

SEX, CRIME AND LITERATURE IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

The Victorians worried about many things, prominent among their worries being the 'condition' of England and the 'question' of its women. *Sex, Crime and Literature in Victorian England* revisits these particular anxieties, concentrating more closely upon four 'crimes' which generated especial concern amongst contemporaries: adultery, bigamy, infanticide and prostitution. Each engaged questions of sexuality and its regulation, legal, moral and cultural, for which reason each attracted the considerable interest not just of lawyers and parliamentarians, but also novelists and poets and, perhaps most importantly, those who, in ever-larger numbers, liked to pass their leisure hours reading about sex and crime. Alongside statutes such as the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act and the 1864 Contagious Diseases Act, *Sex, Crime and Literature in Victorian England* contemplates those texts which shaped Victorian attitudes towards England's 'condition' and the 'question' of its women – the novels of Dickens, Thackeray and Eliot, the works of sensationalists such as Ellen Wood and Mary Braddon, and the poetry of Gabriel and Christina Rossetti. *Sex, Crime and Literature in Victorian England* is a richly contextual commentary on a critical period in the evolution of modern legal and cultural attitudes to the relation of crime, sexuality and the family.

Sex, Crime and Literature in Victorian England

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Introduction

Dark Shapes

In June 1858, Charles Dickens published a series of notices in the press confirming, in the vaguest possible way, that he had separated from his wife, but denying rumours that the reason lay in his relationship with any ‘persons close to my heart’.¹ His long-time friend and later biographer, John Forster, desperately tried to dissuade him, reasoning that the notice would only serve to titillate public prurience. He was, of course, right. The timing was oddly, and rather discomfortingly, resonant, as the doors of the new Divorce Court had only just opened for business; something which had made the subject of adultery and dysfunctional families of particular contemporary interest.² If the Dickens family was indeed breaking up, and if the reason lay in an extra-marital indiscretion, it was becoming rather too obvious that there was in this nothing particularly unusual. Moreover, only a decade previously Dickens had confirmed his reputation as a ‘serious’ novelist, and chronicler of the ‘condition of England’, by depicting precisely such a familial fragmentation in *Dombey and Son*.³ We shall return to *Dombey and Son* shortly. At the same time as he was publishing his notice, Dickens was giving some of his first public readings, of which one of the most popular, the death of ‘little Paul’, was taken from *Dombey and Son*. The ironies abounded, along with the hypocrisies.⁴

Dickens was right to be concerned, even if the manner of his response proved to be entirely misconceived. The rumours, as to both the state of his marriage and his infatuation with a young actress, were well-founded. The 45-year-old Dickens

¹ C Tomalin, *Charles Dickens* (Viking, 2011) 298. Notices were published in *The Times*, *The New York Tribune* and *Household Words*. *Punch* declined to publish, something which ensured Dickens’s life-long enmity.

² Indeed, Charles’s brother Fred was one of the first to sue for divorce before the new court, in December 1858, citing the alleged adultery of his wife. Dickens, of course, had no grounds with which he could seek a divorce even if he had wanted to do so. Catherine was not at fault. He was.

³ See S Marcus, *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey* (Norton, 1985) 347–48, suggesting that whilst Dickens’s marriage was still relatively strong at the time he was composing *Dombey and Son*, warning signs were present; an early infatuation with Christiana Weller, the fiancée of his friend TJ Thompson, and then more suggestively, his bizarre behaviour towards Mrs de la Rue whilst in Genoa. Mrs de la Rue suffered from hallucinations, which Dickens thought he could cure by hypnosis. Catherine protested that Dickens was paying too much attention to the supposed invalid; an accusation that Dickens hotly denied. He refused to stop paying his visits to Mrs de la Rue either during the day, or more troublingly, at night.

