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Near Confinement: Pregnant Women in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel

Cynthia Northcutt Malone

While eighteenth-century British novels are peppered with women "big with child"—Moll Flanders, Molly Seagrim, Mrs. Pickle—nineteenth-century novels typically veil their pregnant characters. Even in nineteenth-century advice books by medical men, circumlocution and euphemism obscure discussions of pregnancy. This essay explores the changing cultural significance of the female body from the mid-eighteenth century to the early Victorian period, giving particular attention to the grotesque figure of Mrs. Gamp in Martin Chuzzlewit. Through ostentatious circumlocution and through the hilariously grotesque doubleness of Mrs. Gamp, Dickens both observes and ridicules the Victorian middle-class decorum enveloping pregnancy in silence.

And now one of the new fashions of our very elegant society is to go in perfectly light-coloured dresses—quite tight—without a particle of shawl or scarf . . . and to dance within a fortnight of their confinement and even valse at seven months!!! Where is delicacy of feeling going to? Sybil St Albans danced a quadrille under these circumstances.

—Queen Victoria, March, 1870 (qtd. in Perkin 66)

Smack in the middle of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dickens introduces the unforgettable Mrs. Gamp in a circumlocution so exaggeratedly delicate that it draws attention to the very subject it tiptoes around. Pecksniff has just arrived at

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Mrs. Gamp's lodging, seeking that "performer of nameless offices about the persons of the dead" (374). The novel discreetly avoids naming the tasks of preparation for burial—washing and dressing the corpse—but how much greater is the ostentatious, excessive politeness that averts mention of Mrs. Gamp's other professional function: "It chanced upon this particular occasion, that Mrs Gamp had been up all the previous night, in attendance upon a ceremony to which the usage of gossips has given that name which expresses, in two syllables, the curse pronounced on Adam" (374). Compare this scene, peopled by Pecksniff and "whole troops of married ladies (some about to trouble Mrs Gamp themselves very shortly)" (375) with the numerous references to Molly Seagrim "big with child" in Fielding's *Tom Jones*, published in 1749, nearly a hundred years before *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44). These two comic treatments of pregnancy and birth, separated by a century, mark a significant shift in literary decorum.

Compare, for example, Tobias Smollett's *Peregrine Pickle* (published in 1751) and Eliot's *Middlemarch* (published in 1871–72). First, *Peregrine Pickle*: Mrs. Pickle "had not been married many months when she exhibited evident symptoms of pregnancy" (21); the narrator later refers to her as "the big-bellied lady" (24). Now, *Middlemarch*: "It was Sunday, and [Dorothea] could not have the carriage to go to Celia, who had lately had a baby" (329). The only hint of Celia's pregnancy came 62 pages before, when Sir James Chettam forms the plan "to plead Celia's indisposition as a reason for fetching Dorothea by herself to the Hall" (267).

Of course, Eliot treats Rosamond's pregnancy much more directly than Celia's. Focusing on Lydgate, a medical man, allows a straightforward approach to Rosamond's condition: "Rosamond was expecting to have a baby, and Lydgate wished to save her from any perturbation" (323). Later, after Rosamond ignores Lydgate's cautions and suffers a fright while riding, the narrator reveals that "[h]er baby had been born prematurely, and all the embroidered robes and caps had to be laid by in darkness" (401). While the novel marks clearly Rosamond's pregnancy and miscarriage, the fate of those tiny caps and clothes gets more detailed attention than the experiences of the body; we hear only that Lydgate found Rosamond to be "mildly certain that the ride had made no difference, and that if she had stayed at home the same symptoms would have come on and would have ended in the same way, because she had felt something like them before" (404). In the narrative zone of this doctor-husband, Eliot permits herself direct speech; even then, however, her novel avoids unseemly bodily details.

Smollett, on the other hand, highlights the big belly of the pregnant matron. Admittedly, Smollett will say *anything*. In this case, though, his candor resembles that of his contemporaries. Eighteenth-century novels are peppered with

women "big with child": Moll Flanders, Molly Seagrim, Mrs. Pickle. Nineteenth-century novels typically veil their pregnant characters. What accounts for this shift?

