SUPERIOR MIRTH: NATIONAL HUMOR AND THE VICTORIAN EGO

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This project traces the wide and varied uses of patriotic (and, at times, jingoistic and xenophobic) humor within the Victorian novel. A culture’s humor, perhaps more than any other cultural markers (food, dress, etc.), provides invaluable insight into that nation’s values and perceptions—not only how they view others, but also how they view themselves. In fact, humor provides such a unique cultural thumbprint as to make most jokes notoriously untranslatable. Victorian humor is certainly not a new topic of critical discussion; neither is English ethnocultural identity during this era lacking scholarly attention. However, the intersection of these concerns has been seemingly ignored; thus, my research investigates the enmeshed relationship between these two areas of study. Not only do patriotic sentiment and humor frequently overlap, they often form a causational relationship wherein a writer’s rhetorical invocation of shared cultural experiences creates humorous self-awareness while “inside” jokes which reference unique Anglo-specific behaviors or collective memories promote a positive identity with the culture in question. Drawing on and extending the work of James Kincaid’s *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter*, Harold Nicolson’s “The English Sense of Humor,” and Bergson’s and Freud’s theories of humor as a social construct, I question how this reciprocated relationship of English ethnic identity and humor functions within Victorian novels by examining the various ways in which nineteenth-century authors used humor to encourage affirmative patriotic sentiment within their readers.
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By

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Benedict Anderson defines “the nation” as “an imagined political community…. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6, emphasis in original). Some may propose that the true sense of any society then is only perceptible and apparent to disinterested, objective historians, removed from said culture by several thousand miles and several hundred years, however I would argue that every newspaper story, every personal diary, every scrap of statistical evidence through which historians would attempt to establish a national or ethno-cultural “communion” are skewed and tainted by the perceptions and egos of citizens of that nation. If nations, as cultural entities, are ideologically imagined, they are also artificially created.¹

Perhaps one of the reasons it is so difficult to “get at” a true idea of English-ness in particular is because there appears to be “a manifestation in the academic world of the fond old idea that God is an Englishman” (Newman xix). It is this idea of a “cultural motherland” (Newman xxiii) which clouds an outsider’s objective view of a particular society’s cultural productions. For Victorian England, the particular mode of cultural production I examine is the novel. Now, of course, I could examine the intersection of humor and cultural identity in political cartoons (Punch is certainly not lacking in ethno-centric political humor), or journalism, or poetry, or a number of other modes, but these are other studies entirely—necessary studies,

¹ I am using the term nation here to indicate a culture defined by both geographical and chronological boundaries. For example, although occupying the same geographic space, Victorian Britain was a completely different Nation from 20th or 21st century Britain. And, yes, the boundary lines of my definition here might seem arbitrary to many (“But where does one Nation end and another begin? So Britain the day before Victoria died was a separate Nation to the same Britain 24 hours later?”), these distinctions are just as real (or arbitrary) as setting a geographic boundary on a certain parallel of longitude and determining that those on this side of the line are Nation X, and those on that side are Nation Y.
which should be made, but I am limiting my focus to the Victorian novel here for several reasons. First, although the so-called “rise of the novel” has been nearly universally attributed to the eighteenth century, I would like to investigate the ways in which nineteenth-century novelists sustained and prolonged this rise. Also, there is the suggestion that “print-capitalism gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation” (Anderson 44). Thus all printed novels offering this “new fixity to language,” offered not only a view of England to their nineteenth-century English readers, but also a time-capsule-like view of this English ego to us, the 21st century global reader.

Nineteenth-century novelists were heavily responsible for creating Victorian England’s image of itself, its ego. Gerald Newman suggests that “the national image is an idealized projection of traits selected by writers in their interconnected effort to reject the alien culture and thus ‘find’ both their own culture and themselves, to *identify* the basic qualities of the national soul…and *realize* these in their own works of art” (125, emphasis in original), and that “qualities *chosen* by frustrated intellectuals are projected as *national* traits…very largely a *mirror* image of those intellectuals as they saw themselves and wished themselves to be” (124, emphasis in original).

