Counterfeit and Disembodied: Speculative Character, Voodoo, and Finance in *Our Mutual Friend*

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"Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," thought Alice; "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!"—*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, ch. 6*

Introduction: "I didn't know there was such a name."[1]

The one thing everyone knows, even before reading a Dickens novel, is the author's celebrated talent for naming. Anthony Trollope writes, "Mrs. Gamp, Micawber, Pecksniff and others have become household words," but he rebukes Dickens for inventing characters who "are not human beings," but rather "puppets."[2] What is left unsaid is how much the genius for names is the flip-side to the characterization method which struck Trollope as underdeveloped. Names like Scrooge, or Pip, do so much of the work of characterization, that it seems unreasonable to expect these names to correspond to a thoroughly nuanced being. With the publication of *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens had worked out this method to the degree that the protagonist has, not one, but three names—which are all supremely forgettable: John Harmon, John Rokesmith, and Julius Handford. The novel teems, however, with *minor* characters whose names jump off the page and which are identifiably "Dickensian": Podsnap, Boffin, Veneering, Fledgeby, etc. In Dickens' last novel, this binary of the minor characters having more fanciful names, and the central characters more conventional names, regularizes the system which had always been true in his novels: minor characters are more eccentric and more distorted than the more or less bland protagonists.

This distortion of character has at times made it seem as if, in E.M. Forster's words, Dickens "ought to be bad,"[3] because his characters give a"merely repetitive pleasure."[4] In Forster's conception, Dickens is the poster boy for the skillful use of "flat" character, which is a sort of damning with faint praise. In turn, Forster's conception of characters as "People," the title of a chapter in *Aspects of the Novel*, has been deemed quaint and naive in the light of formalism

and post-structuralism. William Gass writes, "How absurd these views are which think of fiction...as actually creative of living creatures."[5] But Gass, like Forster, must condescend to Dickens in order to make sense of his characterizations: "It is Dickens' *habit* to treat speech as if it were an attribute of character."[6] By reducing Dickens' characters to products either of a narrative effect or of mere habit, both critics deny the characters a place in a system of meaning. As Deidre Lynch writes, it is easy to be "embarrassed" by character,[7] and both the humanist and the post-structuralist seem most embarrassed by Dickens. If the polarly divided Forster and Gass each make Dickens a sort of guilty exception, it is because they conceive of Dickens' system of characters as a contrived *narrative* effect, as a transparent mimicry of reality. However, what if Dickens were more canny than the lot of them, and were nearly a century ahead of the structuralists in conceiving a text where characters do not exist? I will show that Dickens, more than Gass even, thinks of characters as *products of language*, or sometimes even as language *only*. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens' distortions posit such a poetics of identity under the pressures of high capitalism and its systems of finance. Following the economic readings of character by Lynch and Alex Woloch, I would like to argue character as a critical juncture of structure and meaning, looking at *Our Mutual Friend* as both a theory of character and as a specific, economically coded character system.

Alex Woloch, applying E.M. Forster's coinage of the "flat character" to Dickens in his study of minor characters *The One vs. The Many*, explains, "Flatness is the consequence of narrative distortion, a distortion that takes place in relation to minorness...Dickens' forceful caricature—his insistent distortions of secondary characters—is the wellspring of their affective force."[8] But names, as well as characters, are distorted: Boffin evokes both "bumble" and "affable;" Veneering is a name so flattened and distorted as to be entirely surface. If Dickens'

approach to minorness distorts characters as much as their names, we might ask, what is the difference then between a character and a name?

The answer may be, there is none. In *Our Mutual Friend*, a class of minor character, which I will label “speculative characters,” takes part in the plot without being fully-constituted human beings—several such characters exist *only* as names. This standing-in of the name for the whole is in a sense always present in Dickens, whose names are sometimes so evocative that scant other characterization is required. But Dickens' use of the speculative character turns Trollope's criticism on its head. These characters are not *meant* to be "human beings," and yet they hold the key to the Dickensian world of character: the name. I will develop the concept of speculative characters more fully later, but for now these name-only characters further indicate that Dickens, in *Our Mutual Friend*, gives names more weight and a greater purpose than just being catchy and illustrative.

In fact, like one of his own minor characters, the novel’s narrator gets *stuck* on naming and names: many times within the novel he repeats a sort of discursive stuttering which itself is fragmented and repetitive.[9] A notably egregious instance occurs when Young Blight, Mr. Lightwood’s all-purpose clerk (who serves no purpose), writes Mr. Boffin’s name in the Callers’ Book along with the following: “Mr. Alley, Mr. Balley, Mr. Calley, Mr. Dalley, Mr. Falley, Mr. Galley, Mr. Halley, Mr. Lalley, Mr. Malley. And Mr. Boffin” (84). This recalls *Bleak House’s* Sirs Coodle and Doodle, but a moment later, *real* names, “vast numbers of persons out of the Directory” are entered “as transacting business with Mr. Lightwood” (84). Not only are these visitors fictional, but Young Blight entering them is a “fiction of an occupation” (84). In this way, fake names are made equivalent to real names, and the numerous *actual* responsibilities of

Young Blight ("managing clerk, junior clerk, common-law clerk, conveyancing clerk, chancery clerk..." 83) all merge into a fictional one.

