

The Posthumous Dickens: Commemorative Adaptations, 1870-2012

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Abstract:

This article investigates three pivotal moments in Dickens's posthumous fame – 1870, 1912, 2012 – to consider how Dickens's post-1870 reputation has been forged by stage, screen, and television commemorations. The stage adaptations produced in the years following Dickens's death emphasised the fatherly characters of Dickens's novels, as well as his own paternal traits. Silent film adaptations produced during the Dickens centenary celebrations focused on the youthful elements of Dickens or emphasised his national identity in films that functioned as virtual literary tourism. Bicentennial adaptations, meanwhile, have meditated on the secrets and anxieties inherent in Dickens's life and work, thereby seeking to normalise the apprehensions of our own cultural moment. This essay concludes that, while each generation has constructed its own version of 'The Other Dickens' to meet the specific cultural values and concerns of its age, this bicentenary period has been notable for its interest in the flawed or 'Fallen Dickens'.

Keywords: adaptation, BBC, commemoration, *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, nostalgia, silent film, television, theatre.

An important feature of Dickens's bicentennial year has been commemorative adaptations – media programmes that moved seamlessly between the author's biography and his fiction in a modern form of *memento mori*. While the style and content of 2012's Dickensian programmes may be new, the impulse to commemorate Dickens through adaptation has struck at every major milestone in the author's posthumous fame. In the wake of his unexpected death, Dickens's devoted reading public spontaneously gathered at the playhouse to mourn him via his fiction. When the world marked the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth, the new media of motion pictures played a vital role in solidifying Dickens's reputation as a national and international treasure. And in the bicentenary year of 2012, Dickens was ever-present across all forms of media, especially

television. This article investigates these three pivotal moments in Dickens's posthumous fame – 1870, 1912, 2012 – to consider how Dickens's post-1870 reputation has been forged by stage, screen, and television commemorations. I pay special attention to intersections between Dickens's life and work, noting the curious ways in which adapters map Dickens's biography onto his characters. I argue that, as three generations of writers rewrote Dickens to suit their epoch's authorial ideal, Dickens's personae evolved from a benevolent patriarch to a restless, tormented, and sometimes vindictive genius.

In *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture*, Jay Clayton astutely describes “[i]ncongruity, contradiction, the juxtaposition of mismatched signifiers and ill-assorted values” as “the tokens by which Dickens travels today”, adding that “for this reason, if for no other, Dickens is perhaps the most ‘postmodern’ Victorian writer” (Clayton 2003: 152). Adapters in 2012 embraced this element of incongruity as they furthered Dickens's travels in postmodern culture. The most recent spate of film and television adaptations aimed at convincing the public that Dickens still matters to the ‘common man’ – his reader turned spectator, Joe Whelks watching theatre clips on YouTube. Regarding the cultural work that Victorian adaptations perform today, Dianne F. Sadoff posits that “[h]eritage film morphs, travels, and productively forces us to imagine ourselves in different but not unrelated historical dilemmas and difficulties as we seek to live within and survive our own millennial age of anxiety” (Sadoff 2009: xxii). Curiously, a major trend of the bicentennial adaptations has been to meditate on Dickens's anxiety, thereby normalising our own. As if in an effort to transcend the formidable distance that separates Dickens from us, eulogisers in 2012 have overwhelmingly focused on the novelist's and the man's most glaring flaws.

This marked interest in the dark side of Dickens corresponds to a larger trend in neo-Victorian fiction that Christian Gutleben has identified as the “aesthetics of the unsavoury”:¹

Postmodernism's exploration of Victorian fiction's dark shadows, forbidden lands and taboo topics disintegrates the stable, reassuring world of Christian values and confronts the reader instead with her/his cynical godless postmodern

condition deprived of any ‘transcendental signified.’
(Gutleben 2001: 134)

Recent biographers and film adapters alike have employed the “aesthetics of the unsavoury” when reinterpreting Dickens’s most troubling texts and probing the mysterious secrets of his personal life. While each generation has, then, fashioned resonant versions of ‘The Other Dickens’ (to use the title of our special issue), this bicentenary period has been unique in mythologising ‘The Fallen Dickens’.

1. **The Paternal Dickens of the Playhouse (1870-1885)**

Dickens “was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that” (Dickens 2003: 39). At his funeral service on 19 June 1870, the Dean of Westminster read an extract from Dickens’s ‘Last Will and Testament’ to illustrate the dearly departed’s abiding sense of modesty:

I emphatically direct that I be buried in an inexpensive, unostentatious, and strictly private manner; that no public announcement be made of the time or place of my burial; that at the utmost not more than three plain mourning coaches be employed; and that those who attend my funeral wear no scarf, cloak, black bow, long hat-band, or other such revolting absurdity. I direct that my name be inscribed in plain English letters on my tomb, without the addition of “Mr.” Or “Esquire”. I conjure my friends on no account to make me the subject of any monument, memorial, or testimonial whatever. (Dickens 2002b: 732)