⁴ On the obvious hypocrisy of Dickens writing about the sanctity of the family, see Marcus, *Dickens*, *ibid*, 356 and more recently, K Hager, *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce* (Ashgate, 2010) 92.

had fallen in love with the 19-year-old Ellen Ternan.⁵ The rumours were not to be easily assuaged. In conversation at the Garrick, a club they shared, Thackeray rather witlessly confirmed that his friend Dickens was indeed conducting an affair with an actress; an error for which he was never forgiven. Elizabeth Barrett Browning expressed herself appalled when she came across one of the notices which appeared to hold Catherine Dickens in large part responsible for the separation. It was, she bluntly said, a 'crime' and a 'dreadful' one.⁶ When Angela Burdett Coutts, who was bankrolling the home for fallen women which she and Dickens had set up, heard the rumours she pretty much cut him off.⁷ The even greater risk for Dickens, of course, was that his readers might do the same.

As his notices only barely concealed, Dickens had become bored of his wife of 20 years, confiding in increasingly pained, and self-justificatory, correspondence with Forster that they were never really 'made for each other'; a view which he pressed more strongly the older and less pretty Catherine became. She was, Dickens conceded, 'amiable and complying', in this sense the ideal 'angel in the house' so frequently celebrated in contemporary literature, but she was no longer very exciting, in or out of bed.⁸ Using a metaphor with a very particular contemporary resonance, Dickens confided that what was 'befalling' him had been 'steadily coming'. Of course, the real fall, prospectively at least, would have been Ellen's. It might be noted that when it came to developing infatuations with younger unmarried women, Dickens already had form; as did a conspicuous number of his fellow male writers, including both Ruskin and Thackeray.⁹ As later biographers have lined up to confirm, Dickens anyway struggled to relate in a mature way to most women.¹⁰ He treated Catherine abominably, pointedly telling friends when her sister Mary died that he would have preferred it to have been his wife. Mary was another of those young women for whom Dickens had developed one of his discomfiting infatuations. Ellen was not the first, and was probably not the last.

On the matter of his reputation, however, Dickens was right. There was much to be lost if his readers decided that he was indeed responsible for the 'fall' of an

⁵ He was 'keeping' both her and her sisters in a large house in Amptill Square in London. Biographers and critics have long tried to comprehend the nature of their relationship, the precise details of which remain maddeningly elusive, particularly for the years 1862–65, during which time, according to Dickens's daughter Kate, Ellen gave birth to an illegitimate child. Confirmed critical sightings of Nelly are intermittent during these years, though she does famously resurface as a travelling companion in a railway crash at Staplehurst in June 1865, from which Dickens had her quickly and discreetly whisked away. See most recently, Tomalin, *Charles Dickens* (above n 1) 326–35, commenting that a 'great many questions hang on the air, unanswered and mostly unanswerable'.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁷ Dickens desperately tried to make his case, suggesting in correspondence that Catherine caused him 'unspeakable agony of mind'. Coutts, who prided herself on her personal propriety, was not persuaded and their relationship never recovered.

⁸ See Tomalin, *Charles Dickens* (above n 1) 252, 285.

⁹ Ruskin's marriage disintegrated even more spectacularly than Dickens's, his impotence being cited in his wife's divorce proceedings as grounds for voidity. A little later, he became infatuated with the 11-year-old Rose La Touche, something which he was, for understandable reasons, equally as keen to keep from his public. We will encounter Thackeray's infatuations in the chapter one.

¹⁰ His daughter put it bluntly: 'my father did not understand women' quoted in N Auerbach, 'Dickens and Dombey: A Daughter After All' (1976) 5 *Dickens Studies Annual* 95.

