

**Replotting Marriage
in Nineteenth-Century
British Literature**

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Disabling Marriage

Communities of Care in Our Mutual Friend

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OUR MUTUAL FRIEND (1865), as its title indicates, is centrally concerned with social relationships. But a mutual friendship—a network of multiple, coexisting, amicable relationships—is a complicated matter. In this essay, I argue that *Our Mutual Friend* develops its ideal relationships through caregiving communities, and I argue, further, that such mutual caregiving friendship is what *Our Mutual Friend* advocates as the real basis of marriage. As I have argued elsewhere, Victorian novels depict disability not as a medical deficit but as a social advantage.¹ Someone in need accrues a community of caregivers, a loving social network that is highly attractive to outsiders. Moreover, disabled sociality trains characters in the feelings that make marriage work. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Eugene Wrayburn and Lizzie Hexam initially set about relationships the wrong way, and only through experiencing care relations do they learn the mutual consideration, trust, and respect necessary for a good marriage.

Such affective re-education is fundamental not only to the marriage plot but also to the reader's experience. We too get retrained; we too learn to care in particular ways. To trace these dynamics, it will help to consider *Our*

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1. See Schaffer, *Romance's Rival*.

Mutual Friends care-based marriage in relation to Victorian nursing practices and the theoretical structure of "ethics of care," as well as the discursive elements of Dickensian sentiment.

In Dickens's novels, and indeed in Victorian fiction more generally, conditions are ideal for the formation of care communities. People are bound into small communities observing one another's behavior, vast numbers of the population have no gainful employment and therefore have leisure to care for one another, caretaking is profoundly approved of, and nursing occurs within the home, not the institution. In Victorian fiction, care really does take a village. After all, Victorian fictions, according to Martha Stoddard Holmes,

normalize and valorize relationships built on vulnerability and need. While dyads of care are a common character development structure, ensemble plots construct disability as a feature of community life. . . . Thematically, the fictions engage disability as a force that brings people into a wide range of complex relationships, transforming social institutions like marriage in the process.²

If Victorian marriage depends on disability, as Stoddard Holmes writes, it is no wonder that care is central.³ Brigid Lowe argues that "the mid-Victorian realist novel is the medium par excellence for an exposition of a sympathetic politics of care, and an effective vehicle for the perpetuation of the conditions for its realization."⁴

In many Victorian novels, the impaired suitor has a retinue of caretakers: servants, nurses, parents, siblings, friends.⁵ Not surprisingly, isolated people tend to be drawn to this social world. Lizzie Hexam is just one of many rootless orphans: Jane Eyre, John Halifax, Ruth Hilton, Isabel Archer, Amy Dorrit, Caroline Helstone. All lose their parents and are estranged from any guardians or siblings they may have. They find a new community by affiliating with a disabled individual: Eugene Wrayburn, Phineas Fletcher, Thurstan Benson, Ralph Touchett, the feverish Arthur Clennam, the injured Robert Moore. These are not all marriages in a legal sense, but they function narratively like marriages, with some combination of deep affective ties, shared property, and lifelong cohabitation. In these novels, a vulnerable woman finds

2. Stoddard Holmes, "Victorian Fictions," 30.

3. Care ethicists have used Victorian novels. Carol Gilligan invoked *The Mill on the Floss* when she first delineated the theory in *In a Different Voice* (1982), and Nel Noddings described *The Way of All Flesh* in *Starting at Home* (2002).

4. Lowe, *Victorian Fiction*, 241.

5. For an expanded definition of this marriage plot, see *Romance's Rival*.

a social home in joining a disabled man's community of care, and a lonely man finds a quasi-spouse.⁶ These were communities formed of especially chosen friends. Miriam Bailin writes, "Often, rather than reuniting kin, illness summons a society suited to one's own specifications and substitutes for the coercions of blood and marriage a physical tie as voluntary as friendship and as essential as survival."⁷

In the middle-class, nineteenth-century family, women nursed sick family members at home. Functions we would today outsource to hospitals, institutions, and schools were instead handled (as best they could be) by amateur family members and servants within the domestic realm. "Every woman, or at least almost every woman, in England has, at one time or another of her life, charge of the personal health of somebody, whether child or invalid,—in other words, every woman is a nurse;" Florence Nightingale wrote.⁸ Bailin explains that

nursing was repeatedly invoked to verify in a way no other activity apparently could the genuineness of one's affections, the essential goodness of one's character. In a characteristically Victorian adaptation of the moral assumptions underlying the previous century's cult of sensibility, the shedding of tears over human distress was not in itself sufficient to attest to one's benevolence but required instead the practical demonstration of compassion that nursing affords.⁹

The female mission extended beyond nursing to include succoring the poor, teaching children, and offering religious guidance. From material gifts to more tenuous "influence," women were in charge of improving others' lives. Trained to the "practical demonstration of compassion," in Bailin's words, Victorian middle-class women would have had a strong reaction to accounts of dying children, starving waifs, suffering animals. Dickens, when mobilizing readers for social reform, was writing to an audience accustomed to alleviating others' pain. He had a great deal invested in training his readers to channel their activity properly, to read rightly.

Today, theorists are still asking whether reading can factor into "practical demonstration[s] of compassion." Does fiction immerse the reader in fantasy

6. Of course, this can be painful, as in Craik's *A Noble Life*, where the Earl cannot marry the woman he lives with and loves. The disabled man still does not get a full relationship. It is, however, arguably better than being written out of the narrative completely.

