“JANET! DONKEYS!”: BETSEY TROTWOOD’S UNCONVENTIONAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE MOTHER IN DAVID COPPERFIELD

by

Jill Mathews

An Abstract
of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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For a minor comic character, Betsey Trotwood of *David Copperfield* has received a large amount of critical attention. Betsey's firmness and her eccentricities cause many readers and critics to react negatively to her, but her kindness and her success as a single mother to David and Dick make her a likeable character at the same time, earning her quite a bit of positive critical attention. The combination of these unlikely traits in a female character allows Betsey to transcend the typical Victorian motherhood role. Dickens constructed Betsey as a character capable of growth and change, but one who never loses the ability to stand up for herself and thrive in a culture that expects women to stay in the home. To offer an explanation for the contradictory critical reactions she evokes, this paper examines the traditional Victorian motherhood role, Dickens's experiences with his own mother, and Betsey's unique position. Ultimately, the progressive characteristics that Dickens assigned to her allow for her to be a successful single mother in a world where women, wives, and mothers have little autonomy.

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INTRODUCTION

David Copperfield by Charles Dickens begins with the story of David's birth, and the introduction of his two mother figures: Clara Copperfield and Betsey Trotwood. *David Copperfield* comes to a close with David's reflections on Agnes, his wife and the mother of his children. The many intervening pages contain would-be mothers, ineffectual mothers, devoted mothers, and dead mothers. The most interesting, effective, and successful mother, though, is David's aunt Betsey Trotwood. As her title of "aunt" indicates, Betsey is not David's biological mother. Betsey adopts David when he needs a mother and serves as his unconventional guide through life. Betsey provides David with financial stability, an education, a career, moral guidance, and love. While it was common and expected for mothers to provide moral guidance and love in the Victorian era, the former half of the list was rather uncommon. Dickens uses Betsey to transform the role of a traditional Victorian mother from a passive, dependent woman into a woman able to combine both the maternal and paternal qualities that she needs to survive and thrive as a single mother. Betsey's contribution in the areas of finance and education add to her other male qualities (forthrightness, manner of dressing, etc.), setting her apart from her contemporaries. Some of these qualities manifest themselves in strange ways, like an abhorrence for donkeys walking on her lawn and a general distaste for all marriageable men, but Dickens uses Betsey's oddities of character to illustrate how she copes with this radical position in conservative Victorian society. Her controversial behavior provides some insight into why, as Emily Rena-Dozier states, "several of Dickens's contemporaries reacted to his interventions in the novel with contempt, a

contempt that they expressed in terms of a violation of gender boundaries" (Rena-Dozier 811). Indeed, Betsey Trotwood encompasses traits generally attributed to Victorian females as well as Victorian males, and she successfully manages a family while doing so. However, her violation of the gender boundaries ironically creates an odd but successful family unit.

Perhaps because Betsey is such an atypical Victorian character, critical attention paid to her has covered a broad spectrum. Michael Slater calls her "the domestic ideal of womanhood," while Shale Preston says she is "highly selfish" and "maternally bankrupt" (Slater 312; Preston 5, 83). Catherine J. Golden claims that "Dickens's depictions of women . . . seem startlingly lacking and thoroughly steeped in the traditional views of his times" (5). While she does not have anything particularly negative to say about Betsey specifically, she tucks her into a category reserved for redundant women, and argues that in opposition to "women authors-particularly Charlotte Brontë, who offers spirited Jane of *Jane Eyre* (1847), or George Eliot, who provides spunky, strong-willed Maggie Tulliver of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860)-Dickens idealizes the angelic woman" (6). Julia Saville, on the other hand, notes that Betsey is kind and moral, helping to shape David into a good man (786-87). In order to provide another lens through which to view Betsey, and to offer an explanation for the contradictory critical reactions she evokes, I will examine her unique position as a successful single mother and the progressive characteristics that Dickens assigned to her which allow for her success in a world where women, wives, and mothers have little autonomy.

CHARLES DICKENS'S OWN "GRUMPY, FRUMPY STORY"

In his biography of Dickens, Fred Kaplan explains that Dickens's parents, at the suggestion of a family friend, put him to work at Warren's Blacking, a factory where he earned six shillings a week (38). At this time, Dickens was twelve years old and his parents were seriously in debt. John Dickens, Dickens's father, went to prison for failure to pay his debts shortly after obtaining a position at the factory for Charles. While John was in prison, Dickens's mother Elizabeth, along with his younger siblings, lived in the Marshalsea prison with John. Dickens lived in lodgings with a family acquaintance, worked at the factory, and only saw his family on Sundays (41). The whole family relied on his earnings, so while his mother visited him often and must have seen how miserable he was, Dickens had to continue working. Once his father was released from prison, he enabled Dickens's release from the blacking factory, but Elizabeth strongly requested that he return (43-44). As a result, Dickens blamed his mother for his time as a child laborer, despite it being his father who went to debtor's prison and who was therefore unable to support his family.

Several Dickens scholars have noted the tense relationship that Dickens seemed to have with his own mother, especially in relation to his literary mothers. Natalie J. McKnight argues that Dickens "felt compelled to continually recreate the story of a mother's neglect or emotional abuse of a child and then to punish such mothers" (37). McKnight uses Clara Copperfield and Dora as her examples for the punishment of mothers in *David Copperfield*. She claims that these mothers are punished with death for their inadequacies, and that this punishment probably stems from Dickens's

disappointment in his mother when she sent him to the blacking factory as a child (47). John Carey also addresses this time in Dickens's life. He claims that Elizabeth Dickens is one of two women (the other being Maria Beadnell, Dickens's first love) that can account for the bias toward women found so often in Dickens's work. Carey claims that her presence in the warehouse during her visits to the twelve-year-old Dickens combined with her attempt to send him back to the factory after his father had him released served to solidify her guilt in her son's eyes (155). Michael Slater, in *Dickens and Women,* also closely examines the relationship that Dickens shared with his mother. Like McKnight and Carey, he finds the blacking factory incident to have left scars that appear in Dickens's literature. He points out that Dickens appeared to blame his mother more for his childhood woes than his father, and the resulting resentment and anger manifest themselves in the role that his mother plays in the semi-autobiographical *David Copperfield* (10).