Written in his characteristically strong voice of justice, Dickens forbids the performance of grief, with its externalised trappings of mourning – the funerary props and costumes, rituals and monologues, which are inherently theatrical. These last requests undoubtedly reflect Dickens’s publically asserted abhorrence of hypocrisy. But considering his lifelong love affair with the theatre (including his own inclination to solve social problems by staging private theatricals), he must surely have known that his devoted readers would eulogise him in theatrical ways. After his private family burial, his fans predictably flocked to his grave in Westminster Abbey for

three months, leaving tributes to their beloved Boz (Callow 2012: 348). But from San Francisco to Sydney, fans also assembled at the theatres, where managers commissioned living portraits of Dickens's most famous characters in makeshift commemorations.

Dickens's death effectively erased the long-standing rivalry with his adapters that had begun with his earliest publications. Scholars have often fixated on Dickens's resentment over premature adaptations of his work-in-progress, a practice that he very publically denounced in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839). I have elsewhere argued that Dickens did gradually alter his writing style so that his fiction became less easily adaptable to the stage (see Laird 2011: 193-215). But Dickens also knew that a successful adaptation had the power to reach new audiences, promote his fame, and increase sales of his books. He thus came to accept that adaptation was an inevitable extension of his fame, and began endorsing some playwrights' adaptations over others.² Dickens also adapted his own work for his popular public readings. With the launch of his 'Farewell Tour' of Britain in 1868, Dickens initiated a powerful blend of mourning and entertainment that his adapters sought to emulate after his death.

As H. Philip Bolton explains, the period of 1870-1885 constituted an era of "remarkable theatrical high-water marks" when "more than 350 stagings of Dickens occurred" across England and America (Bolton 1999: 197). These adaptations appealed to Dickens's contemporaries' sense of nostalgia, and also worked as an introduction to Dickens for a new generation of theatre-goers and actors. Over this peak period, every conceivable Dickensian work was staged, with *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839) boasting the highest number of productions (Bolton 1999: 196). In his magisterial compendium, *Dickens Dramatized*, Bolton offers a chronology of each novel's afterlife that clearly illustrates the diversity of Dickensian adaptations in 1870. Dickens's unfinished mystery, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), was adapted by four different playwrights that year (Bolton 1987: 443). Ten versions of *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857) were staged, including James Albery's loose adaptation, *The Two Roses* (1870), which starred Henry Irving as a character based upon Dickens's Old Mr Dorrit (Bolton 1987: 377). One of the most popular plays of the year was Andrew Halliday's [*Little*] *Nell; or, The Old Curiosity Shop* (1870), which ran from November through April at the Olympic Theatre in London and professed on its programme to have enjoyed "Special Permission of the Late Charles

Dickens” (Bolton 1987: 195-196). A London theatre-goer could quite possibly have attended dramatisations of Dickens’s early, middle, and late work in 1870.

Bolton notes, almost as an afterthought, that “David Copperfield, too, perhaps an alter ego for its recently deceased author, was staged at least 40 times” (Bolton 1999: 197). In fact Bolton’s research suggests that *David Copperfield* was actually the most popular choice for adaptation in the immediate wake of Dickens’s death. While *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* (1860-1861) were performed only twice in 1870, at least eighteen different performances of *David Copperfield* (1849-1850) were staged before the end of the year; by the end of the decade, over fifty different productions had been produced in England alone (Dunn 1981: 22). *David Copperfield*’s themes of recollection, nostalgia, and the pictorial vividness of memory made it the perfect choice to stage in honour of Dickens, in addition to its many biographical parallels.

Several of the 1870 *David Copperfield* dramatisations seem to have been based upon the play-script *Little Em’ly* (1869) by Andrew Halliday, one of the most talented journalists at *All the Year Round*. Less than a year before his death, Dickens read Halliday’s manuscript and offered him advice about adapting *David Copperfield* for the Olympic Theatre. In a letter addressed to “My Dear Halliday”, Dickens advised:

I have gone over your notes for a dramatized Copperfield, and although I notice the usual difficulties in the way of endeavour to put so long a story into so short a space, I have no other fault to find: – except [. . .] [i]t is very important to Mr. Peggotty’s character – this is another point – that he should be merciful with, and sorry for, Martha; and that he should never bully her. (Dickens 2002a: 266)

This specification betrays Dickens’s fondness for Mr. Peggotty, the forgiving father figure. Notably absent are any specifications for fleshing out the character of David, the more obvious locus of Dickens’s personal history. Halliday took his editor’s advice to heart by spotlighting Peggotty’s compassion towards Martha, and the play became the most successful version of the era, publically endorsed as it was with Dickens’s stamp of approval. Proof of its success lies in the countless imitations that it sparked

throughout the 1870s, such as Gaston Murray's *Lost Em'ly* (1873), Walter Stephens's *Poor Lost Em'ly; or, The Wreck of the Rosa* (1870), E. H. Brooke's *Little Em'ly's Trials* (1871), and Charles Rennell's *The Ark on the Sands* (1870).

