

Cambridge University Press

0521573556 - Dickens and the Politics of the Family - Catherine Waters

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: the making and
breaking of the family

‘THE SKELETON IN MY DOMESTIC CLOSET’

Writing from Paris in 1856, where he was attempting to assuage his chronic restlessness with travel, Dickens confided his marital unhappiness in a letter to John Forster. The comment is thoroughly characteristic in its perverse animation of the inanimate: ‘I find that the skeleton in my domestic closet is becoming a pretty big one.’¹ At the time when Dickens made this allusion to the dreadful secret lurking within his home, he could hardly have anticipated the public scandal that would attend his separation from Catherine two years later. As his friend Percy Fitzgerald wrote afterwards, ‘Who . . . could have conceived or prophesied that in the year of grace 1858 the whole fabric should have begun to totter . . . Who could have fancied that . . . so disturbing a revelation of his domestic life should have been abruptly placed before the astonished public?’²

The growth of speculation and innuendo concerning the break-up of his marriage prompted Dickens to attempt a public repudiation of these increasingly prurient narratives. On 12 June 1858, habitual readers of *Household Words* were amazed to find a proclamation on the front page announcing the editor’s separation from his wife, and attempting to controvert rumours about the differences which had occasioned it. Dickens addressed himself to the public under the heading ‘PERSONAL’:

Some domestic trouble of mine, of long-standing, on which I will make no further remark than that it claims to be respected, as being of a sacredly private nature, has lately been brought to an arrangement, which involves no anger or ill-will of any kind, and the whole origin, progress, and surrounding circumstances of which have been, throughout, within the knowledge of my children. It is amicably composed, and its details have now but to be forgotten by those concerned in it . . .

By some means, arising out of wickedness, or out of folly, or out of inconceivable wild chance, or out of all three, this trouble has been made the occasion of misrepresentations, most grossly false, most monstrous, and most

cruel – involving, not only me, but innocent persons dear to my heart, and innocent persons of whom I have no knowledge, if indeed, they have any existence – and so widely spread, that I doubt if one reader in a thousand will peruse these lines, by whom some touch of the breath of these slanders will not have passed, like an unwholesome air.³

The simile of pollution recalls the imagery of disease spread by noxious winds, so prevalent in *Bleak House*, and indicates the strength and vehemence of Dickens's indignation. But according to Fitzgerald, the belief that all his readers had heard of some slander concerning his domestic trouble was a 'delusion' on Dickens's part: 'People were all but bewildered and almost stunned, so unexpected was the revelation. Everyone was for the most part in supreme ignorance of what the document could possibly refer to.'⁴ As a result, Dickens's declared wish in writing this document to 'circulate the Truth' was overshadowed by the titillating revelation made to otherwise uninformed people that the man held to be (in the words of one contemporary reviewer) 'so peculiarly a writer of home life, a delineator of household gods',⁵ was embroiled in a domestic scandal.

This episode has traditionally been a focus for discussion in biographical studies of Dickens, where it is commonly interpreted as a climax in the sequence of events leading up to the end of his marriage. Edgar Johnson describes Dickens's publication of his 'PERSONAL' statement as 'the maddest step he had yet made in his unhappy and hysterical state';⁶ Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie conclude that 'Dickens had lost control of himself, and in his fury and anxiety he continued to draw unwelcome attention to his domestic scandal';⁷ and Fred Kaplan observes that Dickens 'felt frantic with being attacked by forces that he could not control, as if he were under siege or being held hostage to ignorance and maliciousness'.⁸

These twentieth-century efforts to explain Dickens's behaviour follow the accounts of his contemporaries. According to Forster, Dickens was moved to take this measure because it had become impossible for him to continue his public readings with his name 'so aspersed'.⁹ Edmund Yates attributed his action to 'a certain bias in the direction of theatrical ostentation' and to the prominence he gave 'in his thoughts to the link which bound him to the public'.¹⁰ What all of these commentaries upon this most notorious episode share is a concern to explain the traits of character supposedly driving Dickens's extraordinary behaviour, a concern to establish the 'truth' of the circumstances involved, and, at

least in the accounts produced by modern biographers, to note the ironic gap apparently opened up between Dickens the novelist and Dickens the husband and father. Such accounts assume a distinction between narratives of 'truth' and fiction, and between private and public identities.