innocent young woman, as well as the resultant disintegration of his own family for, as Fitzjames Stephen put it, the family had become the 'supreme object of idolatry' in mid-Victorian England, especially amongst the kind of people for whom Dickens wrote.¹¹ It was an inherently paradoxical idol, as Edmund Burke had noted in his manual for whimsical conservatives, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. The English political 'mind' was founded on a shared adoration for an iconography that celebrated the common worship of 'our state, our hearths, our sepulchres, our altars'.¹² The Burkean commonwealth cherished each and every English home as an irreducibly public space even whilst it remained, at least in the cultural imagination, privately inviolable. The house of Paul Dombey, as we shall see, was just such a home; 'in private' and 'in public' (554)¹³ so, it had become painfully apparent, was the home of Charles Dickens. As the mainly female readership of the *Home Circle* magazine was reminded, the woman who tends to the hearth exercises a vicarious power 'over the will of the nation'.¹⁴ By now, however, neither the rhetoric nor the iconography was quite so convincing. Few mid-Victorians were more whimsical or more conservative than Walter Bagehot, or more sceptical. Few were more sensitive to the fact that theirs was an 'age of confusion and tumult', not least because ordinary Englishmen and women were no longer so confident in the inviolability of the English 'household'.¹⁵

For this very reason, mid-Victorian England was also a place of anxiety and of uncertainty. The anxiety bred the questioning. England worried about its 'condition', for which reason it also worried, at length, about the state of its families and more particularly, the 'question' of its women, what they should be doing, what they might be thinking, and what they seemed to be reading.¹⁶ This latter affinity was immediate. The Burkean family presumed a particular 'sphere' within which women lived their married lives.¹⁷ At a remove, it also presumed a particular place within which the sexuality of these women might be regulated, and this place was the institution of marriage. This book is about sex and marriage, and the consequences, legal and otherwise, of transgressing the Burkean norm. It is about families like the Dickenses, about men like Charles Dickens and women like Ellen Ternan.

¹¹ See K Chase and M Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton University Press, 2000) 215–16. See also J Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (Yale University Press, 1999) 4–6, exploring the middle-class 'cult of domesticity', and T Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation 1846–1886* (Oxford University Press, 1998) 316 stating, as baldly as Stephen, that the 'family dominated Victorian life'.

¹² E Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Penguin, 1986) 120.

¹³ All internal citations are taken from C Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (Penguin, 2002).

¹⁴ H Fraser et al (ed), *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) 108.

¹⁵ W Bagehot, 'The First Edinburgh Reviewers' in N St John Stevas (ed), *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot* vol 1 (The Economist, 1965–86) 261.

¹⁶ See C Hersh, *Subversive Heroines: Feminist Resolutions of Social Crisis in the Condition of England Novel* (Michigan University Press, 1994) 1–16.

¹⁷ See I Hayward, *The Revolution of Popular Literature: Print, Politics and the People 1790–1860* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) 199, noting the lingering influence of the 'neo-Burkean creed' of liberal conservatism in the early and middle parts of the nineteenth century.

It is also about the families that Dickens created for his thousands of devoted readers, about their conformities and nonconformities, indeed about families such as the *Dombey*s. It is not only about families created by Dickens of course, for it is also about other fictional families we will come across, such as the Newcomes, the Carlyles and the Mellishs, each of which was beset with marital dysfunction. It is also about the fate of those women such as Ellen, who found themselves 'fallen' outside marriage, about women such as Hetty Sorrel, Jessie Phillips and Ruth Hilton, as well as Dickens's own Nancy Sikes. Dickens knew that his age was an interrogatory one, a serious one and an anxious one. He also knew that if he read his audience right, this same anxiety would make his fortune, for the Victorian age, the 'age of so many things', as Margaret Oliphant rather wearily observed, was also a peculiarly literate one; the great 'age of the triumph of fiction', as Edmund Gosse later affirmed in rather more celebratory tones.¹⁸ If there was one thing a Victorian gentleman liked more than worrying, it was reading about worrying things.¹⁹ The same, it was commonly felt, was true of his wife; indeed, of all the worrying things, few were more worrying than the thought that women were reading too much. Indeed, it was commonly supposed that women like Ellen Ternan fell because they read novels written by men such as Charles Dickens.