Slater highlights several similarities between Elizabeth Dickens and Clara Copperfield. He claims that Clara "is a roseate vision of Dickens's earliest experience of his own pretty, vivacious, and loving mother with her fondness for dancing and gaiety" (19). While Clara is certainly youthful, cheerful, and loving, she is unable to take care of herself and is lost without her husband. Therefore, despite the ill effects his presence has on her son, she marries the dreadful Mr. Murdstone. Similarly, Elizabeth Dickens was ill-equipped to support herself and her children when her husband went to prison for his debts. She had to interrupt the education she had been providing for her son to send him to the blacking factory so that he could earn a wage (Slater 7,10). David's time in

Murdstone and Grinby, the factory to which Mr. Murdstone sends him, parallels Dickens's childhood experience at Warren's Blacking. The similarities between the two appear in Dickens's personal letters as well as in *David Copperfield*. In a letter to Maria Winter (previously Beadnell), Dickens claims that his mother "has a strong objection to being considered in the least old, and usually appears here on Christmas Day in a juvenile cap which takes an immense time in the putting on" (Paroissien108). While Elizabeth Dickens could not help but grow old, Charles Dickens allows Clara Copperfield to remain forever young. Her early death saves David from the humiliation that Dickens felt at having a silly, girlish old woman for a mother. However, Clara does live long enough to choose a bad man for a husband and to betray her son by subjecting him to life in a factory. David's father does not save him, but he cannot be blamed because he is dead before the story begins. David Copperfield's dead father and his mother's abandonment reflect Dickens's feelings of hostility toward a mother who did not save him and the exculpation he allows his father.

Indeed, familiarity with Dickens's childhood encourages connections to be made between his personal life and the characters in his novels, especially the semi-autobiographical *David Copperfield*. However, I find the relationship between David and his aunt Betsey much more interesting and enlightening than that between David and his biological mother, Clara Copperfield. Dickens uses his character Betsey Trotwood to critique the role into which Victorian society places women and mothers. In opposition to women such as Clara and Dora, Betsey has the strength to get rid of her no-good husband, to support herself and her servants, and to care for David and Mr. Dick when

she sees that they are in need. She manages to provide moral guidance while escaping the Victorian "angel in the house" stereotype. Because she embraces an alternative to the common Victorian gender binary of male and female roles, Betsey is the most effective mother in the novel. Whether Dickens was thinking of his mother's personal failings or not, he transforms the Victorian mother into a powerful and independent figure through Betsey.

GOOD ANGELS: TRADITIONAL VICTORIAN WIVES AND MOTHERS

The quintessential Victorian wife and mother reigned in the house. She took charge of the household: "leisure time, courtship procedures, and kinship relations, and under her jurisdiction the most basic qualities of human identity were supposed to develop" (Armstrong 3). Victorian domestic wives and mothers had clear roles to fulfill, and they were generally exactly opposite and complementary to those of their husbands. Men obtained goods while their wives saved them, men earned a living and provided for the family while women saved and oversaw spending, and men "dispatch[ed] all things outdoors" while women would "oversee and give orders within" (Armstrong 18). Therefore, the roles of Victorian mothers were reinforced by the roles that their husbands fulfilled. If the husband earned money outside the home, then the wife would take care of matters inside the home. Women like Isabella Beeton and Sara Stickney Ellis also reinforced the existing gender dynamics by writing conduct books about women's roles in England.

Conduct books provided moral instruction, defined women's roles within marriage, and played a part in the construction of gender roles (Shoemaker 21). These conduct books started rising in popularity in the sixteenth century, but became widely read in the Victorian era (Shoemaker 21-22). Ellis wrote such conduct books as *The Mothers of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*, *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character, and Responsibilities*, and *The Wives of England: Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations*. As their titles indicate, these works focused on women and made clear that women were meant to

make things comfortable for the men and children in their lives. In Ellis's widely popular conduct book *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*, she states that "the women of England are deteriorating in their moral character" (10). Ellis goes on to moralize about proper behavior, to provide recipes and directions for cooking meals suited to feed families, to give advice on raising children, and to give the proper procedures in cases of emergencies. She tells women that they must not only fulfill this role that providence has assigned to them, but they must do so pleasantly, so as not to be a "cold and cheerless companion" (23). The titles of Ellis's conduct books make clear that all women, whether daughters, mothers, or wives, must abide by strict gender rules in order to avoid "deteriorating" any more than they have already. They must happily fill this divinely assigned part, first learning their position in society as daughters, then stepping into it to fulfill their domestic duties as wives and mothers.

Isabella Beeton used her conduct book, *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management,* to convey similar ideas. She believed women had been purposefully formed to serve in the home. She says, "nature, as a general rule, has endowed all female creation with the attributes necessary to that most beautiful and, at the same time, holiest function,--the healthy rearing of their offspring" (478). Like Sarah Stickney Ellis, Beeton provided advice on all facets of a woman's life, including fashion, cooking, caring for children, managing servants, and running the household. In her preface, Beeton warns women against a common source of discontent in the home: "a housewife's badly-cooked dinners and untidy ways" (3). She claims that to keep men happy at home, and thus to prevent them from seeking happiness outside the home, "a mistress must be thoroughly

acquainted with the theory and practice of cookery, as well as be perfectly conversant with all the other arts of making and keeping a comfortable home" (3). The responsibility as well as the power to run a household and keep her family happy fell entirely to the woman of the house. As Leonore Davidoff indicates in "Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England," men and women often had very little knowledge of the work that the other performed. Their spheres were separate, and the culture encouraged this. Indeed, often women felt great pride "in the knowledge of her power to run the household and control the family's affairs, of her importance as the mainstay of family life" (419). Maintaining this pride in satisfying her family created more pressure to live up to the standards set by those like Beeton and Ellis, helping to reinforce the gender dynamics already in place.