These plays show little interest in the eponymous protagonist David, whose plight had been identified in John Forster's *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1871) as a fictional account of Dickens's own traumatic childhood. Forster believed that several readers carried "a suspicion, which though general and vague had sharpened interest not a little, that underneath the fiction lay something of the author's life" (Forster 1928: 547). After all, it was a *Künstlerroman*, a story of a writer's growth and development, and the inversion of the author's initials, 'CD' to David Copperfield's 'DC', created a supposition that the novel-writing character was a thinly-veiled version of the novelist himself. But as Michael Slater explains, prior to the publication of Forster's biography Dickens's audience "knew virtually nothing of his life before he became a journalist in his late teens" (Slater 2009: 619). In light of these surprising biographical revelations, the playwrights adapting *David Copperfield* in the 1870s could have easily sensationalised the young Dickens's time in the blacking factory as they translated the novel to the stage.

Yet *Little Em'ly* invests much more narrative time in Peggotty than it does in David, an emphasis that reflects the Victorians' intense privileging of the figure of the patriarch. Dickens himself had invited his readers to remember him as a sentimental father when he confessed: "Of all my books, I like this the best [...]. But, like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is DAVID COPPERFIELD" (Dickens 1990: 766; original emphasis). Dickens's attachment to his characters manifested itself after his death in a curious trend of conflating the author with his creations. Juliet John has observed that: "[i]t is interesting that in the many pieces commenting on Dickens's popularity, there is so often a blurring of the idea of Dickens himself with the reality of his works" (John 2010: 15). We are most familiar with this conflation of Dickens and his protagonists through visual commemorations that depict the writer dreaming or at work, surrounded by visions of his characters that float as if angels, apparent self-projections of the begetter's psyche.³

Throughout Dickens's obituaries, we can see this blurring of the novelist and his characters strongly at work. Dickens's first eulogisers

struck the parental keynote to characterise him as a compassionate and merciful father figure to his creations:

They have been our sweet familiar companions – dear to our hearts themselves, and making their parent dearer for the elevated pleasures they have afforded us. The Cheeryble Brothers, Little Nell, Tom Pinch, Dora, Peggotty, Pickwick, and a crowd of other most human creatures, the product of a most human genius, seem now to gather about the soul, stricken with the mystery of death of our friend their father, as though they were sensible of the dark shadow and participated in the solemn lamentation. (Anon. 1870: 1)

This eulogiser goes on to imagine that Dickens is immortal through his fictive children, proclaiming: “CHARLES DICKENS – the power, the teacher, the good friend, the great creator of more than a hundred beings who cannot die – is not dead. In those beings he lives” (Anon. 1870: 1; original emphasis). Such a persistent image of Dickens as the great father of his characters must have pressured adapters to choose wisely from his vast character stock, ensuring that they focused on protagonists fitting for a national hero at his memorial hour. Adapters of *David Copperfield* in the early 1870s seem to have purposefully re-allocated the role of hero to Mr. Peggotty, thereby directing attention away from both the young David and Emily (the fallen woman). As if seeking to fix his memory via adaptation, the productions of *David Copperfield* staged in the wake of Dickens’s death turned on the audience’s empathy towards a benevolent father whose enduring love restores faith in an errant world. Yet in the early twentieth century, Dickens’s Victorian legacy as a magnanimous patriarch was gradually replaced with an updated authorial image.

2. The English Dickens of the Silent Screen (1912-1913)

By the time of Dickens’s centenary, Dickensian actors were becoming as celebrated as the Victorian writer whose works they immortalised on stage. In *The Dickensian*’s special centenary coverage, the editors related a topical anecdote: “[w]ho is this fellow Dickens they are making all this fuss about?” asked one loiterer of another. ‘Don’t you know!’ was the reply. ‘Why, he’s the bloke wot writes the patter for

Bransby Williams” (Matz 1913: 116). Bransby Williams – the most famous Dickensian impersonator of the day – made a career out of enacting the Victorian myth of the fatherly Dickens. While he imitated Dickensian villains and heroes alike, Williams’s “most popular impersonations included Little Nell’s grandfather (audiences wept)” and Daniel Peggotty (Philip Collins 1999: 587). In his memoir, Williams described an especially moving performance of *David Copperfield* in 1905: “I somehow became Dan’l Peggotty to such an extent that I really seemed to feel the loss of Em’ly, and the tears streamed down my cheeks” (Williams 1909: 96). According to Williams, his performance so affected a self-proclaimed ‘fallen woman’ in the audience that she fled the theatre in tears, and wrote to him the next day, thanking him for inspiring her to return home. Such a strange conflation between Dickens the novelist, his character Mr. Peggotty, and Williams the Dickensian actor illustrates Dickens’s newly modern celebrity in the Edwardian era.

