Herbert] began to realize Capital, it was his intention to marry this young lady. He added as a self-evident proposition, engendering low spirits, ‘But you can’t marry, you know, while you’re looking about you’” (p. 273).

In the opening chapter of *Great Expectations* Dickens immediately confronts the reader with this question of who “made” Pip. Indeed, in contrast to the young Copperfield’s first sense of the “identity of things” as residing exclusively in the maternal reproductive sphere, Pip’s budding sense of the “identity of things” is a combination of familial and economic bonds: in the graveyard scene Pip first registers his beginnings in the deceased father and mother and his kinship to five brothers, but then his “second father” Magwitch appears, who, of course, is the benefactor who will produce Pip and his great expectations (p. 337). What with the absent family unit, particularly the mother, very little in the way of maternal nurture protects Pip from falling from the sphere of reproduction into that of production, for in this state of affairs he is destined to become associated with property one way or another. As Biddy teaches Joe and Joe keeps repeating, when the hero first learns of his great expectations, there are really only two words to describe the change: “Pip” and “Property,” and the sense is as much Pip becoming property as inheriting it (p. 170).

In fact, before he received his great expectations, Pip, who was “raised by hand,” was in the same situation as Herbert Pocket, who is always “looking about me” for his opportunity to become a self-made “capitalist.” Juxtaposed, the suggestion that Pip was “raised by hand,” (pp. 39, 41, 78, 125, 180, 484) and Pocket’s continual assertion that he is always “looking about” for something (pp. 207, 273, 293) seem to contrast the modes of reproduction and production; nevertheless, in actuality the two refrains tend to merge those meanings. For example, Herbert’s “looking about” for a “capitalist” position refers to his
economic need, but that stress is also partially the result of having to look out for himself as a child in a family that “tumbles” children up, clearly portrayed as more the fault of Pocket’s mother than father (p. 209). As Herbert explains to Pip, the offspring of a family in which children are unfathomably produced rather than reproduced, are quick to look about them both for opportunities to marry and enter the market.

Of course “raised by hand,” meaning literally the laborious and usually unsuccessful Victorian practice of feeding orphans or abandoned infants by hand rather than by bringing in a wetnurse, signifies Pip’s physical lack of the breast in the primal infantile stage, but it also implies his lack of maternal love. Thus, given her brother’s fragile beginnings, it is ironic that the woman who raised him by hand, Mrs. Joe, believes that Pip should not be “Pompeyed,” that is, pampered (p. 73). And, in fact, the phrase “raised by hand” comes to mean Mrs. Joe’s physical abuse of her brother. Furthermore, Mrs. Joe also expects remuneration for having raised Pip by hand, for obviously she hopes to advance her own fortunes by placing him at Miss Havisham’s. Her ally, Pumblechook, coopts the phrase, and, by acknowledging that his niece raised Pip by hand, gives added weight to his own claim that he is Pip’s mentor in economic terms (and thus deserving of Pip’s newly inherited “Capital”) when he ludicrously suggests that he “made” Pip (pp. 431-32, 179). Pip thinks and hopes that “Miss Havisham was going to make my fortune on a grand scale,” but he is repulsed that he is the gentleman Magwitch has “made” and “owns” (pp. 165, 337, 339, 346).

Fallen into the world of production and consumption, Pip is not born; he is made, and that makes him particularly vulnerable in the cannibalistic world of Victorian England. James E. Marlow suggests that for the reader of Great Expectations “the dread of being eaten structures the novel.” Asserting that after 1859 “the themes of orality, predation, and the translation of human flesh into economic gain—all metaphoric cannibalism—dominate [Dickens’] fiction,” Marlow argues that by this point Dickens believed that cannibalism was not just an “aberration” in ogres like Quilp, but rather “a custom sanctioned by the ideologues of capitalism” such as Merdle and Casby. Indeed, in Great Expectations production displaces reproduction whenever the individual is abandoned or betrayed by family, more particularly, by the mother.