Magazines directed at mothers also became popular ways to illustrate proper behavior to women in the nineteenth century. In her study of periodicals addressed to mothers in the nineteenth century, Margaret Beetham finds that "from the 1830s onwards, publications which specifically addressed 'mothers' as readers/purchasers emerged." These magazines, like conduct books, offered definitions of motherhood, and "sought not only to address mothers but also to offer more or less explicitly a normative account of motherhood" (Beetham 3). These periodicals emphasized that the traditional Victorian day-to-day domestic functions were responsibilities of the mother and created a community of women who reinforced this idea through their own contributions to the magazines. Women from Britain, America, and as far away as India would write in to the magazine with personal stories. Beetham says, "These journals represented a model

of motherhood that transcended the boundaries of time and space" through the international readership and contributions (15). These glimpses into the lives of their peers provided by reader contributions created a kind of solidarity for those women who filled the traditional motherhood role.

BETSEY TROTWOOD REDEFINES MOTHERHOOD

David Copperfield's great aunt Betsey Trotwood experiences a very different role in motherhood and thus enjoys no such solidarity with other Victorian women. In fact, she lives a secluded lifestyle, which shows that Dickens understood that she would not have fit in with the middle-class, religious mothers who read conduct books and motherhood magazines. The readership of these magazines consisted almost exclusively of women, and mainly of middle-class Evangelicals (Beetham 6). Ellis specifically states that *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* is aimed at those women who have between one and four domestics and live comfortably (19). While Betsey belongs to the same demographics that the magazines and conduct books would have been targeting, her actions and lifestyle prevent her from associating with the kind of mothers reading and contributing to those publications. Aunt Betsey throws out her abusive, worthless husband (although still secretly supports him financially), adopts a middle-aged man of questionable sanity, and faces down a firm man and his sister to adopt her great-nephew. She has an obsession with the non-existent little Betsey Trotwood (her namesake, of course), wears a gentlemen's watch, and stalks around everywhere she goes (Dickens 189). The women reading motherhood magazines would have been shocked and offended at such a direct contradiction of the accepted behavior clearly outlined by Ellis, Beeton, and magazines such as *The English Woman's Domestic Magazine*. Evangelicals, as Allen Horstman explains, founded the Society for the Suppression of Vice which gained popularity around the beginning of the nineteenth century. The society's purpose was to suppress all manners of vice in English society,

such as the theater, obscenities, the violation of the Sabbath, and other such behavior (21). By the time *David Copperfield* was published, Evangelicalism was extremely popular; Betsey's peers would not have condoned her unorthodox behavior.

The previously listed traits, along with her blatant preference for girls and her faintly manly physical features compel Catherine J. Golden to place Betsey in her "eccentric" category for Dickensian women (16). Golden claims that "the eccentric woman emerges as the most intriguing of the Dickensian types, revealing an inversion in values of Victorian culture" (6). As noted above, Betsey does invert several Victorian values, especially those relating to the role of motherhood, but she transcends the boundaries of Golden's category. Golden reserves her eccentric category for widows, redundant women, and those perceived as celibate (13). Betsey is indeed perceived as celibate and certainly has many eccentricities, but perhaps Golden needs a broader range of categories in order to accurately place Betsey. She clearly does not fit the mold for angels or fallen sisters, but because she states that eccentric women "cannot truly appear as heroines in the eyes of a feminist readership today," she does not belong in that category either (17). Golden states that Betsey is "deficient in Dickens's eyes" as proven by his emphasis on her failings and eccentricities (17). While she lives in an "inflexible retirement," yelling at donkeys and raising two unconventional children, Dickens's emphasis on her inversion of Victorian values reveals the ways in which Betsey transforms the motherhood role from one that revolves around serving husbands and children to one that allows a powerful, autonomous mother (Dickens 3).

One of Betsey's major oddities is her adoption of Mr. Dick. Betsey is somehow distantly related to him, and shortly after David's sister, little Betsey, disappoints her by failing to be born, she hears of Mr. Dick's being shut up in an asylum by his brother. Although she is not Mr. Dick's biological mother, she makes a successful adopted mother because she "knows what the man's mind is" and eventually "gets" him from his brother (Dickens 199). She cares for him, finds him employment, and as Gareth Cordery states, subjects him to "a regime of bourgeois domesticity," which includes teaching him about proper bathing, clothing, and sleeping patterns (73). So while Betsey varies greatly from the Victorian motherhood magazine contributors in the way she obtains and raises her children, she shares some similarities with them as well. She completely disregards the place she is supposed to occupy in Victorian society. She does, however, embrace some of the popular bourgeois beliefs of the day and pass those on to David and Dick. Cordery highlights how Dick's replies to her questions regarding what to do with David embody the Victorian virtues of "cleanliness, respectable appearance, and purity" (73).

