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DICKENS’ “BAD MEN”: REPRESENTATIONS OF ELDER WOMEN IN DOMBEY AND SON AND IN VICTORIAN REALITY

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DICKENS’ "BAD MEN": REPRESENTATIONS OF ELDER WOMEN IN DOMBEY AND SON AND IN VICTORIAN REALITY

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Near the end of Charles Dickens’ *Dombey and Son*, after Paul Dombey, Sr., has begged forgiveness from his daughter Florence for past neglect, that omnipresent bystander Miss Tox observes to Polly Toodle: “And so Dombey and Son...is indeed a daughter, Polly, after all” (941). This seemingly obvious realization, coming from the mouth of the well-meaning but slightly dull-witted Miss Tox, is in fact one of the novel’s main objectives. A criticism of what Dickens saw as the potentially destructive nature of the technologically and economically booming mid-Victorian England, *Dombey and Son* includes as part of the problem the patriarchal society which valued sons and sold daughters. The novel’s resolution, and Mr. Dombey’s salvation, rests upon a restored relationship with his daughter. He must come to understand that his entire life did not vanish with the bankruptcy of his business, the death of his only son, and his failed second marriage. At the end of the novel, he finds contentment, and what I’ll call relational value, with Florence. However, he is only able understand the worth of his relationship with Florence when he is forced outside of the bourgeois, economic system which defines a woman’s value as her ability to be a conduit through which money, property, and male heirs can be transferred and maintained.

Certainly, this closure seems to be progressive by nineteenth-century England’s standards. However, a closer look at the portrayals of women in the novel reveals that they are, after all, quite conventional. Despite Dickens’ progressive central theme, his roles for women persist throughout the novel as meek daughter, doting sister, submissive wife, and loving mother—the idealized women of bourgeois Victorian society. Since each of these roles is confined to a rigid patriarchal structure, one might logically speculate that the notion of femininity, in Victorian terms, was accordingly narrow. Further, one might begin to wonder about the women who did
not fit so neatly into the Victorian box—for surely, they existed!

It is in this spirit that I took up the subject of late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century elder women, a population not accounted for in the idealized Victorian version of womanhood. I believe that only by studying the women who fall outside of the ideologically prescribed realm of femaleness-- and who are, in fact, “devalued” because of it--can we have a clear sense of the ideological positioning of younger women and the conditions their “value” hinges upon. Although Dickens’ portrayal of Florence’s restored relationship with her father seems to move outside of the narrow Victorian ideology, ultimately, the characterization of elder women in the novel serves to reinforce the prevailing Victorian position toward women. Thus, I would suggest that perhaps an understanding of nineteenth-century young and old women can be attained only when the profile of each is framed by the other.

Ultimately, I want to argue that in the late eighteenth and nineteenth-century, the limited functions deemed valuable in middle and upper-class women were only possibilities for younger women, thus relegating elder women to positions of little worth and leaving them subject to scathing ridicule. This argument can be more clearly drawn, I believe, by a close examination of the elderly female characters in Dombey and Son. I will preface an analysis of these elder women with a brief look at a representative eighteenth-century novel, Fanny Burney's Evelina, in order to conceptualize the ideology and discourse from which the Victorians emerged.

Through careful analysis of the text of Dombey and Son, I will show that Dickens’ characterization of grotesque, ridiculous, and incomplete elder women in the novel parallels many attitudes prevalent in Victorian society. The characterization culminates in a depiction of these women in which their only value is to serve as “moral scapegoats.” I will also address,
though more briefly, the plight of the spinster in the novel and in Victorian culture in order to explore the possibility of a more progressive, less ideologically limited, portrayal than that of the elder woman (though I would argue that ultimately the spinster serves as a societal scapegoat as well). It will also be important to understand Dickens’ portrayal of and Victorian society’s attitudes toward younger women, since, as I have already speculated, analysis of his elder female characters is only possible by understanding what they once were and what they no longer are. Throughout the paper, I will use a variety of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical texts, diary entries, essays, and other documents concerning women in order to provide a socio-historical frame for Dickens’ work.

Before beginning my analysis, I want to address the problem of naming and defining older women. I would argue that “women of a certain age” have always occupied a peripheral position, at least in middle- and upper-class Western society. Crisis of identity is prominent, with women constantly teetering between encouragement to “defy” and possibly lie about their age at all costs, and, conversely, to acknowledge the end of their prime and resign to “growing old gracefully.” This shaky identity is exemplified, I think, in the difficulty I have had defining and naming these women for the purposes of this paper. It is impossible to establish a definitive threshold between young and old Victorian women, since of course there has never been a magic number. I shall reason that since demographic life-expectancy figures for 1701-1875 hover roughly between thirty-five and forty-five years, the age of forty-five can probably be safely considered “old” for the English in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Wood 17). Equally problematic is the question of naming. Should these women be addressed as old or aging or elderly or post-menopausal? Certainly none of these are an adequate expression for all of the
women who are usually clumped together in the “of a certain age” category. With this problem clearly identified, throughout the paper I will most often refer to older women who have passed the age of forty-five or reached menopause as “elder,” “elderly” or “post-menopausal,” as appropriate. I have chosen these descriptors because they seem to be the most current and respectful. However, I am duly aware of the ideological baggage that each of the terms carries, and consider this fact to be telling of the ongoing, contemporary relevance of my topic.

In order to accurately study the portrayals of elder women in *Dombey and Son*, as well as the position of these women in Victorian culture, it is important to establish a larger ideological context from which the portrayals emerged. Obviously, Dickens’ and the Victorian’s ideology was not an isolated construction, but was formed in relation to their culture’s past. It may be helpful, then, to step back and briefly look at a late-eighteenth-century novel and the elderly women it characterizes, in order to acknowledge both the congruities and shifts that may have occurred as the Victorians took the stage. I will use Burney’s *Evelina* as a representative late-eighteenth-century novel because it encompasses so many aspects of eighteenth-century culture. The narrative reconstructs in detail the polished world of the late eighteenth-century upper-middle-class Londoner, and with skillful precision positions its characters according to the accepted social schema.

First published in 1778, Burney’s novel was a popular bestseller, probably because it spoke so accurately of the particular world in which her readers lived. *Evelina, or The History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World*, is, precisely as the subtitle suggests, a chronicle of a genteel country girl’s entrance into the complex world of society. It begins with a denied birthright, confused innocence, and mishap, and ends in redeemed virtue, aristocracy, and
marriage. The novel is many-layered, encompassing family life and relations, social commentary and critique, character study and matters of moral conduct. What is important for my paper, though, is recognition of societal male dominance, so obviously prevalent in eighteenth-century England, which undoubtedly saturated almost all of Burney’s ideology and accordingly, her novels. In order to study her elderly female characters, then, it is most helpful to situate them in relation to prevailing ideological systems.

Although I have established forty-five as, for my purposes, signaling old age, the eighteenth-century demographic figures tend to be lower than those of the nineteenth century. Actually, from 1776-1800, the average life expectancy was only 37 (Wood 17). Thus, at the time of Evelina’s publication, Fanny Burney, twenty-six and unmarried, could very well have considered herself a spinster on the verge of old age (Straub, Divided Fictions 9). Several of her journal entries dating from this period focus on her unwillingness to accept a proposal from a man she was not in love with and contain many allusions to her limited fate if she would not marry. In a May 8, 1775 journal entry, Burney wrote that her spinster aunt drolly warned her to avoid a fate like hers (Straub, Evelina 470). And on May 15, 1775, Burney wrote to Samuel Crisp that she would hope to have “the Courage to lead Apes” (Straub, Evelina 478) rather than marry without affection, alluding to the saying, “old maids lead apes in hell”.

Notwithstanding Burney’s firm resolve to move courageously past her youth and into middle age without settling for a mediocre husband, female maturity outside of a respectable marriage was not valued in the eighteenth-century middle- and upper-class world. Women were most often thought of, at least in literature, in the context of romantic heterosexual relationships (Straub, Divided Fictions 30). They were, as Lady Howard implies in a letter to Evelina’s
guardian the Reverend Villars, most fulfilled in relation to masculine society’s impression of them. In the letter, Lady Howard conveys her approval of Madame Duval’s plan to bring a law suit against Evelina’s father, Sir John Belmont, to win her granddaughter a title and fortune. She argues that Evelina, who “seems born for an ornament to the world,” will gain opportunity and value in society only if she has the financial means and respectable circumstances of birth that would aid in her success as a societal ornament in the marriage market and in marriage (Burney, Evelina 169).

