

**Mothers and Molls:
Re-imagining the Dickensian Maternal
in Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx***

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Abstract:

The Dickensian nature of Charles Palliser's novel *The Quincunx* has been touted since its publication in 1989. However, little attention has been paid to one significant area in which the novel 're-visions' Dickens's fictional world – the domestic arena of mothers and mother surrogates. This article traces the connections between Palliser's flawed mothers and mother figures and those in Dickens's novels, in particular Palliser's closest maternal 'pretext' *David Copperfield*, demonstrating how Palliser gives expression to the buried or repressed voices of Dickens's mothers, wives, and children. In doing so, he both pays homage to Dickens and provides an ironic modern perspective on the Dickensian maternal.

Keywords: children, Charles Dickens, mothers, mother surrogates, neo-Victorian novel, Charles Palliser, prostitution, *The Quincunx*, Victorian domesticity, wives.

In his *New York Times* review of Charles Palliser's mammoth 1989 novel *The Quincunx*, mystery writer Michael Malone observes that "Mr. Palliser appears to have set out not merely to write a Dickens novel but to write all Dickens novels" (Malone 1990: 12). He cites *Great Expectations* (1861), *Little Dorrit* (1857), *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843), *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), *Oliver Twist* (1839), and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), various of whose plot details Palliser has appropriated. Surprisingly, Malone neglects to mention *David Copperfield* (1850), whose childish innocent Clara Copperfield – and to a certain extent David's first "child-wife" Dora (Dickens 1948: 612) – is re-imagined in the frustratingly naïve Mary Mellamphy or Clothier (née Huffam). However, whereas Clara has the forethought to die soon after the birth of her second child upon marrying the cold Mr. Murdstone, after which David is then cared for by a number of surrogate mothers, John Mellamphy is increasingly obliged to assume the

role of parent as he and his mother flee their country home for the slums of Bethnal Green. Mary, having survived the debtor's prison and been lured into prostitution, eventually dies in a London doss house. In Palliser's novel, the motherly housekeeper Peggotty is replaced by the mercenary Mrs. Bissett, and Betsey Trotwood by a number of duplicitous female relatives. Even the generous former governess Helen Quilliam has a shadowy past and an even more sordid future. In Palliser's world, the ineffective mothering angel of Dickens's work takes on a more sinister role as one of the most significant factors contributing to the epic troubles of the narrative hero.

The following analysis will employ the female figures of *The Quincunx* and their flawed or absent mothering to re-examine some of Dickens's own 'damaged' mothers, particularly those in the novel to which it stands closest, *David Copperfield*. It is today generally agreed that one function of the neo-Victorian novel is to cast a spotlight on those who have been marginalised or under-represented because of gender, race, or class in the Victorian novel itself, and on those facts of their lives that the Victorians preferred to leave hidden (see Humpherys 2002; Kaplan 2007; Llewellyn 2008, 2009; Moore 2008; Carroll 2010; Mitchell 2010; Kohlke and Gutleben 2011). In their introduction to *Neo-Victorian Families*, for example, Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben comment that "it is *en famille* that we like to remember the Victorians and re-imagine them in neo-Victorian fictions, frequently in the problematic terms of failed, abusive, or disintegrating families" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2011: 2). In this respect, Palliser's novel is no exception. However, it is also much more – a novel whose narrative provides answers to some of the questions Dickens left unanswered, whose approach to the Dickensian maternal gives voice to the unfilial (and un-uxorious) thoughts that *David Copperfield* left unvoiced, and whose mothers and mother surrogates are permitted some control over their own stories. It thus gives the lie to Anne Humpherys's judgment that novels like *The Quincunx* are "merely retro" and "do not raise questions about intertextuality, nor call attention to the significant gaps and omissions of the Victorian novel" (Humpherys 2005: 444). Instead, an examination of Palliser's "afterings", to borrow Humpherys's own term (Humpherys 2005: 442), of Dickens's mothers and mother figures will demonstrate how his novel draws attention to the missing mother herself. As Palliser commented in an interview with the *New York Times*'s Suzanne Cassidy, comparing his own hero's "battle scars" to those of one of Dickens's orphans:

Nineteenth-century readers may have been able to believe that Oliver Twist, after all he had been through, could still turn into a perfectly behaved human being, but I don't think 20th-century readers would believe that. Actually, I don't think they believed it in the 19th century, either. (Palliser qtd. in Cassidy 1990)

By using the conventions of the Dickensian novel to entice and then subvert the expectations of modern readers, *The Quincunx* traces the effects of mothering and its absence through several generations. Indeed, Palliser's text uses the vehicle of neo-Victorian literature to give mothers and their damaged children the voice they never had in the Dickensian narrative.