Victorian novelists, then, had an incredible power: to essentially *create* an ethno-cultural identity. So, considering the great power their pens possessed, what specific narrative tools might these authors use to achieve the “nation-ness” (Anderson 4) of a communally powerful English ego? I’m suggesting here that they, whether consciously or unconsciously, used humor to achieve this effect.

**My Contribution: Minding the Gap**

There currently exist a plethora of sources dealing with humor in the eighteenth century, and several concerning the fin-de-siècle playwrights (Wilde, Shaw, etc.), but alarmingly few
sources addressing mid-nineteenth-century humor or humor and its specific connection to “Englishness.” The extant sources which do address this topic do so in an introspective manner—many looking only within the novels themselves, and not at larger socio-historical issues. The works which do question and explore the world outside the novels, such as James Kincaid’s *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter*, while identifying humor as a rhetorical tool and showing how it can be used to promote a broad socio-political agenda (sanitation reform, education, etc.), do not connect this rhetoric with the patriotic sense of Englishness. Simply put, extant scholarship does not examine how Victorian authors used humor to promote patriotism and positive ethnic sentiment itself. Kincaid does a superb job addressing how Dickens used humor to make England a cleaner, more compassionate country, but he sidesteps the larger issue of how humor was used to make English readers proud to be English. Additionally, the works which attempt to pinpoint what makes English humor identifiably English, such as Harold Nicolson’s essay “The English Sense of Humor,” examine humor closely in terms of satire vs. irony vs. parody vs. burlesque, etc. but ignore the larger rhetorical mode Victorian humor occupied. Nicolson poses the infinitely puzzling question: “Are the English more sensitive than are other nations to certain aspects of the inconsequent or the incongruous? Or is the English sense of humour little more than the temperamental reflection” of certain “national characteristics”? (3).

I would like to fill in the gaps here by examining not only in what ways the novels I address present their humor as quintessentially English—identifiable products of their homeland as much as Beefeaters, bowler hats, and afternoon tea—but also how this humor, as a unique cultural product, was then used by the authors of these works to promote and foster a sense of positive fellow-feeling and social cohesion in their readers. As I see it, while the comic novel
blossomed in the eighteenth century, and nineteenth-century novels are touted as primarily moral and sentimental, several of the great Victorian humorists blended these genres: using comic techniques toward a rhetorical end—strengthening a collective sense of “Englishness.” I would like to prove that this Victorian comic rhetoric is inherently ethnocentric in nature, both stemming from and contributing to an English-specific pride and identity. Firstly, however, I must address the vocabulary I use throughout this study.

It is important to make a distinction here between British and English identities. The term British is problematic because the political motivations behind this larger, supposedly more inclusive Britishness were (and are) inherently English. By throwing a singular blanket identity over the entire island, the English were able to display their own political agenda to others while simultaneously squelching Scottish and Welsh autonomy. Because Scottish and Welsh citizens frequently resent being lumped together under the grand British-umbrella (you will certainly see fewer Union Jacks flying outside of England), the concept of “Britishness” is thus generally perpetuated by the English, “English” being presented as the most exclusive and desireable subdivision. For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, I generally use the term English because this is the essential identity which the authors I address projected. Many British, non-English characters are either made ridiculously and comically “other” (like the oh-so-Irish O’Dowds in *Vanity Fair*), or are reminded continually of their otherness and patronizingly applauded for

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2 Evidence of Scotland’s continuing dislike can be seen in the astronomical popularity of “Anyone but England” t-shirts sold in Scotland during the 2010 World Cup. And, incidentally, some have accused the Scottish retailers carrying this shirt of “racism” over “recorded incidents relating to nationality”:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/scotland/north_east/8533791.stm

And, as I type this, a referendum on Scottish independence is making the rounds. Oddly enough, a recent poll reports that “Scottish independence has more support in England than Scotland.” Hmmm…sounds like the “united Britain” rhetoric of Victorian England is a long while gone. For more info, see:

http://www.scotsman.com/news/uk/scottish_independence_referendum_greater_support_for_independence_south_o f_the_border_1_2058487