Lady Howard’s line of logic seems to imply that a woman’s societal value stems from her ability to charm men and the use of that ability to win suitable proposals of marriage. Both Burney’s fiction and contemporary documents point to a conception of women as ornaments. James Fordyce, an eighteenth-century clergyman, notes in his sermon, “On the Importance of the Female Sex,” that women are the natural conduits through which the rest of humankind—men—may appreciate the beauty God intended for the earth such as “flowers of the field” and “gems of the mine,” as well as “all manner of curious and cunning works of the carver of wood, the cutter of stones, the jeweler, the engraver, the weaver, the embroiderer” (Straub, Evelina 446). Fordyce’s words imply that women are useful to men as a means of displaying patriarchal prestige. Eighteenth-century wives were decorated with fine fashion and jewels, often the fruit of foreign conquests and the exploitation of working-class needlewomen, acquired by their suitors’ and husbands’ purchasing power. Eighteenth-century moral conduct essayist Thomas Gisborne criticized the young women of the day for their shallow lives, made up of “amusements, and of dress, and of compliments, and of admirers” (Straub, Evelina 458). However, what he fails to mention in his criticism is that the male-determined society was the catalyst of this shallowness
and insisted upon limiting young women's interests.

Besides the usefulness of the female body, a woman's personal beauty and virtue, contracted by some man through marriage, served to further augment his net worth, not only in terms of actual dowry, but also in the success that the ownership of her worthiness symbolized. Lynne Vallone recognizes this dual value in eighteenth-century literary texts, including *Evelina*, in which women of little or no fortune are still objects of aristocratic marital pursuit. She argues that in these novels there is a "coherent social vision that prizes an aristocracy of feminine manners--chaste and 'aesthetic' behavior--as much as the wealthy estate" (51). That wealth and virtue are reconciled in *Evelina*, is, I think, revealing of the text's underlying ideology which necessarily equates women's capacity to take part in the sexual cash nexus with other, more "civilized" (though less effective) forms of value such as beauty and virtue. This layering of values, or perhaps I might say "currencies," is reminiscent of Mr. Dombey's late-found appreciation of Florence. As I have argued, appreciation of Florence's worthiness is contingent, finally, upon her youthful potential, and therefore supports the bourgeois ideology that it set out to subvert.

Thus, these portrayals of young women better illustrate the difficult place of "women past their prime" in this societal picture. In his sermon, Fordyce mentions the attraction of "female youth" (Straub, *Evelina* 449), serving to reinforce why an argument concerning the importance of the female sex focuses on adolescent girls and very young women. Youth was considered beautiful, and the dominant ideology of the eighteenth-century middle and upper-class included women as beautiful ornaments, their luster bolstering the men who engaged in the daily interactions involved in the systems of wealth, property and power. In addition, of course, young
women were more likely to give their husbands a male heir—the more practical and essential function of women. It follows, then, that those who did not fit the conventional mold of beauty and who were past their child-bearing years would be seen as insignificant. No longer deemed worthy of displaying and symbolizing male wealth and prestige, the elder women of the eighteenth-century were faced with even fewer options than other women. Thus, I would ultimately fear Evelina’s immediate fate less than Lady Howard’s, who, though she is a wealthy member of the nobility, is also widowed and elderly. It is only logical that the death of her husband might be followed by a diminishment of worth, a loss of influence, and only nominal function in the novel.

Indeed, Lady Howard, though always spoken of with the utmost respect by Burney’s other characters, finds herself equipped with insufficient power when dealing with two crucial matters. First, she fails to persuade the Reverend Villars to approve Madame Duval’s plan to sue Evelina’s father for her birthright. Despite Lady Howard’s eloquent reasoning on the behalf of Evelina’s well-being, Reverend Villars easily overlooks the plea. Likewise, she attempts to take matters into her own hands, writing an appeal to Belmont himself, and is tacitly refused. Lady Howard’s relationship with Captain Mirvan further indicates the elderly woman’s limited power. Although undoubtedly the head of household at Howard Grove during her son-in-laws long absences, Lady Howard is nonetheless rendered helpless when dealing with him. For example, during the M. Dubois hoax, in which Captain Mirvan and Sir Clement plot to harass Madame Duval at Howard Grove, Evelina intuits that Lady Howard knows of Captain Mirvan’s schemes and thoroughly disapproves. However, Evelina is dismayed when the elderly woman feigns ignorance of the hoax, as she “would not hazard the consequence of discovering his designs”
(184). It seems that the peace of the household, as well as Lady Howard’s own dignity, would be sacrificed at the hands of a worthless cause, since Captain Mirvan would surely take no notice of her pleas. Lady Howard’s desperate attempt to maintain a facade of control by remaining silent is a powerful indicator of the unstable power of elderly women in wealthy households.

_Evelina_ contains several other mature female characters whose experiences in the novel more fully characterize the experience of eighteenth-century elder women, the most prominent being Madame Duval. Madame Duval is Evelina’s recently widowed French grandmother whose unexpected arrival in London during the social season comes as “an accident equally unexpected and disagreeable” (95) to Evelina and her party. It is easy to understand why the granddaughter and her friends would find Madame Duval distasteful. She is an outspoken older woman who defies her place in society with almost every action. She dresses much more youthfully than she “should” and she paints her face. Her style and manner are quite “French,” according to English standards of the day, and to be “French” in eighteenth-century England signalled frivolity and questionable modesty. Joseph Addison complained of French fashions, “What an inundation of ribbons and brocades...For the prevention of these great Evils, I could heartily wish that there was an Act of Parliament for Prohibiting the Importation of French Fopperies” (525). Furthermore, Madame Duval drags Evelina away from her genteel friends and into an acquaintance with her shockingly vulgar cousins, the Branghtons. However, even after taking into account these disagreeable characteristics, it still seems that Evelina’s grandmother is treated more harshly than a few eccentric mannerisms and undesirable acquaintances should warrant.

One particularly vivid example of Evelina’s (and society’s in general) disapproval of Madame Duval is her commentary on her grandmother’s behavior at the Hampstead ball. On this
occasion, Madame Duval has dared to dance a minuet, unspeakable for a woman of her age and position. Evelina is quite embarrassed by this display and confides to Reverend Villars, “She danced in a style so uncommon; her age, her showy dress, and an unusual quantity of rouge drew upon her the eyes, and, I fear, the derision of the whole company” (263). This passage is only one example of a common theme that occurs throughout the novel concerning the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of a mature woman’s dress and toilette. Madame Duval is constantly either privately criticized or blatantly humiliated for her concern with her looks. In contrast, young girls such as Evelina are constantly encouraged to enhance their natural looks, as is evident by the showy fashions of the eighteenth-century, enumerated by Evelina herself upon her arrival in London. She writes to Reverend Villars about shopping for fine silks, linens, “caps and ribbons” and comments upon having her hair dressed: “You can’t think how oddly my head feels; full of powder and black pins, and a great cushion on the top of it. I believe you would hardly know me, for my face looks quite different to what it did before my hair was dressed” (73). Burney’s art certainly seems to have imitated life; Richard Campbell noted in The London Tradesman that “The whole Species of our Modern Beaus and Belles appear in a perpetual Masquerade, and seem contending with one another who shall deviate most from Nature” (509).

The question, then, becomes why society members disapprove of Madame Duval’s preoccupation with her looks when younger women are encouraged to enhance their beauty. Evelina notices that “the traces of former beauty are still very visible in her face” (99), even underneath the “quantity of rouge” (263). However, Madame Duval’s beauty doesn’t matter much, as it fails to increase sympathy toward her and is never mentioned again. Madame Duval’s age and position as a widow seem to automatically override any claim of beauty and
render her the subject of criticism. I conclude that this disapproval stems from supposed threat, though obviously not of a tangible nature. While Madame Duval does not hold any power (excepting her financial buying power) according to the ideological schema of the novel, she is in fact quite problematic to the determined social order. Clinging vehemently to the remains of her beauty, as well as the fortune of her dead husband, she is seemingly unaware of others' disapproval. Through her sheer stubbornness and abandonment of protocol, then, she defies the conventional place of elder women in eighteenth-century British society.