Angels in the House

Of course, as we have already intimated, the shame that Dickens was so keen to evade was nothing in comparison with that which would have attached to Ellen. The mid-Victorian was obsessed with 'fallen' women, which is precisely why they loved to read about them in the novels that Dickens, and so many of his contemporaries, wrote.²⁰ There were two distinct species of 'fallen' women: those who fell whilst married, and those who, like Ellen Ternan, fell outside of marriage. The necessary fact of sexual transgression, even its mere insinuation, made both equally thrilling subjects for leisured contemplation; as did the further insinuation, commonly made in the literature of the 'fallen' women, that transgressive sexuality nurtured criminality. Whilst the 'fallen' married woman could easily find herself slipping into a kind of criminality, it was usually of the less violent kind: a 'criminal conversation' perhaps, a spot of bigamy. But for the 'fallen' unmarried woman, the crimes prescribed tended to be rather more dramatic, certainly more violent. A life

¹⁸ E Gosse, 'The Tyranny of the Novel' (1982) 19 *National Review* 164. For Oliphant's observation, see 'Modern Novelists Great and Small' (1855) 77 *Blackwoods* 555. In his 'Introduction' to the first Penguin edition of *Dombey and Son* in 1970, at 11, Raymond Williams suggested that 'There has been no higher point in the whole history of English fiction'.

¹⁹ On the Victorian age as one of 'apprehension', see M Wolff, 'Victorian Study: An Interdisciplinary Essay' (1964) 8 *Victorian Studies* 1964.

²⁰ See N Auerbach, 'The Rise of the Fallen Woman' (1980) 35 *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30–34 and 37–52; G Watt, *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Croom Helm, 1984) 1–9; and T Winnifrith, *Fallen Women in the Nineteenth Century Novel* (St Martin's Press, 1994) 1–11.

of prostitution leading as often as not to violent death was commonly prescribed, as was the arrival of an unwanted child and the temptation to commit that most 'unnatural' of crimes, child-murder. Ellen appears to have been luckier than most. She did not fall quite so far, or at least so it seems. We shall, however, encounter some of the less fortunate in due course, as we will the associated literature on female sexuality with which so many Victorian gentlemen, for reasons of science or more commonly simple prurience, were evidently so fascinated.²¹

The alternative to the 'fallen' woman was the 'womanly' woman.²² Single women could be 'womanly' but they were generally viewed as being odd if they did not sooner or later get married.²³ The cultural presumption was that women should marry. There were exceptional voices, most famously perhaps that of John Stuart Mill, who argued that a wife was in reality the 'bond-servant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so-called'. There were, he concluded, alluding to recent emancipation statutes, 'no legal slaves' in England 'except the mistress of every house'.²⁴ Early feminist contemporaries such as Mona Caird were quick to cite Mill's authority and deploy his metaphor. As late as 1888, Caird likened the marriage market to the 'Mongolian market-place', with 'its iron cage, wherein women are held in bondage, suffering moral starvation, while the thoughtless gather round to taunt and to insult their lingering misery'.²⁵ But again, the complaint was as much against the practice of marriage as the idea and few in mid-Victorian England even shared this measure of doubt.²⁶ They may have read innumerable novels which insinuated that there was something awry with marital practice but they were hard pressed to find any that suggested a credible, still less desirable, alternative. Thackeray's Ethel Newcome may articulate some of the most caustic condemnations of marital practice found in the Victorian novel, as we shall see in chapter one, but there is nothing Ethel craves more than marriage to the man of her dreams. The same is every bit as true of her fictive sisters, from bigamous adulteresses to traduced maidens. Each wants, above anything, to be married. Florence Dombey may have watched the brutal disintegration of her father's marriage, but she too is desperate to marry her beloved Walter; and quite rightly, as Mr Sownds the church beadle confirms with a Burkean flourish, 'We must marry 'em . . . and keep the country going' (868).