So many characters in *Our Mutual Friend*, including Young Blight himself, have their true names subordinated to nicknames or epithets, that this confusion of names starts to look like an erasure of the original reference. Often, a Christian name is given only once (or not at all), and then is subsumed in the nickname. The most glaring instances of buried names are Jenny Wren and R.W. Wilfer. Following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's argument that the pun of Fanny Cleaver hints at a theme of sexual aggression in the novel, it is important that "we are told—just once—that [Jenny Wren] is not the name she was born with."[14] Sedgwick's insistence that the name is no accident, but is in fact a thematic pointer, relies upon the *incidental* manner in which the narrator introduces Jenny's given name. Many a reader (including myself) has passed over the name without registering it. Dickens' recalcitrance in elaborating the origins of "Fanny Cleaver" comes under further suspicion when thrown into contrast with the presentation of another name in the novel heard only once—Reginald Wilfer:

> He was shy, and unwilling to own to the name of Reginald, as being too aspiring and self-assertive a name. In his signature he used only the initial R., and imparted what it really stood for, to none but chosen friends, under the seal of confidence. Out of this, the facetious habit had arisen in the neighborhood surrounding Mincing Lane of making Christian names for him of adjectives and participles beginning with R. Some of these were more or less appropriate: as Rusty, Retiring, Ruddy, Round, Ripe, Ridiculous, Ruminative; others derived their point from want of application: as Raging, Rattling, Roaring, Raffish. But, his popular name was Rumty... (32)

The extent to which Dickens indulges the origins of this harmless nickname, compared to the casual dropping of "Fanny Cleaver," assures us that both real names are being consciously buried—introduced only to immediately disappear. This technique accomplishes a disconnect between the referent and the object it names, which Dickens can choose either to enact (as with R.W.) or conceal (as with Jenny). Thus, without it being always apparent, fully a dozen

characters are known by some pseudonym, namely: the senior Mr. Wrayburn (MRF), Nicodemus Boffin (Noddy), the Veneerings' butler (Analytical Chemist), Roger Riderhood (Rogue), Jesse Hexam (Gaffer), Riah (Aaron), Eugene (T'other Governor), Bradley Headstone (T'otherest), Fanny Cleaver (Jenny Wren), Mr. Cleaver (Mr. Dolls), Reginald Wilfer (Rumty), and Mortimer's clerk (Young Blight).

Ironically, given these fairly elaborate nicknames, the novel's most overt discussion of nicknames centers upon a name that hides nothing and is barely changed:

> "Well, Mary Anne?"
>
> "She is named Lizzie, ma'am."
>
> "She can hardly be named Lizzie, I think, Mary Anne," returned Miss Peecher, in a tunefully instructive voice. "Is Lizzie a Christian name, Mary Anne?"
>
> Mary Anne laid down her work, rose, hooked herself behind as being under catechization, and replied: "No, it is a corruption, Miss Peecher."...
>
> "Of what name is it a corruption?"
>
> "Elizabeth or Eliza, Miss Peecher."
>
> "Right, Mary Anne. Whether there were any Lizzies in the early Christian Church must be considered very doubtful, very doubtful." Miss Peecher was exceedingly sage here. "Speaking correctly, we say, then, that Hexam's sister is called Lizzie: not that she is named so." (330)

Suffice it to say, this passage is not relevant to the plot, and seemingly is just another stutter—in which the narrator, once set in motion on a name, cannot get back on track. But like a joke that keeps putting off a weak punch line, the telling becomes more uncomfortable with every new device. What is of interest is the extreme protraction of the scene in relation to the inconsequentiality of both characters and of the name itself (especially when there are so many more notable nicknames in the novel). Like the single, obscure mention of "Fanny Cleaver," Dickens seems intent on burying this concept of the name/named binary: hiding it in a comic scene between trivial characters discussing only a minor name change. Hidden, because being "called" by a name in the novel is the all-in-all; because the logic of the synecdoche is

paramount—so that names often go forth into the world as proxies independent of their characters or, often enough, with no character referent at all.

"Forced into the use of the third person" (282): Indirect Speech and Brokers

Just as nicknames in *Our Mutual Friend* throw a screen of uncertainty between what someone is "named" and "called," several character-groups in the novel contain a "screen character" who mediates or diverts the truer connection between a pair. In the scene where Charlie Hexam confronts Eugene Wrayburn about his visits to Lizzie, Eugene correctly interprets that Bradley Headstone's (whom Charley has brought along) is the real motive behind the complaint.

> Very remarkably, neither Eugene Wrayburn nor Bradley Headstone looked at all at the boy. Through the ensuing dialogue, those two, no matter who spoke, or who was addressed, looked at each other. There was some secret, sure perception between them, which set them against one another in all ways. (280)
>
> "Now I tell Mr. Eugene Wrayburn," pursued the boy, forced into the use of the third person by the hopelessness of addressing him in the first, "that I object to his having any acquaintance at all with my sister, and that I request him to drop it altogether..."
> (As the boy sneered, the Master sneered, and Eugene blew off [his cigar] ash again.) (282)

Eugene and Bradley can safely ignore the boy Charley (and in my imagination, Charley is short enough so that they can stare right over him), whose position as would-be procurer between Lizzie and Bradley becomes redundant between men[20]. As evidence of a legitimate claim upon Lizzie, Bradley needs Charley, but as Lizzie becomes the excuse for male-male antagonism and eventual violence, the mediator essential to trafficking becomes only an impediment to the campaign of solitary stalking and aggression upon which Bradley embarks. Simply put, prostitution requires a *broker*, whereas rape need not. The transfer of Bradley's gaze in this scene from Lizzie to Eugene reveals the superfluity of Charley's presence in male-male pursuance,

which Bradley will not own up to—his sneer is synchronized with his pupil, and he even asks Eugene, "Why [do] you address me?" (281)—but which Eugene perceives and dismisses.