In her book, *Divided Fictions*, Kristina Straub argues that while Burney's portrayal of older women does not consciously separate itself from the dominant ideology of the time, one can nonetheless detect in *Evelina* "barely articulated, incompletely formulated ideological possibilities that the text cannot, at that moment in history, fully sustain" (25). In other words, Burney, though she may not have been conscious of it, does in a few instances explore older women's identities outside of a male context, and Madame Duval's strong-willed disregard for convention might be one example of this. As Straub recognizes, at times she possesses an almost "renegade female strength" (*Divided Fictions* 28). By demanding that Mr. Smith dance with her at the Hampstead Ball despite his reluctance to be seen with an older woman, hurling insults at Mr. Mirvan as fast as he can take them, and withholding Evelina's inheritance, Madame Duval challenges what is expected of her as an elder woman. Because Madame Duval disregards accepted social forms that normally define older females in relation to male dominance, she lies, to some extent, outside of the structured ideology that otherwise pervades Burney's work (Straub, *Divided Fictions* 29). Burney's portrayal of Madame Duval contains a degree of ambiguity that allows for some exploration of the character that conflicts with her condoned
ideological role.

While I believe that Burney is indeed ideologically ambiguous in her treatment of Madame Duval, any potential strength does not, in the end, gain the elderly woman power. In fact, her positioning outside of male-centered ideology only further ostracizes her from “proper” society, though she may not recognize it. As the novel progresses, Madame Duval’s actions are increasingly inconsequential. In the end, most of Evelina’s plot understandably stems from an eighteenth-century ideology, which proves blinding, even for Burney. Accordingly, the majority of the novel’s elder women, the majority of the time, are degraded and devalued. There is the mainly unchecked torture of Madame Duval at the hands of Captain Mirvan and Sir Clement, and the virtual powerlessness of Lady Howard over her son-in-law’s cruelty that we have already seen. There is Mrs. Mirvan, constantly fearing her husband’s tyrannical ways. There is Mrs. Selwyn, who as Straub notes in Divided Fictions, can achieve partial, and grudging, acceptance in a male world only by disregarding most females (28). And, probably most disturbing, there is the staging of a race between two elderly and infirm peasant women by the aristocratic men of the novel. Each of these instances point to the powerless and sadly laughable position held by elder women in Burney’s world.

Madame Duval fits perfectly into this discarded category of human beings, and draws a nice parallel to the old women’s race. In addition to her vulgarity and lack of access to polite society, she is a woman past her prime; like the peasant women, age and gender combine to exaggerate her low social position, regardless of her financial capabilities. No matter how finely she dresses and what social events she attends, she is bound to lose the race. As an aside, it is interesting that Madame Duval fades into the background of the action at the end of Volume II,
due most likely to Burney’s previously discussed shifting ideological positioning. That is, 
Madame Duval’s disappearance rids the novel of anything problematic to, and paves the way for, 
its conservative conclusion. It is only after Madame Duval’s departure that Evelina is reconciled 
with her father, becomes an heiress and marries Lord Orville. This plot device seems to suggest 
that if Evelina had chosen to ally herself with her grandmother, she would most likely have 
suffered the consequence of becoming, one day, just as ridiculous. Although in the bloom of 
youth she is admired by men and prized as a valuable commodity, once her beauty fades Evelina 
will be an object of contempt unless she is united with a worthy man, and even then her value 
will be questionable once she ceases to reproduce.

If Burney’s Evelina is for the most part typical of eighteenth-century attitudes toward 
elderly woman, then I might next explore how this ideological framework was reworked as 
British society shifted to the century in which Dickens would live and write. My analysis of 
Evelina has focused on the importance of a woman’s ability to please the eye of male society and 
take part in the marital cash nexus. The middle-aged Madame Duval’s shortcomings seem to do 
mostly with her fleeting beauty and improper manners. She is not important to the male-
dominated society because she is no longer a candidate for admiration or marriage. She is 
frowned upon and ridiculed because she refuses to adhere to the conventional status of an older 
woman in polite society. However, what hasn’t been discussed is that her lack of maternal 
instinct is criticized as well, though not nearly as thoroughly as her vulgarity. Early in the novel 
we learn that Madame Duval washed her hands of Evelina’s mother, her own daughter, “at a time 
when a mother’s protection was so peculiarly necessary for her peace and her reputation” (58). It 
is also obvious that Madame Duval has no natural talent for dealing gently with her
granddaughter, subjecting her instead, at will, to her own rash moods and ideas.

As the eighteenth century drew to a close, British society became more and more concerned with motherhood and women’s role in raising children. From a radical perspective, Mary Wolstonecraft published *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* in 1787. Believing that it was women’s responsibility to raise intelligent and sensible daughters who would be capable of asserting their rights, Wolstonecraft was a proponent of closely involved motherhood, including breast-feeding. In her book she opines, “The mother (if there are not very weighty reasons to prevent her) ought to suckle her children. Her milk is their proper nutriment” (3). Ruth Perry, in her essay “Colonizing the Breast,” states that by 1784 it was “a new social expectation” that women breast-feed their own children (123). As the trend continued, women were encouraged to spend more time with their children, and many tracts on the importance and glories of motherhood were published (Straub, *Evelina* 455, Perry 117).

It is important to note that, unlike Wolstonecraft’s radical movement to empower mothers, a lot of the literature reads more like ultra-conservative propaganda, claiming motherhood as a protector of the patriarchal status quo. For example, Fordyce advises the future wife and mother to “leave him [her husband] more at leisure to plan and provide for you all; a task which he prosecutes with tenfold alacrity, when he reflects on the beloved objects of it, and finds all his toils both soothed and rewarded by the wisdom and sweetness of your deportment to him and his children” (Straub, *Evelina* 455). Throughout the eighteenth century, then, a gradual shift concerning women’s role in the structure of society was occurring. While in the first half of the century, Perry claims, women were valued for their physical beauty and their sexuality, by the end of the century these gave way to maternal capability. In *Evelina* the shift can perhaps best be
grasped through the characterization of Madame Duval, who cannot properly play out the role of sexual being or sacrificial mother. Perry further argues that as the shift occurred, display of sexuality, while it had never been outwardly condoned, was suddenly taboo and placed in exact opposition to motherhood—perhaps the ultimate contradiction (112). Of course, for elder women like Madame Duval, any sexual identity displayed in such an unfavorable climate would further serve to highlight, in the eye of a disapproving society, the fact that they could no longer become mothers.

Throughout the early nineteenth century, and continuing right into the Victorian period, the maternal ideal flourished. Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel in the House,” and John Ruskin’s “Of Queens’ Gardens” served to further popularize a sweetly innocent, domestic, and maternal image of women.² Likewise, prudishness concerning women’s sexuality became more and more apparent so that by the 1840’s, Victorian ideology sought to deny women’s sexuality altogether, or at least to avoid speaking of it (Perkin 64), and again—amazingly—managed to ignore the obvious connection between sexuality and maternity. One of the most influential proponents of this view was William Acton, who proposed that “The best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences. Love of home, children and domestic duties are the only passions they feel” (Jalland and Hooper 234). Thus, Acton and many Victorians prescribed to women the singular role of sustaining the population while choosing to ignore anything like female sexual passion, which might complicate the convenient belief that women possess a natural tendency for sacrifice and self-effacement.

Of course, while this analysis is most concerned with the widespread Victorian ideology, it would be foolhardy to neglect mentioning any oppositional nineteenth-century viewpoint
concerning women. The “Woman Question” was one of the most important debates of the century, and there were opinions quite different from that of traditional sentimentalists like Ruskin. John Stuart Mill was an advocate of women’s liberation from the narrow confines of marriage, home, and hearth. In his essay, “The Subjection of Women,” Mill recognized the ideological system which made up the “feminine education and formation of character” as perpetuating the sentimental ideal that women’s duty centers entirely on relationships with their husbands and their children (1015). Further, Mill criticized this ideology and the human relations it created as a sort of slavery of women, which must in fact be abolished in order to accord with “progressive human society” (1015-1016). However, Mill’s essay and other works like it formed only an articulate minority opinion. Though individuals’ opinions may have run the gamut, Victorian society as a whole clung to “The Angel in the House,” a point made quite evident when we consider that it was the second best-selling poem in Victorian England (Hellerstein, Hume and Offen 134).