But it was the cinema rather than the stage that was becoming the dominant venue for centenary celebrations. Michael Pointer estimates that at least twenty Dickensian “picture plays” or “photoplays” were produced in 1912 alone (Pointer 1996: 29). In this second generation of motion pictures, entrepreneurial film-makers felt an affinity with Dickens, the self-made writer. Whereas directors at the turn of the twentieth century had relied upon Dickens to provide material for brief episodes, the rapidly advancing technology of film allowed for directors in the 1910s to depict entire novels for the first time. The most prolific of these film-makers was Thomas Bentley, who directed several Dickensian adaptations in the years surrounding the centenary, including: *Leaves from the Books of Charles Dickens* (1912), *Oliver Twist* (1912), *David Copperfield* (1913), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1913), *The Chimes* (1914), *Barnaby Rudge* (1915), and *Hard Times* (1915). Before turning his attention to film adaptations of Dickens’s works, Bentley had enjoyed a successful career as a Dickensian impersonator and vaudeville actor. Subsequently, his films were marketed as being penned by the “foremost living authority on Dickens” (Anon. 1913a: 572).

Only Bentley’s *David Copperfield* (filmed in 1912 and released in 1913) survives today. Yet it stands as an invaluable record of Dickens’s reputation at his centenary, when British film-makers turned to Dickens as a way of staking their claim in the increasingly international film industry. At

over seventy minutes in length on seven film reels, *David Copperfield* is considered by many film historians to be Britain's first feature-length film. With a then-hefty budget of £5,000, *David Copperfield* was the equivalent of our modern day prestige film, designed to impress viewers with its unprecedented scope, fine attention to period detail, and beautiful cinematography that showcased the camera's newest technology (Low 1971: 119). *The Dickensian* hailed it as "the finest Dickens Picture Play we have yet seen" and encouraged its devoted readers to brave the picture house (Anon. 1913b: 267).

The film resulted from a collaboration between Thomas Bentley and producer Cecil Hepworth, one of Britain's most visionary film pioneers. Like Bentley, Hepworth had a unique personal interest in Dickens. He had grown up literally in the shadows of his father's magic lantern show, helping him to photograph landscapes connected with Dickens. In his memoir, Cecil Hepworth nostalgically recalled of his father: "[h]is most successful lecture was 'The Footprints of Charles Dickens,' in which I gloried, and [which I] heard over and over again. As a result, I read every book that Dickens wrote and got thoroughly saturated with him" (Hepworth 1951: 22). The "saturated" Hepworth and Bentley together constituted a Dickensian dream team whose collaboration set the bar for silent film adaptations throughout the decade.

Bentley and Hepworth's unique contribution with *David Copperfield* was in making visible Dickens's ties to the English landscape, thereby crystallising the writer's reputation as a national treasure. The film pledges fidelity to Dickens's homeland from the prefatory inter-title, which announces that it was shot "On the actual scenes / Immortalized by the author". Joss Marsh explains that "[t]his was a claim only a *British* company could make; through the genius of place, the already flagging industry could exploit its most valuable literary property" (Marsh 2001: 207; original emphasis). Advertisements honed in on the film's topographical realism. The reviewer for *The Moving Picture World*, an American trade journal, gushed:

Much of the beauty of this picture lies in the scenes of old England. Hepworth's have gone to the actual places of which the story tells and given us views of Canterbury, the cliffs of

Dover, and street scenes that have not materially changed in the past hundred years. ([Anon.] 1913c: 29)

Promising access to the aura of Dickens via his fictional settings, Bentley and Hepworth were creating a timely form of virtual literary tourism for an international audience primed to eulogise Dickens's life and works.

If the English landscape had not changed in a hundred years, the technology that allowed for its realistic representation had undergone a revolution. The motion picture camera was increasingly portable, and Hepworth and Bentley's documentary-like shots of England were a timely novelty. The film repeatedly emphasises Dickens's pastoral ties over his urban ones, providing Edenic scenes of Yarmouth and of Mr. Peggotty's coastal home that seem aligned with the genre of the travelogue. Interestingly, film historian Stephen Bottomore pinpointed the years 1912-13 as a time when England became the favourite destination for US film companies such as Edison and Vitagraph (Bottomore 2003: 405). The craze must also have been stimulated by the Dickens centenary, and Hepworth and Bentley were savvy to harness the British landscape for a burgeoning film industry.

The centenary *David Copperfield* stands apart from Victorian stage adaptations in restoring David's coming of age narrative as the central plotline. (As discussed above, David's narrative was long hijacked by the sensational fallen woman plot of *Little Em'ly*.) The film uses three actors to depict David's growth from childhood to maturity. In the scenes of the third actor, Len Bethel, a dashing, handsome David asserts his masculinity more forcefully than he ever did in Dickens's novel, for example in heroically saving Emily, his childhood sweetheart, from the vindictive Rosa Dartle, and in ushering her back to her aged Uncle Peggotty. The latter is portrayed as a Victorian relic through performer Jamie Darling's outdated, melodramatic acting style. It is telling that, at the start of the twentieth century, a new emphasis is placed on the youthful hero of Dickens's *Bildungsroman*. It is no coincidence that, in the centenary year, David is depicted as a capable, active, modern Englishman – the very qualities that increasingly came to be associated with Dickens the man throughout the early twentieth century.