In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, of course, veiling serves the particular narrative ends of comedy and social satire. Dickens exploits in this scene the comic possibilities of extravagant circumlocution. This histrionic tiptoeing around "labor" has the effect of whispering in a crowded elevator: we strain to hear what the whisper pretends to hush. Surely Dickens is snorting here at the ridiculous bourgeois etiquette that blushes to name a condition so remarkably hard to miss. After all, pregnancy was a harassingly present reality for Dickens; he must have felt he was sharing his dinner table with an almost always pregnant Catherine. Who could be more likely than Dickens to milk that absurd middle-class delicacy for all its humorous potential? Evidence for this reading lies in the delicious pairing of Dickensian circumlocution with Hablot K. Browne's illustration of the scene. Among the "whole troops of married ladies (some about to trouble Mrs Gamp themselves very shortly)" is one "lady (with her arms folded)" who "said she wished he had chosen any other time for fetching Mrs Gamp, but it always happened so with *her*" (375). Phiz makes visible the reason for her objection by giving those folded arms a prominent resting place (fig. 1).

The comic absurdity of visual spectacle paired with narrative circumspexion in *Martin Chuzzlewit* points to a cultural phenomenon so obvious that readers generally pay no attention to it. For most of the nineteenth century, in the novel and in bourgeois culture, pregnancy was visible but unspeakable. "In middle-class circles," as Joan Perkin observes, "pregnancy was too indelicate a subject to discuss" (66). Despite the delicate silence of respectable people, pregnancy must have been part of daily life.¹ The etiquette of public appearance during pregnancy was, of course, inflected by class. Middle-class women, according to Perkin, concealed their pregnant bodies: "Voluminous clothes hid the increasing size of the mother-to-be, who tended to stay in virtual hiding until after the birth" (66). But Judith Schneid Lewis contends that, for aristocratic women, "at no time during the century 1760 to 1860 does there appear to have been any social taboo against appearing visibly pregnant in public, contrary to popular myth" (124; see also Perkin 65-66). Certainly the epigraph to this essay supports the contention that upper-class women, at least, participated fully in social life until their confinements. And working-class women typically continued to work until the births of their babies (Davies; Perkin 66). Thus, people in every stratum of British life must have encountered pregnant women, either family members confined at home, or aristocratic women "valsing" without a particle of shawl, or working women going about their daily rounds; yet the treatment of pregnancy in bourgeois culture brings to mind the story of the emperor's new clothes.

The concealment of pregnancy in the nineteenth-century British novel is an intriguing subject. How did novelists manage to veil a condition at once so common, so necessary to the machinery of plot, and so spectacularly visible? One way to address the question is by looking briefly at several novels spanning the first half of the nineteenth century. But the deeper, more intriguing question, of course, is *why* it became not merely impolite but virtually impossible to speak clearly and directly about pregnancy at this time. *Martin Chuzzlewit* deserves particular attention; in this novel, Dickens deploys the mode of grotesque representation to register the anxieties surrounding pregnancy

Veils and Vulgarity

Between *Tom Jones* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, between the raucous eighteenth-century comic figures of pregnancy and Dickens's spoof on ladies in what Mrs. Gamp would call "a interesting state," Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion* serve as a kind of fulcrum (Forster 377). In *Sense and Sensibility*, written in 1797-98 and published in 1811, Austen uses pregnancy to point the contrast between Lady Middleton's coldly elegant manners and the decidedly inelegant manners of her mother, Mrs. Jennings, "a good humoured, merry, fat, elderly woman, who talked a great deal, seemed very happy, and rather vulgar" (29). In Austen's allegory of manners, no conduct is more certain to mark a character as "rather vulgar" than candid discussion of pregnancy. When Charlotte Palmer, Mrs. Jennings's other daughter, appears at the Dashwood's cottage, Mrs. Jennings confides across the room to Elinor Dashwood that Charlotte should not have undertaken an exhausting journey: "it was wrong in her situation" (93). Lest anyone fail to catch her meaning, she elaborates. "She expects to be confined in February," Mrs. Jennings hisses, yet Charlotte refused to stay home and rest this morning. Lady Elegant shrinks in horror from Mrs. Vulgar; the narrator observes that "Lady Middleton could no longer endure such a conversation, and therefore exerted herself to ask Mr. Palmer if there was any news in the paper" (93). The pointed contrast in manners underscores difference in social rank, of course: the late Mr. Jennings made his money in *trade*, and Mrs. Jennings embarrasses Lady Middleton not only by acknowledging frankly her daughter's pregnancy, but also by maintaining friendships with tradespeople in unfashionable quarters of London. A few chapters later, Mrs. Jennings offends again. She asks about Charlotte and her family when Colonel Brandon reports that he has just dined with the Palmers. "I warrant you she is a fine size by now," comments Mrs. Jennings, and an impeccably polite Colonel Brandon responds only that "Mrs. Palmer appeared quite well" (137). No

one except Mrs. Jennings refers explicitly to Mrs. Palmer's pregnancy, and at last it is the newspaper that brings word that "the Lady of Thomas Palmer was safely delivered of a son and heir" (207).