Returning to elder women, one might wonder where they were portrayed in the Ruskinian ideal. Quite simply, they weren’t. As women aged, they would have found themselves pushing the edges of ideological boundaries until they either became invisible, or in attempting to noisily carve out a place for themselves, faced overwhelming disapproval. I will now move into the discussion of how the patriarchal Victorian society and its rigid attitudes concerning women informed the work of Dickens and shaped his elderly female characters. I have chosen *Dombey and Son* to serve as the primary text in this discussion partly because there are several elderly female characters who represent different economic situations and partly because the majority of the novel’s younger female characters conform to the Victorian ideal. Kate Millett notes that
most of Dickens’ “‘serious’ women...are insipid goodies carved from the same soap as Ruskin’s Queens” (122). With this in mind, I thought it might be interesting to discover how a novel mainly peopled with men who comprise the patriarchal middle-class society of the industrial revolution, and women whose value lies in being either sweetly virtuous, youngish, and physically beautiful, or modest, motherly, and still of child-beariing age, treats the elderly women who no longer function as wives and mothers, and the spinster who never has and never will function as either.

Of course, economics and class are especially crucial factors in a novel which centers around the industrial revolution. Dickens’ characters encompass the bourgeois middle-class, the lower middle-class hanging on to respectability for dear life, the working-class poor, and the destitute. The elder women and spinsters included in this analysis represent each of these classes, and I will try to emphasize their differing economic backgrounds throughout my argument. While it would be ridiculous to deny that class differences place an irrevocable gulf between elder women of different classes, at the same time I think we might miss much by ignoring their similar experiences. Thus, my socio-historical discussion will generally focus on elder women of all classes, though I will attempt to point out, on an individual level, class distinctions.

*Dombey and Son* opens with the birth of Paul Dombey, Jr. Dombey Sr. is elated by the event, and pleased with his wife Fanny (as elated and pleased as Paul Dombey Sr. *can* be). Dombey’s general feeling seems to be that Fanny has achieved her (and more importantly *his*) crowning glory as a Dombey, as a wife, and as a woman. As Dickens puts it, “They had been married ten years, and until this present day on which Mr. Dombey sat jingling and jingling his
heavy gold watch-chain in the great arm-chair by the side of the bed, had had no issue” (51). To bear a son, an eventual heir to the family firm, has been Fanny’s sole importance, according to Mr. Dombey. Dickens, ironically mirroring Dombey’s thoughts, next mentions that, “There had been a girl some six years before...But what was a girl to Dombey and Son! In the capital of the House’s name and dignity, such a child was merely a piece of base coin that couldn’t be invested--a bad Boy--nothing more” (51). According to Dombey’s reasoning, little Florence is not of any use to her family, since she will not legally carry on the Dombey name and fortune. A young girl in Florence’s position could hope to be valuable to her future husband’s family only if she is able to provide them with a male heir.

As for Fanny, she dies by the end of the first chapter, her purpose fulfilled. She has produced a male heir and is of concern no more. In fact, just as her daughter Florence, the “bad Boy,” is far too young to contribute the only thing a woman can to a nineteenth-century bourgeois family, Fanny would have soon grown too old. Perhaps even more than for Burney and Evelina, the society in which Dickens and his novels’ characters lived was, very simply, dependent on the patriarchal family model. Joan Perkin, in her book Victorian Women, notes that middle-class family life was “the building block of civilized society” and “won for itself a reputation as a noble institution upon whose continuance depended all that was fine and stable in Britain” (74). Within this family structure, the male reigned in and outside of the home, earned the bread, owned the property and passed all of it down to his sons. It is clear that women were considered no more important to the success of this miniature civilization than they were to the outside world. One might even remark that the patriarchal family model was dependent upon women, in fact included women, in only one respect: childbirth. It easily follows, then, that
women who were physically incapable of bearing children lost their tenuous place of value in the patriarchal structure. Fanny Dombey’s death at childbirth prevents me from charting her progress through motherhood, menopause and old age. However, through analysis of the novel’s other female characters, along with historical accounts of Victorian elder women, I hope to paint a fairly accurate picture of what her progress might have been.

Since menopause signifies the absolute end of reproducitively healthy women’s potential to bear children, it is absolutely essential to explore nineteenth-century accounts of menopausal experience in order to gain a clearer insight into social perceptions of elder women. In their book, *Women From Birth to Death: The Female Life Cycle in Britain 1830-1914*, Pat Jalland and John Hooper discuss Victorian women and menopause, asserting, “If the primary meaning of female life was achieved through maternity, then the woman’s world after reproduction was necessarily characterized by the loss of meaning” (281). Albertine-Adrienne Necker de Saussure wrote in the mid-nineteenth-century about the altered role that elder women must assume after the role of wife and active mother has passed. She not only acknowledged the overwhelming sense of loss and purposelessness elder women so often felt, but also referred to them as otherworldly, almost no longer a part of the functional world, reflecting, “It sometimes seems to her [the elder woman] that her soul has already passed the boundaries of earth, and that she contemplates all things from on high” (Hellerstein, Hume and Offen 481). Here, Saussure suggests a mass identity crisis of startling proportion!

Similarly, Victorian medical explanations of menopause focus on loss, not only of meaning, but of health as well. In 1873, Dr. Robert Barnes observed that “Many women may have passed through the trials of puberty and of child-bearing without serious nervous disorders
and will break down at the menopause” (Jalland and Hooper 292). Likewise, Samuel Mason, author of *The Philosophy of Female Health*, wrote in 1845, only a few years before the first publication of *Dombey and Son*: “Women dread this period [menopause] because hitherto occult or latent diseases now manifest themselves” (Jalland and Hooper 289). These viewpoints, with their emphasis on sickness and debility, exclude menopause from the life cycle, and instead seem to equate it with the beginning of the short spiral toward death. Terror and loss characterize each of these pictures of menopause.

Victorian essays, medical reports, personal journals, poetry, and novels emphasize again and again not only the loss of meaning post-menopausal women experienced, but also the supposed loss of feminine characteristics and beauty. Nineteenth-century fashion authority Lola Montez dictated that after the age of fifty, a woman should lay aside any former claims of beauty, and “by her ‘mantle of grey’ gracefully acknowledge her entrance into the ‘vale of years’” (Hellerstein, Hume and Offen 468). Dr. Michael Ryan identified menopause as signifying the loss of female physical traits, claiming, “The breasts collapse in most cases,” and the “women become corpulent, and lose the mild peculiarities of their sex” (Jalland and Hooper 288). E.J. Tilt, writing in 1857, also commented on post-menopausal women’s loss of femininity, extending his observations to mental characteristics. He wrote, “like the body, their mental facilities assume a masculine character” (Jalland and Hooper 300). However, this so-called shift to a more masculine mentality by no means granted elder women more power, even though that may seem a logical step for a masculine-dominated society. Although some essayists, moralists, and doctors encouraged post-menopausal women to use their new capabilities and free-time toward philanthropic and religious pursuits (Hellerstein, Hume and Offen 464, 466), these were
still viewed as women's realms, and thus marked little progress.

What statistics do show is that post-menopausal women remained quite powerless in British society, and in fact probably lost the influence they had as young women. In terms of monetary power, elder women generally lost at least part of their wealth and property with the death of their husbands. Since property laws concerning widows were problematic and often disadvantageous, the consequence was that many elder women became dependent upon their sons and daughters (Perkin 136-137, 149)—recall, for example, Lady Howard's relationship with her son-in-law, Mr. Mirvan, in Evelina. Among the working class, the plight of the aged widow was even more severe, since a great percentage of Britain's classified paupers were elder women, as Geoffrey Drage indicated in his 1890's study (Hellerstein, Hume and Offen 496). Elderly women, devalued, desexualized, and dehumanized by countless sources, and many times left without sufficient income, undoubtedly became the most powerless women of all.

These nineteenth-century writings point to an image of menopause and aging in which older women cease to be women—and cease to be people as well. I suggest that Dickens, had he applied his witty social critique to the treatment of elder, as well as young, females, would have termed these supposedly "functionless" women "bad Men," no longer physically feminine and almost masculine in character, yet useless in a man's world. Perhaps because of this crisis of identity, it is difficult to separate the elderly women in the novel from the pathetic, the ridiculous, or the grotesque. They can be downtrodden, but they fail to win Dickens' full concern. They can be humorous, but they fail to be endearing. They can be manipulative, but they fail to be truly powerful. They are central to the shifts in plot, but ultimately, the plot excludes them. These contradictions make it necessary not only to analyze the dialogue and the descriptions that
Dickens allots to these women, but to supplement what is said with what is not said. Elderly women must be found not only in the text, but in the margins as well.