3 With the exception, of course, of Northern Ireland. Just as pressure from a French “other” drove England to establish and rigidly defend a separate non-Continental identity, so too does the influence of a Catholic “other” cause Protestant royalists to fervently display their Union Jacks (and red, white, and blue house numbers, and murals of the queen on their garage doors, etc…”).
being so very nearly almost English (like the aptly named Neville and Helena Landless in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*). And so, while many authors use the term “British,” there is a clear, if unmentioned internal demarcation here. If two characters say to each other “Isn’t it great to be British?” and “Yes, yes, I’m very proud to be a Briton” but both characters are English, the author is English, and the action of the novel never leaves England, doesn’t the absence (or glaring peripherality) of all non-English British characters and scenes speak volumes as to the author’s intent? I prefer to use the term English throughout this study because although authors may have used the term “British” hoping to appeal to more readers, it was actually a more selective “Englishness” which my English authors, whether knowingly or unknowingly, promoted, and which British, non-English, authors such as Margaret Oliphant begrudgingly normalized for English editors, publishers, and readers.

In addition to being a vital concern when studying national or cultural identities, subtle nuances in terminology are also perhaps the most frustrating aspects of any study of humor theory and criticism. Some critics use the phrases such as “humor,” “the comic,” and “the laughable” seemingly interchangeably\(^4\) while many others firmly differentiate between these terms and use specific syntax to incite academic disagreement.\(^5\) However, at the risk of splitting hypocritical hairs, I choose primarily to use the word “humor” rather than “comedy” or “laughter” for various reasons. Comedy, while used in society at large to indicate a comic or humorous genre, is academically too closely associated with drama and the dramatic tradition. So, since I address mirth-making novels and not plays, I prefer the term “humor.”\(^6\) Also, while

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\(^4\) See, for example, Jean-Paul Richter’s *School for Aesthetics* (1804), Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “The Comic” (1843), and George Meredith’s “An Essay on Comedy” (1877).

\(^5\) When in several, the syntax appears to be the only point of contention. For example, if you remove the word “laughter” from Descartes’s argument in “The Passions of the Soul” (1649) and replace it with “comedy,” it becomes (humorously) identical to Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry* (1595).

\(^6\) Although in this study, I have differentiated what I mean by the term “humor,” I do not make it a point to distinguish between the numerous and individual methods of humor here: satire, parody, irony, slapstick, etc. but
some use the term “laughter” to denote that which is humorous, these are not mutually inclusive, or even necessarily causal, terms—that which is humorous does not always produce laughter, and that which produces laughter is not always humorous. So, if we then establish that humor does not necessarily stem from comedy, and does not necessarily involve laughter, then what is it? For the purposes of this study, I think of humor as being that which produces a sense of smug superiority in readers, smug because we “get” the joke and superior because we are pointing the finger at one needing a behavioral corrective (i.e. the quintessential slip on a banana peel or foot-in-the-mouth comment). We pat ourselves on the back for understanding the cultural implications of an “inside” joke and also congratulate ourselves for being superior to the fool or buffoon who is the butt of it. However, even after grasping at a tentative definition of “humor,” a new and potentially problematic question arises: is humor decided by the author’s intent, or by the reader’s perception and reaction? While labeling writers of humor as “humorists” does indicate a certain level of intent or purpose on the author’s part, this may not always be the case. Certainly there have been situations in which authors have written scenes and characters intending them to be comic, but which, for whatever reason, are not perceived humorously by the reader. And, conversely, certain non-comic scenes and characters have produced humorous reactions from readers.\footnote{Here, of course, I must invoke Oscar Wilde’s alleged statement: “One must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing.”} In the case of my thesis, it is imperative that I examine the intersection of intent and perception: concentrating on those novels which both the author intended to be humorous and which his/her readership then perceived as humorous. In cases where we only find one or the other, any underlying rhetorical potential is lost. If an author did not intend a certain work to be humorous, then I hesitate to argue for its functioning as such. And, if an
audience does not find humor in a work, then any humorous rhetorical purpose the author intended to instill in that work becomes impotent and useless. Therefore, my arguments focus exclusively on works which meet both of these criteria: humorous intent and humorous perception. The humorist’s involvement is an essential and crucial factor of my argument. Also, my critical approach includes the following tenet:

it is a common supposition that there exists a dialogic interchange between the humorous text and its culture…humorous and comic representations function politically by revealing contradictions in ideological discourses, by exposing repressed illogicalities and prejudices, by way of irony or ridicule, attendant to nineteenth-century ideologies of gender, class, race, nationalism. (Wagner-Lawlor xvi)