Alternately, such intermediaries can be essential to a relationship; as well as being a screen placed between a "sure perception," a broker can also imply a relation not truly there. This is so between Georgiana and Fledgeby:

> They would not look at one another. No, not even when the sparkling host proposed that the quartet should take an appropriately sparkling glass of wine. Georgiana looked from her wine-glass at Mr. Lammle and at Mrs. Lammle; but mightn't, couldn't shouldn't, wouldn't, look at Mr. Fledgeby. (257)
>
> [Lammle] and his wife made a conversation between Fledgeby and Georgiana in the following ingenious and skillful manner. They sat in this order: Mrs. Lammle, Fascination Fledgeby, Georgiana, Mr. Lammle. Mrs. Lammle made leading remarks to Fledgeby, only requiring monosyllabic replies. Mr. Lammle did the like with Georgiana. At times Mrs. Lammle would lean forward to address Mr. Lammle to this purpose...Through this device the two young people conversed at great length and committed themselves to a variety of delicate sentiments, without having once opened their lips, save to say yes or no, and even that not to one another. (259)

Dickens cleverly places the real interlocutors at either end of the line, for the comic possibilities of shouting and leaning-forward, presenting the image of the young couple sitting together, presumably bolt-upright and mute. Putting words in Fledgeby's and Georgiana's mouths effects the detachment of speech and representation from their selves, and enters their identities into an inflationary exchange that freely elaborates and constitutes their opinions. In a sense, the younger pair ceases being *named* and begins being *called*, at which point Rumty-esque liberties may be taken with their conversation.

As with Lizzie, there is a sort of prostitution going on, with Alfred having "in [his] desk, [Fledgeby's] dirty note of hand for a wretched sum payable on the occurrence of a certain event, which event can only be of [the Lammles'] bringing about" (266).

The real relation then is again between men, with the exception that trafficking in women in this instance is only a *front* for a financial scheme and the promissory note only another investment in Fledgeby's "outlaw" (264) portfolio.

Between the comic scene and the serious confrontation, we can see how indirect conversation, which contains a screen character, in fact *screens* for the themes of prostitution and the covert male-male (whether sexual or financial) relations in the text. In a larger sense, all the mediating characters who proliferate in the novel—such as the Veneerings (whom no one speaks to at their own parties, but "to anybody else in preference"(13)), or Mr. Twemlow as a go-between twixt Mrs. Lammle and Mr. Podsnap—constitute an economy-by-proxy in which, if something is to be done, it must be done by or through someone else. This can create the sort of paranoia that leads Charley to see Mortimer as Eugene's pimp, claiming "It was through Mr. Lightwood that you ever saw my sister" (281); while not true of Mortimer, this paranoia is later justified when Eugene employs Mr. Dolls to locate Lizzie. In short, the novel is rife with indirection and intermediation, removing any one-for-one correlation of value to identity, and spawning numerous brokers who, as with all profiteers, inevitably inflate and falsify the value of being a character in the novel.

"You could easily buy all you see of her, on Bond Street" (115):

Character Markets and Character as a Commodity

How does the status of a character *as* character attain exchange-value in *Our Mutual Friend?* As in the above quote about Lady Tippins, being able to buy "all you see" of her translates to buying "any fragment" of her. "You might scalp her, and peel her, and scrape her, and make two Lady Tippinses out of her, and yet not penetrate to the genuine article" (115).

Being able to purchase someone, then, involves reducing them to component parts, just as the dust mounds must be sorted into piles of each valuable article. Among the piles of Lady Tippins, I should expect to find not just her clothes, eye-glass, and artificial flowers, but also her name and a sort of certificate of *being* a character.

When the Reverend Milvey and his wife try to acquire an orphan for the Boffins, they are daunted by the instant commodification of orphancy which greets them everywhere:

> It was found impossible to complete the transaction without buying the orphan. For the instant it became known that anybody wanted the orphan, up started some affectionate relative of the orphan who put a price upon the orphan's head. The suddenness of an orphan's rise in the market was not to be paralleled by the maddest records of the Stock Exchange. He would be at five thousand per cent. discount out at nurse making a mud pie at nine in the morning, and (being inquired for) would go up to five thousand per cent. premium before noon. The market was "rigged" in various artful ways. Counterfeit stock got into circulation. Parents boldly represented themselves as dead, and brought their orphans with them. Genuine orphan-stock was surreptitiously withdrawn from the market. It being announced, by emissaries posted for the purpose, that Mr. and Mrs. Milvey were coming down the court, orphan scrip would be instantly concealed, and production refused, save on a condition usually stated by the brokers as "a gallon of beer." Likewise, fluctuations of a wild and South-Sea nature were occasioned by orphan-holders keeping back, and then rushing into the market a dozen together. But the uniform principle at the root of all these various operations was bargain and sale: and that principle could not be recognized by Mr. and Mrs. Milvey. (190)

Orphans become valuable because they meet two conditions: they have no parents, and their names are more or less open to change (as with Sloppy, who "speaking quite correctly...has no right name" (194)), the Boffins' original desire being to revive the name of John Harmon and transfer it to an orphan. As seen here, the value of being a live parent drops tremendously, so that those living "represented themselves as dead," making that aspect of character completely worthless in inverse to the inflation of "genuine orphan-stock." But essentially, what is being sought (but not purchased) is a *character* who will be a living allusion to the original John Harmon, and the key to this is the name. In this sense, as is true stretching back to Oliver Twist,

Dickens' orphans represent "character" in its most blank-slate form, variables to be plugged into pre-existing formulas.

Of course, the "bad" version of the marriage market in the novel is equally likely to sell one's character to the highest bidder as the orphan "market." Bella Wilfer remarks to Lizzie Hexam that she has "no more of what they call character, my dear, than a canary-bird" (512). That a canary may not have much character, 'tis true, but even a dead canary can be turned into money in this novel: Mr. Venus sells a "stuffed canary" for "three and ninepence" early on (78), and it is exactly this turn of profit which Bella hopes to effect before she ends her mercenary ways. As she tells her father, she "must marry money. In consequence of which, [she] is always looking out for money to captivate" (312). Whereas "character," in the sense of integrity, is a component of a character in the same synecdochic relation as the name to the named, this metonym (to "marry money") completely removes character from the picture, transferring the object from a person to the pounds and shares Bella will marry. At the same time, this logic turns Bella into a commodity; as Mr. Boffin cruelly puts it, "This young lady was looking about the market for a good bid; she wasn't in it to be snapped up by fellows that had no money to lay out; *nothing to buy with*" (575, emphasis mine). He accuses John Harmon of making "a speculation" upon Bella (576), of "making Miss Wilfer stand for Pounds, Shillings and Pence!" (578). This, too, is metonymy, and Bella's aim of marrying money turns *her* into raw financial figures. The irony, of course, is that John Harmon has been speculating on Bella: but only on the character she claims to have none of; John's entire scheme involving Boffin is only to realize the value this speculative value. In Bella's speculating phase, she in effect consents to be a commodity, to exchange her character, in marriage, for money. Ironically, it is this commodification that she rails against in the Harmon will: "Left to him in a will, like a dozen spoons" (36), she supposes

she could never have liked John Harmon, and until Boffin points out that she has once again commodified herself, when she abandons her "lying in wait for money" (575).