In *Persuasion*, pregnancy is more completely veiled. The reportedly beautiful wife of Colonel Wallis never appears because "she was in daily expectation of her confinement" (155). In this novel, the pregnant woman remains discreetly just out of view. Mrs. Wallis does take part in the circulation of important information, however; her monthly nurse, Mrs. Rooke, also attends Anne's school-friend, Mrs. Smith. As the nurse passes in and out of Mrs. Wallis's rooms, taking in "little thread-cases, pin-cushions, and card-racks" and bringing out the money for those dainty niceties, she also—and more importantly—brings out revelations crucial to the plot (167). As I will show, Dickens makes astonishing comic turns twenty-five years later, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, on the figure of the monthly nurse shuttling in and out of the invisible place where pregnant women are confined in nineteenth-century fiction.

Circumlocution

Dickens's periphrastic treatment of "labor" may ridicule bourgeois delicacy, but it also preserves it. Certainly *Martin Chuzzlewit* seems proof against the charges leveled at *Adam Bede* ten years later. As Jill Matus points out in *Unstable Bodies*, the unsigned review of Eliot's novel in *Saturday Review* reproved the author for "his" indecent treatment of pregnancy:

The author of *Adam Bede* has given in his adhesion to a very curious practice that is now becoming common among novelists, and it is a practice that we consider most objectionable. It is that of dating and discussing the several stages that precede the birth of a child. We seem to be threatened with a literature of pregnancy. We have had *White Lies* and *Sylvan Holt's Daughter*, and now we have *Adam Bede*. Hetty's feelings and changes are indicated with a punctual sequence that makes the account of her misfortunes read like the rough notes of a man-midwife's conversations with a bride. This is intolerable. Let us copy the old masters of the art, who, if they gave us a baby, gave it us all at once. A decent author and a decent public may surely take the premonitory symptoms for granted. (28 February 1859, vii, 250–51, qtd. in Carroll 76)

We might wonder which "old masters" this reviewer had in mind, though we can safely rule out the writers of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, Shakespeare, Defoe, Smollett, and Fielding. But if these "old masters" are open to the charge of representing "the premonitory symptoms" of childbirth, was the author of *Adam Bede* also open to this charge? Evidently these remarks drove Matus back to Eliot's novel. "We are hardly likely to think

of *Adam Bede* as a novel that breaks new ground in its treatment of pregnancy," Matus comments: "Reviews such as this mark as contentious what we would surely bypass as insignificant, or perhaps even experience as evasive. The narrative offers but a few details and symptoms of Hetty's pregnancy, and those are euphemistically expressed" (2).²

Closer investigation of this reviewer's charges leads to the hypothesis that circumlocution is the only available locution for the discussion of pregnancy in the British novel by mid-century. Without that hypothesis, Charles Reade's *White Lies* and Holme Lee's (Harriet Parr's) *Sylvan Holt's Daughter* certainly provide no fuller explanation of this reviewer's disgust. In *White Lies*, Josephine de Beaurepaire, secretly married after her family receives news that a man with her husband's name and title has been killed in battle, loses her appetite, faints once, and then regains her health:

Her hollow cheeks recovered their plump smoothness, and her beauty its bloom, and her person grew more noble and statue-like than ever, and within she felt a sense of indomitable vitality. Her appetite had for some time been excessively feeble and uncertain, and her food tasteless; but of late, by what she conceived to be a reaction such as is common after youth has shaken off a long sickness, her appetite had been not only healthy but eager. (249)

Josephine herself fails to grasp the significance of these premonitory symptoms. A trusted servant must break the news: "'My poor young mistress, you are but a child still. You have a deep water to wade through,' said Jacintha, so solemnly that Josephine trembled. 'A deep water, and do not see it even. You have told me what is past [the secret marriage], now I must tell you what is coming.'" After asking whether Josephine has any "misgiving," Jacintha goes on: "'Then turn your head from me a bit, my sweet young lady; I am an honest woman, though I am not so innocent as you, and I am forced against my will to speak my mind plainer than I am used to'" (253). A reader hoping for plain speech here must endure disappointment: Jacintha's explanation is elided.

Like *Adam Bede*, *White Lies* depends on ellipsis, euphemism, and oblique reference to represent pregnancy. A respectable novelist teaches nothing about "the facts of life"; only those who already know the code understand the import of "plump cheeks," "bloom," and "indomitable vitality." If not from the works of respectable novelists, where would a young woman learn the reference of such delicate allusions? What other texts or sources of information supplied the information that the bourgeois novel hushed? The documentary evidence suggests the delicate avoidance of pregnancy-talk may have left many young women ignorant.