I concur wholeheartedly with this “common supposition” but I would like to extend Wagner-Lawlor’s assertion even further—not only to pinpoint this “dialogic interchange” between humor and ethno-cultural ideology in several nineteenth-century texts, but also to show the inherent causality of this exchange.

The Big Three: The Basics of Humor Theory and Criticism

Before I explore the connection between humor and patriotism further, I should present a brief background regarding humor theory and the basic assumptions which underlie my argument. The three main theories of humor which appear again and again within humor criticism are: disparagement theory, incongruity theory, and suppression-repression/release theory, theories advanced by Thomas Hobbes, Henri Bergson, and Sigmund Freud, respectively. Each of these theories, in turn, explains a unique aspect and particular “angle” of what defines humorousness. While numerous critics have proposed numerous theories attempting to pin-down exactly why we find humor in certain situations, characters, word order, etc., Hobbes’s,

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8 See Regenia Gagnier, esp. p.135.
Bergson’s, and Freud’s theories have survived the test of time and remain to this day the most fundamental and popular theories in humor criticism.

The crux of Hobbes’s disparagement theory (by which is meant the laughers’ perceived superiority in comparing himself to an inferior victim) is his assertion that: “The passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others” (Hobbes 54). If we break down this term, we find that the suddenness occurs when “whatsoever it be that moveth laughter, it must be new and unexpected” while the glory appears since “men laugh at the infirmities of others, by comparison of which their own abilities are set off and illustrated” (Hobbes 54). Frequently dubbed “sudden glory,” Hobbsean theory posits a superior self against an inferior “other.” This very readily lends itself to nineteenth-century patriotic sentiment, which found both a collectively superior “Britain” empirically dominating an inferior colonial “other,” and also a more subtle demonstration of superiority from England over the perceived inferiority of non-English Brits. In this study however, these distinction and internal demarcations become even more complex. In Chapter 4 for example, I examine how women writers reject their perceived “infirmity” by making men the inferior “other.” Or, as in Thackeray’s novels and works by travel humorists, when the humor is self-critical or mocking, the superior self and inferior other are culturally self-contained; the “other” is ideologically internal; England laughs at the English. In these instances we also see Bergsonian “corrective” laughter.

Henri Bergson is perhaps the most famous humor theorist and his essay “Laughter” (1900) remains to this day the seminal work for any student of humor criticism. His incongruity theory states that “the comic” arises from a perceived incongruity wherein the subject (the laughable, the butt of the joke) occupies a role contradictory to that which the audience
expects—whether by wearing clothing and/or exhibiting behavior inappropriate to his situation, or saying something controversially unexpected (the proverbial foot-in-the-mouth). However, Bergson adds the caveat that in these situations, the subject must not be aware of his incongruity. Indeed, if a man takes pride in his ill-fitting and out of date wardrobe or purposefully makes inappropriate comments, he loses much of what makes him comic; the ideal comic character’s humorousness must be “invisible to its actual owner…but visible to everybody else” (Bergson 171). Bergson’s incongruity theory is inextricably linked to collective cultural sensibility when he affirms that humor is both a group activity and a social corrective. Indeed, he views an audience’s laughter as “a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events” (127). He goes on to state that an audience’s humor “cannot be absolutely just. Nor should it be kind-hearted either. Its function is to intimidate by humiliation” (188-9). According to Bergsonian theory then, laughter acts as a social benchmark by which to gauge and maintain a society’s norms. Humiliation of the subject is a means, not an end: this humiliation will ideally lead to the subject’s correcting his deviant (inferior) behavior, and, in doing so, joining the elite ranks of “Englishness” (as I demonstrate in the works of Dickens in Chapter 2, and travel narratives in Chapter 5). But, then an important question arises: how does an audience collectively recognize which behaviors are unacceptable, and thus humorous? Herein lies the second half of the Bergsonian equation—before the subject can become humorous by doing something humiliatingly improper, the audience must first collectively determine the subject’s behavior to be improper—they must agree, as a group, to certain standards of behavior and etiquette before they can judge a deficiency (or inferiority) in