Bella is not the only character whom markets reduce to a commodity or sign. The narrator tells us that "Nothing would have astonished [Mr. Podsnap] more than an intimation that Miss Podsnap, or any other young person properly born and bred, could not be exactly put away like the plate, brought out like the plate, polished like the plate, counted, weighed, and valued like the plate" (138). This conceptualization of the family (and indeed, all society) in economic terms turns any character into a potential commodity. As Bella is turned into pounds and shillings, those who leave cards at the Boffins', "attracted by the gold dust," are metonymically metamorphosed into their mere visiting cards:

> [Mr. Podsnap] leaves four cards, to wit, a couple of Mr. Podsnaps, a Mrs. Podsnap, and a Miss Podsnap. All the world and his wife and daughter leave cards. Sometimes the world's wife has so many daughters, that her card reads rather like a Miscellaneous Lot at an Auction; comprising Mrs. Tapkins, Miss Tapkins, Miss Frederica Tapkins, Miss Antonina Tapkins, Miss Malvina Tapkins, and Miss Euphemia Tapkin; at the same time, the same lady leaves the card of Mrs. Henry George Alfred Swoshle, *née* Tapkins; also, a card, Mrs. Tapkins at Home, Wednesdays, Music, Portland Place. (203)

Not only are people reduced to their names, so that two cards bearing Mr. Podsnaps name changes into the more terrifying prospect of there being "a couple of Mr. Podsnaps" standing on the Boffins' porch, but the cards themselves read like a lot at an auction. Thus, characters turn first into signs, and then into commodities to be bid upon.

The more sinister version of this process follows Mr. Riah, Fledgeby's front for his bill-purchasing business. Fledgeby buys "queer bills," and uses Riah to collect them, or more precisely: uses the signifier of Riah's Jewishness to collect them. Fledgeby "felt that to relinquish an inch of [Riah's] baldness, an inch of his grey hair, an inch of his coat-skirt, an inch of his hat-brim, an inch of his walking staff, would be to relinquish hundreds of pounds" (270).

In reducing Riah to these synecdochic properties, Fledgeby latches onto a commodity which is not subject to market fluctuations: the stereotype of the usurious Jew. In a sense, while Riah is the middle-man screening Fledgeby's involvement in the business, his appearance is yet another mediator, intruding between himself and the debtor, and driving the bargain that much harder. Fledgeby, however, oscillates between understanding his own game and, as Riah puts it, "ming[ling] the character [he] fairly earns in [Fledgeby's] employement, with the character which it is [Fledgeby's] policy that [Riah] should bear" (413). Fledgeby is paying not only for the character of a Shylock (as Eugene calls Riah, as well as "Aaron"), but for his "bad name as an old Jew" (551). The character and the name, detached from the person, and the isolated parts of his appearance, all turn to profit in the character market of *Our Mutual Friend.*

"She saw but a duplicate" (342): Doubles and Fusions

Our Mutual Friend, like *A Tale of Two Cities* or *Nicholas Nickelby*, employs twins or doubles to create anecdotal or moral significance in an implausible but novelistically tried-and-true method. As with counterfeit orphans, doubles call into question a character's genuineness through the confusion of whether one is talking to the original or the double (if such a distinction can be made). Doubling also complicates the one-to-one connection of characters to their bodies: e.g., two characters, but only one version of their body, or two physically different characters fused into one personality. The Veneerings' parties are especially productive of this latter confusion: Mr. Twemlow is mistaken for Mr. Veneering himself and then is introduced to "Mr. Boots and Mr. Brewer—and clearly has no distinct idea which is which" (8). As a commentary upon the indistinctness of the *nouveau riche*—whose nascent wealth lends them the undifferentiated quality of fetuses—this is comically appropriate. But still resonant from the

previous (and first) chapter is the bloated and "muffled" corpse showing all the "spoiling influences of water" (167). This image first underscores the comic similarities between the Veneerings' guests and then is more emphatically dragged into the chapter through Mortimer's story of the "man from nowhere," the person (or the double) whom we have just left trailing behind Gaffer's boat.

Although one could not know it on first reading, the events of the Harmon Murder remove any remaining doubt in the narrator's statement, "It is questionable whether any man quite relishes being mistaken for any other man" (9), and activate doubling in a new way. John Harmon is presumed drowned because he has traded his clothes with a look-alike who then is mugged by another gang; but John Harmon *stays dead* in the novel because of his own doubling, first as Julius Handford, then as John Rokesmith. Mary Poovey links this doubling to Bradley Headstone's imitation of Rogue Riderhood to divert blame for his attack on Eugene: "Sameness generates masquerade and finally a fight to the death. When one man can be 'taken' for another, as Radfoot is taken for John Harmon, then a man can be taken down with another like himself, as Headstone takes Riderhood into their mutual, watery grave."[49]

Poovey asserts one side of a chicken-or-egg debate, whereas I will ultimately argue that *masquerade* generates sameness and that the erosion of "difference" in the novel is a profit-driven response. Thus, it is not that Radfoot and Harmon are identical in appearance,"alike in bulk and stature, but not otherwise, and [not] strikingly alike, even in those respects" (357), but that the "masquerade" makes them interchangeable, and produces their common fate of being dumped in the river. What is an initial, loose similarity gains strength by the scene at the morgue where George Radfoot's body becomes John Harmon's, for all official purposes. Thus, the relation between sameness and masquerade is a two-way street, as is true with Rogue and

Bradley: though not physically similar, Bradley comes to look, in clothes like Riderhood's, "as if they were his own" (616).