With no nourishing mother figure, Pip becomes the object of market relations, learning only to consume or be consumed. Certainly, the masterplot of Pip’s rise to and fall from fortune indicates Pip’s sense of self as devoured or devouring. Gluttony and starvation oscillate in Pip as his often violent assertion of hunger conflicts with his sense of being devoured. In his “first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things,” Pip is confronted by a convict who threatens to eat Pip if he does not bring him food and a file. As Magwitch later explains to Pip, he turned to crime because he was starving and no one ever “measured my stomach,” for “I must put something into my stomach, mustn’t I?” (p. 361). Furthermore, when asked what his occupation is, the convict replies,
“Eat and drink . . . if you’ll find the materials” (p. 362). However, eating and drinking in a society that tolerates starvation—physical or emotional—may be defined as robbery, and Dickens does seem to suggest that any kind of market relations between human beings is a kind of robbery, or, worse, cannibalism. Thus, Pip becomes like “my convict”: the starving child of his sister’s “bad breast,” he broods “I was going to rob Mrs. Joe,” and metaphorically assaults the surrogate mother’s bad—unreproductive—breast by invading his sister’s pantry (pp. 68, 46).

But, as Marlow suggests, the scene that follows indicates that “Pip’s dread of being eaten was founded long before the arrival of Magwitch.”13 Young Pip seems in constant danger of being eaten by adult swine. In the Christmas Day feasting scene tales of the eating of children act as appetizers for the adults. Wopsle begins the linguistic cannibalism:

“Swine,” pursued Mr. Wopsle, in his deepest voice, and pointing his fork at my blushes, as if he were mentioning my Christian name; “Swine were the companions of the prodigal. The gluttony of Swine is put before us, as an example to the young.” (I thought this pretty well in him who had been praising up the pork for being so plump and juicy.) “What is detestable in a pig, is more detestable in a boy” (p. 58).

Pumblechook takes up the sermon, focussing on the “boy” Pip. He opines, “If you’d been born a Squeaker,” which Mrs. Joe heartily affirms he was, “You would have been disposed of for so many shillings according to the market price of the article, and Dunstable the butcher . . . would have shed your blood and had your life” (p. 58). The suggestion, of course, is, and Marlow alludes to it as well, that Pip’s relations with his sister and her uncle are “market” relations, their chief interest in him being both what fortune they can accrue through him, and making him repay them for how much effort and energy they have spent on raising him. To extend the metaphor, in a later scene, Joe clumsily remarks of Pip’s London apartments, “I wouldn’t keep a pig in it myself—not in the case that I wished him to fatten wholesome and to eat with a meller flavour on him” (p. 243). This remarkable statement by the “angel” of the novel suggests just how much Pip is consumable “property,” subject to the market and its consuming practices (p. 168).

Nevertheless, the epithet “swine” indicts the hero as a devouring as well as devouring self, for, in addition to describing Pip as victim, it is also used, of course, to refer to a person with an inordinate appetite. Pumblechook notes that when Pip leaves for London to fulfill his expectations he is “plump as a Peach,” whereas in his diminished state he returns as “little more than skin and bone” (p. 483). It might be taken literally, then, when Joe visits Pip in town and exudes that he has “grewed” and “swelled” as he becomes “gentle-folkted” (pp. 241-42). In fact, like most of Dickens’ young heroes and heroines, Pip is “uncommonly small,” yet like young Oliver and David, who are accused of wanting “more,” and
being a “boa constrictor,” respectively, Pip is accused of “bolting.” Like his predecessors, Pip is both innocent and guilty when it comes to being accused of gluttony. On the one hand, this ostensible ingestion is an empty consumption, for the hungry boy foregoes eating the bread in order to feed it to the escaped convict, yet his guardians accuse him of “bolting” (p. 43).

But, on the other hand, Dickens never leaves these accusations of his hero’s inordinate appetite alone. Quite commonly he complicates the hero’s motives, suggesting that there is a kind of oscillation between guilty desires and innocent victimization. Thus, when Pip feeds Magwitch with the hoarded slab of bread and butter, the convict actually does bolt the wadded up supper, as Pip watches with the fascination of revulsion: “He swallowed, or rather snapped up, every mouthful, too soon and too fast . . . In all of which particulars he was very like the dog” (pp. 50-51, see also p. 346). But, of course, Pip both directly and implicitly compares himself to “bolting” canines, an animal image like the swine imagery that implies both voracious gluttony and victimization and starvation. Estella offers Pip “bread and meat” as if he were “a dog in disgrace,” and it is also telling that Pip’s fanciful description of his first visit to Miss Havisham’s includes four “immense” ravenous dogs that “fought for veal-cutlets out of a silver basket” (pp. 92, 97, 118). In the same interlude, after young Pip pummels Herbert Pocket, he regards himself “as a species of savage young wolf or other wild beast,” an image reiterated at the end of the novel when a murderous Orlick refers to Pip as “wolf” (pp. 121, 439).