While Josephine's ignorance serves the specific narrative end of emphasizing her "innocence" in *White Lies*, it also points to the obvious consequence

of polite silence. A sizeable number of young women—even married women—evidently knew nothing about sex or pregnancy. The ignorance of young working-class women shows up in several heartbreaking letters gathered by the Women's Co-Operative Guild and published in *Maternity*. One of the most poignant letters begins:

My first girl was born before I attained my twentieth year, and I had a step-mother who had had no children of her own, so I was not able to get any knowledge from her; and even if she had known anything I don't suppose she would have dreamt of telling me about these things which were supposed to exist, but must not be talked about. About a month before the baby was born I remember asking my aunt where the baby would come from. She was astounded, and did not make me much wiser. (30)

This young woman's experience was not anomalous; letter after letter emphasizes the suffering that resulted from ignorance. Another writer notes,

I should tell you I was twenty-eight years old when I was married, and I had been married eleven months when my first baby was born, and I can truthfully say I was ignorant of anything concerning married life or motherhood when I was married. In fact, when the midwife came to me when I was in such pain, I had not the slightest idea where or how the child would come into the world. (187)

(As an aside, let us pause to note that a pregnant woman in her situation would be likely to find the answer, be it ever so plainly spoken, barely comprehensible and nearly unimaginable. I suspect that many and many a well-read, clinically instructed late-twentieth-century woman has sat through prepared childbirth classes in secret certainty that *this is not going to work*. We all learned the lesson of relative size in toddlerhood, when we tried laboriously and repeatedly to pass large objects through small holes. It is late in the day to unlearn that lesson. Surely any pregnant women could echo Louise Erdrich's rueful remark in *The Blue Jay's Dance*: "I fear I've made a ship in a bottle" (9).)

Working-class women may have had fewer resources than middle- or upper-middle class women for learning about sex and pregnancy; Ross argues that "upper middle-class mothers and daughters exchanged reasonably informative letters and conversations about sex and the female body," but "such sexual talk rarely passed between working-class generations" (107).³ But ignorance about these matters was also common among young women in the higher ranks. "Women grew up with widely differing knowledge about sex," Perkin suggests, "and it was not simply a matter of class, though upper- and middle-class daughters were more strictly guarded." She goes on to illustrate with the case of "Annie Besant, the birth-control activist," who "said when

she married in 1866, 'My ignorance of all that marriage meant was as profound as though I had been a child of four instead of twenty. My dreamy life . . . kept innocent of all questions of sex, was no preparation for married existence' '' (Perkin 57).

Of course, it is dangerous to generalize broadly about the distribution of and access to information. John Hawkins Miller quotes one ladies' magazine story, published in 1828, which reminds readers that some young girls surely knew more than their elders imagined: Two girls are talking in a corner: "'So, Rosa, I see Mrs Buckle is in the family way again.' 'Hush, Laura, pray speak lower, for Mama thinks I don't know anything about it. Our old Nurse and Sally always tell me everything, but Mama would be so very angry if she knew'" (qtd. in Miller 33; qtd. from Cunningham 64-65). Still, we can reasonably conclude that bourgeois delicacy must have left many young women in the dark about these matters.⁴

Women with sufficient leisure and means could consult advice books like Dr. Thomas Bull's *Hints to Mothers*, "the first book devoted to antenatal care," according to Jenny Carter and Therese Duriez. Dr. Bull's *Hints* was published first in 1837 and then in twenty-four subsequent editions (48). In the brief preface to the 1841 edition, Dr. Bull approves the delicacy that silenced direct speech about pregnancy and childbirth even as he acknowledges women's need for information. His work, of course, enters the world to solve their dilemma—in the discreet form of *Hints* rather than, say, *Advice*:

In the minds of married women, and especially young females, those feelings of delicacy naturally and commendably exist which prevent a full disclosure of their circumstances, when they find it necessary to consult their medical advisers. To meet this difficulty, and to counteract the ill-advised suggestions of ignorant persons during the period of confinement, is the chief aim of the following pages.

While it is believed that much of the information contained in this volume is highly important to the comfort and even to the well-doing of the married female, much of it is, at the same time, of a character upon which she cannot easily obtain satisfaction. She will find no difficulty in reading information, for which she would find it insuperably difficult to ask. (3)

The published notes of a man-midwife to a prospective bride, then, are intended to mediate between the insuperable difficulties of clear speech and the perils of ignorance—and, of course, to shore up the medical men's authority as the only reliable writers and resources of information for pregnant women.