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10 This aspect relates to Hobbes’s theory of disparagement: if the subject takes pride in his awkwardness, then we, the audience, are robbed of the feeling of superiority over him. Only unawareness or nervous self-consciousness begets inferiority.
others. Bergson asserts that: “You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others…. Our laughter is always the laughter of a group” (64), and laughter’s function “is a social one” (65). So, while the act of humorously judging a subject involves superiority on the audience’s part (as per Hobbes’s theory), Bergson’s theory would seem to imply that this superiority is collective and shared. Thus, if we measure a culture’s capacity for humor by its audience’s collectively perceived superiority, then Victorian England seems especially suited and well adapted for humorousness.

Finally Sigmund Freud in his work *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) proposes a suppression-repression or “release” theory of humor. Like Bergson’s idea of humor as a “social corrective,” Freud defines the joke as: “the judgement that produces a comic contrast…the joke is a playful judgement” (2). And, although one could make a distinction here between a humorous “social corrective” and a “playful judgement” the ideas in these two theories are rooted in a collective social assessment of deficiency or inferiority in an “other.” Freud adds that our ability to find enjoyment in a joke lies in an innately human “pleasure of remembering,” the “rediscovering of what is familiar,” which is the “factor of topicality” (117). It is this topicality which roots jokes within a particular time period and culture. The “release” aspect of Freud’s suppression-repression theory stems from his assertion that we joke to “escape the pressure of critical reason” and to rebel against “the compulsions of logic and reality” (121), and that joking “sets pleasure free by removing inhibitions” (129). While Freud establishes a mutually exclusive relationship between pleasurable release and “the pressure of critical reason” which is seemingly antithetical to Bergson’s theory of humor as a social corrective, Freud actually offers another angle of humorous intent: where Bergson’s social corrective theory

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11 Although I distinguished earlier between “laughter” and “humor,” Bergson makes no such distinction here. Indeed, he fails to recognize the possibility of one without the other. Thus, he uses the term “laughter” where, for the purposes of my argument, I mean “humor.”
positions humor in the eye of the audience, Freud’s social release theory places humor in the eye of the subject—essentially allowing the butt of Bergson’s joke to joke back. This is extremely applicable to the unruly “anti-heroines” and otherwise disruptive females I examine in Chapter 4.

While some critics, like Nicolson, use these theories to examine to what degree each is (or is not) an identifiable aspect of “English” humor, I argue that all of these theories are inherently related not only to English identity, but English patriotism. As social corrective, topical social release, and evidence of perceived national superiority, humor’s various facets both create and perpetuate an imagined system of moral values which include nineteenth-century English ethnic identity and socio-cultural sentiment.

The Final Step: Connecting Ethnic Identity to Humor

Because humor fosters a strong sense of self-identity in individuals (as a member of an inclusive, “us” group), humor is the ideal method through which to promote a rhetorical message to a mass audience—in this case, validating the English reader’s sense of cultural ego. And, incidentally, no ethnic identity lends itself to humor quite as readily as this one in particular: “Humor was linked with the roots of a whole people…And nowhere was humour so well understood as in England. It was generally accepted that humour was traditionally English, so indigenous to Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic peoples that it was useless to attempt to translate either the term or the practice into a Latin tongue” (Martin 35-6). It is no surprise then that “Britcom” has become an easily recognized phrase in the Western lexicon while other phrases such as “Americom,” “Canadicom,” or “Bollycom” are culturally meaningless. Humor not only provides “inside” cultural jokes, but easily allows readers to distinguish between that which is “English” and that which is “non-English” (superior vs. inferior) while simultaneously humiliating and correcting those English characters who exhibit non-English behavior. I extend
this further and propose that in recognizing and correcting inferior (i.e. non-English) behavior, Victorian humor was meant to make the Victorian reader more secure, and proud, in his identity as a superior Englishman.  