7. Bailin, *The Sickroom*, 19.

8. Nightingale, *Notes on Nursing*, v.

9. Bailin, *The Sickroom*, 11. For accounts of the affective pleasures of illness in the Victorian period, see Bailin and Frawley, *Invalitism and Identity*.

in lieu of real social action, or does the intensity of fiction motivate readers to act in the world?¹⁰ Mary-Catherine Harrison argues that characters come to stand as synecdoches for larger types: reading about Tiny Tim, for instance, trains a reader to want to help all disabled children.¹¹ However, this question assumes that reading is a passive activity, with the reader unable to act until the reading experience ends. Victorians did not necessarily share this expectation of silent, passive, private reading.

Indeed, Victorian readers might have wanted to act on behalf of a specific person in the midst of reading, to help Tiny Tim himself, instead of later generalizing the lesson of Tiny Tim to real children. Such a reader might yearn for a kind of interactive reading. Indeed, active, pragmatic, inclusive reading experiences were common in nineteenth-century culture. Victorian readers read aloud to people who would comment along the way, wrote reviews that urged characters to behave differently, and attended dramatic versions of beloved sentimental stories like *East Lynne*, *A Christmas Carol*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It's not that Victorian readers believed these characters were real and could somehow benefit from their advice, but rather that there seemed no particular reason to discontinue the habit of active intervention just because the characters were fictional. The fact that famously sentimental tales got dramatized is no coincidence. Sentiment was particularly irksome to caregivers, as we shall see, provoking an especially urgent desire to insert oneself into the story.

We can help understand this urge through the modern theory of "ethics of care," a feminist philosophy developed over the past fifty years by scholars like Nel Noddings, Virginia Held, and Eva Feder Kittay. Ethics of care argues that humans are, in Held's words, "relational and interdependent, not the individualistic autonomous rational agents of the perspective of justice and rights."¹² We can only live insofar as we depend on others; no newborn can survive on its own, and none of us would be alive today if we didn't depend on others to grow our food or build our homes. Thus care is an ongoing, universal network, in which we are constantly involved. Care relations become especially visible in cases of disability. The disabled person and the caretaker (the carer and the cared) offer models of the kind of intimate dependency on which all human relations depend, and in these situations, it is often the disabled figure who becomes exemplary and teaches others how to care. *Our Mutual*

10. See Harrison, "The Paradox of Fiction." Suzanne Keen (*Empathy and the Novel*) is skeptical that fiction influences our real-world behavior at all, although psychologists Kidd, Ongis, and Castano ("On Literary Fiction") argue that reading literary fiction does produce improved empathy.

11. Harrison, "The Paradox of Fiction."

12. Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 72.

Friend charts such an experience. In this novel, Dickens constructs marriage as a care relation in which a disabled woman, Jenny Wren, has a crucial role in retaining and mediating Eugene's and Lizzy's feelings. In *Our Mutual Friend*, marriage is about consolidating community, not forming a private dyad, and marital love means caregiving tenderness, not erotic passion.

This marital model challenges half a century of literary-critical norms. Ever since Ian Watt published *The Rise of the Novel* in 1957, literary critics have tended to read the novel as the story of the individual's growth, maturation, and autonomy.¹³ The marriage plot supposedly requires the individual to choose a uniquely suitable partner and experience the thrill of being chosen. Desire thus ratifies one's individuality. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong builds on Watt's idea to stress the particular importance of the female individual as corroborated through marriage.¹⁴ In Victorian marriage plots, however, such individualist desiring subjects are often dangerous as well as charismatic: Rochester, Willoughby, Wickham, Stephen Guest. Eugene Wrayburn begins as this kind of lover—someone whose intense desire singles out another person for an exotic shared future life, swept away from all other ordinary social ties into a blissful private haven of mutual adoration.

However, the dangerous desiring lover is not the only marital option. He often competes against a well-known local connection, a cousin or a neighbor or family friend. In lieu of desire, this man offers esteem, trust, and a future characterized by companionship, continuing social networks, and meaningful work: St John, Colonel Brandon, Mr Collins, Philip Wakem. If the romantic lover is associated with modern individualism, the familiar lover derives from a history of traditional relationality. In choosing between her suitors, the woman is actually deciding what kind of future she wants to live. Sometimes the romantic lover can be reformed into a familiar suitor; this occurs with Rochester and Eugene Wrayburn, as suffering teaches the man to be a patient, kind, tender participant in care relations and finally therefore worthy of marriage. In this novel, then, marriage does not confirm the unique modern selfhood of its participants. Rather, *Our Mutual Friend* regards individual desire as a problematic delusion that needs to be recalibrated into a communal, companionable experience.

In Eugene's case, what makes him require care is a trauma that renders him nonverbal and immobile, core competencies that must now be provided by others. But other fictional characters experience milder, more common, chronic conditions, from Jenny's bad back to Venus's weak eyes. Indeed, as disability studies scholars often point out, we will all be disabled if we live long enough. Everyone has experienced periods of illness or injury, a body that

does not fit the spaces designated for it, a cognitive orientation that means ordinary tasks are a struggle. Everyone who has been shorter or taller or wider than the norm, had to use crutches, tried to read with dyslexia, gone to work while ill, been pregnant on public transit, knows what it feels like to need help—a lived experience that disproves the unrealistic assumption that everyone is or ought to be fully able at all times.

For Victorians, of course, bodily impairments were far more visible, common, and intractable than they are today. They accepted impairment as an ordinary variant of human experience, whereas we tend to view it as a catastrophic error to be fixed by medical intervention. This modern attitude is called the medical model: the idea that the body (or brain) is flawed and must be fixed. Disability scholars espouse the social model instead: people become disabled by entering an environment that is not designed for their needs. Although the social and the medical model disagree on where the problem lies, they both focus on something that has gone wrong, whether it is a person's legs or a staircase.