Mr. Dick is certainly not the typical Victorian child, and by assigning him to Betsey's care, Dickens promotes the atypical mother role that Betsey must fill to meet his needs. Gareth Cordery provides a Foucaldian reading of *David Copperfield* and states that Betsey furnishes the same social discipline that David receives at the hands of the Murdstone's, but in a "more subtle and persuasive" style (73). The persuasion he refers to is that of the rewards that Mr. Dick (and later David) receives for conforming to bourgeois values: "good food, clean sheets, and new clothes" (73). Any mother that could provide them for her children, however, would render those rewards. Motherly

love and responsibility, rather than Betsey herself, are to blame for providing those necessities. Cordery illustrates several similarities of appearance and character between the Murdstones and Betsey, but he does admit that she "rescues" Dick and David from an insane asylum and Creakle's school, respectively (74). Additionally, while Betsey does encourage the traditional bourgeois Victorian values of cleanliness and respectable appearances, she completely shirks many others and occasionally even neglects her usual duties in favor of fulfilling those responsibilities required by her nontraditional role.

Betsey has faith in Mr. Dick's faculties and in her own ability to understand and guide him. She tells David that he is "not a morsel" out of his mind and often reminds Mr. Dick to act respectably through verbal cues (Dickens 199). He proves her right about her teaching ability and his own capacity for understanding by reading her cues and having complete faith in her in return. When she introduces him to the Murdstones, she tells them that he is "an old and intimate friend. On whose judgment . . . I rely" (Dickens 204). He realizes by her pointed tone that he needs to straighten up and act like someone on whom she would rely, so he takes his finger out of his mouth and stands looking grave and gentleman-like. The verbal cues that Betsey provides to Dick also give the readers an indication that Betsey is teaching him how to behave in a way that will allow him to function in society. These clues contradict the argument that Natalie J. McKnight makes about how Betsey "bows to the advice of the man of the house, even though he's an idiot" (48). McKnight argues that the kind of mother who defers to a man is the only "kind of maternal authority that Dickens can stomach" (48). However, Dickens gives clear textual evidence that Betsey is guiding Dick, not submitting to him. This evidence

includes the aforementioned verbal cues, the admission that he is eccentric and has an "illness" to deal with, and her need to find employment for him. Hers is clearly a motherly role with Mr. Dick, not a submissive one (Dickens 200).

Normally, Victorian mothers are the primary caretakers of their children, especially the boys, only until the age of around seven. At that point, the fathers begin to participate in the parenting, preparing them for employment and life outside the home (Shoemaker 123). Betsey sets the stage for her transformation of the mother role by turning that tradition upside down. She does not start caring for Mr. Dick and David until both are past the age of seven, and she provides them with employment when the appropriate time comes. For Mr. Dick, that time is right away. Mr. Dick has no financial need to work since Betsey provides for him, so he fills his time writing his memorial. Betsey keeps him busy writing for over ten years as she insists he keep King Charles the First from intruding upon it. She explains that he uses the king as his "allegorical way of expressing" his illness (Dickens 200). In this way, Betsey performs what would normally be considered a task of the father, finding employment, as well as a task of the mother, teaching Mr. Dick that referring to Charles the First is "not a business-like way of speaking" and that he must learn to control it (Dickens 200). These preparations help Dick learn to negotiate the world successfully.

Betsey also provides David with a career. She sends him to school so that he can earn an education and then encourages him to visit Peggotty when he has finished school in order to get new perspective and make a good decision about his career (Dickens 267). Later, when he finally decides to become a proctor, his aunt offers to pay the thousand

pounds it will take to get his articles. David tells her quite correctly that she has been "the soul of generosity" (Dickens 338). By performing these actions, Betsey plays the part of the traditional mother and father, satisfying David and Mr. Dick's needs in exactly the ways required.

The very nature of the motherhood that she embraces defies the usual rules. She is a woman living on her own and supporting herself with her own funds. She runs her own household, both inside and out, and makes all of her own decisions. She adopts a very unlikely dependent in Mr. Dick and ends up adopting David only by standing up to and vanquishing a man of very firm character. Betsey's complete disregard of societal rules sets her apart from her contemporaries, which makes her quite likable for a modern readership that may not easily relate to the Victorian ideal of womanhood. However, the strength that enables Betsey to live a different kind of lifestyle makes her accomplishments believable while also contributing to those characteristics that encourage negative critical attention. Betsey's sharpness with Clara during her first appearance in the novel and her no-nonsense authoritarian manner throughout allows for the unfavorable reception that many critics give her. David does, as Cordery says, pass "from one authority to another" when Betsey adopts him (73). This role of motherly authority that Betsey fills highlights her lack of another of those characteristics that Victorian mothers are supposed to possess: passivity.

When David initially arrives to the breakfast table after the first night spent in his aunt's house, he notices that Betsey sits at the table musing, allowing the teapot to overflow and soak the tablecloth completely. He strongly suspects that she is thinking

about him, and she mostly confirms his thought by opening the conversation with the fact that she has written to Mr. Murdstone (Dickens 195). After breakfast she atones for her lapse with the teapot by cleaning everything minutely. The scene indicates, however, that Betsey must compromise on some of these typically female duties occasionally, as she takes on the added responsibilities required by her alteration of the Victorian motherhood role. She cannot sit back passively, reliant on a husband to make the plans for her family; she must make them herself. After she has thought for a while, she speaks to David, cleans up, and then sends him upstairs to get to know her first adopted son, Mr. Dick (Dickens 196).