3. The Fallen Dickens of the BBC (2011-2012)

In his editorial for the Bicentenary Issue of *The Dickensian*, Malcolm Andrews swiftly bridges the formidable gap between Dickens's Victorian mourners and his twenty-first-century readers:

His mourners around that open grave in the summer of 1870 must have felt there was also, suddenly, a very large Dickens-shaped hole in the national life. That is something we might be feeling, too, a century and a half later – except that Dickens keeps filling it. (Andrews 2012: 3)

Andrews's vivid image of the ever-replenished "Dickens-shaped hole" underscores our hagiographic treatment of Dickens in 2012. Reminiscent of the incorruptible bodies of the saints, Dickens's body of work endures long after the grave is closed, to fill us up and sustain us. Readers' faith in an intimate, even sacred, connection with Dickens can be detected again and again in the innumerable essays, articles, books, and blog postings published during the bicentenary year. Even though we have only known a world post-Dickens, the 'feeling' of losing him and mourning him has been indulged with unabashed sentiment.

Significantly, however, the nostalgia infusing these bicentennial reflections resists idealising the distant past or extolling a simpler way of life. Unlike the film-makers of the centenary who romanticised Victorian England, adapters and commentators today have proved more interested in Dickens's grittier portraits of Victorian daily life. This critical shift parallels a thematic shift in twenty-first-century neo-Victorian novels. From Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) to Dan Simmons's *Drood* (2009), recent neo-Dickensian fiction visualises the crime, filth, poverty, prostitution, and addiction lurking beneath the veneer of propriety that had clung to the Victorian epithet throughout much of the twentieth century. However, such contemporary texts still employ nostalgia as "a creative tool for remembering the past and mapping present identities" (Mitchell 2010: 6). As Kate Mitchell argues, neo-Victorian fiction often proves "less concerned with *making sense* of the Victorian past, than with offering it as a cultural memory, to be re-remembered, and imaginatively re-created, not revised or understood" (Mitchell 2010: 7) – not least in its exposé approach to biofictional treatments of the great writer.

This new recognition of nostalgia's creative function has shaped recent adaptations of Dickens's life story and fiction. John J. Su observes that "[n]ostalgia is haunting in that it not only proposes alternative worlds but interweaves itself with memory so that life stories become saturated with images of lost promises" (Su 2003: 170). Most notably, the BBC's Dickens Bicentenary Season (2011-2012) reappraised Dickens's life and work. Featuring biographical programmes such as *Armando's Tale of Charles Dickens* and *Mrs Dickens' Family Christmas* alongside new adaptations of *Great Expectations* (directed by Brian Kirk) and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (directed by Diarmuid Lawrence). BBC Dickens Bicentenary Season aggrandised Dickens's mastery as a writer of Victorian crime fiction while probing his personal shortcomings. The result was a composite portrait of 'The Other Dickens' that might best be dubbed 'The Fallen Dickens' as its focus was overwhelmingly on the hidden, unsavoury details of Dickens's biography and the dark, even demented, themes of his later novels.

Several of these bicentennial programmes insisted on Dickens's populist appeal, and some revealed a growing chasm between the academy's Dickens and the people's Dickens. A backlash against the professionalisation of Dickens can be discerned in *Armando's Tale of Charles Dickens*, a programme that sought to reclaim Dickens for the individual reader (as its possessive title alone suggests). Originally aired on BBC Two on 2 January 2012, Armando Iannucci's programme flirts with the genres of the biopic, memoir, and literary travelogue. As both writer and host, Iannucci proclaims at the start of the episode: "Dickens, the nineteenth-century novelist, speaks to us now, and I want to gauge his impact and relevance by talking not to literary critics and biographers, but to his readers" (Lee 2012). Spoken with an undisguised tone of disdain for "literary critics and biographers", the programme then goes on to interview comedians, actors, archivists, lawyers, judges, and even a representative debtor about their love of Dickens. With this rather skewed cross-section of readers, Iannucci restructures the hierarchy of Dickens's readers to supplant academics with entertainers and to privilege life experience over educational credentials.

In an article for *The Telegraph*, Iannucci elaborated on his democratic approach to telling Dickens's 'Tale': "He didn't study literary theory, delve into the riches of literature or reference Shakespeare and the

Greek myths in any detail. And I think that's why some critics still look down on him as too popular, too instinctively good at it" (Iannucci 2012). Ignoring the abundance of scholarship on Dickens and popular culture by such literary critics as Paul Schlicke and Juliet John, Iannucci opposes Dickens's critics with his ordinary readers. Rejecting scholarly approaches, Iannucci's teleplay advocates a newly emotional approach to Dickens. Reading *David Copperfield* through a biographical lens, Iannucci traces critical terrain that would be familiar, were it not for the addition of his own sentimental reflections on his first encounters with individual texts. Iannucci's dual emphasis on personal feeling and biography speaks to a larger trend of readers valuing Dickens as a formative part of their own childhood development. As Sarah Winter has recently shown, Dickens's legacy might be tied to his ability to shape readers' very sense of self through novels that "do not simply persuade or instruct readers but rather provide new patterns of logic and emotion through which readers can form (or transform) their judgments of society" and also of themselves (Winter 2011: 175).