However, read in the light of recent theories concerning the political implications of textual representation, the controversy surrounding Dickens's marriage break-up yields more than just information about the psychology of the novelist, or evidence of an ironic discrepancy between his fiction and his lived experience. As a scandalous revelation of a family skeleton published in the press of the day, the episode participated in the growing phenomenon of 'sensationalism' that was already being denounced by conservative critics for indulging the lower appetites of human nature. An exploration of the ideological investments disclosed in this episode will demonstrate the approach that informs my analysis of the politics of the family in Dickens's fiction; for it is the disciplinary function of the family that may help us to understand the strangeness of Dickens's response to the rumours about his marriage break-up.

The basic story of Dickens's separation from his wife is well known. After a period of growing dissatisfaction and 'restlessness', Dickens's differences with Catherine came to a head in May 1858. The final break is alleged to have been caused by the mis-delivery to Catherine of a gift intended for Ellen Ternan. Dickens left the house during the disturbance which followed, and after negotiations lasting some two or three weeks his wife was induced to agree to a legal separation. After the formalities were completed Dickens wrote his address for *Household Words*, arranging for its publication in other newspapers and journals as well.

Both Forster and Lemon advised Dickens against the publication of his 'PERSONAL' statement. As Edmund Yates observed, 'the mistake which it will be generally held Dickens made was that which is usually known as "washing dirty linen in public"'.¹¹ This comment neatly identifies the problem with which he was confronted in choosing to mount a press campaign in his own defence: Dickens's statement relied upon a simultaneous construction and deconstruction of a distinction between public and private life. The contradiction is implicit in the 'PERSONAL' heading given to his public announcement, and it emerges in the form of the statement itself, which draws its rhetorical power from an emphasis upon respect for the very boundary it transgresses.

The controversy surrounding Dickens's marriage break-up illustrates the fundamental division of the world into 'public' and 'private' spheres

that came to constitute the dominant definition of ‘reality’ in Victorian middle-class culture. The model of a binary opposition between the sexes was used to ground the division between these supposedly ‘separate spheres’, shaping and legitimising this social arrangement according to sexual differences that were apparently fixed and immutable. Crucial to the maintenance of these divisions was the worship of the family – that nucleus of English society. However, the representation of the family ironically threatened the division between these two domains, betraying fundamental contradictions and instabilities within the ideologies of sexual difference and separate spheres. These discontinuities, and the political effects they enable, become evident in an examination of the controversy surrounding the end of Dickens’s marriage and of the representation of the family in his fiction.

After some preliminary remarks concerning his ‘relations with the Public’, Dickens opens his ‘PERSONAL’ statement with a declaration that lays emphasis upon the ‘sacredly private nature’ of his ‘domestic trouble’. The privacy of this ‘trouble’ is rhetorically inscribed in the euphemism and circumlocution employed to designate it. Dickens’s concluding denunciation of the allegedly ‘false’ reports insinuates its object with conspicuous reticence in a reference to ‘all the lately whispered rumours touching the trouble at which I have glanced’.¹² The reliance upon reserve, upon refraining from disclosure, creates the illusion of an inviolable private sphere that the very existence of this public statement would seem to contradict.

This extraordinary public exposure of a family affair is prefaced by an admission of the singularity of the step taken:

For the first time in my life, and I believe for the last, I now deviate from the principle I have so long observed, by presenting myself in my own Journal in my own private character, and entreating all my brethren (as they deem that they have reason to think well of me, and to know that I am a man who has ever been unaffectedly true to our common calling), to lend their aid to the dissemination of my present words.¹³

Dickens’s assertion of a distinction between his personal and public identities is reiterated in the penultimate paragraph of his statement:

Those who know me and my nature, need no assurance under my hand that such calumnies are irreconcilable with me, as they are, in their frantic incoherence, with one another. But, there is a great multitude who know me

through my writings, and who do not know me otherwise; and I cannot bear that one of them should be left in doubt, or hazard of doubt, through my poorly shrinking from taking the unusual means to which I now resort, of circulating the Truth.¹⁴