At least some of the published instruction about pregnancy, however, used language that was nearly as coded and highly figurative as that of *Adam Bede* or *White Lies*. Consider Dr. Pye Henry Chavasse's *Ladies' Family Physician: Advice to a Wife and Mother*, reprinted several times in the nineteenth century. In the section titled, "Signs of Pregnancy," Chavasse informs women: "The

first sign that leads a lady to suspect that she is pregnant is her *ceasing-to-be-unwell*”:

This, provided she has just before been in good health, is a strong symptom of pregnancy; but still there must be others to corroborate it.

A healthy married woman, during the period of child-bearing, suddenly *ceasing-to-be-unwell* is of itself alone almost a sure and certain sign of pregnancy—requiring but little else besides to confirm it. This fact is well known by all who have had children—they base their predictions and their calculations upon it, and upon it alone, and are, in consequence, seldom deceived.

But as *ceasing-to-be-unwell* may proceed from other causes than that of pregnancy—such as disease or disorder of the womb, or of other organs of the body—especially of the lungs—it is not by itself alone entirely to be depended upon; although, as a single sign, it is—especially if the patient be healthy—the most reliable of all the other signs of pregnancy. (108; italics in original)

Chavasse seems not to notice the linguistic peculiarity that his unvarying use of euphemism, “ceasing-to-be-unwell,” creates: throughout this passage, readers are assured that a *healthy* woman who *ceases to be unwell* is almost certainly pregnant. Being “unwell,” of course, is a euphemistic phrase for menstruating; but this passage suggests that even a woman knowledgeable and resourceful enough to seek information from a physician’s advice book might find the language a tad murky. Even Dr. Bull’s more direct *Hints* could certainly lead to perplexity. Bull begins, as Chavasse does, with “ceasing to be unwell,” but he goes on to use the plainer language of “menstruation.” However, he also treats the disappearance of menstrual periods as a far more dubious symptom, listing four exceptions to the general rule that a woman who misses her periods is probably pregnant, so that the gains of clear language are offset by the uncertainty he attributes to bodily signs. These men-midwives’ counsel to brides was unlikely to enlighten them much about the signs or symptoms of pregnancy.⁵

Labor

If medical advice books must negotiate ways to give information while showing respect for “those feelings of delicacy” which “naturally and commendably exist” in bourgeois women, of course, it is hardly surprising to find the representation of pregnancy in the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel to be far more constrained. From Austen to mid-century, discreet allusion, euphemism, and periphrasis artfully conceal the pregnant woman in the British novel. The question remains: *Why* must the bourgeois novel—or advice book—use such voluminous sentences to hide the condition of the mother-to-be? *Why* can’t these women appear, like Sybil St. Albans, without a particle of scarf?

The most obvious answer is that pregnancy served as an incontrovertible marker of sex, both in the novel and in the semiotics of everyday life. Whether a particular woman's "innocence," so carefully preserved by the mid-century bourgeois novel, was genuine or feigned, her pregnant body testified to carnal knowledge. No wonder bourgeois culture found means of artful concealment; the pregnant body threatened to shatter the culturally defined role for middle-class women.⁶ Let her speech be as delicate as may be, if the pregnant woman appeared in public, she might just as well semaphore "sex."

But surely this answer is incomplete. Recent works in the history of sexuality, including Mason's *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, Barrett-Ducrocq's *Love in the Time of Victoria*, and Anderson's *When Passion Reigned*, have refracted the notion of Victorian prudery. While many works in this area of social history have reminded us to distinguish middle-class mainstream culture from other segments of Victorian life, the wide range of social and sexual practices these works document in the Victorian period should make us cautious about offering simple answers even to questions about middle-class life.

In this essay, I want to complicate that answer. Ruth Perry traces the "desexualization of women" in the second half of the eighteenth century, examining "the double, interlocked, mutually exclusive relationship between sexuality and maternity as it was reconstructed in the middle of the eighteenth century." She argues that, "in a remarkably short span, the maternal succeeded, supplanted, and repressed the sexual definition of women, who began to be reimagined as nurturing rather than desiring, as supportive rather than appetitive" (116). I want to focus on two points in her argument. She documents policy decisions from 1756 to 1760 that situated "reproductive service" first as labor in service to the nation—making new citizens—and then firmly in "the private sphere" (111). By examining "novels dealing with breast disease" and "medical treatises advocating maternal breast-feeding," she highlights "the new cultural discourse constructing women's bodies as maternal rather than sexual" (136–37). By confining and concealing the pregnant woman, I am suggesting, the nineteenth-century novel confirms both the reconstruction of the woman's body as maternal and the containment of that body in the private sphere of the family.