In a 1993 interview with Susana Onega, Palliser claimed that his intentions in writing *The Quincunx* were more complex and ambitious than to produce a "merely retro" piece of literature. He stated, "I wanted to let readers almost think that they were reading a Victorian novel, but then find internal reasons why it couldn't be" (Palliser qtd. in Onega 1993: 281). He also denied the direct influence of Dickens (at least on a conscious level): "I think you can admire a writer without actually wanting to do anything similar. There are probably dozens of writers whom I admire and who have probably influenced me" (Palliser qtd. in Onega 1993: 279). In fact, he went on to stress that

I didn't read Fowles or Dickens all that period, which I think was probably because I realised that there was a danger that I would imitate them if I re-read them, or maybe that I'd be discouraged by thinking about what they had done. (Palliser qtd. in Onega 1993: 281)

Ten years prior to the publication of *The Quincunx*, in a review of Fowles's novel *Daniel Martin* (1977), Palliser regretted Fowles's "preoccupation with ideas", which "though admirable", were at times incorporated "somewhat indigestibly into his novels" (Palliser 1980: 36). Such comments, made at a time when Palliser was in the midst of his own research for his first novel, not only conflict with the statement that he did not read Fowles during that period, but also and more significantly, show that Palliser considered himself as entering the group of neo-Victorian novelists that such writers as

Jean Rhys and John Fowles had initiated, while at the same time hoping to avoid the “indigestibl[e]” intellectuality of Fowles. On the other hand, although Dickensian echoes are evident in *The Quincunx*, Palliser steers clear of the mere “imitation” that he had feared. Instead, these echoes make the reader aware of how the thoughts, actions, and destinies of Dickens’s characters might appear if seen through a more ‘realistic’ and less hopeful lens. In fact, J. Hillis Miller observes of *The Quincunx* that it offers

almost no good people, no guarantee that justice will eventually be done, nothing, for the most part, but uncertainty and prolonged suffering. It is as though Palliser were saying: “Let me show you what things were really like at that time”. (Miller 2004: 147)

While it does offer a vision of some good mothers, their maternal goodness is powerless to ‘save’ the hero, who must in the end make his own way and his own decisions, without the maternal and paternal guidance available to David Copperfield, Nicholas Nickleby, *Oliver Twist*, and other Dickensian sons.

As mentioned earlier, Humpherys coined the term “aftering”, which she uses “to describe the ‘writing over’ of Victorian novels that has been such a distinctive part of the late twentieth-century literary scene” (Humpherys 2005: 442). In terms of *The Quincunx*, the reader may well ask just what of Dickens’s body of work has been “written over”. How do Palliser’s mothers and mother surrogates prompt a return to Dickens’s texts? What is present in *The Quincunx* and absent or hidden in Dickens’s novels? Again, one may find Humpherys’s exegesis useful, in that she suggests that an analysis of “aftering” involves a simultaneous, dual interpretation of both the original text (or “pretext”) and its “aftertext”, resulting in an ironic relationship between the two: “it brings to light a reality different from the appearance [...] and usually results in a *critique* of the pretext” (Humpherys 2005: 445; original emphasis). This idea is shared by J. Hillis Miller in his reading of *The Quincunx* as a “revisionary critique” that “shows Victorian novelistic conventions as conventions, as one way to tell a story among others, rather than as natural and universal, as they may have seemed to 19th-century readers” (Miller 2004: 146). Palliser himself has said that he had early on envisioned his novel as a pastiche, which he later saw as

“grotesque” and “a kind of defamiliarization of Dickens” (Palliser qtd. in Madrigal 1991: 3). He wanted readers to come to the novel with the expectation of a Dickensian “good read”, only to have their expectations fulfilled and subverted at the same time (Palliser qtd. in Madrigal 1991: 3). Maria Theresa Chialant identifies both pastiche and parody in *The Quincunx*, terms for which she is indebted to Gérard Genette’s work on paratextuality (see Chialant 2011: 42). In writing that “there is no literary work that does not evoke [...] some other literary work, and in that sense all works are hypertextual”, Genette points to pastiche as a form of imitation or indirect transformation (hence Palliser’s “imitation” of the style and plotting of Dickens), and to parody as intending to “refresh” our vision of the ‘pretext’ (Genette 1997: 9, 27, 13). Neo-Victorian fiction then, in the words of Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, must “in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4; original emphasis). One significant area in which this (re)vision takes place is in relation to those figures and concerns that may have remained in the background of the Victorian novel (Widdowson 2000; Louttit 2006; Llewellyn 2008; Carroll 2010; Yates 2009/2010). Many of the echoes that are apparent to late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century readers of *The Quincunx* are related to Victorian domesticity and the active or passive influence of the mother.

One such appearance common to much Victorian fiction, as well as to Victorian domestic instruction literature, is the so-called ‘Angel in the House’ (Langland 1992: 290; Golden 2010: 6). However, Palliser’s novel reminds us that the feet of the Dickensian angel are distinctly made of clay. Early on in the novel, John’s description of his mother, sympathetically sharing in one of his childish upsets, is reminiscent of David Copperfield’s remembrance of his own mother; John calls up

the cascade of fair curls that flowed over her shoulders and down to her bosom so that when I snuggled up against her my hands and face were plunged in among the soft scentedness; the sweet face with its gentle mouth; and the wide blue eyes that were bright now with tears for my own grief. (Palliser 1989: 8)

Mary Mellamphy's sympathy is for the grief brought on by the harsh treatment of John by his God-fearing nurse, Mrs. Bissett. However, her tears are just as futile as those of Clara Murdstone faced with the corrective presence of her sister-in-law, Jane Murdstone. As Elizabeth Langland points out, one task of the Victorian "domestic angel" is to make a fortress of the home; nevertheless, frequently within that fortress is staged "the ideological conflict between the domestic angel in the house and her other (the worker or servant)" (Langland 1992: 291). Mary Mellamphy's bowing to the control of her servant Bissett is reminiscent of Clara's submission to Jane, who, while not Clara's servant, assumes the role of the enforcer of her brother's rule over the Murdstone household. Even previous to her marriage to Edward, however, we are shown that another Clara – Clara Peggotty – is the actual domestic force in the Copperfield household, a fact which Clara Copperfield recognises when she complains of Peggotty's criticism of her alliance with Murdstone: "Was ever any poor girl so ill-used by her servants as I am!" (Dickens 1948: 18). As Brenda Ayres remarks, in the Copperfield household,

Clara Peggotty provided the mothering, and Clara Copperfield the dancing [...]. In this particular household, two women bore the same first name: one was the domestic and the other was not and would never be, regardless of a husband's discipline. (Ayres 1998: 17)

Unlike Bissett's duplicitous exploitation of her position, however, Peggotty's rule is open and benign. In fact, she assumes the role of 'mother' to the motherless Clara Copperfield, as well as to Clara's own son.