Despite her care and adoption of two distantly related men, Shale Preston evaluates Betsey's love as "highly conditional and selfish" (83). She claims that Dickens "subtly works to show that she is maternally bankrupt" and that she is less "well meaning" toward David than is Mr. Dick (5). Betsey is not maternally bankrupt, however; she is simply nontraditional. As Gail Terley Houston points out, Dickens uses Betsey as David's mouthpiece in order to share with the reader the "benign neglect" to which David has been subjected (104). Betsey is the only adult who recognizes Clara's inefficiency as a mother and her inability to save David from the abuses that he suffers at the factory and at the hands of his schoolmaster. If Betsey were maternally bankrupt, she would not be able to identify Clara's shortcomings in mothering skills. Betsey has the compassion to realize that Clara's mistakes are mainly due to her age. She is, after all, an unfortunate baby, failing at first because of her inexperience (and that of David Copperfield the older) and then because Mr. Murdstone bullies and intimidates her

(Dickens 8, 51). She cares for Clara during her trial of childbirth, not leaving until she knows that both mother and child have made it safely through. At that point, her disappointment in the child being David and not Betsey overcomes her (Dickens 11-12). She makes up for her abandonment of David at the first possible opportunity, when he presents himself to her in the garden. Natalie E. and Ronald A. Schroeder claim that David's first experiences with Betsey are comparable to his experiences with the Murdstones, saying her gruff behavior "terrifies him into uncontrollable crying" (271). Indeed, she does meet David with a harsh attitude, telling him to "Go along! No boys here!" However, when he reveals himself to be her nephew, she sits down to evaluate the information, and he feels a sense of release as he is finally able to give vent to the crying which "had been pent up within [him] all week" (Dickens 187). She then administers several restoratives to David when she sees what state he is in, including, David believes, salad dressing, anchovy sauce, and aniseed water (Dickens 187). These may not be the ideal items to renew David's strength, but her mad rush through the cabinets to provide *something* for him indicates the strength of Betsey's maternal instinct to provide comfort as well as her unconventional attitude.

Betsey's silence regarding David's immediate future provides another refutation of Preston's claim of maternal bankruptcy. Betsey avoids making any immediate decisions about David's future and simply tries to make him comfortable. Her silence allows Mr. Dick to speak and allows herself to avoid making David a promise that could severely upset him should she not be able to keep it. She encourages Mr. Dick by telling him he is "sharp as a surgeon's lancet" and asks his advice on what to do with David:

"Come! I want some very sound advice" (Dickens 188-189). Her silence in the matter gives him a chance to exercise what she has taught him about proper behavior and makes him feel included, a very thoughtful and motherly action to take. Preston insists that Mr. Dick "miraculously happens to possess excellent moral judgment" and that Betsey "becomes wholly reliant upon his wisdom" (85). In fact, Betsey, not a miracle, is responsible for his excellent moral judgment. The text confirms this reading through Betsey's "grave look and her forefinger held up," more clues to Mr. Dick that he should not "pretend to be wool-gathering" when she has previously taught him the proper answer (Dickens 189). Allowing Mr. Dick to answer the surface question of what to do with David does not demonstrate reliance upon him. Instead, it illustrates Betsey's deeper understanding of the situation. She does not want to promise David that he can stay with her only to disappoint him later if it turns out to be impossible for her to keep him. Until she has spoken with the Murdstones, she must postpone answering that question for the sake of David's feelings. She knows that Mr. Dick will provide a more simple and straightforward solution, buying her some time until she can make the final decision.

Normally, a drastic change to the family, like the addition of a distant relative, would be made by the man of the house. Instead, to the great relief of David and the readers, Betsey defies social convention and makes the decision herself. When she firmly tells Mr. Murdstone to leave David with her, he starts to question the legitimacy of her decision and actions by implying that were she of a different sex, he would challenge her to a duel: "If you were a gentleman—." She immediately lets Mr. Murdstone and the

readers know how absurd she finds this custom by exclaiming "[s]tuff and nonsense!" Miss Murdstone then makes another reference to Betsey stepping out of her traditional place by sarcastically noting how polite she has been (Dickens 207). If Betsey were a traditional Victorian mother, she would show polite deference to the wishes of her husband, and he being absent, to Mr. Murdstone. Both of the Murdstones draw attention to Betsey's nonconformist behavior. At the time, David and the readers believe that she is a widow, so her behavior is a little less shocking as she does not have a husband to whom she can defer. However, after she tells her "grumpy, frumpy story," her true transformation of the motherhood role becomes apparent (Dickens 670).

Before the readers get that story, though, we see Betsey fulfilling more duties that would normally fall to a man. Early Victorian women were often represented in fiction as the angel in the house, as in Coventry Patmore's poem of that name (Shoemaker 42). A Victorian wife and mother should preside over the children and make the home a sanctuary of morality. These angels did not have to worry about the outside world; their husbands did that for them. Betsey, however, must preside over her home both indoors and out. She has no one to worry for her, so she must worry enough for herself and her unconventional family. Several of those worries turn into odd obsessions. Out of context, her little obsessions seem funny to David as well as to the reader, but when her position as caretaker of her family is taken into consideration, they seem a bit more reasonable. Dickens chooses a humorous and ridiculous way for Betsey to fill the part of the protector of the home, making it easier for readers to believe and accept her in the part: she shrieks at and chases off any donkey that gets near the patch of grass in front of

her house. She also protects Janet (and those who served before her) from prowling men outside of the house. While away on her trip to London to visit David, readers find that she also worries that "every house in London was going to be burnt down every night," so she sensibly stays only in houses that have stone staircases and doors opening to the roof (Dickens 336).

She seems to care for nothing so much as preventing donkeys from "trespassing" on her green (Dickens 337). Any time that one of the unlucky creatures dares to place a hoof upon it, she becomes "rigid with indignation" and yells "Janet! Donkies!" until Janet appears to help her chase them off (190). The two ladies do not stop at chasing, either. If the donkeys prove stubborn (which they usually do), they grab them by the bridles and drag them off, taking the opportunity to box the ears of the donkey's attendant (Dickens 190). During her visit to David in London when he is preparing himself for a career, she worries that "Dick's character is not a character to keep the donkies off" (Dickens 337). I suspect that while it may be difficult to keep a yard in shape with donkeys running all over it, the donkeys are not what Betsey is really trying to keep away. The donkeys are a stand-in for anyone trying to upset her family circle. Betsey, as an independent single mother coping with her evolved role, clearly feels strongly about intruders, and her fear is not unfounded. Betsey says that only after much "squabbling" did she get Mr. Dick from his biological family (199). Dickens's word choices give the impression that Mr. Dick's brother is not happy with the arrangement, and so it seems reasonable that she would be nervous about them trying to get him back.