Just as Dickens hides the key distinction regarding names in the scene with Miss Peecher, the novel's best explanation of doubles is given to the marginal character Pleasant Riderhood:

> Show Pleasant Riderhood a Wedding in the street, and she only saw two people taking out a regular license to quarrel and fight. Show her a Christening, and she saw a little heathen personage having a quite superfluous name bestowed upon it, inasmuch as it would be commonly addressed by *some abusive epithet*; which little personage was not in the least wanted by anybody, and would be shoved and banged out of everybody's way, until it should grow big enough to shove and bang. Show her a Funeral, and she saw an unremunerative ceremony in the nature of a black masquerade, conferring a temporary gentility on the performers, at an immense expense, and representing the only formal party ever given by the deceased. *Show her a live father, and she saw but a duplicate of her own father*, who from her infancy had been taken with fits and starts of discharging his duty to her, which duty was always incorporated in the form of a fist or a leathern strap, and being discharged hurt her. (342, emphasis mine)

Pleasant Riderhood's outlook on life describes a particularly bleak proletarian existence, where every social relation is stripped of its human meaning and reduced to a "masquerade." These dreary social processes, though, turn on the difference between the "duplicate" and the faceless—any individual may be *reduced* to a mere "personage," but at the same time, may be a projection of her own father, or of her own "abusive epithet," Poll Parrot. This paradox confuses the species with the genus, by describing the latter in terms of the former and then declaring them to be duplicates. This confusion, of course, is also synecdoche, and it produces the condition where not only is duplication (the intrusion of the generic into the specific) inevitable, but where the specific manifests itself insufficiently, in the form of speculative characters.

"Vast Vague Reputations" (243): Speculative Characters and The Pale of Personhood

When Trollope complains that Dickens' characters are not "human beings," but only "puppets" charming enough to enable the author "to dispense with human nature,"[53] one may

counter with whatever character is dearest to the readerly heart, or with the Orwellian line that Trollope is simply missing the point—but we must allow that, in *Our Mutual Friend*, this really is the case. The French Gentleman, Julius Handford, Pubsey, Uncle Parker, *et al*, are each a step or more removed from the already tenuous verisimilitude of the standard Dickensian character. To give a brief example, here is the passage where Silas Wegg projects identities onto the occupants of a nearby house:

> He always spoke of it as "Our House," and though his knowledge of its affairs was *mostly speculative and all wrong*, claimed to be in its confidence. On similar grounds he never beheld an inmate at any of its windows but he touched his hat. Yet, he knew so little about the inmates that he gave them names of his own invention: as "Miss Elizabeth," "Master George," "Aunt Jane," "Uncle Parker"—having no authority whatever for any such designations, but particularly the last—to which, as a natural consequence, he stuck with great obstinacy. (44, emphasis mine)

Although the variety of speculative characters ranges from these offstage projections to the personae and disguises adopted by John Harmon, a speculative character is not any identity that is counterfactual or invented. Characters can be called "speculative" when their presence in the novel is *invested* with weight, animation, motives, identity, or participation in the plot when they are not, properly speaking, persons. A short, but morbid, definition of a "person," to establish a rule of thumb is: someone whose *representation* in the novel, if killed, could be buried bodily with his or her real name engraved on the headstone. Thus, Lord Snigsworth, who never appears as anything but a name and a portrait, is not a person—but the tremendous importance given him for his opinion and his line of credit secures his place in the pantheon of speculative characters.

Speculative characters either act like, or are believed to be, "real" characters; they are scarecrows—physically or coneptually—who, to borrow an Eve Sedgwick phrase,"swell up with accumulated value"[55] in terms of the reality of the novel. As such, Uncle Parker, seemingly a benign illusion, but becomes the deranged impetus for Silas Wegg's entire "friendly move":

when Venus dissembles concerning his involvement in said move, Wegg tells him, "It was never your lot to know Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, nor Uncle Parker...Without having known them, you can never fully know what it is to be stimulated to frenzy by the sight of the Usurper" (479). What is purely Wegg's invention, then, is carried to very real ends, and his fantasy of revenging the inmates of Our House generates hundreds of pages of plot. Wegg's motive for putting Boffin's nose to the grindstone is the financial recompense he feels he is owed for having "given up in [Boffin's] cause, Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, and Uncle Parker" (322). Like the partners in a law firm, these names are always given in this order, and Wegg feels that, having parted with his *share* in the imagined life of this firm, he should be paid for it.

The intangible signifiers of Lord Snigsworth are also worth money when parted with, and not before: Twemlow is twice urged in the novel to give Lord Snigsworth's name. Veneering, in his electoral campaign, presses Twemlow: "Are you of the opinion that your cousin, Lord Snigsworth, would give his name as a Member of my Committe? I don't go so far as to ask for his lordship; I only ask for his name. Do you think he would give me his name?" (238). Because this is not a real election, and Veneering is merely buying a seat in Parliament, Snigsworth's name here is a metaphor of credit (as in the fruitful phrase, political capital) which it will later be, literally. Fledgeby, putting words into Riah's mouth, asks if he is "fully determined (as a plain point of business) either to have that said great party's [Snigsworth's] security, or that said great party's money?" (558). As Twemlow has "given [the creditor] his name" (555) for a friend's debt, he now in turn must give Snigsworth's name as security. Thus, it is the name of Snigsworth, and not the real person ("his lordship") that attains value in the novel, politically and financially.