As Sally Shuttleworth observes, "Motherhood was set at the ideological centre of the Victorian bourgeois ideal" (31). While maternity has come to be equated with femininity—understanding "femininity" as a distinctly, if tacitly, middle-class construct—by the nineteenth century, pregnancy troubles this equation, suspending the woman's body between sexuality and maternity. Not only does pregnancy bear clear witness to a woman's sexual relations, defining her simultaneously as sexual being and as mother-in-the-making, but the swelling of the breasts in pregnancy also connoted both preparation for

nursing and sexual attractiveness. "According to one scientific commentator of the era," Shuttleworth notes, "woman was most pleasing to man during 'the period of activity of the reproductive organs,' and her 'greatest beauty of form' was to be found in 'those parts peculiar to her organization': the bust and the pelvis" (41).⁷

Confining the pregnant body, then, conveniently locates both maternity and sexuality in the private sphere. As we've seen already, that confinement—both as a representational practice, in nineteenth-century bourgeois novels, and as a social practice—is largely, at least, a middle-class phenomenon. To understand why women in some ranks are visible while those in other ranks are invisible, we need only return to the word that Dickens avoided with such relish, "labor," and ask: Who owned their labor? Perry suggests that women's reproductive labor was positioned decisively in "the private sphere" in the eighteenth century, and social historians have documented thoroughly the nineteenth-century bourgeois ideal of the maternal woman tending her children and tending the hearth. Her domestic and reproductive labor, like her legal identity, were wholly subsumed in husband, family, and home. Tightening up the constraints when she was pregnant, confining her to the private space of the home, signalled even more clearly that the full range of this sexual-maternal woman's energies and capacities belonged there. While working-class women's reproductive labor presumably belonged to their husbands, the different ownership of reproductive and other forms of labor meant that they couldn't be confined to "the private sphere": their employers also directed and owned their labor.⁸ In the ranks above the middle, the structure of financial settlements tended to give women a greater measure of autonomy, and with greater independence from their husbands evidently came greater freedom during pregnancy (see Lewis 124–27). The greater visibility of pregnant women in the ranks above and below the middle serves as a foil, highlighting the complete absorption of a middle-class woman's sexual, maternal, and domestic labor in the private space of the family.

At one level, then, the invisibility of the middle-class pregnant woman signalled the control of her body and her energies. At another, the confinement of that body may have been a strategy intended to contain a less obvious threat: the ways in which pregnancy undermines the notions of self-possession and coherence central to the notion of the bourgeois self. As Donna Haraway observes:

Pregnant women in Western cultures are in much more shocking relation than men to doctrines of unencumbered property in the self. In "making babies," female bodies violate Western women's liberal singularity during their lifetimes and compromise their claims to full citizenship. For Western men in reproduction, setting aside the "problem" of death, the loss of self seems so tiny, the degrees of freedom so many. Ontologically always potentially pregnant, women

are both more limited in themselves, with a body that betrays their individuality, and limiting to men's fantastic self-reproductive projects. (143)

In the case of Victorian culture, we can move from the ontological condition of perpetual potential pregnancy to the reality: many women of all social classes were pregnant much of the time for a period of many years. Patricia Branca concludes that "more than a quarter of the Victorian woman's life was spent in either pregnancy "or in nursing and recovering from pregnancy" (75). Think of Catherine Dickens. . . .⁹

As Amanda Anderson has shown, the figure of the "fallen woman" in Victorian culture registers the threatening opposites of the characteristics that define "normative masculine identity" (13). But at least a man could close the door on the importunate fallen woman. The pregnant woman in his own home, a weirdly double and single body, both herself and not herself, undeniably sexual and visibly maternal, ate at the same table and slept uncomfortably nearby. Small wonder, then, that the fallen woman can parade around the Victorian novel making a spectacle of herself while the more threatening figure of the pregnant woman is kept in representational confinement.

"A Interesting State"

In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dickens employs a mode of representation that simultaneously observes middle-class decorum and registers the anxieties that muffle nineteenth-century discussions of pregnancy. He draws Mrs. Gamp as a grotesque figure, one that brings to mind Bakhtin's musings on the "senile pregnant hags" in the Kerch collection of terracotta figurines (Bakhtin 25). Like a Möbius strip, Mrs. Gamp dissolves the distinction between the singular and the dual. This apparently singular body dresses in voluminous clothing that blazons doubleness. Furthermore, she speaks as one occupied by another: that ardent admirer whom "a fearful mystery surrounded," Mrs. Harris (472).