Langland also reminds us that the "regulatory presence" of the angel in the house "is symbolized in Victorian novels by housekeeping keys" (Langland 1992: 295). Clara's submission is signalled by her surrendering of her keys to her sister-in-law; Agnes Wickfield, even as a child, proudly carries her little basket of keys that signals her role as keeper of her father's home; later, Dora Copperfield plays childishly with her household keys. In the case of Mary Mellamphy, instead of the household keys at her waist, she keeps a locked silver box, wherein she protects the codicil that she believes will ensure her future and that of her son. In doing so, she has already given up control of the household to her servants. Both Clara Copperfield and

Mary Mellamphy, then, have abdicated their role as household regulator – Clara by ceding power to the domestic dragon Jane, and Mary by putting the prospect of future wealth in the place of present domestic comforts and security. In both cases, the precarious financial position of widowed mothers of the lower middle class is illustrated.

David Copperfield is notable for its presentation of two other domestic angels, Dora and Agnes, both of whom, like Mary Mellamphy, are flawed, the first because of her inability to move beyond being a “child-wife”, the second because of her iconic stained-glass unreality (Golden 2010: 6) as “wife-child”, in the words of Leonard Manheim, to both her father and David (Manheim 1965: 189). Indeed, Langland remarks that “Dickens is one of the few authors [of his time] to depict the household angel amid domestic chaos” (Langland 1992: 298). Dora’s domestic chaos is a product of her own absent mothering. Raised by a father to be childishly picturesque, she has no notion of how to manage a household. Hence she is unsuited for the role of mother herself and conveniently dies soon after her marriage to David, surrendering her role to the “wife-child” Agnes Wickfield. Agnes, too, has been raised without a mother. Her role, however, has been to supply that role platonically to her father (although her father’s substitution of Agnes for her deceased mother seems, to a modern reader at least, as bordering on the incestuous). Like *Our Mutual Friend*’s Jenny Wren, she reverses the parent-child relationship, mothering her grieving and increasingly incompetent father. Nevertheless, the limitations of her mothering are evident in her inability to alert her father to or to fight off the ambitions of her father’s clerk, Uriah Heep, towards her father’s practice and towards herself. It is significant that David recurs to an image of “tranquil brightness” when he refers to Agnes (Dickens 1948: 212). Like the stained-glass icon to which David so frequently compares her, her power is symbolic, not real, passive rather than active. So, too, in *The Quincunx*, John remembers his first view of his childhood love, Henrietta Palphramond, yet in the case of Henrietta, what he sees is spectral, full of foreboding, rather than angelic:

Her face was very pale – so pale that I wondered if she had been ill – so that her dark eyes looked all the darker. She held her hands inside a muff she carried in front of her, and a

strange, solemn little figure she made altogether. (Palliser 1989: 45).

The quiet pallor of Henrietta, however, unlike the tranquil brightness of Agnes, foreshadows John's rejection of Henrietta, when she is about to become a mother, at the end of the novel. Agnes's absent mothering has not damaged her; indeed, in the unrealistic psychology that Palliser identifies in Dickens's novels, it has strengthened her maternal instincts. Henrietta, on the other hand, appears to John as a victim of both nature and nurture. The legacy of Mellamphy madness, combined with her being raised as a family 'hanger-on', dooms her at the end of the novel to wandering the corridors of the ruined family mansion.

Like Dora, the motherless Mary Mellamphy was raised by a doting father. In his 'Author's Afterword' to the second edition of *The Quincunx*, in fact, Palliser hints at a possible incestuous relationship between Mary and her father (Palliser 1990: 1205). Unlike Spenlow or Wickham, however, John Huffam has fed his daughter neither on extravagant indulgence nor on memories of the long-dead mother, but on dreams of future wealth. His obsession with the codicil to the Huffam will is passed on to his daughter. Even when faced with personal danger, her first thought is of the document (see Palliser 1989: 21). The harm that John Huffam has done to his daughter is remarked on by his grandson:

I thought of my mother's unhappy, wasted life. She had been too trusting but, more than that, she had had no purpose, no design, and had believed too much in luck. Her love for others had made her vulnerable. All this had made her a victim, merely drifting through a life that had no meaning towards a meaningless end. (Palliser 1989: 446-447)

