Dickens’ Women
Dickens’ Women

Miriam Margolyes and Sonia Fraser
To the memory of our parents

Published by Hesperus Press Limited
19 Bulstrode Street, London W1U 2JN
www.hesperuspress.com


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Incidental piano music for the play was arranged from contemporary sources by Michael Haslam.

Typeset by Bookcraft Ltd, Stroud, UK
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

ISBN: 978-1-84391-351-1

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Miriam Margolyes

(Image © Branco Gaica)
Introduction

In this, his bicentenary year, it is appropriate that we should focus on Charles Dickens, the last great artist to reach and delight all classes of Society, from politicians, professors, shipping magnates and Royalty to the servants, hansom-cab drivers, farmers and navigators, whose work supported and enabled England to flourish and dominate the world in the nineteenth century. His writing, full of social observation and fierce criticism, remains as relevant as ever. And the man himself, contradictory, charming, mercurial and driven, demands our scrutiny.

We are constantly being warned against using the biographical approach to literature. I agree it can be treacherous but I defend its application to the work of Charles Dickens. More than any other writer, his life was in his work. Many biographers have written and are writing about Dickens but only one, his great friend John Forster, actually knew the man himself. It is a life worth studying in detail because of its great contrasts, its secrets and because of the genius of the subject. He is our greatest prose writer, he stands with Shakespeare as a Master, his creations are etched in our consciousness. The life started in obscurity, and then rose to the heights of wealth and celebrity. It is a romantic story of rags to riches; these always appeal to the Public. But it is also a story of committed application, focused energy and occasionally ruthless exploitation. Each time we learn of a new twist in Mr Dickens’ fortune, we realise that we are dealing with a man of many contradictory facets, a man capable of deep compassion and sharp cruelty, of miserable insecurity and staggering conceit.

Oliver Twist was the first Dickens book that I read. It was bis second book, usually a stumbling-block for writers. Not so for him. I was eleven and was immediately gripped by the story – what is going to happen next – and then by the characters,
who are described so exactly that I saw them quite clearly and reacted to them emotionally. I particularly enjoyed Fagin. I am Jewish and I did resent some of the descriptions: ‘as he glided stealthily along, creeping beneath the shelter of the walls and doorways, the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved: crawling forth, by night, in search of some rich offal for a meal.’ But I couldn’t help responding to the humour of the man too; as the novel progressed, I started to laugh as well as be horrified – and that’s another of the special, I would say, unique techniques Dickens employs – to use Evil and Comedy intertwined – as with Squeers, Quilp and Heep. That facility is extremely useful in the theatre! He takes us, seemingly effortlessly, from the Saffron Hill den to the serenity of the Brownlow home, as if he’d been to both those places and knew them well. How could that be? From the beginning of my acquaintance with him, I wanted to know more about the man, explore his techniques and understand his artistic journey, which I came to realise mirrored his own journey, up and up through the English class system.

So when I first studied him at Cambridge, it was the man as much as the work which interested me. My great teachers, F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, taught me how Dickens fitted into the English novel’s Great Tradition of moral clarity. And there was no doubt when reading him that you knew whose side he was on. He didn’t hide or prevaricate or cheat; Good and Evil were palpable, clear and unequivocal, and I clutched onto his coat-tails and flew through the novels, reacting exactly as he wanted me to – with horror sometimes, as in *Oliver Twist*:

‘The eyes again!’ he cried in an unearthly screech. Staggering as if struck by lightning, he lost his balance and tumbled over the parapet. The noose was on his neck. It ran up with his weight, tight as a bowstring, and swift as the arrow it speeds.
He fell for five-and-thirty feet. There was a sudden jerk, a terrific convulsion of the limbs; and there he hung, with the open knife clenched in his stiffening hand.

And sometimes with laughter – this description of Mrs Gamp from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the fifth of his novels:

She was a fat old woman, this Mrs Gamp, with a husky voice and a moist eye, which she had a remarkable power of turning up, and only showing the white of it. Having very little neck, it cost her some trouble to look over herself, if one may say so, at those to whom she talked. She wore a very rusty black gown, rather the worse for snuff, and a shawl and bonnet to correspond. In these dilapidated articles of dress she had, on principle, arrayed herself, time out of mind, on such occasions as the present; for this at once expressed a decent amount of veneration for the deceased, and invited the next of kin to present her with a fresher suit of weeds; an appeal so frequently successful, that the very fetch and ghost of Mrs Gamp, bonnet and all, might be seen hanging up, any hour in the day, in at least a dozen of the second-hand clothes shops about Holborn. The face of Mrs Gamp – the nose in particular – was somewhat red and swollen, and it was difficult to enjoy her society without becoming conscious of a smell of spirits. Like most persons who have attained to great eminence in their profession, she took to hers very kindly; insomuch that, setting aside her natural predilections as a woman, she went to a lying-in or a laying-out with equal zest and relish.