Sue Perkins also offered a heartfelt approach to Dickens in *Mrs Dickens' Family Christmas*, a self-reflexive programme for BBC Two that depicted the comedienne lying on a psychiatrist's couch as she psychoanalysed Charles and Catherine Dickens's marital separation. In reclaiming Catherine Dickens's experience as her dominant subject, Perkins drew heavily on Lillian Nayder's groundbreaking work, *The Other Dickens: A Life of Catherine Hogarth* (2010), while her speculations on Charles Dickens's infidelity summarised research published by Claire Tomalin in *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* (1991). However, neither Nayder nor Tomalin are cited as sources for Perkins's project, nor are they granted more than a few seconds of airtime as interviewees. In contrast, Michael Slater and Robert Douglas-Fairhurst enjoy prominence as Dickens experts in lengthy interviews. It seems the programme thereby perpetuates the very gender inequity that it sought to expose by telling Catherine Dickens's story.

Described glibly as not being "a stunner" albeit "blue-eyed and bonny", Catherine Dickens is presented as modern precisely because of her marital unhappiness (Halliley 2011). Perkins charts the similarities between Catherine's unhappy family experience and her own, musing, "she also experienced a much more modern Christmas, one that's certainly familiar to

me, full of family bitterness and recrimination, of cold shoulders, silence, and awkwardness” (Halliley 2011). After investigating the terms of their separation, Perkins reprimands Dickens for his callous dismissal of Catherine: “It’s a pretty poor show for our national treasure, isn’t it?” (Halliley 2011). Yet Perkins seems to redeem Dickens by presenting his marital infidelity as necessary fodder for his late, great works. Perkins attests:

His late novels are imaginative triumphs that reflect his torment. In *Great Expectations* of 1861, it’s the torture of unrequited sexual longing. In *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* of 1870, it’s a murderous guilty secret that no one must discover. (Halliley 2011)

These rather reductive assessments cannot be dismissed as merely one reader’s unstudied response, as they reflect the kind of stereotypes that surfaced throughout the bicentennial commemorations. No longer seen as the spokesperson of social injustice, the Dickens of 2012 is mainly relatable to us in his insatiable sexuality and his psychological guilt. A critic for *The Observer* captures this curious cultural delight in attacking Dickens’s morals when he sums up Perkins’s programme as “a stringently researched, captivating account of what a bastard Dickens actually was” (Ferguson 2012).

While both Iannucci’s and Perkins’s television programmes profess a mistrust of literary theory, their approach to Dickens is reminiscent of a mid-twentieth-century branch of literary criticism, The Geneva School, epitomised by J. Hillis Miller in his 1958 *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*. In his 1966 essay ‘The Geneva School’, Miller advocated an unapologetically personal and spiritual approach to literature that sought to access the consciousness of the author running across his complete canon. Miller advocated for studies of “the total work of an author, including his notes, his diaries, his unfinished works, his fragmentary drafts”, reasoning that “[s]uch incomplete writings may allow better access to the intimate tone or quality of a mind than a perfected masterpiece” (Miller 1966: 307). As Vincent B. Leitch explains, this approach to literature was unique in “the vital role accorded the reader” and “the implied critique of other modes of criticism (particularly formalism)” (Leitch 1988: 158-159). In a similar

spirit of inquiry, *Armando's Tale of Charles Dickens* reads the rather obscure *Mugby Junction* (1866) alongside *David Copperfield* in his quest to understand Dickens's inner life, while *Mrs Dickens' Family Christmas* ponders private letters and newspaper notices as keys to Dickens's repressed psychology.

Bicentenary dramatic television adaptations were equally interested in accessing Dickens's consciousness. In her adaptation of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* for BBC Two, writer Gwyneth Hughes attempted the formidable challenge of ending Dickens's unfinished mystery. This open-ended text has long plagued readers with its literal lack of closure. As Frank Kermode so eloquently argued in *The Sense of an Ending*, we make sense of our own lives through fictional endings:

Men, like poets, rush 'into the midst,' *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. (Kermode 1968: 7)

In Kermode's terms, the anxiety sparked by Dickens's eternally open-ended novel is indelibly linked to our fear of death. Putting an end to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* undertakes the valuable cultural work of sparing us the lingering uncertainty of Dickens's unfinished life work.