Once married, the Victorian woman was expected to assume a particular role, and it was adherence to this role that distinguished the 'womanly' wife from the 'fallen' one. The dominant doctrine here was that of 'separate spheres'. In her essay

²¹ For an overview, see K Harvey, 'Sexuality and the body' in H Barker and E Chalus (eds), *Women's History: Britain 1700–1850* (Routledge, 2005) 78–99.

²² See P Ingham, *The Language of Gender and Class: Transformations in the Victorian Novel* (Routledge, 1996) 20–22.

²³ A presumption that Cobbe sought to satirise in her essay 'What shall we do with our old maids?' to which the answer was educate them and put them to useful employment. S Hamilton (ed), *Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors: Victorian Writing by Women on Women* (Broadview, 1995) 85–107.

²⁴ J Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (Hackett, 1988) 32, 86.

²⁵ M Caird, 'Marriage' in Hamilton, *Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors* (above n 23) 279.

²⁶ See Hager, *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce* (above n 4) 2–5, concluding that 'it sometimes seems as if marriage is everywhere written against, even as it is everywhere desired or assumed'.

Laws Concerning Women, Elizabeth Lynn Linton confirmed that the assumption of 'separate' spheres was 'the very first principle of domestic existence'.²⁷ Such essays, and such comments, were legion. So too were domestic manuals; inordinately popular and invariably keen to reaffirm the 'natural' distinction between the alternative realms of spousal authority. In her 1838 manual *Women of England*, Sarah Stickney Ellis confirmed that 'there is an appropriate sphere for women to move in, from which those of the middle class of England seldom deviate'. This 'sphere', she continued, 'has duties and occupations of its own, from which no woman can shrink without culpability and disgrace'.²⁸ It was not simply a matter of maintaining domestic harmony. As Mr Sownds appreciated, the 'nation's moral worth' depended on women 'keeping' these responsibilities; an invocation which necessarily aligned the emergent 'question' of women with larger questions about England's 'condition', of the kind famously asked by Thomas Carlyle and Henry Newman.

As we have already noted, religious and scriptural metaphors commonly reinforced the more prosaic presumptions of domestic utility. Thus Ellis adopted a distinctly Burkean tone in confirming that the 'household hearth', the maintenance of which was at the very top of the good wife's responsibilities, possessed an 'inviolable sanctity'.²⁹ In *The Woman's Mission*, Sarah Lewis made the theological affinity more patent still:

Let men enjoy in peace and triumph the intellectual kingdom which is theirs, and which, doubtless, was intended for them; let us participate in its privileges without desiring to share its domination. The moral worlds is ours ours by position; ours by qualification, ours by the very indication of God.³⁰

Alongside the domestic manual was the domestic journal, saying pretty much the same. *The Ladies Treasury* assured its readers that between its pages would be found nothing to 'enervate or bewilder the pure female mind'. Rather it was intended to 'illustrate and uphold each dear, domestic virtue, child of home'.³¹ The home was sacrosanct indeed. Dickens's *Household Words* was not a woman's journal as such; but he chose the title for a reason. There will be occasions in the chapters which follow when we encounter writers who appear to be rather more sceptical, articulating the kind of doubts as to the veracity of the separation doctrine insinuated in the essays of Mill and nascent feminists such as Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Frances Power Cobbe; voices which sought to raise a distinct 'question' of women, in effect a question of their place in mid-Victorian England. But such voices were few; even amongst those who are so often credited with nurturing the evolution of modern feminist consciousness. 'There is no question' George Eliot observed, 'on which I am more inclined to hold my peace and learn,

²⁷ E Linton, 'Laws Concerning Women' *Blackwood's Magazine*, April 1856, 381.

²⁸ See P Ingham, *The Brontës* (Oxford University Press, 2006) 128.

²⁹ S Ellis, *Women of England*, (Fisher and Son, 1839) 1

³⁰ S Lewis, *The Woman's Mission* (John Parker, 1840) 129.