Clara and Dora, as well, have "no purpose, no design" in their lives, other than to serve as domestic pupils (especially in the case of Clara) or as decorative playthings (in the case of Dora) to the men in their lives. Hence, just as the trusting Mary Mellamphy is victimised by the nurse and later housekeeper Bissett, so too is Clara sacrificed to the tutelage of the Murdstones and the newly married Dora to her own servants. However, while Dora's vagaries are presented by the now older David with both sad

nostalgia and a touch of humour, the “unhappy, wasted [lives]” of Clara and Mary hold a darker significance, for both serve as catalysts for the narrative that follows. David becomes an orphan early on, through the actions of his mother in marrying Murdstone and bearing his child. For John, even a few pages into Palliser’s novel, the idea of orphanhood is appealing. Upon meeting the orphaned Henrietta, he comments, “An orphan? Here was an interesting word and I felt envious of her right to it. Then I supposed I was at least halfway towards being an orphan too” (Palliser 1989: 45). Ironically, John is figuratively orphaned even while his mother is alive, as he increasingly takes on the role of parent to the “weak and foolish” Mary Mellamphy (Palliser 1989: 96). As he watches his mother take delight in making the negus to which, along with laudanum, she becomes increasingly addicted, he remarks that “I feared that she had not yet realized how difficult things were going to be for us and I felt oddly as if I were older than she” (Palliser 1989: 155). Such Dickensian heroes as Nicholas Nickleby and David Copperfield smile more indulgently than does John Mellamphy upon the vagaries of their “weak and foolish mothers”; more frequently, it is daughters such as Agnes Wickfield, Jenny Wren, Lizzie Hexam, and Pleasant Riderhood who take on the parental role in caring for their fathers. Not even Jenny Wren, however, matches the filial hostility the reader hears in John’s voice.

Inseparable from the childlike wife and mother, of course, is the forced assumption of the role of parent on the part of the child. As Vereen Bell reminds us, in *David Copperfield*, “David has a child mother [...] ultimately he takes a child bride. Some disaster overtakes [them]; they are not fit for the world” (Bell 1968: 639). While they are in this world, these women require that David act the adult role while still a child himself, either in years or in emotional maturity. The novel even opens with David’s impending birth and his mother’s (and Betsey Trotwood’s) predictive reference to her childlike nature. Clara feared that “she was but a childish widow, and would be a childish mother if she lived”, and Betsey refers to her as a “Baby” (Dickens 1948: 5, 6). Upon his mother’s marriage to Murdstone, David is first sent away to one of the notorious Yorkshire schools, where he assumes the maternal role of telling stories to his fellow students at bedtime. Later, after the death of his mother and his leaving Salem House school, he is thrust into the adult world as an employee of Murdstone’s wine-bottling warehouse. Clara Copperfield Murdstone is

preserved in her childishness by her very death, and this is how David remembers her as he recalls some of his “earliest impressions” of life with his mother and Peggotty “playing in the winter twilight, dancing about the parlour” (Dickens 1948: 15). As Bell observes,

David’s childhood with his beautiful mother is blissful because his mother is a child like himself; for David there is no essential difference between them, between what they both know and expect of life. They have nothing to do but choose among simple pleasures. (Bell 1968: 639)

In fact, David comments that they “were both a little afraid of Peggotty, and submitted [themselves] in most things to her direction” (Dickens 1948: 15). Similarly, both Mary Mellamphy and her son are “a little afraid” of Mrs. Bissett; conscious of Bissett’s warnings that her indulgence will “mar him”, Mary colludes with John to avoid Bissett’s scoldings: “Yet I knew it was true for my mother had promised me it was, but before I could say so she laid her hand to her mouth unseen by Bissett and I consented to hold my peace” (Palliser 1989: 6). It is Peggotty who assumes the role of maternal carer for both the child mother Clara and her child, so that Clara Copperfield Murdstone remains in David’s memory as the carefree young girl of his earliest childhood. Hence, it is not surprising that her memory recurs in the figure of Dora Spenlow, who also dies, this time so that David can cast off the role of ‘father husband’.

A darker side to the reversal of the roles of mother and child is portrayed in Palliser’s novel, and, rather than repeatedly referring to “my poor mother”, as does David, John gives vent to his frustration with his mother’s naïveté: “My mother’s face was before me as I pounded the pillow. It was true what I had said, that I hated her” (Palliser 1989: 61). From the beginning, Mary’s fears hold her back from creating the thoroughly blissful childhood for her son that David Copperfield has revived and retained in his memory, and by living long enough to embroil her son in the results of her rashness, she forfeits the untarnished memory that John might have had of their early life together. At the end of the novel, John recalls the “lies and inconsistencies and distortions and omissions” that have characterised the stories that he has been told about his family history – and he attributes their perpetuation mainly to the women of the novel

(Palliser 1989: 773). This is not a failing that he has only recently discovered in his mother, however; less than one hundred pages into his narrative, he sobbingly asks himself, upon learning of his mother's risking their small living allowance,

Why did she do such things? Why was she so rash? And to have hidden her actions from me was so underhand. I vowed that I really would stop loving her from now on. She was weak and foolish and from now on I would be strong and cold towards her. (Palliser 1989: 96)

This 'coldness' never completely disappears, even as John lovingly forgives his mother, as he increasingly has to make decisions as the head of the household to counteract his mother's hasty, naïve trustingness. So might David Copperfield have remarked of the singular example of Clara Copperfield's own 'underhandedness', that of keeping hidden her intended marriage to Mr. Murdstone while sending David on a visit to the home of his nurse, Clara Peggotty. Dickens fails, however, to tell the reader of any sense of betrayal on the part of his child hero. Unlike Clara Copperfield, whose early death preserves her in childish innocence, Mary Mellamphy continues to complicate her son's life even after her death in the latter part of the novel. By giving the reader access to John's mixed emotions of both love and frustration, Palliser re-appropriates Dickens's abandoned boy hero and offers a more complex filial response. Palliser has explained that his intention was to "obey the conventions of the Victorian novel" (Palliser qtd. in Cassidy 1990), and at the same time to allow readers to discover "the chronological gap between us and the nineteenth-century novel" (Palliser qtd. in Omega 1993: 282). One feature of that gap is the awareness of the lasting and potentially damaging effect of flawed parenting.