By contrast, ethics of care is primarily interested in the quality of a relationship between people, and it is surprisingly indifferent to the question of why care might be needed, or even whether it is genuinely needed at all. One can need care because of one's age, status, or situation: a penniless orphan, elderly woman, an infant, a second-language learner, a person who feels sad, would all be legitimate recipients of care. The primary examples in ethics-of-care theory are parenting, teaching, and nursing, and because ethics of care is a feminist idea—a way to grant the significance of women's heretofore slighted activities of caregiving—care ethics makes a point of prioritizing maternal relations.¹⁵ Children, parents, students, and teachers practice care as a sustaining way of life, not because something has gone wrong. In ethics of care, then, one need not be disabled. Everyone needs care, and everyone gives care, enmeshed in a fluid network of multiple interactions.

Such a network grows increasingly complicated the more people that get involved. While care ethicists often imagine the simplest model, a partnership between a cared-for and a carer, Victorian novels tend to chart the dynamics of larger communities of care. In Dickens's vivid versions of such networks, a neglected child might find help from a neighbor, an aunt, a local shopkeeper, a servant, the servant's brother—and the child's innocent admiration may sustain them in return for their protection, affection, or shelter. Care communities are not determined by gender, marital status, class, or relationship. They extend beyond nuclear families and private couples. Therefore, such communities offer alternative ways of organizing social experience in texts.

13. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 177.

14. Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 4.

15. For examples of maternalist emphasis in ethics of care work, see Noddings's *Starting at Home*, Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking*, and Held's *Feminist Morality*.

That means they offer a kind of egalitarian freedom in the midst of what otherwise tend to be heavily hierarchical, heteronormative, essentialist, strictly regulated behavioral expectations. The members of such care communities are not merely minor characters assisting the main figures towards marriage (for instance) but actually substantive entities in themselves. Care ethicists emphasize case-by-case, particular treatments in lieu of universalist abstractions.¹⁶ Each figure in a care community matters. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Eugene's care community comes to include Jenny, a disabled doll's dressmaker, and Sloppy, a cognitively impaired foster child, as well as his same-sex friend Mortimer.

The care community in Victorian fiction has three key qualities. First, it is reciprocal: everyone cares for everyone else. Within the care community, everyone is equal and appreciated. Second, it is discursively regulated: people must ask to join, and negotiate the terms under which they stay or leave. For instance, Mortimer invites Jenny to join Eugene's care community, and she agrees. Third, care is an act—one can give care without really caring.¹⁷ Care is a performative act inasmuch as acting as if one cares can make it true.

Dickens explores the performativity of care in the scene where the men resuscitate Rogue Riderhood: "Everyone present lends a hand, and a heart and soul. No one has the least regard for the man; with them all, he has been an object of avoidance, suspicion, and aversion; but the spark of life within him is curiously separable from himself now, and they have a deep interest in it, probably because it is life, and they are living and must die."¹⁸ As life gradually returns, the four rough sailors weep at the miracle, shaking hands and sobbing. However, "as he grows warm, the doctor and the four men cool. As his lineaments soften with life, their faces and their hearts harden to him" (441). Riderhood's resuscitation is the first of three near-death caregiving scenes I will examine, and it is the one that most dispassionately registers the way that care can operate without real feeling.

This efficacious, uncaring care is one end of a spectrum whose other endpoint is helpless sentiment. Sentiment, in Dickens, is a peculiarly passive form of sympathy. Most scholars trace Victorian sympathy to its eighteenth-century origins in theories of moral sensibility (especially those by Kant, Smith, and Hume), but we can understand it differently if we see sympathy as the under-

16. See for instance Bowden, *Caring: Gender-Sensitive Ethics* and Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach*, 5.

17. As a nursing home director points out, "carers [must] avoid 'personal feelings' getting in the way of a professional approach." Sevenhuijsen, *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care*, 2. The same is true for teachers or daycare providers. They can't show their real preferences or real irritations—they have to treat all their wards the same way.

18. Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1997), 439. Further references are to this edition and are noted parenthetically in the text.

lying feeling that might emerge in various contemporary forms of emotional expression.¹⁹ Sympathy can provoke active care, but sympathy can also spill into an inefficacious, self-indulgent feeling that has no effect in the world. Rogue Riderhood's resuscitation is a startlingly antisentimental scene inasmuch as it shows caring as a mere automatic reflex that ebbs as the subject recovers. But sentiment occurs in the opposite of the Riderhood resuscitation: unavailing sorrow. Sentiment means despair over a decline with no possibility of recovery; it is emotion expended in futility. We care for people whom we cannot help, fictional characters preordained to live out their allotted pain. And if we are habitually irritated by sentiment, it might be not because of sentiment's excessive feeling but because that feeling remains useless, a surge of emotion with nowhere to go.

Little Johnny's death is textbook sentiment. Betty Higden reacts to Johnny's decline:

To conceal herself in sickness, like a lower animal; to creep out of sight and coil herself away and die; had become this woman's instinct. To catch up in her arms the sick child who was dear to her, and hide it as if it were a criminal, and keep off all ministrations but such as her own ignorant tenderness and patience could supply, had become this woman's idea of maternal love, fidelity; and duty. (321)

This kind of ignorant instinct leads to tragedy. The doctor reminds us that "this should have been days ago. Too late!" (325). Johnny dies because Betty experiences a sorrow that forestalls "ministrations": sentiment.