³¹ See N Thompson, *Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian Novels* (Macmillan, 1996) 123.

than on the Woman Question'.³² Even Frances Power Cobbe was later moved to remark, along similar lines, that 'of all theories concerning women, none is more curious than the theory that it is needful to make a theory about them'.³³ Even as they wrote novels which appeared to push at the boundaries which sought to confine the mid-Victorian woman, writers such as Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell and Ellen Wood did so cautiously.³⁴ Having articulated her distrust of the 'Woman Question', Eliot gestured to the reason why. 'It seems to me', she opined, 'to overhang abysses, of which even prostitution is not the worst'.³⁵ At the sharp end of the 'Woman Question' there lay real darkness and real suffering, and real sex too.

The mid-Victorian aesthetic was written accordingly in deference to the broader presumptions of the separation thesis, affirming the more prosaic declarations articulated in the myriad domestic manuals published by the likes of Ellis and Lewis. Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House* assumed a particular iconic status. A closer reading revealed that the 'angel' in Patmore's house was love. But in the minds of his contemporaries, male and female alike, it became a cultural shorthand for the ideal 'womanly' wife; for if the wife failed to play her role as prescribed, then the 'house' would be governed not by love but by suspicion, dislike and very probably violence.³⁶ In his review of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*, a novel we shall revisit in chapter three, JM Ludlow confirmed that 'if man is the head of humanity, woman is its heart'.³⁷ A generation earlier, Thomas Gisborne's popular *Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, confirmed that it was for men to plumb the 'inexhaustible depths of philosophy', just as they write the 'science of legislation, of jurisprudence'. Their wives, in return, exercise a 'sympathising sensibility'.³⁸

This prescriptive, and necessarily pejorative, poetic found famous expression in John Ruskin's 1865 lecture, 'Of Queen's Gardens'. The demarcation of male and female spheres was not, Ruskin averred, a matter of power or subjugation, but of nature and harmony. A 'true wife', he urged, was not a 'slave' but rather a 'help-mate'. Thus:

³² Ibid, 12.

³³ Adding 'we are driven to conclude' that whilst men grow like trees, 'women run in moulds, like candles, and we can make them long-threes or short-sixes, whatever we please'. See Newton, *Women* (above n 29) 2.

³⁴ For a commentary on this caution, see N Thompson, 'Responding to the woman questions: rereading non-canonical Victorian women novelists' in N Thompson (ed), *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) 2–4, 6.

³⁵ See Thompson, *Reviewing Sex* (above n 31) 12.

³⁶ Virginia Woolf famously denounced the image as one of the most pernicious in English literature. For commentaries, see S Gilbert and S Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Yale University Press, 2000) 20–23; E Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton University Press, 1977) 14–16, emphasising the extent to which the lives of mid-Victorian women were defined by an elaborate scheme of associated icons and rituals of domestic conformity; and J Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (Yale University Press, 1999) 54–59, 68.

³⁷ J Ludow, 'Ruth' (1853) 19 *North British Review* 90.

³⁸ Gisborne's *Enquiry* was first published in 1797, but retained its popularity during much of the nineteenth century. See J Guy and I Small, *The Routledge Concise History of Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Routledge, 2011) 173.

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest, wherever war is just, wherever conquest is necessary. But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle and the intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. Her great function is Praise; she enters into no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of contest. By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation.³⁹

Or at least, this is what an 'incorruptibly good' wife would be.⁴⁰ There were, of course, other women, as Ruskin inferred, those who had not been properly 'trained in habits of accurate thought', who thought to 'understand' too much, who read the wrong books, 'frivolous' books, books that engaged notions of 'folly' and 'wit' and romance, for even the 'best romance becomes dangerous if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes we shall never be called upon to act'; or so he hoped.⁴¹ We will consider contemporary attitudes to women's reading shortly. It was, as we shall see, a subject which aroused considerable anxieties. Ruskin was certainly anxious, seizing upon Thackeray as just the kind of author who, if not read carefully, might despoil an impressionable female mind; an observation the acuity of which we will again contemplate in chapter one.⁴² It was not, as WR Greg confirmed, merely a matter of the 'good' wife not reading such novels; she should also not be able to comprehend them:

Many of the saddest and deepest truths in the strange science of sexual affection are to her mysteriously and mercifully veiled and can only be purchased at such a fearful cost that we cannot but wish it otherwise.⁴³

As the century progressed, anxious men of letters could look for some reassurance to men of science, at least on the subject of sexuality. Thus the eminent psychologist, Henry Maudsley, could be found agreeing that the biology of female reproduction confirmed that 'the male organisation is one, and the female organisation is another'.⁴⁴ The equally eminent William Acton agreed, straying further into the realm of female sexuality to confirm in his *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, published in 1857, that a 'modest' woman was 'seldom' in need of sexual 'gratification' for its own sake; a supposition which clearly implied that there was something unnatural in women engaging sexual activity for any purpose other than furnishing her husband with progeny.⁴⁵ Acton's treatise comprised endless case studies in which the happiness of women, and the harmony of

³⁹ J Ruskin, *Selected Writings* (Oxford University Press, 2004) 158.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 159.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 161–64.

⁴² *Ibid*, 164.

⁴³ WR Greg, 'The False Morality of Lady Novelists' (1859) 7 *National Review* 149.

⁴⁴ See L Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (Routledge, 1992) 14.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 15. See also R Clark, 'Riddling the Family Firm: The Sexual Economy in *Dombey and Son*' (1984) 51 *ELH* 70, commenting on the strength of this belief in mid-Victorian culture.

their homes, directly correlated with the extent to which they were over- or under-sexualised; insofar as Acton was prepared, barely, to countenance the idea that any woman might be somehow under-sexualised. Thus in the case of a barrister who was afflicted with impotence, Acton was able to offer the reassurance that no matter how frustrated he might be, his wife, being 'kind, considerable, self-sacrificing, and sensible' and above all 'so pure-hearted as to be utterly ignorant and averse to any sexual indulgence', would be fine.⁴⁶

We will revisit Acton and Maudsley and the discourse of sexuality which they strove so hard to prescribe in chapter four, when we take a closer look at prostitution and obscenity. As we shall see, the discourse of science was just one of many discourses which sought to somehow regulate sexual activity and its depiction. None were particularly successful, for the simple reason articulated by Florence Nightingale; there is nothing more futile than the attempt to regulate the expression of 'passion'.⁴⁷ For obvious reasons, the discourse of sexuality was inexorably bound up in the larger 'question' of women; even if it remained, very often, in the darker recesses of the debate. The attempt to regulate one presumed the concomitant necessity of confining the other, both within the walls of the Englishman's home and within the pages of his novels.

At Home with the *Dombey*s

It is a critical commonplace of Dickensian scholarship to suggest that *Dombey and Son* was Charles Dickens's first serious novel, by which is meant the first novel in which he engaged with larger questions of England and its 'condition'.⁴⁸ This was certainly the impression of contemporary admirers such as Thackeray and Forster.⁴⁹ The critical inference is that earlier novels such as *Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* were written, at least in part, in lighter shades. The inference is, of course, questionable. At the same time, it can certainly be agreed that there is precious little that is light about *Dombey and Son*. It is a novel, as the narrator affirms, about 'dark shapes'. The house of Paul Dombey, which assumes such symbolic

⁴⁶ E Ermarth, *The English Novel in History 1840–1895* (Routledge, 1997) 186.

⁴⁷ F Nightingale, *Cassandra, and Other Selections from Suggestions for Thought* (Pickering and Chatto, 1991) 200.