At the most obvious level, of course, Dickens's satirical portrait of Mrs. Gamp fits within a larger contemporary frame of attacks on midwives. In professional medical circles, these attacks served to heighten the prestige of "medical men" and erode the traditional role of midwives (Poovey 39-40). But the letters in *Maternity*, along with other contemporary evidence, make it clear that the dirty, drunken, ill-educated nurse-midwife was not simply a satirical figure which physicians invented for professional gain.¹⁰ One woman complains of a birth attended by "a woman who did not know her work" (Davies 83). Another writes, "I have not had a doctor to any of my confinements, but nearly lost my life and child's through the first one. The midwife was a qualified woman, but addicted to drink (which I found out afterwards)"

(Davies 83, 186). Another describes reports that "the midwife I had [for the first birth] had started drinking," and another observes: "I know from one or two of my friends and from my own experience we were all greatly worried at not being able to secure good nurses. As you are aware, many of them drink" (13, 149). Such dreadful stories should come as no surprise, given the extreme laxity of licensing for midwives. As Patricia Branca notes, the licensing requirement instituted in the eighteenth century required only that "the woman had to be recommended by a few matrons, take a formal oath, and pay a fee of 18s.4d. The oath stated that the would-be midwife foreswore child substitution, abortion, sorcery, and over-charging" (78). Thus, the horrors registered comically in Mrs. Gamp include the usual failures attributed to bad nurses and midwives—tippling, ignorance, brutal treatment of patients—but those horrors run deeper.

The peculiar suggestions that Mrs. Gamp is somehow both dual and singular provoke this deeper horror and anxiety. As a pregnant woman's body does, Mrs. Gamp's body calls into question the distinction between double and single; she embodies an insult to bourgeois notions of selfhood and individuality. As a monthly nurse and midwife, furthermore, Mrs. Gamp is associated with the scenes of birth and death, those liminal moments of human life associated, as Bakhtin points out, with the grotesque (Bakhtin 318): "setting aside her natural predilections as a woman, she went to a lying-in or a laying-out with equal zest and relish" (Dickens 378). Through that unseen creature, Mrs. Harris, Dickens heightens this sense of liminality and duality. When Mrs. Gamp speaks, the words of another issue from her mouth: Mrs. Harris's obliging commendations. Thus, when the loquacious Mrs. Gamp pauses for breath, the narrator notes:

advantage may be taken of the circumstance, to state that a fearful mystery surrounded this lady of the name of Harris, whom no one in the circle of Mrs Gamp's acquaintance had ever seen; neither did any human being know her place of residence, though Mrs Gamp appeared on her own showing to be in constant communication with her. . . . the prevalent opinion was that she was a phantom of Mrs. Gamp's brain . . . created for the express purpose of holding visionary dialogues with her on all manner of subjects, and invariably winding up with a compliment to the excellence of her nature. (472)

Mrs. Gamp conceives an invisible other with whom she is "in constant communication," but the tracking device that might consolidate the identity and existence of Mrs. Harris, her "place of residence," turns out to be the person of Mrs. Gamp. Dickens registers here the puzzling arithmetic that continues to vex the discourses of pregnancy: here is one self, Mrs. Gamp, but the possibility of an equation hangs in the air—one possibly plus something equals goodness knows what.

Even if we share the "prevalent opinion" which the narrator reports, "that [Mrs. Harris] was a phantom of Mrs Gamp's brain . . . created for the express purpose of holding visionary dialogues with her on all manner of subjects, and invariably winding up with a compliment to the excellence of her nature," the argument holds. Even if she is a chronically soused lunatic, her belief in her duality supports the point: an 1858 *Manual of Psychological Medicine* lists among the primary "Moral and Physical" causes of insanity not only "Intemperance" but also "Uterine and Childbearing" (Bucknill and Tuke 256).

But the grotesque doubleness of Mrs. Gamp is also emphatically physical. If "grotesque imagery constructs what we might call a double body," as Bakhtin suggests, if "the image consists of orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived body," then Mrs. Gamp is surely a latter-day example of the grotesque (318). Her alcohol-reddened nose and her insatiable appetite are common features of the grotesque body (319). And Dickens complicates the topography of this grotesque body by turning it into a stunning construction of "orifices and convexities" when Mrs. Gamp settles down for the night: "she produced a watchman's coat, which she tied round her neck by the sleeves, so that she became two people; and looked, behind, as if she were in the act of being embraced by one of the old patrol" (481). This "fat old woman" who drinks and overeats becomes "two people" in a moment that collapses the sexual embrace and the doubleness of pregnancy (378). The mode of representation, the grotesque, exaggerates the threatening anxieties of pregnancy—evidence of female sexuality and vexing relations of singularity and doubleness—and displaces them from the young women in the novel. Just as circumlocution allows Dickens to speak the unspeakable, so embodying the troubling features of pregnancy in the "senile hag," Mrs. Gamp, allows him to emphasize and defuse the anxieties that attend pregnancy.