In many ways, this new adaptation does achieve a comforting sense of closure through a convincingly Dickensian visual style rendered vividly with up-to-date production values. The opening credits' stark, black and white ink theme evokes the novel's unfinished composition, as the black lines etching a city skyline gradually trail off at the end of the screen. Filmed on location in Dickens's beloved Rochester and in London's St. Bartholomew the Great church, this adaptation beautifully captures the claustrophobic, Gothic atmosphere of the novel's fictional Cloisterham. Alan Almond's cinematography owes a large debt to an earlier BBC drama, *Bleak House* (adapted by Andrew Davies in 2005), which marked a revolution in visual style for Dickensian teleplays. Like its predecessor, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* makes excellent use of a dark colour palette replete with blue tints and shadowy compositions, low-angle street shots of carriage

wheels in motion, and abrupt edits and jump cuts, that together recreate the gritty texture of Victorian urban life.

Psychoanalytic readings of Dickens's last novel have always flirted with the idea of John Jasper as a vessel for the aging novelist, obsessed with the young actress Ellen Ternan. Watching the film with the most recent biographies of Dickens in mind, Jasper's flaws parallel Dickens's sins all too neatly. In the film, Jasper pointedly asks the Reverend Crisparkle: "Is there a circle of hell reserved especially for fathers who do not love their children?", to which Crisparkle feelingly replies, "There ought to be" (Lawrence 2012). Readers of Claire Tomalin's *Charles Dickens: A Life* will recall Dickens's undisguised "resentment" towards the disappointing sons that he perceived "as a long line of versions of himself that had come out badly" (Tomalin 2011: 388). Dickens's failure as a father is confirmed in his heartless comment about his debt-driven son, Sydney: "I fear Sydney is much too far gone for recovery, and I begin to wish that he were honestly dead" (qtd. in Tomalin 2011: 388). With such evidence of Dickens's loveless parenting style newly restored to our attention by Tomalin's biography, viewers of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* can easily chart the film's prominent theme of bad fathers back to Dickens. Furthermore, the film most often mourns the broken father/son relationship within the setting of the cathedral, where laments to an absent Father have a significant double meaning.

The recognition of Dickens's moral failings seems to add weight to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*'s penultimate scene, which captures the spirit of mourning that haunted 2012's festivities. As the surviving characters gather in a domestic scene, the eponymous hero raises his glass: "One final toast – to our older brother, Jack, and his fond memory" (Lawrence 2012). As the guests exchange nervous glances, Neville qualifies the toast: "To the man he *might* have been – to Jack" (Lawrence 2012). The emphasis on the *might* seems especially pointed this year, as new scholarship makes clear that Dickens *might* have been a better man towards his wife, his children, his lover, and his friends.

This small screen adaptation does, though, offer redemption in modern ways. In a discussion of her artistic process, screenwriter Hughes recounted how she returned to the novel's illustrations when developing the characters of Helena and Neville Landless: "I decided, on no textual evidence, that they had a British father and a Tamil mother. With great

enthusiasm, the production team put two young British Asian actors into starring roles in a costume drama for the first time” (Hughes 2012). Considering that Andrea Arnold’s choice to cast a black actor as Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (2011) barely raised an eyebrow, it seems safe to say that viewers in 2012 readily accept postcolonial re-readings of Victorian fictions. Hughes’s casting effectively brings *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*’s barely submerged themes of colonial oppression and racism to the surface. The intense love between Rosa and Helena – which at times seems purposefully depicted as in danger of overstepping sisterly bonds of affection – is supplanted with a final betrothal scene between Helena and Crisparkle. Reaffirming the persistence of the marriage plot over the murder mystery, this adaptation ultimately appeases viewers by upholding the love-based marriage that Dickens chose to dissolve in his own life.

Further evidence of a new interest in the darker side of Dickens can easily be seen in the BBC’s 2011-2012 Christmas holiday programming. The season has been long dominated by that festive perennial favourite, *A Christmas Carol* but, in a daring change to the traditional line-up, a screen adaptation of *Great Expectations* (written by Sarah Phelps and directed by Brian Kirk) headlined the Christmas listings, debuting on BBC One on 27 December 2011, and running for three successive evening instalments.⁴ *Great Expectations* was an ambitious choice for the holiday season because it resists the quality of national nostalgia that heritage films so often use as currency. *Great Expectations* is set apart from the rest of Dickens’s fiction by a hero whose origins are decidedly, unalterably working class. Unlike the middle-class David Copperfield, the ‘raised by hand’ orphan Pip is unable to feel nostalgia for his childhood world, steeped as it was in death and abuse. Even though his childhood is redeemed by the love of honourable Joe Gargery and by his own powers of imagination, Pip’s world is fundamentally one of lack. By cross-cutting between the daily grind of the forge and the paralysed materialism of Satis House, Dickens establishes an uncomfortable argument that the wealth of the haves comes at the considerable expense of the have-nots. Furthermore, as screenwriter Sarah Phelps observes, Dickens’s psychological portrait of “a transported felon, criminal, and thief” demands viewers’ “unflinching regard” as it shines “a spotlight into some areas of society that certainly his audience didn’t want to look at” (Phelps 2012).