⁴⁸ It was also the first from which he made serious money which is somewhat ironic given that the overarching theme of *Dombey and Son* is the devastating consequences that can follow from the single-minded pursuit of wealth. He earned £3,800 from serialisation in 1847 and 'from this date', as Forster confirmed, 'all embarrassments connected with money were brought to a close'. Tomalin, *Charles Dickens* (above n 1) 200. For influential early comments on the pivotal place of *Dombey and Son* in the evolution of Dickens's canon, see F Leavis and Q Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (Penguin, 1994) 22, basing his assessment on the unity of plot, K Tillotson; 'Dombey and Son', in A Dyson (ed), *Dickens: Modern Judgements* (Macmillan, 1968) 158–61, 179; and H Stone, 'Dickens and Leitmotif: Music-Staircase Imagery in *Dombey and Son*' (1963) 25 *College English* 217.

⁴⁹ Tomalin, *Charles Dickens* (above n 1) 193.

import, is a 'dark' place, every bit as bleak as the infamous Bleak House.⁵⁰ At its best, it can be said to have a 'dreary magnificence' (351). At its worst, it is a 'dismal' house, 'as blank a house inside as outside' (34). Shrouded in seemingly perpetual darkness, Dombey's mansion is a monument to vaunting pride and selfishness, and a fragile one too. The fragility becomes shockingly apparent in chapter forty-seven, the moment when Dickens gets very serious indeed.⁵¹

At this moment, rebuked by a wife who refuses to do anything 'that you ask', possessed of an impotent fury, Paul Dombey lashes out and assaults his daughter Florence (712, 718). The fragile pretences of domestic harmony are shattered. Sarah Ellis had solemnly warned that: 'There are private histories belonging to every family, which, though they operate powerfully upon individual happiness, ought never to be named beyond the home-circle.'⁵² However, the dysfunction of the Dombey family is not something that can be kept under one roof, metaphorically or literally. Florence flees, the 'darkening mark of an angry hand' livid upon her breast, a semiotic that will recur throughout the pages that follow (736). The 'dark shadows' are uncovered, as the narrator famously declaims moments before Dombey loses control:

Oh for a good spirit who would take the house-tops off, with a more potent and benignant hand than the lame demon in the tale, and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes, to swell the retinue of the Destroying Angel as he moves forth among them! (702)

More than anything else Dombey fears public humiliation, the 'opinion of the world' (774, 776). But his shame cannot be allowed to remain in the shadows.⁵³ Thirty thousand Englishmen and women would follow the disintegration of Paul Dombey's family month by month for the best part of two years.

The first 46 chapters had charted the gradual disintegration of Paul Dombey, emotionally bereft widower and 'Colossus of commerce' (398). The 'fall' of the house of Dombey is triggered by the early death of Dombey's son Paul, the intended heir to the family business, an event which plunges his father into a deep depression from which he is seemingly unable to recover.⁵⁴ The death of little Paul attracted considerable critical applause. Thereafter the novel tends to mark time until Dombey makes the fateful mistake of deciding to remarry, or rather the fateful mistake of choosing Edith Granger to be his second wife. Edith proves to be a reluctant bride, or at least a deeply cynical and unsympathetic one. The marriage

⁵⁰ On the symbolism of Dombey's house, and its conspicuous darkness, see A Jackson, 'Reward, Punishment and the Conclusion of *Dombey and Son*', (1978) 7 *Dickens Studies Annual* 107–11; J Gold, *Charles Dickens: Radical Moralizer* (Minnesota University Press, 1972) 157; and H Stone, 'The Novel as Fairy Tale: Dickens' *Dombey and Son*' (1966) 47 *English Studies* 16–17, likening Dombey's mansion to a bewitched and decaying fairy-tale mansion.

⁵¹ On chapter 47 as the pivot of the novel, see C Colligan, 'Raising the House Tops: Sexual Surveillance in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*' (2000) 29 *Dickens Studies Annual* 100–102.

⁵² See Chase and Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy* (above n 11) 12.

⁵³ It is reported that 'The Papers' are 'eager for news' of Dombey's separation and its causes (801).

⁵⁴ Critics have long supposed that little Paul is a precursor to David Copperfield, whose conception followed quickly on his heels. See Tomalin, *Charles Dickens* (above n 1) 185.