This passage uses an omniscient narrative voice that makes authoritative moral assessments. The analytic distance here encourages the reader to stand back and view Betty not as a fellow being but rather as a kind of specimen: "this woman" (twice repeated). Similarly, when Eugene is at his worst, he watches Jenny crying over her alcoholic father. "Eugene Wrayburn saw the tears exude from between the little creature's fingers as she kept her hand before her eyes. He was sorry, but his sympathy did not move his carelessness to do anything but feel sorry" (533). Once again we have the generalizing language about subjects ("the little creature") combined with narrative disapproval, as if individuality was incompatible with torpid sorrow. Indeed, when Dickens specifically uses the term *sentiment*, he does so in the context of deploring the indistinguishability of the dead. We should identify their graves, he argues,

19. Important work relating nineteenth-century sentimentality to its eighteenth-century philosophical roots includes Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism*; Kaplan, *Sacred Tears*; and Festa, *Sentimental Figures*.

so that the soldier, sailor, emigrant, coming home, should be able to identify the resting-place of father, mother, playmate, or betrothed. For, we turn up our eyes and say that we are all alike in death, and we might turn them down and work the saying out in this world, so far. It would be sentimental, perhaps? But how say ye, my lords and gentlemen and honorable boards, shall we not find good standing-room left for a little sentiment, if we look into our crowds? (507)

"Sentiment" is connected to the fear of indistinguishable stasis. What does it mean to be "all alike," to be "this woman," a "creature"? *Our Mutual Friend* is a novel full of generic types: the cherub, the schoolteacher, the pardner, the Secretary, tother gentleman, Boots, Brewer, and the Buffer. Sentiment means suffering a promiscuous sympathy, immured in a depressive state, lost in the crowd. A mutual friend is meaningless if everyone is already the oldest friend, as Twemlow finds at the Veneerings' dinner table. Yet the alternative may be no better. Who would endorse individuation if it is associated with the dangerous predatory desires of a Eugene Wrayburn (always identified by his full name)?

This is a question for the critic, as well as the characters. In moving away from the individualist readings advocated by Watt and Armstrong, towards a more relational, communal understanding of the novel, might we lose our critical edge, merely merging into the crowd of weeping readers that supposedly awaited word of Little Nell on the docks of New York?²⁰ Emma Mason has argued that sentiment, which demands personal feeling, irritates us because we are committed to a calmly analytical stance as critics.²¹ We might resent sentiment not only because it pushes us towards an involvement we find unprofessional, but also because it insists we participate in a declassé mass movement, a crowd of the undifferentiated ignorant, people like Betty Higden, like "a lower animal," operating from "instinct."

Our Mutual Friend offers an alternative in two other near-death scenes, which use a very different rhetorical structure. John Harmon tells himself,

20. Nicola Bown, however, argues powerfully for the humane benefits of such merging into the crowd: "When we cry at the death of Little Nell, 'we are involved.' Through the 'movements' of emotion through our bodies we come nearer to the grief and sorrow of all those in the past who mourned their own and others' children through the death of Dickens's heroine. Weeping at her death collapses the distance in time and circumstance between us and them, and allows us sympathetically to share their emotional world" ("Introduction: Crying Over Little Nell"). Carra Glatz, however, claims persuasively that there were no crowds awaiting the news of Nell's fate. In my view, this makes the Little Nell story all the more compelling as an example of sentiment: it is a cultural myth generated to testify to the imagined power of mass sentiment ("When Found, Make a Note Of").

21. Mason, "Feeling Dickensian Feeling."

"This is John Harmon drowning! John Harmon, struggle for your life. John Harmon, call on Heaven and save yourself!" (363). When Lizzie rescues the drowning Eugene Wrayburn, she prays, "Now, merciful Heaven be thanked for that old time, and grant, O Blessed Lord, that through thy wonderful workings it may turn to good at last! To whomsoever the drifting face belongs, be it man's or woman's, help my humble hands, Lord God, to raise it from death and restore it to some one to whom it must be dear!" (683). The person in need, bereft of human help, invokes God as the ultimate carer, and the divine sponsorship lends strength to do the necessary, though unimaginably difficult, action. Both John Harmon and Lizzie must deliberately swallow their panicky horror, subordinating feeling to activity.

In the most astounding act of caregiving in the novel, Lizzie deliberately beats back her sentiment. Allowing herself just one "terrible cry" when she recognizes the mutilated face as Eugene's, Lizzie manifests nearly supernatural strength as she lashes the body to the line, rows him in, and carries him into the inn (684). This rescue helps transform Eugene's feeling towards her from a kind of sexual obsession towards what Twemlow, rightly, calls "feelings of gratitude, of respect, of admiration, and affection" (796).

Jenny Wren, on the other hand, seems a sentimental subject, given her perpetual suffering, which makes us want (in vain) to alleviate it. However, Jenny is, it turns out, one of the most active figures in the novel, and, as I shall argue, not particularly pitiable in certain respects. Jenny is simply the most visible figure in a narrative full of nonnormative people, from the cognitively impaired Sloppy to the amputee Wegg to the "disfigured" and "mutilated" Eugene Wrayburn at the ending, none of whom are particularly good subjects for sentimental sympathy. If, however, we read Jenny, Sloppy, and Wrayburn in ethics-of-care terms, then instead of diagnosing their incapacity, we ask about how they care for one another.

Care ethicists often assess whether care is appropriately respectful, or whether it is, rather, a form of domination over someone powerless to fight back. Bad care can abuse or damage the cared-for. People can give or demand care for many reasons besides love, ranging from automatic duty, to pay, to a desire for power over someone else. Bad care relations, too, can deplete and exploit the carer. As Kittay notes: "Care is a costly morality: costly in the personal and emotional resources it demands and in the time it consumes (time that cannot be devoted to investing in a career or advancing oneself materially)."²² Victorian fiction often highlights bad relations. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Jenny Wren is verbally and sometimes physically abusive of her father,

22. Kittay, "When Caring Is Just," 272.

while Lizzie suppresses her own needs to accede to her father's demands. Accustomed to self-erasure, Lizzie says that she wants to "give herself up to another," as she says, enunciating a particularly damaging element of Victorian femininity and a particularly bad kind of care (384). Eugene Wrayburn's relation to his own father is characterized by intensive mutual resentment. This is a novel in which paternal relations are, more often than not, traumatic.