The contrast between direct and indirect forms of acquaintance used to justify his resort to these ‘unusual means’ is implicitly embedded in another opposition between ‘Truth’ and fiction: the ‘I’ whose voice is heard in this ‘PERSONAL’ statement must be distinguished from the narrator of his novels in order to establish the authenticity of his declaration. However, it is the very process of articulation, of putting oneself into words, that compromises the self it would seek to justify. Dickens’s claim of self-presence implicitly rests upon the newspaper convention of the ‘Personal Column’; but these notices were themselves highly codified appeals, as Sherlock Holmes was to demonstrate in his use of them later on in the century. The opposition between ‘Truth’ and fiction is destabilised by the rhetoric displayed in Dickens’s public performance. The hyperbolic style is created by an extraordinary preponderance of superlatives, emotive expressions and exclamatory protestations. As the Mackenzies observe, ‘This [is] strong stuff, more fitting for a sensational novel than a quasi-legal document’;¹⁵ and this comment about the mixing of generic categories highlights the way in which the oppositions upon which Dickens relies here – between fiction and truth, public and private identity – are made problematic by the very form of their expression.

While Dickens had hoped to keep his marriage break-up a private affair, with Forster acting on his behalf and Lemon acting for Catherine, talk about his relationship with Ellen Ternan began to spread; and by mid-May 1858, comment was abroad that the separation had occurred because he had fallen in love with another woman. This allegation was soon supplanted by the more scandalous accusation that the marriage was breaking up because he was having an incestuous affair with his sister-in-law, Georgina Hogarth, who had elected to stay with Dickens and his children following the departure of Catherine. This juicy gossip about Dickens’s supposed intrigue with his sister-in-law was relayed to Thackeray on his way into the Garrick Club. ‘No . . . no such thing’, said he, in an effort to counteract the ‘other much worse story’; ‘– it’s with an actress’.¹⁶ As Kaplan notes, ‘Dickens must have been hard put to determine whether he should focus on denying incest with Georgina, adultery with Ellen, or both.’¹⁷

The variation in the degree of damage attributed to these two stories

(by Thackeray and others) derives from assumptions associated with the doctrine of separate spheres. The first rumour, the allegation of Dickens's affair with an actress, though sufficiently injurious in itself, refers to a transgression that is explicable in terms of the sexual double standard. According to the dominant middle-class code of sexual mores, unregulated sexual activity was to be condoned in men as a sign of masculinity, but deplored in women as a sign of deviant behaviour, a loss of femininity.¹⁸ As W. R. Greg argued in his plan to solve the problem of prostitution by exporting 'redundant women' to the colonies, the regulation of sexuality in men and women must be organised according to the 'natural' difference between active male sexuality and passive female sexuality.¹⁹ Indeed, in the very year preceding the end of Dickens's marriage, Parliament had enshrined the sexual double standard in the new Divorce Act, when it agreed to allow wives to divorce their husbands for adultery only when it was aggravated by cruelty, bigamy, wilful desertion for four years or incest. Parliament was much more ready to tolerate male than female philandering, for as Cranworth, the Lord Chancellor, had argued in support of his divorce bill in 1854, 'it would be too harsh to bring the law to bear against a husband who was "a little profligate"'.²⁰ This argument is another formulation of that binary organisation of sex which grounded the doctrine of separate spheres; thus, according to this view, Dickens's adultery must be accepted as inevitable and natural.

According to Peter Ackroyd, at some point in May 1858 Mrs Hogarth actually threatened Dickens with action in the new Divorce Court.²¹ If this is so, it would help to explain his intense hostility towards his mother-in-law and strengthen the grounds for his charge that Mrs Hogarth was responsible for repeating what he referred to, in a letter to his lawyer, as 'these smashing slanders' concerning his relationship with Georgina.²² For the implication of a threatened divorce suit was that Dickens had committed incest with Georgina, thereby providing Catherine with the grounds for action under the new law. Forster wrote an urgent letter to Dickens's solicitor, Frederick Ouvry, seeking clarification of the new Act, and Georgina was examined by a doctor. The Hogarths apparently dropped the threat of court action, but the speculation did not cease. When Dickens published his disclaimer on 12 June, the *Court Circular* reported:

The story in circulation is that his wife has left his roof – according to the mildest form of narrative, 'on account of incompatibility of temper' – according to the worst form, 'on account of that talented gentleman's preference of his wife's

Introduction

7

sister to herself, a preference which has assumed a very definite and tangible shape'...²³

and later, in October, when he was in the middle of his first reading tour, Dickens received a letter from a well-wisher in Glasgow who reported having heard that Dickens 'was the outcry of London' and that his 'sister in law had three children by him'.²⁴