The name of Fledgeby's bill-broking business is "Pubsey and Co." but there is no such person as Pubsey. If Mr. Riah's identity as a Jew were not too valuable to go around with a name like Pubsey, surely Mr. Riah would pose as Pubsey. Neither can Fledgeby be Pubsey, because he wants to keep clear of the social taint of usury. He tells Riah, if anyone asks who Fledgeby is, "Say it's Pubsey, or say it's Co., or say it's anything you like, but what it is" (274). Pubsey, then, is not a real person, but at the same time, to everyone who is not in on the secret, Pubsey is equally as real as the never-seen Chicksey and Stobbles, R. Wilfer's employers, and more to be worried about.

The value the novel puts on names, as stand-ins for character, as parts that circulate without a clear or locatable whole, finds its apotheosis in Pubsey, a name that does all the work of character: Pubsey owns a business in St. Mary Axe, employs Mr. Riah, and is particularly avaricious. Yet, as a person, he simply does not exist. To borrow a phrase from the orphan-market scene, he is "counterfeit stock" (190) of a character, whom Fledgeby puts into the market to turn a profit while screening out his own involvement. Although Fledgeby may be only on the outskirts of the Veneerings' Society, this generation of buffers is inherent to the paradox of the Veneerings and their guests. These upstart capitalists and speculators, whose success testifies to the weakening of class barriers and the possibility of overnight fortunes, simultaneously cannot allow that money could be made in such a fantastic, intangible way. So, there are numerous ways that the magic of shareholding and sudden wealth are converted to conventional signs of old money—a sort of inverted "money laundering" where it is the Veneerings, rather than their money, who are being laundered, put into "a state of high varnish and polish" (7). This conversion can be seen, on both large and small scales, in Veneering's Parliamentary campaign. For one, he is changing his money into political power, but his electoral methods themselves

demonstrate the principle of exchanging speculative capital for a more solid respectability. As the narrator holds forth, "More is done, or considered to be done—which does as well—by taking cabs, and "going about," than the fair Tippins knew of. Many vast vague reputations have been made, solely by taking cabs and going about. This particularly obtains in Parliamentary affairs" (243). The men turning about in these cabs are Boots and Brewer, who belong to a group of Veneering's guest called "Buffers," which is given as if it were a proper surname, and contains two other, anonymous guests. By "going about" in cabs, Boots and Brewer accomplish a figurative buffer between Veneering's flagrant purchasing of office and the appearance of a democratic elections.

It is in such buffering and conversion that character, both in the sense of a person and of his or her reputation, becomes valuable. Bradley Headstone tells Lizzie, "My reputation is quiet high, and would be a shield for yours" (387). He is volunteering *his character* as a buffer between hers and society, whereas John Harmon, Fledgeby, Veneering, Wegg, and Boffin all generate separate, speculative characters to act as buffers in their speculations. This distancing of onself from the various taints of bride-buying, usury, election-rigging, betrayal, and miserly acting via a speculative character reverses the process of the character markets: instead of characters turning into signs and then into commodities, here the commodity of being a character is implemented only through signs and partial or implied characters. This generation of a whole, if speculative, character from parts falls apart in every instance in the novel, because the logic of synecdoche which allows a character to be constituted without a matching human reality also makes the original vulnerable *through* a speculative or synecdochic representation, which we know more commonly as voodoo.

Voodoo and Bodily Animation

When he calls Jenny Wren "that little witch" (221), Charley Hexam is demeaning her physical appearance, and the reader is meant to chide him for it. But in another sense, Charley is exactly right. Jenny repeatedly engages in a kind of voodoo in which characters can be got at via a doll representation or conjured up through violent ritual. She brags that she makes "the great ladies try [her] dresses on" (425), and describes how, having seen one Lady Belinda at a party, she "ran straight home and cut her out and basted her...That's Lady Belinda hanging up by the waist, much too near the gaslight for a wax one, with her toes turned in" (425-6). Jenny always speaks as if the doll were the person, with the same name and human sensitivity to being carved and forced to try on clothes. She also lives vicariously through her dolls, who are dressed for "going to balls, for going out driving, for going out on horseback, for going out walking, for going to get married, for going to help other dolls to get married, for all the gay events of life" (424-5), many of which Jenny, with her bad back, will never be able to do. As such, the dolls stand in both for their original models, and for her desires.

Jenny also uses her needle and her imagination to inflict pain on men, such as "pricking at [Eugene] in the air with her needle" (518), when he is prying for information about Lizzie's whereabouts. This might pass unnoticed if Jenny did not a moment later threaten to "throw a doll" at her drunken father (519). For most of the novel, Jenny is tormented by three men: Eugene, who eventually gives her father liquor money in exchange for locating Lizzie; her own father, who drinks himself to death; and her future suitor, for whom "no intentions were stronger in her breast than the various trials and torments that were, in the fulness of time, to be inflicted upon 'him'" (227). She takes out her anger on the masculine world which has distorted and

degraded her, through these imaginative and speculative revenges. And she saves the worst for Him, *if* he should turn out a drunkard:

> When he was asleep, I'd make a spoon red hot, and I'd have some boiling liquor bubbling in a saucepan, and I'd take it out hissing, and I'd open his mouth with the other hand—or perhaps he'd sleep with his mouth ready open—and I'd pour it down his throat, and blister it and choke it." (236)

Being only a small child with bad legs, Jenny of course cannot literally attack men in this way, but only through the implements of voodoo (dolls and needles), as well as the speculative character of "Him."