At least in their aura of virginal purity, both Clara Copperfield and Mary Mellamphy are portrayed as flawless, even in the minds of their disappointed sons, existing in an unsullied state they share with many of Dickens's heroines, both married and single. In the case of Mary Mellamphy, however, the complication of identifying John's true father has led, in Palliser's words, to what he calls a "hidden narrative" of potential illegitimacy (Palliser 1990: 1203), as well as to a possible "hideous" interpretation striking "at the heart of Victorian family values and which

would certainly have shattered the conventions of the nineteenth-century novel far more devastatingly than what I had in fact devised” (Palliser 1990: 1205), namely, the suggestion of incest. Such potential readings are indeed far from those of Palliser’s Dickensian models. Given that Clara and Mary are biological mothers, of course, true virginity is not possible. However, as Manheim reminds us, “David, the child whose father has died before he is born, is as close to the produce of a virgin birth as modern literature will allow” (Manheim 1965: 187). Furthermore, Clara is not allowed to live when she gives birth a second time, thus providing further evidence of her lost ‘virginity’ to Murdstone in a marriage that could be interpreted as legalised prostitution, as will be discussed below. Palliser complicates this notion of the assumed purity of the domestic angel by throwing into question the identity of John’s father. John, too, is virtually fatherless and ignorant of the fate of his mother’s husband, who is at least his legal father. A stain upon Mary Mellamphy’s ‘virginity’, however, lies first in the suspicion that it was Martin Fortisquince, not her husband Peter Clothier, who fathered her child.¹ In fact, it would seem that Mary’s marriage was not consummated, since immediately after her hasty wedding, she and Peter travelled to Hertford from where Peter immediately returned to London when he discovered a bundle of bloodstained banknotes in the package given to him by Mary’s father; in London, he was arrested for the murder of Mary’s father and was never again reunited with his bride.

Both David and John, however, are given more capable mother surrogates. Both Arthur Adrian and Eileen Gillooly remark on the inadequacy of biological parenting and the use of substitute parents in Dickens’s novels (Adrian 1984: 96; Gillooly 2009: 209). For David, there is another Clara, the nurse Clara Peggotty, mother to both Clara Copperfield and to David himself. Later, he is provided with the ‘fairy godmother’ Betsey Trotwood, who, Manheim suggests, like the fairy-tale figure, “fulfils both requirements [of good and bad mothering] by attending the birth of the hero, taking offense and abandoning him, and then returning after a long interval to grant him his ‘three wishes’” (Manheim 1965: 187). Upon reaching adulthood, as mentioned previously, David must himself play the part of father to his “child-wife” Dora, and it is not until his marriage to the unrealistic Agnes that he is again provided with a mother-wife. However, one may be tempted to place Agnes herself within Manheim’s category of

girls who never age, never reach maturity (nor maternity either, no matter how many fictitious children may be ascribed to them in the final chapter of a novel), never violate the canons of the persistent regressive idea which obsesses the author's unconscious strivings. (Manheim 1965: 181)

Agnes has not grown – she is the same as a mother-wife to David as she was when a wife-child to Mr. Wickham. We might speculate that, in giving the reader these variations on the theme of 'virginal' wifedom and motherhood Dickens is seeking to exorcise his still powerful childhood discontent with his own mother. Palliser, in contrast, in creating Mary Mellamphy, has created a mother whose lack of maturity has made her a victim both of the men in her life and of those who pretend to be potential surrogate mothers.

John Mellamphy, too, has his share of mother substitutes, beginning with the vinegary nurse Mrs. Bissett. The latter, however, unlike both the unfailingly maternal Peggotty and the unremittingly grim Jane Murdstone, is a more complex character. While it is indeed Bissett who has imbued John's childhood with the dictum that "if I was good I would go to Heaven for ever and ever and if I was bad I would go to Hell", and who urges his mother to discipline his "malpertness" (Palliser 1989: 29, 6), Bissett's harshness, and her eventual betrayal, are tempered by her genuine, if misplaced, concern for John and his mother. This complex character is reflected in John's early memory of her "as a crisp, slightly astringent aroma of starched apron and gown, a faintly apple-like smell, fresh and a little forbidding", her thin lips giving "the impression, without compromising themselves, of going up a little at the ends" in her rare smiles (Palliser 1989: 7-8). When compared to David's memory of his beloved Peggotty, this description is both more faceted and less sentimental. While she scolds John as a "wicked creatur [sic]" (Palliser 1989: 6), Bissett is not an unremittingly critical Miss Murdstone, a fact which John seems to recognise when it is Bissett's starched bosom, rather than that of his helpless child-mother, to which he flees early on in the novel when frightened by a cow. Indeed, it is the cook Mrs. Belflower who most closely resembles Clara Peggotty, both in her ample size and in her benign presence in the household. She too, however, is powerless against the more forceful Bissett, just as Peggotty is forced out by Miss Murdstone. John seems to be hinting at this inherent weakness when he describes the cook with a slight Dickensian echo in his

turn of phrase: “She had a kindly face as plump and pale as one of her own puddings wrapped in muslin, and rather vague blue eyes that didn’t quite meet your gaze” (Palliser 1989: 13). Like Peggotty, she is the conveyer of bedtime stories to the child John, but her stories, unlike those of Peggotty, are chilling versions of John’s own family history, although both he and Mrs. Belflower are at the time unaware of their relevance.