Luckily, bad parent-child care can be overridden by a more egalitarian care relationship in adult life. Good care is the kind of relationship that Jenny Wren enacts and teaches to both Eugene and Lizzie that makes them capable of marrying one another. It is a relation characterized by mutuality, by concern for the other, and by affection for multiple people rather than desire for one. It is for that reason that Lizzie and Eugene can only marry once Eugene himself becomes disabled. Disability enables him to become a person who needs and appreciates care. It moves him into an alternative form of relationship that the novel presents as the most constructive mode of personhood.²³ It reprograms the hostile, destructive relations of parental bad care into a more nurturing form of love. And it does so through respecting that person's ability to navigate relations.

In her enormously influential account of the homoerotic dynamics of *Our Mutual Friend* in *Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes: "Dickens makes no attempt to disguise the terrible diminution in [Lizzie's] personal stature as she moves from being the resentful, veiled, muscular, illiterate figure rowing a scavenger boat on the Thames, to being a factory worker in love, to being Mrs. Eugene Wrayburn *tout court*."²⁴ She loses her own identity, Sedgwick insists. But this is only tragic if the achievement of a full individuality is the aim of the novel. If the aim of the novel, on the other hand, is to get Lizzie away from her rough, exploitative, and often cruel father and brother, and the watermen and schoolteachers with whom they socialize, into the company of people who will respect and cherish and care for her, then her final situation is fairly good. If the aim of the novel is to replace an unsatisfactory family with a chosen social network, Lizzie succeeds.

While male sexuality in Victorian fiction is often seen as frighteningly predatory, male sociality offers a safer and more egalitarian basis for a rela-

23. Space forbids a discussion of the Harmon plot in *Our Mutual Friend*, but I note briefly that the Willer and Harmon families demonstrate bad forms of care. Mrs. Willer's hostile domination and Reg Willer's self-erasure create a pathological pattern followed by Lavinia and George. John Harmon's sustained trickery of Bella in her most intimate private life, aided by the Boffins, turns a care community into a communal victimization. Arguably, it is only the Boffins who demonstrate a genuinely mutual and egalitarian marriage through much of this novel.

24. Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 178.

tionship. When Eugene is able-bodied, he aggressively pursues his lower-class love, in spite of his friend's remonstrances and her own misery. When he tracks Lizzie to her refuge, she has to repeatedly implore him to stop putting his arm around her waist (674, 675). Eugene seems bent on a seduction plot, almost against his own will—it is "out of the question to marry her," Eugene reminds himself, in the "wickedness" of his thoughts, just before Headstone assaults him (292–93).²⁵ Only traumatic injury reforms him and frees the woman. Once the man requires care, Lizzie Hexam can initiate contact, soothing and ministering to the man's bodies. Lizzie "drew her arm under his head, and laid her own head down upon the pillow by his side" (734). Instead of the stark choice of either responding to or refusing male sexual overtures, the woman can generate touch herself, in a different way. The relationship becomes mutual, respectful, and egalitarian, instead of a stalker pursuing a victim.

The narrative's emphasis on affectionate contact does not necessarily mean that the marriage will be sexless. Indeed, in nineteenth-century fiction, disabled male bodies were often hypersexualized rather than desexualized, like Quilp, a demonically perverse male dwarf.²⁶ Female disabled bodies were also often sexualized. As Stoddard Holmes points out, quite often the disabled woman is "too feeling, too expressive, and potentially too sexual for matrimony."²⁷ I am not arguing that Eugene and Lizzie enter a de-eroticized marriage but rather that, in this novel, desire is a poor motive for marriage, and caring tenderness is far better.

Marriages based primarily on mutual care, not desire, can accommodate nontraditional unions. Any couple will work: siblings, cousins, same-sex friends. So long as one needs care, their loving cohabitation is not in the least controversial. If the issue is the quality of care between two people, not their biological relationship or marital status, then all relationships—adoptive, sexual, companionable, professional, and marital—are simply enunciations of the same fundamental principle of care. Anyone can mother; anyone can husband; anyone can friend. Everyone can nurse. This substitutability can produce radically democratic, modern relationality, as Holly Furneaux has argued in her account of the way disability allows Dickensian characters to construct their own queer family organizations.²⁸

25. Hilary M. Schor clarifies that Wrayburn is "clearly bent on seducing, if not raping her" *Dickens*, 182.

26. See Kelly Hager's memorable discussion of Quilp's sexual aggression in *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce*.

27. Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 39.

28. Furneaux, *Queer Dickens*. See especially ch. 5. "It is impossible to be gentler": The Homoerotics of Nursing in Victorian Culture" 177–211.

We see Dickens favoring relationality over eroticism in the union between Jenny Wren and Sloppy that seems imminent at the end of the novel. *Our Mutual Friend* critics tend to agree that Jenny is the one exception to the general rule that “sexuality is inaccessible to disabled people, who are culturally enjoined from reproducing their defect”²⁹ and that physically disabled characters “are removed from the sexual economy.”³⁰ Consequently, they have applauded Dickens’s provision of a marriage plot for Jenny: Jenny is, according to Helena Michie, allowed an erotic future denied to the other female characters.³¹

While it does seem significant that Jenny is depicted as marriageable, I would argue that what makes this relationship viable is not her sexuality but her sociality. Jenny proves herself worthy of marriage because she becomes a notable caregiver, and in *Our Mutual Friend*, caregiving is the core quality for a good marriage. Jenny and Sloppy’s relationship shows very little sense of mutual physical attraction—if anything, it shows mutual physical revulsion. Jenny warns Sloppy to close his mouth more when he laughs, and Sloppy evades Jenny’s query about whether he likes how she looks. There is, however, a strong sense of mutual care, as Sloppy offers to make items for Jenny and Jenny to sing for Sloppy in return.