Pip’s first impression of Miss Havisham, that she is “immensely rich” and lives in a “large and dismal house barricaded against robbers,” also suggests his unconscious motives (p. 81). In other words, already having “robbed” his sister, Pip now desires to rob Miss Havisham of her material and maternal wealth. However, her domicile is a fallen and unfruitful paradise. Indeed, the home of Satis, which reproduced Miss Havisham, is infiltrated by the market because it is also the house of Satis, a brewery where her father produced the family’s wealth. Likewise, market relations penetrate marital relations, for Satis House is where Miss Havisham has been the victim of her own brother’s and lover’s economic designs. Consequently, in the next generation, the cycle of production infiltrates reproduction again as the motherless Miss Havisham becomes the unnatural mother to Estella. Thus, though “Satis” is the root of satiation and satisfaction, Satis House is unsatisfying, unnourishing, and barren. Indeed, Satis House may represent a fundamental contradiction of the Victorian economy in the startling and simple revelation that abundant wealth is founded on deprivation. In other words, there must be poor Magwitches for there to be wealthy Miss Havishams.

Nevertheless, in Great Expectations Dickens reveals that both rich and poor fill the roles of consumer and consumed, as consuming and being consumed almost become interchangeable states. Hence, caught in the cycle of production and consumption, Miss Havisham, like Pip, devours others and is herself
devoured. Indeed, to a certain extent, Miss Havisham equates herself with her own digestive processes, about which she is morbidly self-conscious. In fact, the reader does not see Miss Havisham eat or drink: “She has never allowed herself to be seen doing either . . . She wanders about in the night, and then lays hands on such food as she takes” (pp. 262-63). Such self-imposed physical and emotional deprivation on the part of this wealthy woman reveals a number of things. Most important, I suggest, is the contrast of Miss Havisham’s asceticism with Little Nell, Florence, Agnes, and Little Dorrit and their insistent indifference to eating. In fact, I believe that in *Great Expectations* Dickens faces the fact that in a consumer society the lack of appetite in a character like Miss Havisham is a grotesque display of the miraculous anorexia that the younger Dickens had expected to mediate aggressive market demands.

Indeed, as Miss Havisham ascetically nibbles in her decaying house, she watches the natural world—or rather, supernatural—mimic the intrusion of the economic and public into her very private sphere as spiders invade and devour her decomposing wedding cake. Dickens’ representation of such public and private consumption is unforgettable, for Miss Havisham’s bridal “feast” remains like “a black fungus” on the table where “speckled-legged spiders with blotchy bodies [run] home to it, and [run] out from it, as if some circumstance of the greatest public importance had just transpired in the spider community” (p. 113). At the same time, this “feast” also represents Miss Havisham’s moral decay and her acquiescence to the demands of the market, revealed in the fact that she can only express her emotional responses in images of devouring. Indeed, in *Great Expectations* the cliche of being eaten up by revenge almost becomes actuality when Miss Havisham remarks, “The mice have gnawed at it [the wedding cake], and sharper teeth than teeth of mice have gnawed at me” (p. 117).

A displaced representation of anthropophagy, the arachnid feast is not only a gothic image of the market dynamics that have also become Miss Havisham’s bodily dynamics. This construct of consuming also displays the incursion of the financial into the familial, for Miss Havisham’s cousins wait to “feast” on her death, on the same table where the spiders feed on her rotting bridal cake (p. 116).