This second rumour concerning Dickens's alleged incestuous relationship with Georgina reflects the controversy which surrounded the question of marriage with a deceased wife's sister in the nineteenth century. A bill on this issue was introduced into Parliament in 1842, proposing the exemption of a wife's sister from the list of fixed degrees of consanguinity and affinity within which marriage was prohibited. It was repeatedly debated and defeated as a perennial legislative problem, and, in addition to issues surrounding the preservation of property, contention over the bill throughout the Victorian period was closely related to a growing concern over the defence of 'family purity'.²⁵ Even as late as 1907, the year in which it was finally passed, Lord Shaftesbury was able to argue: 'It is the sanctity of home life, and the peace and purity of the English home, which are threatened by the Bill.'²⁶ Dickens's supposed liaison with his sister-in-law thus challenged the ideology of the family in a much more radical way than an alleged affair with any other woman could do.

Infuriated by these rumours, Dickens refused to proceed with the settlement arrangements for Catherine until Mrs Hogarth and her youngest daughter, Helen, agreed to disavow the allegations about Ellen and Georgina which he believed they had spread. On 25 May 1858 he composed a long 'letter' outlining his position which he gave to the manager of his public readings, Arthur Smith, instructing him to show it 'to any one who wishes to do me right, or to any one who may have been misled into doing me wrong'.²⁷ When the Hogarths reluctantly agreed to sign a statement drawn up by Ouvry declaring their disbelief in the rumours, this disclaimer was attached to the letter given to Smith and privately circulated. The deed of separation was finally signed. Two months elapsed, and then just when the publicity surrounding Dickens's 'PERSONAL' statement was beginning to die out, this earlier letter, written in May 'as a private and personal communication',²⁸ found its way into the New York *Tribune* on 16 August, from which it was soon copied into the English newspapers. Beginning with an account of the incompatibility and lack of understanding held to plague his relationship with Catherine, Dickens went on in this document to declare his gratitude to Georgina for assuming the

responsibilities of a mother towards his children: ‘Mrs Dickens and I have lived unhappily together for many years’, he wrote, and

Nothing has, on many occasions, stood between us and a separation but Mrs Dickens’s sister, Georgina Hogarth. From the age of fifteen, she has devoted herself to our house and our children. She has been their playmate, nurse, instructor, friend, protectress, adviser and companion. In the manly consideration toward Mrs Dickens which I owe to my wife, I will merely remark of her that the peculiarity of her character has thrown all the children on some one else.²⁹

He goes on to defend an unidentified ‘young lady’ whose name, he claims, has been besmirched by ‘Two wicked persons who should have spoken very differently of me’ (undoubtedly Mrs Hogarth and her daughter Helen). ‘Upon my soul and honour’, he says, ‘there is not upon this earth a more virtuous and spotless creature than that young lady. I know her to be innocent and pure, and as good as my own dear daughters.’

It was in a letter to Angela Burdett Coutts of 9 May 1858 that Dickens first began his attack on Catherine for her alleged failure as a mother:

We must put a wider space between us now, than can be found in one house. If the children loved her, or ever had loved her, this severance would have been a far easier thing than it is. But she has never attached one of them to herself, never played with them in their infancy, never attracted their confidence as they have grown older, never presented herself before them in the aspect of a mother. I have seen them fall off from her in a natural – not unnatural – progress of estrangement, and at this moment I believe that Mary and Katey (whose dispositions are of the gentlest and most affectionate conceivable) harden into stone figures of girls when they can be got to go near her, and have their hearts shut up in her presence as if they were closed by some horrid spring.³⁰

Michael Slater asks why Dickens should suddenly begin calling Catherine a bad mother so insistently in May 1858, and concludes: ‘It was not gratuitous cruelty, I believe, but something that Dickens *had* to get himself to believe so that he could the more freely pity himself in the image of his own children, a psychological trick that he had shown himself perfectly understanding of when he had created *Dombey*.’³¹ This psychological explanation is persuasive; but it is also important to consider the ideological implications of Dickens’s change of tack. To Forster, Dickens had complained for some time about Catherine’s temperament, attributing his own ‘wayward and unsettled feeling’ to the ‘tenure on which one holds an imaginative life’.³² But the public credibility of this excuse can be gauged

from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sceptical comment in a letter to a friend, 'Incompatibility of temper after twenty-three years of married life! – What a plea!'³³ By charging Catherine with incompetence in rearing her children and running the household, Dickens deployed the doctrine of separate spheres to justify his own infraction. If Catherine had failed as a mother and as a wife, then Dickens could hardly be held responsible for breaking up the family, since it was upon her superintendence of the domestic sphere that the sanctity of the home depended. The ideological value of this appeal to the middle-class ideal of womanhood is strengthened by his attribution of all those womanly virtues, supposedly missing in Catherine, to Georgina: she is held to embody the self-sacrificial devotion, the moral influence and dutifulness expected of the Victorian Angel in the House.