Betsey must fight to keep David as well. She conquers the Murdstones when they come to take David away from her, but she still faces societal gender restrictions every day. Just as she objects to the donkeys, she objects to the binary that exists between the genders, dictating how she must behave as wife and mother. While women like Dora and her aunts promote the ideal of the sweet, pure, and moral angel in the house, Betsey sees those like Jane Murdstone as more of an enemy toward the broadening of gender expectations. Her biggest worry while away from London is that Dick will not be able to keep Miss Murdstone's donkey off of the grass: "If there is any donkey in Dover whose audacity it is harder to me to bear than another's, that . . . is the animal!" (Dickens 337). Her constant vexation over this particular stumpy-tailed donkey indicates not only her worry about someone breaking into her life and her home, but specifically Jane Murdstone doing so.

Jane embodies the inflexible social restrictions that women like Betsey face. Some critics, particularly the Schroeders, view Jane and Betsey as doubles. They do share a certain firmness of character and both embrace some characteristics considered as manly by Victorians, but Betsey encourages the rethinking of gender roles while Jane reinforces those already in place. With her mannish features and firmness of character, Jane is almost the twin of her brother, "whom she greatly resembled in face and voice" (Dickens 45). Jane is really an extension in female form of her brother, who employs child laborers under extremely harsh conditions in his factory and whom Betsey considers to be the murderer of the helpless Clara. The Murdstone siblings are similar in their dislike of David and their subjugation of Clara. Jane tells Clara that she is "much

too pretty and thoughtless" to be responsible for any duties in the house (Dickens 46). She bullies Clara into relinquishing the little bit of power that she holds in her home and over her child and manages to make life dreadful for both Clara and David (46-52). Jane is a strong, firm, female character, but she does her best to uphold the gender norms of the day, despite the fact that she herself does not fit into them. She believes her brother should rule unquestioned and that the pretty wife and mother should do nothing but please her husband. Under the guise of being helpful, she allows Clara no authority in her home, not even allowing her access to the keys (Dickens 46). When Clara questions a decision made by herself and her brother, Jane determines that she can no longer live in the house and announces her departure. The announcement has the desired effect and Clara decides she does not need to be consulted by Mr. Murdstone after all. Jane can then stay in the house as Clara has returned to her subordinate position (47-48). Betsey, on the other hand, supports her fellow women instead of subjugating them, as evidenced by her mentorship of her domestic servants and her kind treatment of Dora and her aunts. The great difference between Betsey and Jane is not that Betsey's masculinity "appertains most clearly to her clothing" and that "she retains traces of something distinctly feminine," as the Schroeders contend, but that Betsey manages to meld the traditional masculine and feminine family roles into one, and fill that role well (271). In David's concluding chapter, he mentions that his aunt "not at all relented toward the donkeys" (838). Betsey alters her frame of mind on several issues throughout the novel, but never on donkeys. She continues to rebel against unfair social mores and those, like the Murdstones, who promote them.

Although she makes a tremendous effort with the donkeys, Betsey cannot quite protect her home and family from all the outside forces working against them. Indeed, she cannot keep the young men entirely away from her cottage. One of the "gravest misdemeanors that could be committed against [Betsey's] dignity" is that of young men walking by her cottage and "ogling" Janet (Dickens 201). She becomes extremely indignant when this happens, especially as Janet is one in a series of young women that she takes into service "expressly to educate in a renouncement of mankind" (190). Interestingly, she says "mankind" instead of simply "men." Betsey thinks quite highly of both Mr. Dick and David, and at one time she married. Even after that disastrous marriage she seemed to feel grudging good humor toward David Copperfield senior rather than hate, indicating that she does not in fact hate all males (Dickens 6). Her word choice and her actions indicate a broader meaning underneath her education of renunciation. Betsey's longing for a girl child to bear her name and her education of the housekeepers are actually her efforts toward a renouncement of the intolerance she meets in people like the Murdstones. Jane and her brother embody the traditional Victorian attitude which restricts women like Betsey from succeeding without men in their lives. Betsey chooses to embrace less harmful absurdities, like chasing donkeys and harboring an extreme longing for a surrogate daughter, instead of the more restrictive absurdities accepted in society. She succeeds as a role model for Janet, though, as illustrated by Janet's choice to continue working instead of marrying the pilot whom she did not like (Dickens 545). Many Victorian women would have married him because society expects it, but Janet does what suits her best and rejects him. David's summation of Betsey's

success with past domestic servants seems a bit tongue-in-cheek as he says the girls "complete their abjuration by marrying the baker" (190). However, if the baker turns out to be a tolerant and accepting fellow, then Betsey was ultimately successful.

While Betsey makes a good role model for Janet and her other servants, she does not meet with complete success in her own love life. David and Dick witness a mysterious stranger harassing Betsey and taking her money at the cottage and in London. She eventually explains her perplexing encounters with the stranger that Mr. Dick and David witness by confessing that despite the use of her maiden name and the personal title 'Miss,' Betsey is in fact a married woman, and the shabby stranger is her husband (Dickens 699). She tells David that she loved him "right well," and that "she believed in that man most entirely." However, when he treated her cruelly and ruined her fortune, she left him (Dickens 670). As opposed to Clara and Dora, who simply bore their husbands' bad behavior and then let them off easily by dying, she stands up for herself. Betsey forces this unnamed man to leave and pays him well, although he "made ducks and drakes" of what she gave him. Instead of having him punished for his continued shameful activities, she carries on supporting him monetarily (Dickens 670). Betsey does, after all, turn out to be quite a sentimentalist, despite her numerous protestations to the contrary.