Perhaps, then, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the spider community may represent all England itself actively engaged in the perpetuation of its own consumption. In fact, *Great Expectations* suggests that consumer society is the ultimate gothic horror. Indeed, this novel almost endlessly produces gothic or comic oral images of ingestion for the reader’s consumption, from Miss Havisham, who “feasts” on Estella, “as though she were devouring the beautiful creature she had reared”; to Wemmick “putting fish into” his “post-office” mouth, and bullying customers as a kind of “refreshment” or “lunch”; to the “heavy grubber” Magwitch who threatens Pip that “your heart and your liver shall be tore out, roasted and ate”; to the fish-mouthing Pumblechook who stuffs himself with food at Mrs. Joe’s funeral (pp. 320, 402, 427, 346, 38, 299).
It is only natural, then, that Pip represents Orlick’s attempt to kill him as an expression of violent appetite: Orlick “slowly unclenched his hand and drew it across his mouth as if his mouth watered for me” (p. 436). Obviously, such oral imagery may be Pip’s projection of his own ravine, for as Pip explains, Orlick hates him because he fears Pip will “displace him,” but in fact Pip displaces onto Orlick his own violent anger towards his sister and her bad breast (p. 140). As Orlick ominously reveals of the bludgeoning of Mrs. Joe: “I tell you it was your doing—I tell you it was done through you” (p. 437). I need not retrace Julian Moynihan’s excellent essay on this projection;14 suffice it to say, that like an Oedipus figure seeking the perpetrator of his sins, Pip “revengefully” vows to pursue Orlick, or “anyone else, to the last extremity,” when it is his own tail he chases and swallows, and his own tale he must ingest (p. 297).

Once again, Pip is both innocent and guilty as Dickens dramatically underscores Pip’s rationalized and displaced appetite for revenge at the same time asserting that Mrs. Joe, Miss Havisham, Estella, Pumblechook, and Magwitch are to blame for the hero’s fall into the sphere of production. In any case, Dickens calls each to a violent accounting: Orlick brutally attacks Mrs. Joe and robs and beats Pumblechook, while Compeyson assaults Magwitch;15 in two instances Pip fantasizes Miss Havisham as hanging, and he is there when she rather spontaneously combusts. And to punish the heartless heroine, heavy-built Drummle, nicknamed the “spider”—surely an evocation not only of the spider feast, but also of Miss Havisham feasting on her adopted daughter—beats Estella. His physical abuse, of course, leads to the abasement that purportedly makes the heroine worthy of Pip’s love (p. 234).

The novel, then, persistently manufactures images of Pip’s innocence and guilt. But it must stop somewhere, and Dickens must redeem his alter-ego from the cycle of production and consumption. Thus, in the end, after all those who claimed to have “made” Pip receive their just desserts, in Dickens’ displaced system of tit for tat, Pip, as a kind of outcast in India, spends his energy for eleven years paying his financial and emotional debts. Obviously Dickens cannot fully disentangle his hero from market relations, because, in fact, Pip’s calculated debt-paying really provides no redemption, nor does the protagonist’s hinted marriage to Estella, for these only seem to perpetuate the dynamics of production. After all, in a capitalist society, the notion of paying for one’s sins is hardly to the purpose.

Dickens allows Pip only a brief return to the ideal reproductive sphere through the characters who seem most immune to the desire for money: Joe and Biddy. Joe, for instance, shies away from a premium Miss Havisham offers him for putting Pip into his indentures. Likewise, he castigates the intimidating, money-conscious Jaggers for his “bull-baiting and badgering” insistence that “Money can make compensation to me for the loss of the little child—what come to the forge—and ever the best of friends!” (pp. 168-69). In fact, Pip’s deepest regret is that he never acknowledges properly that it is Joe who has made him,
or rather, reproduced him. Joe, who has “the touch of a woman,” spiritually and physically nurses Pip, acting in the end as his true mother: when Pip is ill, Joe wraps him up and carries him “as if I were still the small helpless creature to whom he had so abundantly given of the wealth of his great nature” (pp. 168, 476). This illness offers Pip his only chance in actual and figurative terms of having all his debts canceled. In fact, even the ideas of debt and the market dynamics of production and consumption are repealed when Joe freely pays Pip’s creditors. Thus, for an Edenic while Pip is no longer equated with “property.” That reproduction of Pip—“I again”—is wonderfully recreated in Joe and Biddy’s young son, named after Pip, who under the “good matronly hand” of Biddy and the woman’s touch of Joe, returns the protagonist, at least for awhile, to the condition of the child’s bonding with the maternal (p. 490).