Care relations can queer normative assumptions about the novel, and one thing they challenge might be our assumption about which characters matter. In *The One vs. the Many*, Alex Woloch describes the novel’s protagonist as struggling for character-space against a horde of minor characters.³² What happens, however, if we conceptualize the characters in a novel not as major or minor, but rather as egalitarian members of a community? In a care community, everyone is important. In reconceptualizing the novel in this radically democratizing way, we would not dismiss Sloppy and Jenny as minor characters, grotesques, or comic sidekicks.

The members of this relationship come together from two experiences of care communities. Like Eugene and Lizzie, they have had abusive parental relationships in early life, and had to be retrained in better care relations. Sloppy is an abandoned, neglected, illegitimate, and cognitively disabled teenager, whom Betty took in from the poorhouse (199–200). In return for her care, he runs the mangle for her and reads the paper aloud. When the Boffins offer to adopt him, Sloppy refuses, thinking first of his care responsibilities: “Oh, mum!—But theres Mrs. Higden, said Sloppy, checking himself in

his raptures, drawing back, and shaking his head with very serious meaning. “Theres Mrs. Higden. Mrs. Higden goes before all!” (332). Sloppy cheers up only when he finds a way to work for both Betty Higden and the Boffins simultaneously. Sloppy’s disability, combined with his poverty, requires others to care for him. Their care makes him grateful enough to demand to work for them in turn. Sloppy requires care because he is both impoverished and disabled, but his extraordinary capacity for labor allows him to offer a compensatory care in return.

Similarly, Jenny Wren initially suffers from a toxic filial relationship. Jenny acts as parent for her own father, her “bad boy.”³³ This tragicomic role reversal is actually not that different from Betty Higden and Sloppy’s far more positive relationship; Sloppy, too, is the child but plays the role of the parent, working hard to provide for the elderly individual in the home. In this respect alcoholism and aging respectively have much the same role in shifting the burden of care to those whose own impairments might normally make them the cared-for.

However, Jenny gets retrained by her friendships, while Sloppy gets retrained by his adoptive mother. Sara D. Schothland argues that “in *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens presents a dynamic relationship in which the disabled person slips in and out of the role of care receiver and caregiver.”³⁴ Jenny cares for Lizzie—combs her hair, counsels her, gives her a place to live, and helps facilitate her move to the paper mill. She also has a mutually beneficial relation with Riah, who nurtures her when she purchases waste fragments, and whom she accommodates when he is fired from Pubsey & Co. Schothland sums up: “As in the case of her relationship with Lizzie, the dolls’ dressmaker is first presented as requiring the help of the able-bodied, but then becomes the protector.”³⁵ Jenny finally transfers her attention to a peer, Eugene, where she outdoes both Lizzie and Mortimer:

It was amazing through how many hours at a time she would remain beside him, in a crouching attitude, attentive to his slightest moan. As he could not move a hand, he could make no sign of distress; but through this close watching (if through no secret sympathy or power) the little creature attained an understanding of him that Lightwood did not possess. Mortimer would often turn to her, as if she were an interpreter between this sentient world and the insensible man; and she would change the dressing of a wound, or

29. Klages 77, cited in Schothland, “Who’s That in Charge?”

30. Schillace, “Curing ‘Moral Disability,’” 37, 588.

31. Michie, “Who Is This in Pair?” 212.

32. Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*.

33. On Dickens’s childish men, see Nelson, *Precocious Children*, 53–54.

34. Schothland, “Who’s That in Charge?”

35. *Ibid.*

ease a ligature, or turn his face, or alter the pressure of the bedclothes on him, with an absolute certainty of doing right. (720)

In this description of caregiving, Dickens stresses Jenny's intensive observation and swift movements. Like a reader, Jenny remains attentive, achieving understanding through her close watching, sympathy, or power; but unlike a reader, Jenny can take action. Jenny is the only person who can decode Eugene's incoherent muttering to supply the missing word, "wife," thereby indeed acting like a writer, not just a reader. By supplying Eugene's dialogue, she facilitates Eugene's marriage plot, translating his inarticulate yearning into legitimate marital intention.

Thus Jenny and Sloppy's union makes sense for a number of reasons. Impoverished teenagers, adopted by the kindly Boffin/Wilfer/Harmon/Wrayburn care community, they must still make their own economic way through their manual dexterity in small craft practices. Both care for their own carers. Both find their own impairments spurs to better work habits—Sloppy works instead of sleeping, and Jenny uses the time when ordinary children would have played to practice her craft instead. As a result, both become exceptionally accomplished in their jobs. Desire may or may not be present, but it is certainly not the deciding factor in their relationship, which seems instead to be based on shared habits of caring, class position, and laboring.

We might ask whether this pair is disabled at all. Jenny's impairment mainly seems to function as a rationale for not answering the door. For Jenny has no trouble crutching her way around London, dodging the horses, visiting Flegby and Riah, taking her dolls for sale, and visiting Eugene at the site of his attack. As Sloppy remarks when Jenny demonstrates her crutch, "it seems to me that you hardly want it at all" (788). It is true that she has a spinal impairment, but her environment does not disable her. Jenny's bad back and queer legs do not inhibit necessary functions. Rather, they work to excuse her from tiresome social rules like standing to greet a guest, they gift her with empathy for others who are suffering, and they collude to keep her indoors where she can be more productive. Jenny's physical situation is not necessarily fortunate, or pain-free, but in her particular environment it might not be disabling.