Mary Mellamphy’s ineffective mothering is partly compensated for, then, by both Bissett and Belflower, and later by the maid Sukey, their mothering styles constantly in conflict. The influence of Mrs. Belflower and of Sukey, however, is limited, while Bissett remains to play a role in Mary Mellamphy’s downfall. As a child, John delights in playing off the cook against the housekeeper, as well as the housekeeper against his mother, and he learns from Sukey the benefits of occasional untruths and keeping them from his mother. Later, although both Sukey and Mrs. Digweed offer him aid and protection, he is quick to put them behind him as he rises in the world, unlike David Copperfield, who finds room for Peggotty and her family even in his success at the end of the novel. By presenting this more faceted approach to the relationship between the ‘mothering’ and the ‘mothered’, Palliser accomplishes his intention of “[letting] the reader work out the implications of the prejudices and class assumptions” of the Victorian novel (Palliser qtd. in Onega 1993: 282). The progress of John Mellamphy, unlike the progress of David Copperfield, necessitates a distancing from working-class family ties.

Although conflicts between potential mother figures are more common in *The Quincunx*, a state of warfare also exists between Peggotty and Jane Murdstone, and this conflict ends, as it does in the Mellamphy home, with the banishment of the weaker – because kinder – maternal figure. In both cases, an at least temporary absence of mothering is needed for the narrative progression. Without the mitigating advocacy of Peggotty, David’s relegation to the bottling warehouse is more easily effected. Similarly, in Palliser’s novel, once Mrs. Belflower (and later the servant Sukey) are removed from the scene, Bissett assumes more of the household responsibilities, collaborating with Mary Mellamphy’s ‘enemies’ and eventually facilitating her financial ruin.

Since *Jane Eyre* (1847), the figure of the lowly and lonely governess destined to rise through marriage has assumed a significant role in modern re-visions of nineteenth-century fiction. Palliser gives us Helen Quilliam,

one-time governess to the orphan Henrietta Palphramond, who assumes the role of mother to both John and to his Mary. John's first description of Helen Quilliam reveals his admiration for her, as well as her difference from his mother, her sober dress and facial features conveying "an impression of gravity nicely balanced with playfulness and wit" (Palliser 1989: 109). His memory of the mature thoughtfulness of Miss Quilliam is a touchstone for John when he and his mother flee to London, until he finally convinces his mother to seek help from the former governess. In fact, Mary's reluctance to admit Miss Quilliam into their household troubles may betray a sense that her own maternal hold is slowly disintegrating. Helen Quilliam, however, is a mother surrogate with her own secrets and malign influence. At first, she strikes John as being able to relieve his shameful burden of parenting his mother:

‘My dear, you are safe now, you are quite safe,’ Miss Quilliam said, quite as if she were the elder, looking at me with concern over my mother's shoulder. I was divided between pride in having such an acquaintance and shame on my mother's behalf. (Palliser 1989: 210).

Miss Quilliam's story, however, is not the fairy-tale romance of Jane Eyre and her Rochester, nor the somewhat amusing though frustrating anecdote of Kate Nickleby's foray into the schoolroom, but the more common one of being forced into employment as a governess by the importunate marriage of her parents and her later orphanhood, and then her subsequent dismissal from her post when an attempted seduction by the son of the manor is discovered. While John idealises the idea of Helen Quilliam as a potential 'saviour' and mitigating influence against his mother's dangerous naïveté, she initially displays reluctance to provide a home and a chance at employment for John and his mother. At the same time, she soon converts Mary Mellamphy to her own recourse to the 'black drop' as a means of enduring their hard lives. It is also Miss Quilliam who is responsible for Mary's introduction to the procuress Mrs. Purviance and to her subsequent short life as a prostitute.

In Miss Quilliam and in Mary Mellamphy, Palliser has portrayed the more probable outcome of the female descent into poverty. While Clara Copperfield is saved by her marriage to Murdstone, and Dora by marriage to

David, a more likely scenario is that which awaits both Helen Quilliam and the child-mother she attempts to rescue – the fate of Emily Peggotty and of Martha Endell. However, Dickens's prostitutes, while punished, are by and large eventually rescued through banishment. Taken to Australia by Daniel Peggotty, both Emily and Martha repent; however, Emily, perhaps because she has assumed a greater importance for David and hence her sin is greater, is denied marriage, while Martha eventually marries a farm labourer. Palliser is not so kind to his fallen women. Saints or sinners, they die in sordid circumstances, as does John's mother, or continue to ply their trade abroad, a fate hinted at in the hero's last words concerning Helen Quilliam and apparently Henrietta Palphramond also:

It appears that about a twelvemonth after the meeting just described, her [Helen's] situation improved considerably when she was re-united for a few months with a younger woman who was an acquaintance from earlier and happier days and who had herself fallen into unfortunate circumstances and was consequently encumbered. They shared lodgings in Holborn and I understand that for a while they maintained themselves by their needles. Then the little household suffered the sad loss of one (the youngest) of its number and sank under this blow. Helen was lost from sight and her companion as well – though I have been informed that the latter went to France and was last heard of in Calais. (Palliser 1989: 713)