The most anticipated and debated aspect of this new *Great Expectations* was Gillian Anderson's youthful performance of Miss Havisham, a character whom she imagined to be "about 37" in Dickens's novel (Osborn 2011). Anderson elicited criticism for her frenzied hyperbolic enactment that included neurotic hand scratching, a falsetto voice, and Gothic look that reminded more than one reviewer of Lady Gaga's shocking aesthetic (Craven 2012). Though it proved polarising, Anderson's melodramatic style of acting bravely embodied Peter Brooks's concept of the "hystericized body":

a pure image of victimization, and of the body wholly seized by affective meaning, of message converted on to the body so forcefully and totally that the body has ceased to function in its normal postures and gestures, to become nothing but text, nothing but the place of representation. (Brooks 1995: xii)

Just as the Victorian theatre-goer could effortlessly read the melodramatic body, contemporary television audiences are equally skilled at interpreting melodramatic conventions. (It is no coincidence that *Great Expectations* screenwriter Sarah Phelps also pens episodes of the soap opera *EastEnders*.) Whereas Martita Hunt's iconic performance in David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946) immortalised the dignified otherness of Miss Havisham, Anderson's treatment of Miss Havisham strives to win the viewer's identification with the spurned, lonely individual precisely through melodramatic physical acting. This film shares with the other BBC programmes of 2012 a strategy of inviting viewers to personally identify with Dickens through his characters' repressed psychological wounds, which are raised to the most obvious surface of the adapted text.

Having starred as Lady Dedlock in the highly acclaimed *Bleak House*, Gillian Anderson exemplifies the repetition and recycling of actors across the thriving Dickens adaptation industry that has been a dominant trend since the Victorian dramatisations. In perhaps the strangest moment in all of the bicentennial ballyhoo, Gillian Anderson served as hostess at the Charles Dickens Museum on the morning of 7 February 2012, where the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall cut Dickens's birthday cake. According to a report in *The Dickensian*, the cake's icing inscription –

“Please, Sir, Can I Have Some More?” – cheekily hinted at the funds needed to renovate 48 Doughty Street. It is a far cry from one hundred years ago, when *The Dickensian* assured readers that “The Tiny Tim Tea on January 16th was a huge success, some seven hundred children of the very poorest class having been entertained in the Guildhall” (Anon. 1912: 109). The greatest shift from the centenary to the bicentenary may be the complete replacement of Dickensian philanthropy with Dickensian adaptation and heritage industry.

It is today our actors, and not our social reformers, whom we hold up in Dickens’s name. At the Westminster Abbey ceremony held on Dickens’s 200th birthday, dignitaries such as Prince Charles and Dr. Rowan Williams commemorated Dickens’s prodigious contribution to British literature. But it was Shakespearean actor Ralph Fiennes who brought the audience to tears with his emotive reading of a poignant extract from *Bleak House*: “Dead, Your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order” (Dickens 1977: 572). Fiennes was a particularly fitting choice of actor, as he plays Magwitch in director Mike Newell’s 2012 film adaptation of *Great Expectations*. Significantly, Fiennes also directs and stars as Charles Dickens in the forthcoming biopic *The Invisible Woman*. As Bransby Williams embodied Dickens’s paternal characters for audiences still mourning Dickens’s death, Ralph Fiennes now reminds audiences of the tragic flaws beneath Dickens’s celebrity persona. Fiennes’s much anticipated *The Invisible Woman* is sure to please audiences if it replicates the bicentennial script for success: adaptations which perform the cultural work of forgiving our hero-novelist for being as fractured and fallen as we are.

Notes

1. Examples of ‘unsavoury’ neo-Victorian novels include Lynne Truss’s *Tennyson’s Gift* (1996), Richard Flanagan’s *Wanting* (2009), and Gaynor Arnold’s *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008) and *After Such Kindness* (2012).
2. For example, although he engaged in a fierce dispute with W. T. Moncrieff over his adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens praised the Adelphi Theatre’s *Nicholas Nickleby* as “admirably done in every respect”. Furthermore, Dickens promised Adelphi Theatre manager Frederick Yates: “I

felt it an act of common justice after seeing the piece, to withdraw all objection to its publication, and to say thus much to the parties interested in it, without reserve” (Letter from Charles Dickens to Frederick Yates, 29 November 1838, rpt. in Hartley 2012: 47).

3. See, for example, ‘Dickens Surrounded by His Characters’ by J. R. Brown (1889-90) and ‘Dickens’ Dream’ by Robert W. Buss (1875), viewable at <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/gallery/24.html> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dickens_dream.jpg respectively. For a complete discussion of these images, see Litvack 2005.
4. In America, Phelps’s and Kirk’s *Great Expectations* was aired in two weekly instalments on PBS’s *Masterpiece Classic* in early April 2012.

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