A similar case might be made for Sloppy, whose cognitive disability does not inhibit his mobility, his literacy, or his judgment. If anything, Sloppy, who never needs sleep, who is enormously tall and strong, who can do the police in different voices, and who can eat prodigious quantities, seems almost excessively able. Like someone in a wheelchair who is disabled at a staircase but extra mobile on a ramp, Jenny and Sloppy manifest different capacities in

different environments. In this respect *Our Mutual Friend* demonstrates the social model—the idea that the disabling factor is one's environment, not one's body—a century before disability scholars invented the term.

In fleeing to Jenny, Lizzie puts herself in relation with a loving disabled woman, instead of two dangerously sexualized men, Bradley Headstone and Eugene Wrayburn. To read from Lizzie's point of view allows us to see her as more than simply a conduit, a pawn between men, or an alienated piece of property. Sedgwick notes that "Charley's offer of Lizzie to his schoolmaster represents the purest form of the male traffic in women," but Lizzie never does get trafficked, since she refuses to be transferred to Headstone.³⁶ Rather, from Lizzie's point of view, this is a novel in which a woman rejects the male suitors available to her, choosing instead to construct an alternative social realm and cohabit with an alternative kind of partner. Her care relation with Jenny in turn can be transposed back on the eventual marriage, reforming and improving it, so that Eugene Wrayburn becomes remodeled on this better predecessor.

For Jenny Wren is, as she announces frequently, "the person of the house."³⁷ The appellation means that, legally speaking, she is the householder, who would be paying taxes and voting, had those civic responsibilities been accessible to her—but in a deeper sense, that she is gifted with a kind of personhood that others lack. To feel pain that allows you to imagine and then alleviate others' suffering is to be a "person." This is a gender-neutral position, in the radically egalitarian sense characteristic of ethics-of-care narratives; in the radically egalitarian sense characteristic of ethics-of-care narratives; men, women, mothers, fathers, children, husbands, wives, all are equivalent and interchangeable in a system where relationships are predicated on care. Thus it is possible to be a "person," escaping the constraints of gender. (As the narrator remarks when we first see Jenny, she is "a child—a dwarf—a girl—a something"—her femininity is the third of four terms, by no means the most important [222].)

When Lizzie and Jenny cohabit, their mutuality is obvious in a small incident. Jenny, loosening Lizzie's hair, "so managed a mere touch or two of her nimble hands, as that she herself laying a cheek on one of the dark folds," reveals Lizzie's face to the firelight, and once Lizzie confesses her love for Eugene, Jenny cries in pain—"but not the old pain" while she "folded [her hands] around Lizzie's neck, and rocked herself on Lizzie's breast" while praying for her fantasized angelic children to come console Lizzie (342, 344).

36. Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 167.

37. See pp. 222, 224, 232, 239, 241, 243 for examples.

This complex scene reveals considerable physical intimacy—the two young women are locked together in an intimate embrace, stroking each other's hair—and there is more than a suspicion that the "pain" Jenny feels derives from the confirmation that Lizzie wants Eugene rather than herself. Although it is rarely read as scene of same-sex desire, the hair scene is certainly amenable to such a reading. However, Lizzie's breast is maternal as much as, or more than, anything else. Their bodies are entangled as if their identities have merged and become interdependent. As Sharon Marcus has argued, female friendships need not always be cover stories for same-sex desire, but quite often function to facilitate heterosexual marriage for the main character.³⁸ Jenny and Lizzie's relationship clearly functions this way. Both had been in damagingly askew care relations with fathers, and it is their female friendship that teaches both of them the mutually considerate care they will need to marry.

Same-sex care relations teach kindly loving in this novel. If Lizzie learns this kind of relation from Jenny, Eugene similarly acquires it from Mortimer. In a scene just as intimate as the hair scene, the wounded Eugene lies in bed, pleading, "touch my face with yours, in case I should not hold out till you come back. I love you, Mortimer" (723).³⁹ Yet in both cases, this expression of same-sex love occurs in the context of the declaration of heterosexual desire. Eugene is asserting that he wishes to marry Lizzie, just as Lizzie, in the hair scene, confesses that she loves Eugene. In other words, the same-sex beloved kisses and hugs in the moment of the symbolic transfer of the affections to the other-sex lover, as if teaching the kind of affection that would be needed in the future heterosexual relationship.

This reading is supported by the fact that Lizzie and Eugene solemnize their wedding as a communal event: "As the bridegroom could not move his hand, they touched his fingers with the ring, and so put it on the bride. When the two plighted their troth, she laid her hand on his, and kept it there" (732). Eugene's illness has created a community of care around Eugene—Mortimer, Jenny, Bella, and Lizzie all participate in enacting his wishes, like prostheses, acting as his hands when he cannot use those hands himself. Indeed, when Eugene decides to marry Lizzie, one would expect the proposal to be sealed with a kiss. But Eugene makes the proposal through Mortimer's voice, and it is Jenny who, "for the first time, kissed him on the cheek, and kissed the poor maimed hand that was nearest to her" (722).⁴⁰ From the moment Jenny

38. Marcus, *Between Women*.

39. Furneaux reads this scene as highly homoerotically charged, arguing that the relationship between Eugene and Lizzie pales by comparison. *Queer Dickens*, 101–2.