It was that description which started my thinking of myself as a possible exponent of Dickens onstage. Having very little neck myself, it seemed quite possible that I could play Mrs Gamp and use some of my unfortunate physical qualities to bring her
into the theatre. She was based, as John Forster relates, on a real nurse: ‘and the common habit of this nurse in the sick room, among other Gampish peculiarities, was to rub her nose along the top of the tall fender’. Dickens knew he was creating an icon; he wrote to Forster: ‘I mean to make a mark with her’. And he did.

The world of 1812 into which Dickens was born, was very unlike our own time and indeed, quite unlike the year in which he died, 1870. Dickens was born a Georgian, into the brutal, colourful world of the stagecoach and the Riot, when most people lived in the country, stayed there and knew their place. But it was the beginning of a great change in the world. When he was thirteen, the Stockton and Darlington Railway opened and became the first of many to provide a new form of transport across the nation, when Dickens was twenty-five, a giddy, passionate young girl of strict morals and German upbringing ascended the throne; and in 1870, the year of his death, convict transportation to Australia ceased.

All these events were part of a shift in the social order. As the changes were happening, Dickens lived through them, watched them and recorded the England he saw.

Social class has always been the crux of English comedy and Dickens, so acutely self-aware from his earliest days in the blacking factory, was always measuring himself on the social graph. His characters reflect those minute gradations of class distinction peculiar to the English and our picture of the world of Dickens’ time is largely built from the observations of fiction. Because Dickens’ own experience travelled up and down the social scale, likewise his characters reflect and occupy the complete and vivid tapestry of this changing social order.

His competence as a writer, quite aside from his genius, springs from his apprenticeship as a journalist. He loved reading and at eighteen he got his Reader’s Ticket to the British Museum. At this time he was working as a reporter in the
Law Courts, where he would have seen a variety of desperate, poverty-stricken and damaged people; they feature most strongly in *Bleak House*. Miss Flite’s tragedy, with which we end our script, combines Dickens’ compassion with the accuracy of his reporter’s eye. Dickens defends in his Preface the truth of his words:

> In this connexion, I mention here that everything set forth in these pages concerning the Court of Chancery is substantially true, and within the truth. The case of Gridley is in no essential altered from one of actual occurrence, made public by a disinterested person who was professionally acquainted with the whole of the monstrous wrong from beginning to end. At the present moment (August, 1853) there is a suit before the court which was commenced nearly twenty years ago, in which from thirty to forty counsel have been known to appear at one time, in which costs have been incurred to the amount of seventy thousand pounds, which is a FRIENDLY SUIT, and which is (I am assured) no nearer to its termination now than when it was begun. There is another well-known suit in Chancery, not yet decided, which was commenced before the close of the last century and in which more than double the amount of seventy thousand pounds has been swallowed up in costs. If I wanted other authorities for Jarndyce and Jarndyce, I could rain them on these pages, to the shame of – a parsimonious public.

Dickens tried to use and manipulate the Press, in a manner that is strangely and unpleasantly familiar to us now. He trained as a journalist at the *Morning Chronicle*, earning a weekly salary of five guineas, a secure income. But journalism did not satisfy his creative energy and from the dry accuracy of his court and parliamentary pieces, he moved to creative ‘sketches’ which
became his first published book, *Sketches By Boz*, in 1836, the year of his marriage. At the end of that marriage, which lasted for twenty-one years, his attempt to use the Press to keep the public on his side was a rare mistake in the reading of Public Opinion.

There is no doubt that Dickens’ creative power was equally at home creating men and women. Michael Slater, in his brilliant book *Dickens and Women*, has divided the women into three groups: the unattainable sexual object, the pre-pubescent, idealised woman and the grotesque who was both comic and frightening.

But there was an important gap in his repertoire of females. I would argue that he never portrayed a woman whom we would recognise as a mature sexual and emotional partner for his heroes. And I venture to suggest this was because his own relations with women were all damaged, incomplete or destructive. As his daughter, Kate Perugini, remarked: ‘my father never understood women’.

Dickens’ dark note of bitterness, resentment and a sense of injustice, which purveyed his attitude towards the female, was rooted in his relationship with his mother. He explains in the ‘Autobiographical Fragment’ how she was prepared to return him to the horrors of the blacking factory. I wish to quote from this piece fully because it explains so much of the man in his own words, which were read in his lifetime only by John Forster, his biographer.

This speculation was a rivalry of ‘Warren’s Blacking, 30, Strand’, – at that time very famous. One Jonathan Warren (the famous one was Robert), living at 30, Hungerford Stairs, or Market, Strand (for I forget which it was called then), claimed to have been the original inventor or proprietor of the blacking recipe, and to have been deposed and ill-used by his renowned relation. At last he put himself
in the way of selling his recipe, and his name, and his 30, Hungerford Stairs, Strand (30, Strand, very large, and the intermediate direction very small), for an annuity; and he set forth by his agents that a little capital would make a great business of it. The man of some property was found in George Lamert, the cousin and brother-in-law of James. He bought this right and title, and went into the blacking business and the blacking premises.