As I have shown, grotesque physical descriptions of elder women were fairly common throughout Victorian society, and there are many examples to find in *Dombey and Son*. Good Mrs. Brown is first introduced to the reader when Little Florence has been separated from Polly Toodle and Susan Nipper on the way home from Staggs's Gardens. Frightened and alone, she is approached and then temporarily kidnapped by Good Mrs. Brown, “a very ugly old woman with red rims round her eyes and a mouth that mumbled and chattered of itself when she was not speaking...she had lost her breath and this made her uglier still, as she stood trying to regain it: working her shrunken yellow face and throat into all sorts of contortions” (128). Dickens seems to spend more time dwelling on Mrs. Brown’s hideous coloring and incoherent mush-mouthed mumbles than on any real character development of the elder woman. The novelist does not pity her breathlessness; instead he uses the woman’s weakness as added proof of her ugliness. In fact, afterward Mrs. Brown is almost always introduced into the scene first with some mention of her hideous looks. It is as if Dickens is pointing out that there is nothing much left inside of Good Mrs. Brown, and that her outside appearance is equally useless and undesirable.

The grotesque witch-like portrayal is a common thread among several of the elder women in *Dombey and Son*. This imagery is perhaps most blatant with Good Mrs. Brown, “crouching over a meager fire” (566) in her black little room, smoking her pipe, and telling “fortunes” to Edith and Carker. However, it is also noticeable in descriptions of Mrs. Pipchin, with her “mottled face, like bad marble, a hook nose, and a hard grey eye” (160). When young Paul Dombey first goes to live with the Widow Pipchin, she is referred to more than once as “the
ogress and child-queller” (160). Interestingly, Dickens furthers his grotesque depiction of the woman by adding that her “milk of human kindness had been pumped out dry” (160). Here, the reader is given a picture of Mrs. Pipchin in which she is deemed incomplete. One might even interpret the “milk of human kindness” as her own maternal capabilities, dried up with old age. Perhaps what is suggested is that despite all of Mrs. Pipchin’s “witchcraft,” including the financial success of her school for children, she is unable to masquerade as a real or even a surrogate mother.

*Dombey and Son’s* most memorable, and most disturbing, witch-like caricature is that of Mrs. Skewton. Mr. Dombey’s eventual mother-in-law uses “witchery” in her daily attempts to preserve a youthful facade. In one of the most brutal scenes of the book, Mrs. Skewton’s maid helps her to bed:

At night she should have been a skeleton, with dart and hour-glass, rather than a woman, this attendant; for her touch was as the touch of Death. The painted object shriveled underneath her hand; the form collapsed, the hair dropped off, the arched dark eyebrows changed to scanty tufts of grey; the pale lips shrunk, the skin became cadaverous and loose; an old, worn, yellow, nodding woman, with red eyes, alone remained in Cleopatra’s place, huddled up, like a slovenly bundle, in a greasy flannel gown. (Dickens 472)

It is interesting to note how remarkably similar the above passage is to Ryan’s 1841 description of women after menopause, in which he remarks that “The breasts collapse in most cases, the fullness of habit disappears, the skin shrivels, and appears too large, and loses its colour and softness...The cheeks and neck recede in their sockets, and the countenance often becomes
yellow, leaden-coloured, or florid” (Jalland and Hooper 288). Though Ryan’s description could be read as an objective account, the obviously spiteful tone of Dickens’ words calls into serious question a passage so similar. Both Ryan and Dickens focus on what the elder woman’s body no longer is, concentrating solely on the young female body as the obvious model of normalcy. I would suggest that because both the doctor and the novelist are mainly blinded by their Victorian ideology, they are unable to view the elderly female body objectively. Because a post-menopausal, nineteenth-century body has no visible societal worth, they must place it in opposition to the standard female “currency.”

Mrs. Skewton is branded ridiculous, as well as grotesque, throughout the novel. Upon the reader’s first introduction to her character, we find that, “The discrepancy between Mrs. Skewton’s fresh enthusiasm of words, and forlornly faded manner, was hardly less observable than that between her age, which was about seventy, and her dress, which would have been youthful for twenty-seven” (362). However, Dickens makes it clear that she fools nobody, comically stripping her of dignity in a way reminiscent of Burney’s portrayal of Madame Duval. Mrs. Skewton is often alluded to as “Cleopatra,” a reference to her youth, when she was actually thought quite beautiful. However, youth has clearly faded, and “Cleopatra” becomes a satiric taunt. Even when she suffers a stroke, Dickens seems to be most concerned with the failure of her youthful pretenses to protect her from disease and death: “Cleopatra was arrayed in full dress, with the diamonds, short sleeves, rouge, curls, teeth, and other juvenility all complete; but Paralysis was not to be deceived, had known her for the object of its errand, and had struck her at her glass, where she lay like a horrible doll that had tumbled down” (471). Serious disability and the approach of death does not slow Dickens’ harshly comic treatment of the elderly woman.
Shortly after Mrs. Skewton’s attack, Dickens mentions that she recovers quickly enough to "sit up, in curls and a laced cap and night-gown, and to have a little artificial bloom dropped into the hollow caverns of her cheeks" (614). Apparently, Dickens’ customary sympathy for the downtrodden does not extend so far as an elder woman’s deathbed!

Michael Slater, in his comprehensive book, *Dickens and Women*, points out Dickens’ personal attitude toward women to explain the ferocity of his portrayal of Mrs. Skewton. Throughout his book, Slater makes clear Dickens’ nervous dislike of any display of a woman’s sexuality, and he links this attitude to the treatment of Mrs. Skewton. Slater writes, “The source of the extra venom, I would suggest, lies in a basic hostility towards women asserting themselves as sexual beings. The older they are the worse it is, Dickens would seem to feel” (362-63). Slater makes an interesting point, but I believe that concentrating solely on Dickens’ attitude toward sex is missing half the point. His nervous dislike of female sexual display was not merely the result of Dickens’ various romantic relationships, or a Freudian ambivalence toward his mother; rather, confusion and prudery concerning women’s sexuality were culturally pervasive.

I have already noted that Victorian ideology hardly recognized women’s sexuality, or at least that sexuality was almost always considered aberrant. However, perhaps it was even more unacceptable for elder women because there was no male-oriented justification for women’s sexuality after menopause. Once a woman was no longer able to produce something useful for men, there ceased to be a function for sexuality. Thus, any sexuality displayed by an elder woman became especially disgusting and unnatural. This mentality is echoed in various medical tracts (Jalland and Hooper 287, 295). J.C. Webster asserted that generally, sexual passion disappears completely after menopause, and that, “cases in which there is a marked increase is
generally due to some abnormal state, such as a tumour in connection with the genitals” (Jalland and Hooper 295-296). If Dickens and a sampling of the nineteenth-century medical field is any indication, the Victorians found sexual passion to be even less acceptable for post-menopausal woman than it already was for women in general.