In a social world governed by "delicacy of feeling," as Queen Victoria put it, Dickens whisks the troubling figure of the doubled, bulging female body out of representational confinement. His deployment of the grotesque allows him to figure pregnancy obliquely. Crossing out of the veiled scene of pregnancy and childbirth into the action of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Mrs. Gamp brings into spectacular visibility the deeply unsettling meanings of the pregnant body.



Fig. 1. Hablot K. Browne's *Mr. Pecksniff on his Mission*

NOTES

1. In *Love and Toil*, Ellen Ross argues: "though ubiquitous, pregnancy was also invisible" (107). George Moore's novel, *Esther Waters*, seems to support the point; when Esther Waters is dismissed from service because she is "seven months gone" and unmarried, her mother fails to notice her pregnancy (116). A few pages later, her mother comments, "'I haven't told yer, but I daresay you have noticed that nother [child] is coming;'" it isn't clear from the narrative whether Esther has noticed (118). Does her silence indicate polite avoidance of the subject or failure to notice her mother's pregnancy? In general, Ross' assumption that silence marks invisibility seems questionable.
2. Matus goes on to note: "At one point, the narrator hints that there is 'a more luxuriant womanliness about Hetty of late'; a bit later we learn that 'after the first on-coming of her great dread, some weeks after her betrothal to Adam, she had waited and waited, in the blind vague hope that something would happen to set her free from her terror'; finally, on her flight from Hayslope a stranger's eyes wander to her figure and detect 'what the familiar unsuspecting eye leaves unnoticed'" (2). Matus uses the edition edited by S. Gill, Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1859] 1980) 405, 411, 422.
3. "The word *pregnant* . . . was not used outside medical settings," according to Ross (107).
4. In an 1859 letter to Princess Frederick William, Queen Victoria recalls the princess's wedding and casts a stark light on the position of mother, father, and daughter in relation to secrecy and silence: "That last night when we took you to your room, and you cried so much, I said to Papa as we came back 'after all, it is like taking a poor lamb to be sacrificed'. You now know—what I meant, dear. . . . It really makes me shudder when I look around at all your sweet, happy, unconscious sisters—and think that I must give them up too—one by one!!" (10 April 1859; Hibbert 111).
5. As Lorna Duffin argues in "The Conspicuous Consumptive: Woman as Invalid," the murkiness of these advice books served a strategic end. She notes that "a steady stream of popular literature appeared on the subject of female health" in the nineteenth century: "It revealed little however; to provide women with knowledge of their bodies would have removed the expertise of the doctor and undermined the woman's dependence on him" (31).
6. I am speaking here, of course, about the cultural role assigned to middle-class women, not about individual women's relationships to their own sexuality. As Perkin notes, we do have documentary evidence of married women's enjoyment of sex—notably Fanny Kingsley's—we can't draw general conclusions because, of course, most women didn't comment. But we can say with assurance that "an ideology about women emerged in the 1840s and 50s which virtually denied women's sexuality, and the majority of women accepted the judgment" (64).
7. Shuttleworth goes on: "The descriptions of the bosom, 'on which the organs for nutrituion of the tender offspring are developed' spirals off into ecstatic, sexual contemplation: 'It is to her bosom that woman instinctively clasps all that she

- rightly loves—her bosom, remarkable for the unsurpassable beauty of its voluptuous contours and graceful inflexions, the white transparent surface of which is set off with an azure network, or tinged with the warm glow of the emotions and passions that make it heave in graceful undulations (Anon. 1851: 19–20) (41–42). See also Anderson on sexualizing maternity (34).
8. See Duffin 29–31 on the crucial differences between middle- and working-class women's social roles.
 9. Dickens's letters show his bemusement at the frequency with which children joined his family: His letter to W. H. Prescott, dated 10 November 1843—during the writing of *Martin Chuzzlewit*—serves as an example: "Mrs. Dickens sends her love and best regards. We think of keeping the New Year, by having another child. I am constantly reversing the Kings in the Fairy Tales, and importuning the Gods not to trouble themselves: being quite satisfied with what I have. But they are so generous when they do take a fancy to one!" (House, Storey, and Tillotson, vol. 3, 597).
 10. As Anthony Wohl points out in *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain*, physicians' delivery practices were also appalling (15). All in all, he notes, "the great wonder is that so many babies survived" (14).

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