40. Wedding scenes where the groom lies near death are not uncommon in Victorian fiction; we might think of Charlotte Yonge's *The Pillars of the House* (1873), in which Wilmet marries John Harewood, and *Dracula* (1897), in which Mina marries Jonathan Harker.

solicits Lizzie's private feelings in the hair scene, to the nuptial kiss, Jenny is "participating in the birth of a courtship as someone with a right to be there," in Stoddard Holmes's words.⁴¹

Finally, the Eugene–Lizzie union is one in which sex is somewhat irrelevant. When Eugene states that he wishes to marry Lizzie, he vows that the marriage will make him "more at peace" and complete his "reparation" (722). Such language does not sound particularly erotic, and, given that Eugene's entire body is bound in bandages and he needs round-the-clock nursing, this is not a union that will be consummated any time soon. After their wedding ceremony, "he mustered strength to move his wounded head a very little way, and lay it on her bosom." This is not a sexualized contact; it is a "refuge that I have so ill deserved" (734). In this respect Eugene exactly emulates Jenny. Both lay their heads on Lizzie's breast, but both identify it as a maternal haven, not a sexualized incitement. *Our Mutual Friend* offers a vision of communal, care-based social relations as a better basis for marriage than individualist, desire-driven marriage.

One of care's fundamental tenets is that carers need to imagine themselves into the mindset of the cared-for. "Motivational displacement," as Nel Nodding calls it, means that the carer must be willing to suspend her own wishes in order to fulfill another's ideas.⁴² Jenny demonstrates this perfectly when she crouches by Eugene's bedside, watching intently, so that when he evinces discomfort she can intuit exactly what he needs. However, in reading, only the first part of that process is available to us. We can know what a character wants but we cannot give it to her. How, then, can the reader find emotional satisfaction? How can we channel our sympathy into a real act, avoiding the futile, passive, generalizing flood of sentiment?

Dickens works through the problem of the passive reader in two scenes that frame *Our Mutual Friend*. The "Society" around Lady Tippins hears the core story of *Our Mutual Friend* itself, focalized through Mortimer Lightwood. In chapter 2, "The Man From Somewhere," Mortimer tells the story of the Harmon family. While dinner guests ask him questions, they are essentially passive spectators who regard it as entertainment. Twemlow, though privately dismayed, remains silent. Mortimer and Eugene themselves are bored observers of their own lives. "'Then idiots talk,' said Eugene . . . 'of Energy. If there is a word in the dictionary under any letter from A to Z that I abominate, it is Energy'" (29–30). The final chapter, "The Voice of Society," reassembles the same group, with Mortimer again as the raconteur to a group of largely passive guests—but the great difference this time is that Twemlow speaks back. A resisting reader, Twemlow forcibly inserts himself into the

41. Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction*, 58.

42. Noddings, *Caring*, 16–18.

narrative, insisting that Eugene was right. This unexpected defense electrifies Mortimer, who then pursues a bond with Twemlow. The contrast between these dinner parties shows that Dickens finds it crucial to act, to intervene, or, to use the terms from Jenny's sojourn with Eugene, to be "attentive" enough to be "an interpreter between this sentient world and the insensible man" (720).

Twemlow testifies, accurately, to Eugene's "feelings of gratitude, of respect, of admiration, and affection" for Lizzie, fighting the idea that Lizzie is a generic item, a mere female waterman, factory girl, or mechanism for turning beefsteak into labor (796). The dehumanizing generalizations associated with sentiment can have no place in a novel endorsing the care community's values: one should look at particular cases instead of abstracting generally, and each person is as important as any other. Their love comes from care. Eugene tells her, "Out of your compassion for me, in this maimed and broken state, you make so much of me—you think so well of me—you love me so dearly" (735). How, he wonders, "shall I ever pay all I owe you?" and realizes "it would require a life, Lizzie, to pay all; more than a life" (734–35). The basis of their marriage is caregiving. She has saved his life; he gives her his life. She has showed such compassion and love he can do no more (or less) than reciprocate.

This is the meaning of marriage: care—the intimate relation between a cared-for and his carer that can flower into "gratitude, respect, admiration, and affection," a marriage that is not about romantic love or individuation but rather about a tender trust and an intimate kindness. Steeped as it is in care relations, *Our Mutual Friend* envisions marriage as the ideal union of feeling and doing; caring while caregiving, for which disability may well be the best possible teacher. Because some form of performative carework is necessary to form this tie, the reader cannot have precisely such relationships with the characters. Reader, we cannot marry him. Rather, what Dickens wants is for us to be like Twemlow in the final chapter, speaking back to the author, asserting real values, insisting on the best readings: a form of critical care that Victorians may well have felt to be the best possible relation between ourselves and the novel.

CHAPTER 10

Extra Man

Dining Out Beyond the Marriage Plot in Our Mutual Friend

HELENA MICCHIE

"EXTRA MAN," the term that names this essay, suggests for me the problems and possibilities of superfluity on several levels. It is a phrase not quite discarded from an earlier joint lifewriting project with Robyn Warhol for which we found ourselves trying to articulate an identity for our subject, Sir George Scharf, a Victorian bachelor and diner-out. Although we came to know through seventeen years of research much more about Scharf than what he ate for dinner at country houses, London lodgings, and restaurants, we wanted to retain our initial sense of him as a social and professional diner—but we came up against the poverty of descriptive terms for those for whom eating is a central activity. We wanted an identity category that suggested a connection between our emerging sense of Scharf's complicated sexual identity and his dining without using one as a euphemism for or displacement of the other. "Extra man," our primary term for Scharf during the long middle of our project—and his life—was inspired by my rereading of *Our Mutual Friend* and by the character Mr. Twemlow, the unmarried, poor relation of a lord and a guest at all the novel's many dinner parties. Twemlow's undermotivated ubiquity at upper-class dining tables forcefully reminded me of Scharf's: Scharf's scrap-books and diaries—the latter full of triumphant notations of his friendships