This disapproval of sexuality in elder women may explain much of Dickens’ harsh treatment of Mrs Skewton. In her behavior the reader sees echoes of Madame Duval, painting her face and dancing a minuet with Mr. Smith. From her coy speeches to her youthful pretenses, Mrs. Skewton, like Madame Duval, obviously still values that which is feminine and even sexual about her, and strives to make use of it. However, in Victorian society, a woman who attempted to prolong her youthful beauty was seen as ridiculous. Joan Perkin notes, “Lola Montez wrote in her book The Art of Beauty (1858) that paint and powder should not be used by ‘ladies who have passed the age of life when roses are natural to the cheek. A rouged old woman is a horrible sight - a distortion of nature’s harmony’” (147). Similarly, journalist Eliza Lynn Linton, a harsh critic of society women past their prime, scathingly labeled a woman such as Mrs. Skewton “the wretched creature who will not consent to grow old, and who will still affect to be like a coquettish girl when she is nothing but la femme passee—la femme passee et ridicule into the bargain” (Hellerstein, Hume and Offen 470). Dickens mirrors these critics’ viewpoints in Dombey with his running satire on Mrs. Skewton’s artificiality. Mrs. Skewton is constantly longing for heart, and the natural life, and worrying that "The world is coming to such an artificial and ungrateful state" (Dickens 615). Her exaggerated enthusiasm, of course, only highlights her artificial mannerisms and renders her attempts to preserve her beauty all the more ridiculous.
Perhaps what is most disturbing about Dickens’ witch-like portrayal of Mrs. Skewton, Mrs. Brown, and Mrs. Pipchin is that he expands the grotesque and the ridiculous to engulf not only these elderly women’s looks and mannerisms, but their souls as well, so that there is no distinction between outer and inner merit. He seems to suggest that their souls have shriveled along with their bodies. That Dickens may have intended this parallel is not inconceivable when one considers the apparent obsession with the female body that Western civilization has entertained for hundreds of years while virtually ignoring the many other aspects of women. Consequently, one might safely assume that mainstream Victorian ideology only valued those characteristics in women that promoted sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and the perpetuation of aesthetically pleasing and docile young wives and mothers. It makes sense, unfortunately, that the lack of these desired physical traits in post-menopausal women results in a blurring of the line between inner and outer beauty for Dickens, so that what he finds lacking in their bodies becomes a reflection upon their souls.

A rich example of the way in which Dickens blurs the line between physical circumstances and the morality of elder women can be found in the parallel stories of Mrs. Skewton and Good Mrs. Brown. Here, Dickens draws explicit class lines between the well-connected Mrs. Skewton and the destitute Mrs. Brown, yet in the end implies that both elderly women are morally quite similar. When Mrs. Brown and the “fallen” Alice Marwood are first introduced as mother and daughter, Dickens asks the reader, "Were this miserable mother, and this miserable daughter, only the reduction to their lowest grade, of certain social vices sometimes prevailing higher up? In this round world of many circles within circles, do we make a weary journey from the high grade to the low, to find at last that they lie close together?" (579)
Here, Dickens compares them to Mrs. Skewton and her daughter Edith Granger. Both Mrs. Skewton and Mrs. Brown are described as physically repulsive, though each woman is referred to as having been quite attractive in her youth. Neither woman is taken very seriously by her family and acquaintances. Mrs. Skewton, upon briefly encountering Mrs. Brown, notes that they are both mothers who are “sometimes treated undutifully enough” (664). Even Hablot K. Browne’s (Phiz’s) illustrations of the two women are quite similar, especially the portrait "A Chance Meeting" which accompanies chapter 40. Most importantly though, their similarity lies in the fact that their daughters are their sole worth.

Throughout most of the novel, Alice blames her mother, at least partly, for her misfortunes. As she explains to Harriet Carker, “She was covetous and poor, and thought to make a sort of property of me” (847). In his article, “Good Mrs. Brown’s Connections: Sexuality and Story-telling in Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son,” Joss Lutz Marsh comments on the episode in which Florence Dombey is kidnaped by Mrs. Brown. He suggests that this passage is a foreshadowing or a prelude to the destinies of Alice and Edith, and their mother’s role in their fall. As Marsh puts it, “To Dombey, Florence is ‘merely a piece of base coin that couldn’t be invested.’ But to those used to dealing in different markets, like these bawd-mothers [Good Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Skewton], she is a valuable commodity” (408). Regardless of Alice’s indictment of her mother, and acknowledging the fact that a mother utilizing her daughter’s body as a way to earn a living is horrifying, I still must ask myself if Alice would have come to the same end without her mother’s aid, keeping in mind the high demand for prostitution and the limited means of destitute working-class women in Victorian London.\(^3\)

Although Mrs. Skewton is not nearly as destitute as Mrs. Brown, her well-being also
relies on her daughter’s sexual desirability. The widow and Edith (also a widow) are well-connected but financially feeble. As relatives of Lord Feenix, they are given enough monetary support to travel to fashionable places in order to seek a suitable husband for Edith. It is essential that Edith remarry in order to lift the financial strain of her mother and herself off of their relatives. This was a common situation among families of the upper class. According to Sheila Ryan Johansson: “Because so many privileged women neither married nor worked outside the house, they created an unusual ‘dependency burden’ for their male relatives” (282). Caught in this bind, Mrs. Skewton taught her daughter early on to present herself as a commodity, and negotiates the dealings for her daughter. As Edith declares, “There is no slave in a market; there is no horse in a fair: so shown and offered and examined and paraded, Mother, as I have been, for ten shameful years” (Dickens 473). Here, Edith functions as a mouthpiece for Dickens, critiquing Mrs. Skewton for her contribution to the shameless commodification of marital relationships. However, Edith’s and Dickens’ clear-cut condemnation of Mrs. Skewton ignores a pertinent social issue of the Victorian Era---the problem of “redundant women.”

In 1862, Frances Power Cobbe wrote an article for Fraser’s Magazine entitled “What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?” dealing with the increasing population of women who were choosing to remain celibate, much as Edith might have had she been given the least opportunity. This was a crucial issue in the nineteenth century, since there was no real identity for women who did not make marriage and motherhood their vocation. At the beginning of the article, Cobbe lays out the two sides of the issue, the first being the acceptance of more unmarried women and the modification of education and business to improve the conditions of those who remain celibate, and the other to fight against the rising trend of single women by shipping
celibate women off to the colonies and generally making unmarried life seem as uncomfortable as possible (Cobbe 86). Cobbe is, of course, arguing for the first of these measures, and in the process has some interesting things to say which relate very well to the bind that entangles Good Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Skewton.

At one point in her argument, Cobbe notes,

If marriage be indeed the one object of a woman’s life...then, we repeat, why despise these match-making mothers? Are they to do nothing to help their daughters to their only true vocation, which if they miss, their lives ought to be failures, poverty-stricken and miserable? (88)

Here, Cobbe eloquently points out the double bind that mothers such as Mrs. Skewton and Mrs. Brown face. On one hand, they must attempt to ensure that they, along with their daughters, will be provided for, and in Victorian society this more than likely requires a successful marriage (or an illicit arrangement in Alice’s case). However, at the same time, by attempting to marry off their children, they find themselves the targets of hatred from their disillusioned daughters, and ridicule from satirists such as Dickens and society in general. As Cobbe asserts, “Truly it is a paradox passing all limits of reason, that society should enforce marriage on woman as her only honourable life, and at the same time should stigmatize as dishonourable the efforts of her parents to settle her in marriage” (89). Cobbe intuits that women past a certain age were worthless to society, and that, even in their attempt to secure their daughter’s a worthier fate, they were bound to face nothing but contempt.

Cobbe, though magnificent, was undoubtedly ahead of her time. As she herself acknowledged, most Victorian men and women did not appreciate the difficult position of
women like Mrs. Skewton and Mrs. Brown. In her late nineteenth-century conduct manual for
women, Helen Ekin Starratt recognized the lack of societal appreciation for mothers of
marriageable daughters, stating that they have been “unjustly ridiculed and made the butt of
cheap wit” (111). No longer able to perform the biological role of mother, the elderly were
denied the respect and affection they may have received in younger years. I think that this double
standard, in particular, points out the nineteenth-century focus on an idealistic and unrealistic
version of maternity that was so damaging to cultural attitudes toward elder women, and makes
the sting even more harsh than in the eighteenth-century Evelina. Even today, it may be difficult
to sympathize with Mrs. Skewton and Mrs. Brown. Although feminist theory has long won
respect for the “undutiful” Edith and the “fallen” Alice, the brunt of the blame for their fates is
stilled placed, at least partially, on spiteful old women. Take Marsh’s article, for example.
While his critical analysis lends a modern perspective concerning female sexuality to the novel, it
still focuses on the plight of young women and hardly questions the impossible situation that
their mothers are placed in. He even characterizes Mrs. Skewton and Mrs. Brown as “bawd-
mothers” (408), and seems to overlook the fact that every business deal, especially those that deal
in human goods, must include a consumer.