In fact, Kelly Hager argues that at the end of the day, Betsey is just another typical Victorian wife. She says, "For all her independence and strength, Miss Betsey looks quite traditional at the end of the novel. . . Despite the fact that she has left her husband (or perhaps in an attempt to disguise this fact), we have a Miss Betsey who has

always loved her husband" (1005). Her actions, while criticized by Hager for being too soft, were in fact quite a feat for a middle-class Victorian woman. After all, "life outside marriage was far more difficult for women than for men" (Shoemaker 143). Betsey has to live as a single woman, with no one to help her bear the burdens of everyday life while supporting two men as sons and taking on the financial burden of a man who has no pecuniary responsibility. Her ability to handle life for herself, Mr. Dick, and David makes her an outcast among her would-be peers, those women who would read and contribute to the motherhood magazines of the day. Betsey's renunciation of the love she cannot stop feeling for her husband emphasizes the strength it takes to stay away from him.

The institution of marriage had, by the time of *David Copperfield's* publication, come under attack by those such as Godwin, Shelley, Byron, and Southey, but it still held sway over most of the Victorian population (Perkin 207). Dickens himself clearly believed that society should view divorce in a more forgiving light as he created such a sympathetic character in obvious need of a divorce. Just a few years later in 1857 (the very same year the Divorce Bill passed) Dickens obtained a divorce from his own wife (Horstman 113). By rewriting the part of motherhood as one that can be fulfilled by a single woman with no biological children, Dickens also undermines the institution of marriage. After all, one of the three goals of marriage in the nineteenth century was procreation (Perkin 236). If Betsey does not need to procreate and is able to care for her adopted children alone, then she has no need for marriage. The trouble for Betsey, though, is that she does not come to this realization until after she has already said her

vows. At that point, she cannot get out of the marriage easily. Except for the aristocracy, it was almost impossible to get a divorce before 1857, especially for a woman (Perkin 23). Betsey's previous marriage, though, makes her role as single mother all the more controversial because she chooses it. Although Kelly Hager argues that Dickens presents Betsey as a loyal wife because of her continued affection toward her husband, Betsey's conduct-book-reading peers would not have felt the same (1005). Kicking her husband out of her house would have been unheard of, regardless of the amount of money she gave him. Betsey does show continued affection toward her husband, illustrated by the financial support, the lack of a legal separation, and her attendance at his funeral, but these signs of affection make her all the more remarkable for doing the right thing in the face of society and her own personal feelings. Betsey's noncompliance with the social rules makes her an effective woman, but also an eccentric one by Victorian standards.

Once readers know Betsey's story, it is easy to look back and ascribe the compassion she shows to Clara and to Dora to her own woes. As illustrated by her reaction to Mr. Murdstone's marriage to Clara, she clearly has an agenda against marriages where wives are dominated by their husbands. She also has big plans for inculcating little Betsey, whom neither Clara nor Dora can manage to produce. Even though Dickens highlights the ineptitude of the typical Victorian, middle-class wife and mother in Clara and Dora, he shows kindness and compassion for them through Betsey. Sharp as she is with Clara when she meets her for the first time, she does, as noted earlier, allow her the excuses of age and inexperience. She also stands up for her to Mr. Murdstone when he tries to take David. She tells him in reference to Clara, "Do you

think I don’t know . . . what kind of life you must have led that poor, unhappy, misdirected baby?” (Dickens 207). Her defense of Clara shows lenience toward Clara’s failure to David by taking into consideration the outside forces that she faced. Middle-class Victorian expectations make it impossible for Clara, weak-willed as she is, to fight back against Mr. Murdstone. As the husband, he rules the relationship as well as Clara’s, David’s, and even his sister Jane’s lives. Betsey does not hate Clara for it; she simply tries to fix the broken system by standing up to it herself. As Julia Saville notes, Betsey “is a reformer . . . in the moral sense of making the world better, where ‘better’ has the ring of genteel, middle-class, Christian humanism” (788). Cruelty to Clara would not make the world a better place, and that is what Betsey tries to do through her progressive stance on marriage and motherhood.

Betsey gives readers another example of her attempt to make the world better through Dora. First, she expresses her doubts about Dora’s and David’s suitability for each other through a couple of questions. She asks David if he fancies himself in love, if Dora is not silly, nor just a bit light-headed. David responds without considering the real answers to these questions, just as he never thought about them before Betsey asked (Dickens 489). She shows great restraint, though, and does not question him again. She makes an effort to befriend Dora and her aunts, showing a clear progression from her marriage-halting campaigns with her servants to tolerance and understanding with David and Dora. Granted, since she herself has influenced David, she does not have to worry about propagating the type of marriage that she herself was in. She ultimately acts very kindly toward Dora, rechristening her (as she does with Mr. Dick and David) with a more

suitable name and by giving David very motherly advice in her defense. She calls Dora "Little Blossom" in reference to her tenderness and she encourages David to take her as she is (Dickens 588). She refuses to try to mold Dora's character into something that it is not, even though David is asking her to help give Dora some sense and practicality, virtues highly valued by Betsey (Dickens 621). Betsey is good enough to realize that while she herself can function in the world without someone taking care of her, not everyone can. She tells David that he must "estimate her by the qualities she has . . . and not by the qualities she may not have" (Dickens 622). Gwendolyn B. Needham states that by doing so, Betsey is "extending the charitable love to Dora that she had denied to Mrs. Copperfield" (88). In fact, as previously argued, Betsey does show kindness and compassion to Clara. With the memory of her own nightmarish marriage being fresh in her mind, she simply does not have the distance with Clara that she does with Dora, which makes her kindness a little less obvious.