Given that the procuress Mrs. Purviance had wanted to send John's mother to France, it is most likely that Henrietta (and perhaps also Helen Quilliam) have supplied her place, for John tells us at the close of his narrative what little he knows of the fate of his childhood love; he links her fate to that of Miss Quilliam, stating that in knowing of Helen Quilliam's story, "you have heard as much as I know of her later life" (Palliser 1989: 780). Palliser also reminds us that rescue through marriage, through a kindly benefactor, or through a newly returned or enriched brother, from the fate that threatened impoverished Victorian women was for most an unreal outcome. More likely was a fall from virtue, disease, and eventual death in the workhouse, in Newgate, or on the streets.

A kinder outcome, perhaps, was that which Clara Copperfield chooses – a loveless marriage, or legal prostitution. Dickens betrays his awareness of the nature of the Murdstone's marriage when he has young David overhear a conversation between his mother and Peggotty regarding Edward Murdstone's courtship. In response to Peggotty's concerns, Clara quickly revises her description of herself as a "girl" to ask "Have I never been married, Peggotty?" and to imply that her choice of Murdstone is at least partly based on her having not "a single friend to turn to" (Dickens 1948: 18-19). This conversation reveals not only that Clara regards herself as still a "girl", needing to remind herself that she has been married, but that both are aware of the basis of the forthcoming marriage – that Clara is without "a single friend to turn to" for the means to support herself and her family, and that the 'price' of such support is marriage to Murdstone. It is Peggotty who is able to put this transaction into its proper perspective: "No price could make it do. No!" (Dickens 1948: 19). Palliser's novel more openly treats the commodification of women in the marriage market, as not only is Mary first intended by her father to be the bride of Daniel Clothier, Peter's brother, but Henrietta too is to be sacrificed to one or the other of the Mompesson sons in order to secure the family fortune. Her elderly cousin Lydia Mompesson recounts a female family history of arranged and aborted marriages, all in the name of financial gain. In fact, Mary's own father, John Huffam, may have been Lydia Mompesson's son, taken from her at birth and given to the childless James and Eliza Huffam. Similarly, Anna Mompesson 'loses' a child, who she is told has died, and subsequently descends into madness. Deprived of their children, Palliser's mothers, unlike Dickens's, do not die gracefully, but live at least long enough to trouble the purity of the family line.

While Dickens's heroines, with a few exceptions, are generally saved from a life on the streets through fortuitous and financially beneficial love-matches, Palliser shows us the more sordid aspect of the marriage exchange and its effects on mothering. Those who resist the arranged loveless marriage in Dickens's novels are ultimately rewarded with marriage to the beloved. In Palliser's work, such resistance more frequently results in lonely old age as a family 'hanger-on' or in insanity. In addition, most Dickensian fallen women have fallen through unfortunate choices, rather than through economic necessity, although once fallen, they find it difficult to escape. Of Martha Endell, described as somewhat flighty and

seen by Daniel Peggotty as a bad influence on Emily, such an outcome was not unexpected. Emily's head is turned by the blandishments of Steerforth, and once seduced, her fate is sealed. In both the 'pretext' and Palliser's 'aftertext', however, an unattached woman, whether widowed or a spinster, has little recourse other than to sell herself through marriage or more illicit sexual exchanges, as observed by Brenda Ayres:

Ironically women are to prevent other women from becoming prostitutes to men when none of the women has the financial or legal means to survive without the trade of their sexuality or gender identities for economic sustenance. (Ayres 1998: 133)

Hence the Huffam codicil represents the possibility of avoiding such a sexual exchange for Mary Mellamphy, a fate which she is, however, unable to escape. Her ability to mother her son, like that of Clara Copperfield, is sacrificed on the altar of economic necessity. It is economic necessity that leads her to invest more and more of her funds in land schemes designed by her enemies to bankrupt her; that brings her to London where she falls under the influence of negus and laudanum; that leads her to a debtor's prison; and that causes her to fall into prostitution.

Neither Clara Copperfield Murdstone nor Emily is given the opportunity to tell her own story in Dickens's text. What little we know of their pasts and of how these pasts have shaped their present is given us in the words of the narrator – Clara's son. One might well ask with Brenda Ayres, "Where are the stories of the women in *David Copperfield*?" and concur with her reading of the "many gaps in the narrative about them" as "signal[ing] the lack of power that women had to make their own place in the novel, in a relationship, or in society" (Ayres 1998: 31) – this despite the fact that Dickens has created a wealth of female characters, many of them mothers. With few exceptions, however, it is the male narrators who tell the women's stories, and these narrators are prone either to idealise the innocence or to condemn the vagaries of the women in their lives. Hence, they have the ultimate power to narrate their mothers', sisters', and spouses' lives, and holes in the narrative are inevitable. Palliser's novel attempts to fill some of those gaps. As the title suggests, the notion of the number five plays a significant part in the text, not only in the search for the solution of

the quincunx itself, but also in the novel's five-part structure and in its shifting narrative mode. Although Palliser gives us three main narrators – John, Silverlight, and Pentecost – he interrupts their narratives to insert the lengthy self-told tales of both Mary Mellamphy and Helen Quilliam, whose voices signify their attempts to reclaim control over their own stories, a female control which the Dickensian text denies. Mary's power over her own story is so complete that she can decide what to reveal and what to keep hidden, going so far as to destroy the section of her chronicle disclosing the name of John's father. Palliser's re-vision of the Dickensian maternal thus subverts what Palliser sees as the Dickensian 'tying up of loose ends', one in which true parentage is revealed. In his 1990 interview with Suzanne Cassidy, Palliser compared his novel with its Victorian counterpart, where

there would be a chapter at the end devoted to righting all of the wrongs. I thought to right all of the wrongs would be too glib. I thought it would be better to lull the reader into thinking that is the way it would work, but then not to do that. (Palliser qtd. in Cassidy 1990)