In the nineteenth-century, the sexual consumers, of course, were men. However, this is
only lightly touched upon in Dombey and Son. It is the elder women of the novel who most often
end up being “moral scapegoats” precisely because they are not necessary to the final plot, just as
they were not necessary in Victorian society. Desperate older mothers such as those whom
Cobbe defends in her essay were easy to mock and to hold in contempt, and the role of scapegoat
became their sole function in society. For example, at one point in the novel, Major Bagstock
and Mrs. Skewton are in cahoots about the union of Edith and Mr. Dombey. However, it is Mrs. Skewton who is lectured to about match-making, and to whom death comes as the final retribution. Notwithstanding their equal leverage in the Edith-Mr. Dombey affair, Bagstock remains a distasteful comic figure, while Mrs. Skewton is treated with contempt and becomes the object of scathing commentary. Likewise, although Dombey is just as bad a parent as his female counterparts, he nonetheless gains affection from his daughter before the novel is through. In contrast, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Skewton must be satisfied with the stern forgiveness, made necessary by death, that is bestowed upon them by their daughters. There are no second chances for elderly women.

Because Mr. Dombey is a man, he is of some value to his daughter, and to his society as a whole. Good Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Skewton however, are not so fortunate. If they are valued at all, it is only because they are forced to be the catalysts through which male-dominated social conventions such as female commodification can be perpetuated, and further, because any blame can be transferred from useful members of society onto them. Although Mrs. Skewton and Good Mrs. Brown are only specific character-types employed by Dickens to further his social commentary, and although there are instances throughout nineteenth-century novels in which elder woman are portrayed in a gentler light—recall brave Betty Higden and kindly Mrs. Boffin in Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend*—the elder women in *Dombey and Son* nonetheless provide an enlightening glimpse at the ways in which a reader must energetically sort through a novel not only to discover its period’s social bias, but also to come to terms with contemporary bias.

I want to briefly turn to another group of discarded and devalued women—Cobbe’s own subject—Victorian spinsters. “Redundant women,” as they were commonly referred to in social
commentary, were obviously seen as a problem in a society whose narrow expectations of women almost always included matrimony. In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens’ characterization of the middle-aged and unmarried Miss Tox is representative of this group of women. Miss Tox is introduced very early in the novel as the doting friend of Mr. Dombey’s sister, Mrs. Chick. Her fervent admiration of Mr. Dombey is immediately evident to the reader, though humbly displayed by the woman herself. Dickens’ opening descriptor of his old maid runs as such: “The lady...was a long lean figure, wearing such a faded air that she seemed not to have been made in what linen-draper’s call ‘fast colours’ originally, and to have, by little and little, washed out” (55).

From this passage, one might deduce the attitude that a woman of certain years, having never experienced the fulfillment of matrimony and motherhood, is sure to be a little peaked and colorless, one could say incomplete, herself.

Shifting for a moment to the historical context in which Dickens wrote, once again there is an interesting parallel to be found between Dickens’ physical description of his characters and Victorian theorists’ stances about their real-life counterparts. In 1838, social theorist Richard Carlile asserted that “women who have never had sexual commerce begin to droop when about twenty-five years of age...they become pale and languid,...their forms degenerate, their features sink, and the peculiar character of the old maid becomes apparent” (Jalland 132). Here is a description of women in Miss Tox’s position, very like Dickens’ imagery, that assumes a lack of purpose and value in women who do not partake in sexual contact to further the British population of men. Pat Jalland, in her article, “Victorian Spinsters: Dutiful Daughter, Desperate Rebels and the Transition to the New Woman” reports that social theorists, doctors and novelists all perpetuated the stereotypes common among Victorians concerning the “abnormality” of
spinsters (132).

Yet the Victorian attitude toward spinsters is riddled with contradiction. First, unfavorable attention was increasingly focused on spinsters in the nineteenth-century after new census statistics indicated a larger population of women than men in Britain. However, this "surplus" population of women was due to factors such as a higher male mortality rate, male emigration and colonization, participation in the military, and a rising nineteenth-century, upper-class trend in which men waited until they were financially established (and quite old) to marry (Jalland 131-132). Frances Power Cobbe ridiculed those who failed to see the double standard: "We cannot but add a few words to express our amused surprise at the way in which the writers on this subject constantly concern themselves with the question of female celibacy, deplore it, abuse it, propose amazing remedies for it, but take little or no notice of the twenty-five percent old bachelors (or thereabouts) who needs must exist to match the thirty percent old maids" (91). Although women, obviously, had little to absolutely no control over any of these factors, those that remained unmarried were the embodiment of the problem of an unbalanced population of a society based upon the institution of marriage. Thus, I would argue that spinsters became scapegoats for the obvious shortcomings of societal limitations perpetuated, traditionally, by the male population.

Jalland points out another contradiction in the Victorian disapproval of women who remained unmarried, which stems back to Carlyle’s assertion about the negative physical and mental characteristics attributed to women who remain celibate after a certain age. In light of the idealized Victorian woman--the Angel in the House--whose existence is clearly caretaker of the home, hearth, children, and husband, and whose purity seeks to deny sexual need or pleasure,
only submitting to intercourse for the sake of husband and country, does it not seem quite problematic that nineteenth-century doctors, theorists, and oftentimes novelists portrayed spinsters to be sexually frustrated, hysterical, and inherently incomplete (Jalland 132)? Dickens expresses this common stereotype best when he denies its presence in Miss Tox, noting, “She is no chicken, but she has not grown tough with age and celibacy” (933). Dickens’ characterization of Miss Tox is most interesting precisely because of the degree to which it perpetuates these contradictions, and conversely--yet simultaneously--the ways in which it criticizes and subverts the prevailing stereotypes.

Beyond her pale looks and manner of humble deference, one of the first bits of information revealed about Miss Tox is that she “was a lady of what is called a limited independence, which she turned to best account” (56). Later, she (along with her dwelling at Princess’s Place) is referred to by Dickens as a “hanger-on” (144), desperately clinging to gentility and polite society. Although she is fortunate enough to have been bequeathed her dwelling at Princess’s Place by a benign uncle, she must nonetheless keep constantly on her toes to make the most of her resources. Here, Dickens is more intent on portraying the trying financial situation and day-to-day living conditions that understandably plagued many middle-class spinsters than he is on enumerating the many physical and emotional flaws that must plague Miss Tox in her celibate state. Indeed, any incompleteness in her life would seem to stem more directly from her meager income and a lack of opportunity than from a lack of romance. This side of Miss Tox corresponds quite well with the results of Jalland’s extensive historical research: she concludes that “Harsh material considerations caused flesh and blood spinsters more suffering than sexual deprivation or ‘premature physical decay’” (136). Although those
who wrote about spinsters were most concerned about their abnormalities, what really plagued these women was their lack of access to a comfortable and “normal” lifestyle. If I left my analysis of Miss Tox here, I might conclude that Dickens portrayal is quite progressive, focusing on the real, rather than the stereotypical, plight of the spinster.

However, Dickens’ portrayal of Miss Tox becomes more conventional as the novel progresses, especially in the plot twist in which Miss Tox--through the scheming of Mrs. Chick--entertains hopes concerning a romantic attachment to Mr. Dombey. Miss Tox, home at Princess’s place, slips from her busy regime of plant pruning and the harpsichord to gaze out the window in quiet reflection and recollection of times past. Suddenly, she seems pensive and wistful concerning her age and the quietness of her life (488-489). Certainly, this could be a fair assessment of any person living outside the bosom of a large family or close-knit group of friends. In fact, in Jalland’s case studies of nineteenth-century British spinsters and old maids, melancholy and wistfulness were present, many times in quite disturbing degrees, among the subjects. However, her research finds that this was due less to a lack of sexual or romantic involvement than to the absence of an outlet for worthwhile expression of their talents, a sense of fulfillment, respect, and human affection in whatever form.4

Miss Tox’s gloom, on the other hand, seems quite caught up in her romantic aspirations, and culminates in a fateful swoon whence Mrs. Chick reveals to her Mr. Dombey’s engagement to Edith Granger (494). After Mrs. Chick ruthlessly cuts her off from visiting the Dombey family, Miss Tox “became depressed in her spirits, and suffered much from melancholy” (617). It is clear that Dickens, although he sympathizes with the plight of women like Miss Tox, is unable to move away from the very Victorian assumption that the natural cause of a woman’s
despair is the inability to pour her affection and feminine instincts onto a man and his children. Unlike Jalland's subjects, Dickens portrays Miss Tox as depressed because she is no longer able to coddle the Dombey family—not because she desires respect, affection, and fulfillment for herself.