Significantly, Georgina is only referred to as 'Mrs Dickens's sister' or as the 'aunt' of the children throughout this document. Dickens never names the relation in which she stands to himself. This rhetorical manipulation of family relationships to deflect criticism of his own position is also apparent in his veiled comment upon the accusations levelled against Ellen. In proclaiming that she is 'as good as my own dear daughters' Dickens not only asserts his belief in her virtue; more importantly, he also suggests that the relationship he enjoys with this 'young lady', for whom he has such a 'great attachment and regard', is that which would be shared by a father and daughter. (The irony of this strategy is apparent, of course, to readers aware of the extent to which father–daughter relationships are so frequently charged with erotic feeling in his fiction.) As if to offer a final proof of his innocence, in the last paragraph Dickens positions himself amongst his children, claiming his own share of the candour and artlessness they are all held to evince: 'All is open and plain among us, as though we were brothers and sisters.'

Dickens was reportedly 'shocked and distressed' by the appearance of this document in the newspapers. He asked Ouvry to inform Catherine that though 'painfully necessary at the time when it was forced from me, as a private repudiation of monstrous scandals . . . it was never meant to appear in print'.³⁴ He always referred to the document thereafter as the 'violated letter' – a name which reaffirms the distinction between 'public' and 'private' that was made so problematic in his earlier 'PERSONAL' statement. But, as a number of commentators have remarked, it is not really clear who had violated it.³⁵ The vagueness of the instructions given to Smith suggests the possibility that Dickens may have intended the letter to be made public without his being seen to sanction its appearance:

a version of having one's cake and eating it, that makes his peculiar investment in the distinction between public and private life even more equivocal. In the episode of the 'Violated Letter', Dickens attempts to evade the ideological instability that beset his 'PERSONAL' statement. His entry into public discourse in *Household Words* had already collapsed the very division of spheres that he tried to support in defending the privacy of his 'domestic trouble'. However, by functioning as the mark of a shameful transgression, Dickens's 'Violated Letter' simultaneously seeks to reconstitute the domain of privacy through its admission of a breach.

The appearance of Dickens's 'Violated Letter' provoked severe comment in the English press. *John Bull* observed, 'Qui s'excuse, s'accuse', and added that Dickens had 'committed a grave mistake in telling his readers how little, after all, he thinks of the marriage tie'.³⁶ The *Liverpool Mercury* declared: 'we consider this practice outrageously impertinent as regards the public, and so wantonly cruel as regards the private persons whose names are thus forced into a gratuitous and painful notoriety, that we feel called upon to mark it with indignant reprobation'.³⁷ These comments echoed the criticisms made earlier in the year about the publication of Dickens's 'PERSONAL' statement. *Reynolds's Newspaper* had reprinted Dickens's address in full, accompanying it with some editorial comments:

The names of a female relative and of a professional young lady, have both been, of late, so freely and intimately associated with that of Mr Dickens, as to excite suspicion and surprise in the minds of those who had hitherto looked upon the popular novelist as a very Joseph in all that regards morality, chastity, and decorum . . . No journalist had heretofore any right to interfere with Mr Dickens in his domestic concerns; but, as he now thrusts them before the public, the case is altered . . . Let Mr Dickens remember that the odious – and we might almost add unnatural – profligacy of which he has been accused, would brand him with life-long infamy.³⁸

However, it is not simply the revelation of domestic disorder that this commentator objects to. It is the manner in which this disclosure has been made to the public:

Mr Dickens has been ill-advised. He should either have left the 'calumnies' to die a natural death, or have explained them away in a style less ambiguous and stilted than that he has adopted in the . . . letter.³⁹

He has told too much, or else too little; and, what with (wordy) incontinence on the one hand, and ill-considered reticence on the other, he is in danger of having divers most ugly interpretations put upon his explanation.⁴⁰