Nevertheless, the ending of Great Expectations is troubling, and we know, of course, that Dickens had difficulty concluding his story. The main problem with the ending(s) is not that Dickens cannot bring about his protagonist’s permanent regeneration. I suggest, instead, that the conclusion is problematic because Dickens ends up affirming and advocating what he also reviles in a consumer society: the necessity for the powerless to underwrite the powerful. In Dickens’ earlier fiction that quite typically means that the heroine, though herself motherless, must be a self-sustaining source of nurture and nourishment to the emotionally starved hero. In the later Great Expectations, though Dickens rigorously explores the effects of a market economy on his protagonist, Pip’s momentary but transcendant rebirth is at the expense of the female, for Dickens fails to redeem Estella from the sphere of production. Indeed, he forces her back into the mold of his earlier ascetic heroines. Thus, this physically abused, motherless heroine is still an ornament, for neither Pip nor the reader has any conception of what Estella’s desires or hungers might be, only that she has been “bent and broken” into “better shape” in order to fulfill Pip’s desires (p. 493).

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NOTES


3 See Alexander Welsh’s discussion of Agnes as muse in From Copyright to Copperfield: The Identity of Dickens (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), p. 113.

4 As Poovey points out, Dickens defines the writer as self-effacing and idealistic in order to set himself apart from the alienation and acquisitiveness of the market. But obviously Dickens’
profession depends on the crass reality of the product, the novel, being consumed, and Dickens’ genius had much to do with the brilliant marketing techniques (most importantly serialization) that he introduced into the profession of writing in the nineteenth century. Hence, in this novel, Dickens must avoid saying very much about the economic realities of David’s and his own profession, and if he does speak of it, he always associates it with Agnes, for by locating in her the “source of every worthy aspiration,” David redeems his rather more earthly economic and social aspirations (p. 740).

Thus Copperfield’s longest discussion of his profession starts with the direct statement that “I have been very fortunate in worldly matters; many men have worked much harder, and not succeeded half so well,” but then he quickly moves on to “humbly” numerate the “spiritual” qualities that have brought about his financial success, including, “perseverance,” “patient and continuous energy,” “punctuality, order, and diligence,” and “ardent and sincere earnestness.” He ends, as he must, referring all his financial and personal success to Agnes: “How much of the practice I have just reduced to precept, I owe to Agnes, I will not repeat here. My narrative proceeds to Agnes, with a thankful love” (pp. 517-18). Thus Agnes is David’s hidden—spiritualized—business partner. Indeed, Heep makes a grotesque conjunction between her business acumen and domesticity when he replies to Betsey Trotwood’s assertion that “Agnes is worth the whole firm [Wickfield and Heep].” Uriah “fully agree[s] . . . and should be only too appy if Miss Agnes was a partner” (p. 441). But David sounds not much better in the final chapter when he permanently associates male and female economics, saying, in one breath, “I had advanced in fame and fortune, my domestic joy was perfect” (p. 741).

5 Charles Dickens. Great Expectations, ed. Angus Calder (1965; reprint New York: Penguin, 1985), p. 41; further citations will be noted parenthetically in the text.


7 Seltzer, p. 136.


10 Victorian men were taught to be sexually economical even after marriage. Dr. William Acton believed that husbands should conserve energy, and thus he advocated indulgence in the sex act no more than once in seven to ten days. William Acton, The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs (n. p., 1857), as cited in Harrison, p. 22.


12 James E. Marlow, “English Cannibalism: Dickens after 1859,” Studies in English Literature 23 (1983): 660, 655. Of all Dickens’ novels, perhaps Great Expectations incorporates the most alimetal images. The plot is structured round meals and hospitality; Barbara Hardy notes that in Great Expectations the meals offered to and by Pip vividly an important contrast between what she calls the “ceremony” of love and “failure in hospitality” in “Works in Progress IV: Food and Ceremony in Great Expectations,” Essays in Criticism 13 (1963): 354, 361. Ian Watt has called Great Expectations the best example in Dickens of “a comprehensive integration of eating and drinking into every aspect of the novel,” for Dickens uses each character’s attitude toward the subject of eating “as diagnostic of his moral essence and his social role (‘Oral Dickens,’ Dickens Studies Annual, ed. Robert B. Partlow, Jr., vol. 3 [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1974], p. 170).

13 Marlow, p. 660.

15 In the final scenes, Pip’s seemingly merciful wish that Magwitch die before his execution, is replete with ulterior motives. Indeed, it is an opportune way to dispose of his “burden,” a fact that becomes more ominous when Pip worries that the prison guards might suspect him of trying to poison Magwitch. Thus, he asks them to search him thoroughly at every visit (pp. 341, 468).