Regardless of his inaccurate portrayal, it is obvious that Dickens is affectionately inclined toward Miss Tox, and I would even venture intends her as a role model to real-life spinsters. He mostly praises her good heart and her mild disposition. He sermonizes, "there was no such thing as anger in Miss Tox's composition. If she had ambled on through life, in her soft-spoken way, without any opinions, she had, at least, got so far without any harsh passions" (617). Thus, Dickens, though in a roundabout way, praises Miss Tox for not stirring the waters, for sitting back and being agreeable. Mrs. Chick, a member of the matrimonial establishment, must judge Miss Tox in the same way. When she is assured that Miss Tox is content with being a wet blanket, she has nothing but praise for her friend, and even feels confident enough in the spinster's lack of ambition to throw around meaningless opinions concerning the state of Mr. Dombey's feelings toward Miss Tox. However, being dependent on the conventions of marriage herself, when Mr. Dombey chooses a fiancée more suitable to his situation, Mrs. Chick realizes the danger to her own situation that any ambition in Miss Tox could have caused. In order to escape her own ridicule, Mrs. Chick must make the spinster her scapegoat. Feigning righteous surprise and indignation, Mrs. Chick conveniently condemns Miss Tox's swooning as displayed evidence of her secret hopes, and angrily marvels that a spinster of limited means should "dare to aspire to contemplate the possibility" (497) of uniting with a great man Mr. Dombey. Even the most humble and secret ambitions and opinions of a powerless spinster were presumptuous and
dangerous in Dickens’ world.

Just as elderly women such as Mrs. Skewton and Good Mrs. Brown are employed as “moral scapegoats” throughout *Dombey and Son*, and (as Frances Power Cobbe would argue) in nineteenth-century British society, the unmarried Miss Tox becomes a scapegoat to the otherwise powerless Mrs. Chick. For those who had never been and who never would be married must have held little, if any, power in the Victorian world. However, the growing social criticism of the time concerning treatment of women who remained unmarried is evident in Dickens’ writing as well. The Woman Question, as well as the debate regarding “redundant women,” seemingly opened a semi-respectable space in literature for women like Miss Tox. As Michael Slater notes, “That Dickens himself respects the creature [Miss Tox] he has made is shown, I think, by his not marrying her off, as a kind of reward, to the nearest suitable single male at the end of novel” (246). Instead, the novel leaves Miss Tox as a “great favourite” (971) and social acquaintance of the Dombey Family, as well as taking Rob the Grinder under her wing. This is a more positive conclusion to the portrayal of an aging unmarried woman, in comparison to the unrelenting grotesque and ridiculous treatment of the elderly Mrs. Skewton, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Pipchin. These women, past any hopes of marriage and child-bearing, yet still responsible for the products of their youth, are not given the option of any other employment or worth past motherhood. Thus, unlike Miss Tox, they do not have even the slightest chance to be valued, outside of their past, and are trapped by the narrow Victorian ideological constraints of traditional womanhood—an image they no longer mirror, but are not allowed to transcend.

It is worth mentioning that there are elderly and spinster women in Dickens’ later works that are not quite so easily dismissed by the novelist. For example, *Great Expectations*
showcases the eccentric recluse Miss Havisham. Here Dickens portrays a wealthy elderly spinster, unable to overcome the shock of having been jilted at the altar, who devotes her life to her bitterness. In his last complete novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens creates an heroic elder women, Betty Higden, who, though poverty stricken and frail with age, would rather die working herself to the bone than be sent to the poorhouse. Miss Havisham and Betty Higden are worth mention because in their characters Dickens individualizes members of a group usually pigeonholed by Victorian society. These women are characters of some complexity and depth, even though Miss Havisham is predictably bitter about her lost chance at marriage, and Betty Higden is over sentimentalized and praised, I fear, in relation to elderly women who were thought to be a “burden” on their families or on society. Regardless, these elder women possess complexity and humanity that, unfortunately, their counterparts in *Dombey and Son*, as well as the typical Victorian stereotypes, do not. It is tempting to wonder whether Dickens, as he aged himself, began to have some sympathy for and understanding of the elder women in his later works.

Nonetheless, it is crucially important to recognize the grotesque and ridiculous portrayals of elder women in both *Evelina* and *Dombey and Son*. As I briefly noted near the beginning of the paper, I believe that my thesis has current resonance; the societally devalued, desexualized, and dehumanized elder woman is not just rooted in the historical and fictional worlds of Burney and Dickens, but can be found in the corporate board room, on the current film screen, and at your local department store’s Estee Lauder counter. The contemporary elder woman may be more educated and might wear better make-up than Madame Duval and Mrs. Skewton, but she is scapegoated all the same by a society that insists upon upholding ridiculous standards for the
female face and figure. Our culture has made “femininity” a gigantic economic industry, and it is, unfortunately, women who have passed middle-age who are made the industry’s biggest “suckers.”

However, as the babyboomers, one by one, celebrate (or do not celebrate) their fiftieth birthdays, elder women will account for a larger percentage of our population than ever before, and I think it would be naıve to discount their societal influence. Already, there are more and more positive portrayals of independent and spirited middle-aged and elder women. Some of the portrayals are cliched, some are subtly problematic, and some are truly wonderful, but most at least set out to debunk many of the myths our culture maintains about the passing of femininity, and more importantly, personhood, with age. Even a cursory glance through the self-help section at the local bookstore, or the grocery store’s magazine selection is also telling of the babyboomers’ dominant presence as consumers. Book and magazine publishers are recognizing the demand for advice on aging, whether it be spiritual, medical, or cosmetic. I suggest that it will be most interesting to watch the trends of these publications. There is a distinct possibility that society will once again insist upon “defying” age, but it is my hope that the economically demanding babyboomers’ might push our culture beyond framing elder women with what they once were, and begin focusing on forging a new identity.

Finally, I want to address why studying portrayals of elder women in eighteenth-century, nineteenth-century, and contemporary culture should be important to younger women, as well as those women the portrayals represent. Just as I believe Florence Dombey’s ideological societal positioning in Dombey and Son cannot be accurately seen without critiquing the portrayals of the novel’s elder women, I would also reason that younger female readers cannot understand our
own cultural constraints without analyzing what our position would be if we were no longer young women. In other words, negative portrayals of elder women are, in the end, also negative reflections of younger women. If, as in Evelina and Dombey and Son, elder women are valueless figures because they are no longer sexual commodities, then the novels’ young women are necessarily valuable precisely because they are sexual commodities. Likewise, if today, elder women are tempted to bust their budgets buying Estee Lauder because they no longer fit the cultural standards of feminine beauty, then young women must face the terrifying fact that perhaps we are mostly valued by society because we temporarily fit the standard mold.
Notes

1Straub notes that Burney’s reference refers to a traditional saying: old maids lead apes in hell.

2Patmore’s poem, published in 1856, describes the ideal woman as “Marr’d less than man by mortal fall,/Her disposition is devout/Her countenance angelical. . .Her modesty her chiepest grace/the cestus clasping Venus’ side/How potent to defect the face/of him who would affront its pride.” Virginia Woolf’s essay “Professions for Women,” in which she proclaims that serious women writers must kill Patmore’s Angel in order to write well, is a powerful example of how deeply the poem, and other popular texts, penetrated the Victorian psyche. Of the Angel, Woolf writes, “whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard” (1385). Refer to Hellerstein, Offen and Hume (134-140) for the complete text of the poem.

3Mid-Victorian social investigator Henry Mayhew conducted years of investigation into nineteenth-century London’s poor. Among those he investigated were the city’s prostitutes, the overwhelming majority of whom he found to be very young, working-class needlewomen. Overworked and literally starved, these women could not eke out an existence without turning to prostitution. As one young woman put it, “There isn’t one young girl who can get her living by slop work[needlework]. . .I am satisfied that there is not one young girl that works at slop work that is virtuous, and there are some thousands in the trade. . .To be poor and to be honest, especially with young girls, is the hardest struggle of all” (Hellerstein, Offen and Hume 422-423). Certainly Alice Marwood would have faced this struggle, regardless of her mother’s influence. Refer to Hellerstein, Offen and Hume for other nineteenth-century studies of prostitution among the working-class.
Jalland's essay pays particularly close attention to the melancholy experienced by Victorian spinsters in section (i) “Dutiful daughters: the stereotypical spinster” (137-148).
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