Jenny is not the only woman who engages in this style of figurative punishment: Miss Peecher, finding out Bradley has come to the schoolhouse but not stopped in to see her, "repressed a sigh as she gathered her work together for bed, and transfixed that part of her dress where her heart would have been if she had had the dress on, with a sharp, sharp needle" (226). This masochistic use of voodoo effectively says, her heart is broken, but Dickens codes it in the feminized context of sewing and places it for emphasis immediately prior to the above noted scene with Jenny Wren. As the passages follow upon each other, so Jenny's abuse of men through representations follows from Miss Peecher's metonymic self-abuse (the dress for her body, her physical heart for her emotional heart). Kenneth Burke, in his *Grammar of Motives*, allows the treatment of such metonymy "as a special application of synecdoche."[75] This one-way *reduction* is elaborated as a system of *representation* in the way that Jenny Wren's dolls are both channels through which she can control her world and vehicles through which she can participate in that world, activating new possibilities of what Burke calls "synecdochic reversals"[76] in the psychology of the text. In looking up the improbable word "synecdochism" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I found not only the self-reflexive definition "the use of synecdoche", but also this ethnological meaning: "The belief or practice in which a part of an object or person is

taken as equivalent to the whole, so that anything done to, or by means of, the part is held to take effect upon, or have the effect of, the whole."[77] In other words, synecdoche has the power not only to represent, but like voodoo, by relating the part to the whole can alter the meaning of the sign *through* the signifier. Jenny's attempts to wield control over a male world in which she is severely disadvantaged fixate on the representation of the body through the doll, or on descriptions of intense physical pain, while being precisely nonphysical, figurative, and synecdochic. But it is not only women who use figurative stand-ins to punish: Boffin and Wegg oppose each other primarily through this language. Wegg, peering in at Boffin's window, "labored with a will at turning an imaginary grindstone outside the keyhole, while Mr. Boffin stooped at it within" (644), while Boffin counters by striking the air with the head of his stick. "Possibly the wooden countenance of Mr. Silas Wegg was incorporeally before him at those moments, for he hit with intense satisfaction" (571).

What drives these characters to abuse of others via spectral or toy manifestations? All of these characters are notably powerless at the moment of their voodoo-act. But power in the novel, as Eve Sedgwick writes, "comes to be expressed as power over reified doubles fashioned in one's own image from the vast waste of one's own body. Power is over dolls, puppets, and articulated skeletons, over the narcissistic, singular, nondesiring phantoms of individuality."[80] This is certainly true for Jenny, Miss Peecher, and the feminized Mr. Venus, but the line between phantom "doubles" and fleshy originals is never so clear in this novel. Speculative characters do not need any real form to seize the value of being a character—they are profoundly disembodied, while such a real character as Fledgeby must aver that he is Lammle's "doll and puppet" (263). With Venus' assortment of "human warious" (466) and his selling Wegg back his own leg, it is a

logical fear that a person might be lumped in with the dolls and skeletons, or somehow become vulnerable if one's body parts were circulating on the market.

Sedgwick writes that when "the human body is taken as a capitalist emblem...the relation of parts to wholes becomes problematic."[83] I hope I have shown that it is *character* that, as a commodity and capitalist emblem, confuses parts and wholes, so that names and the incomplete aspects of a speculative character are parts of a character, just as much as the human body is. As such, the confusion around bodies in the novel is a confusion through synecdoche. When Mortimer, Eugene, and John Harmon (as Julius Handford) view George Radfoot's body in the morgue, the Abbot reproduces this confusion: "Pity there was not a word of truth in that superstition about bodies bleeding when touched by the hand of the right person; you never got a sign out of bodies" (26). Boffin similarly accepts Venus' bodily articulations as characters:

> The fire being low and fitful, and the dusk gloomy, the whole stock seemed to be winking and blinking with both eyes, as Mr. Venus did. The French gentleman, though he had no eyes, was not at all behind-hand, but appeared, as the flame rose and fell, to open and shut his no eyes, with the regularity of the glass-eyed dogs and ducks and birds. The big-headed babies were equally obliging in lending their grotesque aid to the general effect....
>
> "You don't expect Wegg, I take it for granted?"
>
> "No, sir. I expect no one but the present company."
>
> Mr. Boffin glanced about him, as accepting under that inclusive denomination the French gentleman and the circle in which he didn't move, and repeated, "The present company." (561-2)

The human body, as a commodity, thus aspires to the state of character, just as an incomplete skeleton aspires to be fully articulated, or a human being want its leg back. Voodoo, in essence, exploits this confusion of the part (body) to the whole (character), seizing on representational parts to influence or control the whole, just as a speculative character masquerades as a whole, though assembling only its trappings.

Conclusion

A fairly reliable way to read a Dickens novel is to follow money through the plot. *Our Mutual Friend* resists this reading, because value is located elsewhere than money. As Catherine Gallagher puts it, "Most of the book's economic enterprises amount to trading in human remains."[86] I hope I have shown that the status of the human body is so confused in the text that trading in human remains means trading in representations of character, in a deanimated but still identifiable entity which can still be *named.* In either case, following the money in *Our Mutual Friend* means following misidentified corpses, false wills, fraudulent marriages, and duplicitous bill-buying—in short, following only lies about money, while actual value reposes in character and projects of manipulating and fabricating character. If there is no counterfeiting ring in the plot, the play of speculative characters and the uncertain referentiality of the human body amount to the same confusion in tracking value in the novel.

In this way, the novel literalizes the mode of the Veneerings' male guests: "They all spoke of sums of money, and only mentioned the sums, and left the money to be understood" (254). Value is reposited in character, and control over and production of this value is manipulated through speculative character and the workings of voodoo, but this trajectory of value in the novel is subordinated to the overt, yet dead-end, schemes of Fledgeby's usury, and Wegg's search for hidden, tangible treasures at the Bower. Where the unspoken nature of character is as a site for investment and value, the spoken sums of money exist as shares. "Traffic in Shares is the one thing to have to do with in this world. Have no antecedents, no established character, no cultivation, no ideas, no manners; have shares...Where does he come from? Shares. Where is he going to? Shares" (110). In the language here, shares *replace*

character, just as they do in the plot: shares are the visible corollary to the actual site of value in the novel, character.