Instead, Palliser leaves the reader (and John himself) uncertain not only of the identity of John's biological father, but also of his intention to pursue his inheritance.

As suggested at the beginning of this essay, Humpherys's term of "aftering" is a useful descriptor for the role that texts like *The Quincunx* play in relation to Dickens's novels, and one may be tempted to see these neo-Victorian novels as merely riding on the coat-tails of their more famous predecessors. For example, Christian Gutleben in his study *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, labels such novels as Palliser's "retro-Victorian fiction", deeming them more often to offer a "response to fashion" than to some ideological or imaginative purpose (Gutleben 2001: 11, 37). In this respect, Julie Sanders's work on adaptation is useful: according to Sanders,

'After' need not [...] mean belated in a purely negative sense. Coming 'after' can mean finding new angles and new routes into something, new perspectives on the familiar, and

these new angles, routes, and perspectives in turn identify entirely novel possibilities. (Sanders 2006: 158)

The mothers and mother figures of Palliser's *The Quincunx* provide intriguing "angles" and "perspectives" on their Dickensian counterparts. By allowing his women to recount their own stories – not only Mary Mellamphy and Helen Quilliam, but also Henrietta Palphramond and her Aunt Lydia have tales to tell – and by foregrounding their mothering and their being mothered, Palliser makes it impossible to read Dickens with the same innocence. Such is one of the effects of neo-Victorian fiction on its 'pretexts'. Palliser's mothers and mother surrogates serve as reminders of what the reader may have overlooked in the Dickensian text: the mother raised and married as a playful innocent, then expected to wear the halo of the angel in the house; the child thrust into the role of parent to the wayward mother; and the power of financial need to change the female path from that of mother to moll, from domesticity to corruption.

Just as *David Copperfield* begins with the hero's 'memory' of his own birth and of his child-mother, so at the end of Palliser's novel the reader is left with a vision of another 'childish widow', herself most likely pregnant with the child of her aborted marriage to Henry Bellringer, a descendant of the mad Anna Mompesson. Palliser precedes each of the five parts of his novel with a family tree, underlining the importance of family and of inheritance in the plotting of John's story. Unlike Dickens's accounts of mothers and children, where each family grouping is isolated in its dysfunction and in the effects of the latter, Palliser's complex plot traces the legacy of failed and absent mothering through several generations. One aspect of this legacy is the spectre of insanity that in the end causes John to break the cycle in walking away from Henrietta. In her own madness, Henrietta echoes Miss Havisham wandering the rooms of her mansion in her tattered wedding dress; Henrietta's dress, "the one she had been wearing the last time I had seen her," is let out and mended, her hair is loose, her face pale and haggard, and John reveals that he has decided that he cannot marry her, lest "if I were to regain the Huffam estate, it should be inherited by anyone tainted with Mompesson blood" (Palliser 1989: 779-780). Like Mary Mellamphy, Henrietta has been married and widowed on the same day – the last time John had seen her – although Mary's widowhood was a figurative one.² Like both Mary Mellamphy and Clara Copperfield, at the

time of her widowhood Henrietta is a mother in waiting. However, unlike both Mary and Clara, she will not be allowed even a temporarily idyllic period of motherhood. As mentioned earlier, John tells us that “she disappeared shortly after this” and implies that she shared in the fate of the fallen Helen Quilliam (Palliser 1989: 780). Henrietta the mother-to-be thus becomes an absence in John’s narrative; “encumbered”, she enters Miss Quilliam’s household, where the death of the youngest member of the household (presumably Henrietta’s infant) soon after contributes to a further deepening of her madness (Palliser 1989: 713).

María Alfaro has commented that “what *The Quincunx* illustrates is the fact that literary creation involves both making something up and making it up out of previously existing materials”, a dialectic which she describes as “central to postmodernist literature as a whole” (Alfaro 1997: 1). In revisiting and revising Victorian motherhood in his novel, Palliser has brought to bear not only his strenuous research into the period, but also his appreciation – and critique – of the Dickensian achievement. The reader of *The Quincunx* returns to Dickens with a new appreciation of his mothers, of his mother surrogates, and of how flawed and absent mothering affected his heroes, Dickens’s ‘hidden narratives’ having been brought to light.

Notes

1. Fortisquince signs the record of birth “father and godfather”, among other clues, and when John asks if a miniature portrait of Clothier is that of his father, Mary responds with evasion: “[she] lowered her eyes and said softly: ‘The likenesses were taken a few days before we were married’” (Palliser 1989: 6).
2. Mary’s husband, Peter Clothier, accused of the murder of her father, has been committed by his family to a lunatic asylum, although Mary leads her son, John, to believe that her husband (and his assumed father) is dead.

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