Dora is almost the exact opposite of Betsey. She is extremely feminized, silly, and utterly helpless. When David declares to her that he is ruined, she says, "I declare I'll make Jip bite you! . . . If you are so ridiculous" (Dickens 524). Instead of facing the matter with practicality as Betsey does, she simply denies that there can be a problem. She has no idea how to keep house, and when David asks her to correct the hired help, she absolutely refuses, saying that she cannot do it because she is "such a little goose." Although David does not understand why this precludes her from chastising Mary Anne, he knows he will get no farther and so allows her to draw on his face instead (Dickens 619). Dora is completely incompetent in almost every aspect of her life and lacks the

intelligence to realize her shortcomings. McKnight claims that the "docile girl-women" in Dickens's novels "seem the embodiment of ideals established in female guidebooks like those by Sarah Ellis or Mrs. Beeton" (42). Indeed, Dora seems to exist only to please her father, her aunts, and David. She frolics around with her little pet Jip and behaves just like a little pet herself. According to the moral guidebooks of the day, for women "the first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men—inferior in mental power, in the same proportion that you are inferior in bodily strength" (Ellis, *Daughters* 11). Dora embraces this doctrine to the fullest, and certainly everyone around her encourages it. Betsey's strength of character, her ability to navigate life successfully without a husband, and her success in guiding two men through difficult lives all stand in stark contrast to Dora's oblivious adherence to society's gender restrictions. Reading Dora through the lens of Betsey provides insight into what Dickens must have viewed as the consequences of readers taking societal guidelines too seriously. One would think that Betsey would be immediately turned off by Dora, but instead she shows sympathy for her fellow woman in the face of what society has turned her into. Dickens uses Dora to illustrate how impossible it was for Victorian women to fulfill the image of the child-like angel in the house and also be effective wives and mothers.

David falls in love with Dora as soon as he sees her and immediately loves her "to distraction" (379). Since David does not actually get to know Dora before he falls in love with her, he bases his affections entirely on what he projects onto her. He later admits, "I don't think I had any definite idea where Dora came from," and that he often "sought consolation in the image of Dora" (461). Dora has no character of her own; she

simply lives the role that Victorian society has impressed upon her. As Patricia Ingham says, Dora "is seen not as subject nor even as object but as adverb. Though 'idealized' she does not matter" (21). Her father and then her aunts simply want her to be a pretty little girl, living up to Ellis's expectations for young, middle class Victorian daughters. At first, David loves that Dora is an empty vessel because then he is free to love her for everything he can imagine her to be. But before he marries her, he realizes that everyone in her life treats her like "a pretty toy or plaything" (588). David then "reveals" the way people treat Dora, as if she herself did not realize it. He selfishly tells her she ought to encourage different behavior from those around her because she "is not a child" (588). Predictably, she does not react well to this, and David chooses to leave the subject alone. David feels trapped by Dora because he has already committed to her, but Betsey lets him know that he is not the only person trapped by convention when she tells him that he must take Dora for who she is and not try to make her someone she is not. Her treatment of Dora must contribute to why Slater claims that Dickens individualizes Betsey so successfully that "she not only fully humanizes her moral-allegorical role . . . but she also compels us to suspend our disbelief in the existence of real-life fairy god-mothers" (275). Granted, *David Copperfield* is not real life, and Betsey is a character that Dickens invented, but I think I understand Slater's point. Her kindness to Dora, a girl so opposite to herself in nature, as well as her effectiveness as a single mother in spite of the restrictive societal norms imposed upon her, create an almost supernatural character.

John Carey believes that Dickens based Dora on Maria Beadnell, his first love (156). David's immediate and reasonless love for Dora and then his immense

disappointment in her when she turns out to be exactly what she appeared to be embodies Dickens's critique of the traditional Victorian mother. Women who grow up reading Ellis's *Daughters of England* never really learn how to be an effective woman. Like Clara, Dora is attractive to her mate, but when it comes to parenting, she is a complete failure. Dickens knows that Dora is really no match for his protagonist, so Dora dies before she gets a chance to be a mother. She highlights how silly the Victorian role really is. David's story turns out better than Dickens's: he initially gets to marry her, and then when he realizes what a mistake he has made, she dies and he gets to marry the woman he really wants to. While on the surface Dora fits everyone's idealized expectation of the Victorian wife and mother, she is in fact not suitable for anything other than playing and being admired. When she actually becomes a wife and is then expected to be a mother, she cannot adapt and therefore dies.

CONCLUSION

Betsey's growth through the novel is especially noticeable when contrasting her kindnesses to the two childish wives. Betsey first appears as a stiff, uncompromising, and unsympathetic character insistent on pointing out Clara's deficiencies. However, her appearance at Clara's house during a time of need is itself an indicator that she cares about Clara and her baby. Betsey has the incredible strength and firmness to ignore convention with a deep sense of love and caring, making it possible for her to mother two men. Her dynamic character, while simultaneously endearing and frightening, allows her to adjust to circumstances as necessary in order to provide David and Mr. Dick with a loving and structured home. By the time she meets Dora, Betsey has become more tolerant, and is able to show the kindness that she feels toward her in a more understandable way than she was able to with Clara. She remains firm throughout, though, fighting off donkeys, securing education and careers, managing her home, and providing sound advice.

Her success is most evident, however, in those changes she does not make. Betsey never conforms to the ideal Victorian woman that society wants. She maintains those traits of character that she needs to be successful regardless of gender violations, she remains firm and querulous, and her love for Mr. Dick and David never fades. Dickens constructed Betsey as a character capable of growth and change, but one who never loses the ability to stand up for herself and thrive in a culture that expects women to stay in the home. Betsey's firmness and her eccentricities cause many readers and critics to react negatively to her, but her kindness and her success as a single mother

to David and Dick make her a likeable character at the same time. The combination of these unlikely traits in a female character allows Betsey to transcend the typical Victorian motherhood role.

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