In 1856, character and share-holding became inextricably linked with the passage of the Joint Stock Companies Act, and the Companies Act of 1862, two years before Dickens published *Our Mutual Friend.* As Andrew Miller writes in a reading of Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford*, the 1856 act "paradoxically retained for the corporation as a whole a legal facsimile of the undivided individual," and acknowledged that "the subjectivity of the corporation is entirely a fiction, [while simultaneously inisting] that we should nonetheless proceed as if the corporation were a person."[89] Corporations are the prototypical speculative characters, being literally speculative while insisting upon treatment as persons. Comprised of the shares held by their investors, this "legal facsimile" alters both conceptions of money and of character, an alteration Dickens reproduces in the character-system of *Our Mutual Friend.* A share of a joint stock company is essentially a part standing in for one's portion of say in the company's operations, and for one's corresponding take of the profit. Like a lock of hair which one would place a curse upon, the share represents the entire company in miniature, but upon a closer look it represents only a portion of a character whose existence is only a legal fiction.

Speculative character, then, is the procedure of incorporation writ small, where voodoo operates upon a representation of a person like the buying of shares in a company. That it is character which gets this treatment testifies both to the intricacies of the Dickensian method, where minorness and even fictionality itself over-attain value, and to the degree to which high capitalism engaged the discourse of personhood, *Our Mutual Friend* exhibits an intense anxiety about neither being able to distinguish between a real person and a speculative front, or whether

a person (or their name, or their body) might actually be made to "stand for Pounds, Shillings, and Pence!"

Nonetheless, Dickens confines this anxiety about character to a sort of basso continuo accompanying and underscoring the blatant (though largely irrelevant to the plot) "sums" and shares of the Veneering circle. The anxiety about shares is answered *by* shares, following the logic of "have no antecedents...have shares." In the same way that shares create a sum, and leave the referent understood, the novel's concern about the diminishing line between a real and a speculative person, and the confusion of the body with the character, is *screened for* by the discourse of shares, essentially dropping the antecedent, in the same way that Fanny Cleaver and Reginald get dropped. By expressing one anxiety about investment while concealing its deeper counterpart concerning character, Dickens collapses the logics of speculative investment and voodoo: although he drops the antecedent of anxiety about speculative characters, it is *through* this hidden and partial discourse that the system of character is articulated, reflexively generating a plot and a morality which exposes and bankrupts the participants of the overt investment plot.

This repression of the referent brings us finally to the intersection of character and language in the novel. In *Our Mutual Friend*, "calling" repeatedly trumps "naming," just as the speculative identity overrides the necessity of a person to back it up. The readerly belief that a character is a human being like his or herself repeatedly disintegrates, as what once was a character falls apart into a bundle of signs and referents so self-reflexive as never to have existed at all, other than *as* language. This is why the name is so powerful and so weak a tool for Dickens, because as language a name purports to represent a character in the most direct sense, but being made of the same stuff as character, one name is never sufficient and the signs multiply in frustration. This is why metonymy must always give way to synecdoche when Dickens comes

to character: in order to manifest a person from the endless referentiality of signs, there must be a stopping point which stands for the self. As with the Cheshire Cat in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a complete referent can be asserted merely by dropping it from the picture, juggling synecdoches in an illusion of signification. Character in Dickens and shares in finance capitalism work this way: betting in the margins of language for the chance to buy out a non-existent principal before the illusion that there is a final referent falls apart.

[1]Dickens, Charles. *Our Mutual Friend.* Modern Library: New York, 2002. p. 265. All subsequent citations will be given in parentheses.

[2]Trollope, Anthony. *An Autobiography.* University of California: Berkeley, 1947. p. 154.

[3]Forster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel.* Harcourt: New York, 1985.p. 72.

[4]Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 75.

[5]Gass, William . *Fiction and the Figures of Life.* David R. Godine: Boston, 1979. p. 38.

[6]Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life,* p. 52 (emphasis mine).

[7]Lynch, Deidre. *The Economy of Character.* University of Chicago: Chicago, 1998. p. 17.

[8].Woloch, Alex. *The One vs. The Many.* Princeton University: Princeton, 2003. p. 129.

[9]c.f.: Woloch: "Dickensian repetition is both local and intervallic: the minor character will typically repeat himself...several times in a single scene...and then repeat this repetition when he appears again." *One vs.the Many,* p. 167.

[10]Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men.* Columbia University: New York, 1985. p. 164.

[11]"Charley's offer of Lizzie to his schoolmaster represents the purest form of the male traffic in women." Sedgwick, *Between Men,* p. 167.

[12]Poovey, Mary. "Reading History in Literature: Speculation and Virtue in Our Mutual Friend" in volume IV of *Historical Criticism and the Challenge of Theory.* Janet Levarie Smarr, ed. University of Illinois: Urbana, 1993. p 67.

[13]Trollope, *Autobiography*, p. 154.

[14]Sedgwick. *Between Men*, p. 170.

[15]Burke, Kenneth. "Appendix D: Four Master Tropes" in *A Grammar of Motives*. Prentice-Hall: New York, 1945. p. 509.

[16]*Ibid.*

[17]*Oxford English Dictionary* online, entry: "synecdochism." www.oed.com.

[18] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p. 170.

[19]*Ibid.*

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[20]Gallagher, Catherine. "The Bio-economics of Character in *Our Mutual Friend.*" appeared in volume 3 of *Fragments for a History of the Human Body.* Michael Feher, ed. MIT: Cambridge, 1989. p. 353.

[21]Miller, Andrew. "Subjectivity Ltd: The Discourse of Liability on the Joint Stock Companies Act of 1856 and Gaskell's *Cranford.*" appeared in *ELH* 61, no. 1 (1994 Spring): p. 139-57.