– In an evil hour for me, as I often bitterly thought. Its chief manager, James Lamert, the relative who had lived with us in Bayham Street, seeing how I was employed from day to day, and knowing what our domestic circumstances then were, proposed that I should go into the blacking warehouse, to be as useful as I could, at a salary, I think, of six shillings a week. I am not clear whether it was six or seven. I am inclined to believe, from my uncertainty on this head, that it was six at first, and seven afterwards. At any rate the offer was accepted very willingly by my father and mother, and on a Monday morning I went down to the blacking warehouse to begin my business life.

It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age. It is wonderful to me, that, even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been since we came to London, no one had compassion enough on me – a child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily or mentally – to suggest that something might have been spared, as certainly it might have been, to place me at any common school. Our friends, I take it, were tired out. No one made any sign. My father and mother were quite satisfied. They could hardly have been more so, if I had been twenty years of age, distinguished at a grammar school, and going to Cambridge.

The blacking warehouse was the last house on the left-hand side of the way, at old Hungerford Stairs. It was a
crazy, tumbledown old house, abutting of course on the river, and literally overrun with rats. Its wainscotted rooms and its rotten floors and staircase, and the old grey rats swarming down in the cellars, and the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs at all times, and the dirt and decay of the place, rise up visibly before me, as if I were there again. The counting-house was on the first floor, looking over the coal-barges and the river. There was a recess in it, in which I was to sit and work. My work was to cover the pots of paste-blacking; first with a piece of oil-paper, and then with a piece of blue paper; to tie them round with a string; and then to clip the paper close and neat, all round, until it looked as smart as a pot of ointment from an apothecary’s shop. When a certain number of grosses of pots had attained this pitch of perfection, I was to paste on each a printed label; and then go on again with more pots. Two or three other boys were kept at similar duty downstairs on similar wages. One of them came up, in a ragged apron and a paper cap, on the first Monday morning, to show me the trick of using the string and tying the knot. His name was Bob Fagin; and I took the liberty of using his name, long afterwards, in *Oliver Twist*.

Our relative had kindly arranged to teach me something in the dinner-hour; from twelve to one, I think it was; every day. But an arrangement so incompatible with counting-house business soon died away, from no fault of his or mine; and for the same reason, my small work-table, and my grosses of pots, my papers string, scissors, paste-pot, and labels, by little and little, vanished out of the recess in the counting-house, and kept company with the other small work-tables, grosses of pots, papers, string, scissors, and paste-pots, downstairs. It was not long, before Bob Fagin and I, and another boy whose name was Paul Green, but who was currently believed to have been
christened Poll (a belief which I transferred, long afterwards again, to Mr Sweedlepipe, in Martin Chuzzlewit), worked generally, side by side. Bob Fagin was an orphan, and lived with his brother-in-law, a waterman. Poll Green’s father had the additional distinction of being a fireman, and was employed at Drury Lane theatre; where another relation of Poll’s, I think his little sister, did imps in the pantomimes.

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these every day associates with those of my happier childhood; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written. My whole nature was so penetrated with the grief and humiliation of such considerations, that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life.

My mother and my brothers and sisters (excepting Fanny in the royal academy of music) were still encamped, with a young servant-girl from Chatham Workhouse, in the two parlours in the emptied house in Gower Street North. It was a long way to go and return within the dinner-hour, and, usually, I either carried my dinner with me, or went and bought it at some neighbouring shop. In the latter case, it was commonly a saveloy and a penny loaf; sometimes, a four-penny plate of beef from a cook’s shop; sometimes, a plate of bread and cheese, and a glass of beer, from a miserable old
public-house over the way: the Swan, if I remember right, or the Swan and something else that I have forgotten. Once, I remember tucking my own bread (which I had brought from home in the morning) under my arm, wrapped up in a piece of paper like a book, and going into the best dining-room in Johnson’s alamode beef-house in Clare Court, Drury Lane, and magnificently ordering a small plate of alamode beef to eat with it. What the waiter thought of such a strange little apparition, coming in all alone, I don’t know; but I can see him now, staring at me as I ate my dinner, and bringing up the other waiter to look. I gave him a halfpenny, and I wish, now, that he hadn’t taken it.

There is something naked and pained in that account which strikes at the heart of the man. At his core, he felt betrayed by the very women whom he most trusted, his mother, his first love, Maria Beadnell, his wife, and perhaps even by his mistress, Ellen Ternan, with whom he conducted a relationship for twelve years from 1857 to his death in 1870.

Out of that hurt and sense of abandonment came vivid and crafted characters; again and again he returned to the depiction of women who led men on and let them down; they haunt his books and their chiselled cruelty both convinces and disgusts. It’s not a complete portrait of the female sex but it is a damning one.

Dickens repeated in his portraits of women these stereotypical archetypes – the pre-pubescent child, usually described as ‘little’ (Emily, Nell, Dorrit, Dora, Ruth Pinch); the unattainable sexual object (Estella, Lady Dedlock, Edith Dombey); the grotesque, sometimes evil (Madame Defarge, Mrs Squeers), sometimes comic (Mrs Gamp, Mrs Corney); the bad and incompetent mother (Mrs Clennam, Mrs Nickleby); the spinster longing for a man (Rosa Dartle, Miss Tox), but never was he able to draw a complete, believable, fully realised female – because the women in his life never offered him the opportunity.