My overarching goal here is to explore the causational relationship between English humor and positive self-perception at the height of empire. Thus, I’ve limited my scope in this study to the Victorian English novel (i.e. from Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers* in 1837 to Jerome K. Jerome’s *Three Men on the Bummel* in 1900) although this basic premise (that a country’s authors use humor to rhetorically promote patriotic sentiment) can arguably apply to any nation during any time; for example, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish humor, or American humor during the 1940s-1950s, while fascinatingly similar to my study of the ethno-political superiority/dominance veins in Victorian English humor, and surely a scholarly necessity at some point, are other studies entirely. Another reason for my singling out Victorian English humor and its effects on cultural identity is that the socio-historical environment was favorable in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England to breed patriotic conceit, that Victorians felt secure enough in their world position to admit (and correct) internal incongruity, and that the literary environment of the Victorian era leant itself to interweaving this patriotic bias in rhetorically charged narratives. For the British, it began as a national defense mechanism: “it was during [the eighteenth century] that a sense of British national identity was forged” largely due to “a

12 In fact, the use of humor to promote ethno-cultural identity remained an essential facet of English culture through the twentieth century. Even after Britain’s post-WWII fall from power, the humor which emerged still promoted a pride in “Englishness.” The majority of laughter directed at Manuel, the inept bellhop at Fawlty Towers, is not because of his pratfalls or his unkempt physical appearance—but rather, because of his many failed attempts to speak and comprehend English. Poor Manuel becomes so lost in translation that his linguistic attempts at Britishness are cause for Basil Fawlty’s repeated apology: “You’ll have to pardon him; he’s from Barcelona.” And, incidentally, the larger humor surrounding Basil Fawlty stems from his inability to rise above Manuel’s level of un-Englishness and maintain the quintessential stiff upper lip. His own ineptitude calls into question his need to apologize for Manuel’s mistakes while the hot temper we see flaring up in each episode belies Basil’s ability to “Keep Calm and Carry On” so to speak. Viewers, proudly identifying themselves as members of the “English” group, recognize both Manuel’s and Basil’s behavior as inherently un-English and therefore in need of a humorous corrective.
succession of wars between Britain and France” (Colley 1). England’s push for a unified sense of Britishness began in response to anti-French sentiment—“Imagining the French as their vile opposites, as Hyde to their Jekyll, became a way for Britons – particularly the poorer and less privileged – to contrive for themselves a converse and flattering identity” (Colley 368). Although I agree with Colley’s thesis, it is not anti-Frenchness, but pro-Englishness which I am studying here. Colley’s study Britons: Forging the Nation traces British nationalism to a collective fear/hatred of a French “other,” emphasizing that Britons “came to define themselves as a single people not because of any political or cultural consensus at home, but rather in reaction to the Other beyond their shores” (6), Dickens’s works were published after this period of self-definition (which Colley cites as occurring between 1707 and 1837, Pickwick Papers first appearing in 1836). I would suggest that as collective British power rose and the perceived “French threat” receded, cultural identity became more internally defined; thus, I argue that Dickens promoted ethnic pride and cultural cohesion within his readers by crafting characters which represented an inherently pro-English (rather than anti-“other”) nostalgic ideal. So, while a unified British identity may have begun in response to a xenophobic fear of a French Other, as the memories of revolution faded with passing generations, this protective umbrella of “Britishness” became less necessary—leaving the English, as formerly the largest proponents of “Britishness,” to reestablish themselves as separate and distinct. This newly redefined identity surely included humor which, as mentioned previously, was (and is) an integral part of English culture. Newman goes so far as to assert that “to be truly English was to live up to a stereotype generated in anti-Frenchness” (124). But again, I worry that this reduces English humor as an oversimplified binary (“that which is not French”), and as the nineteenth century dawned, anti-French feeling, resisting this controversial “other,” became instead pro-English feeling,
embracing the domestic self. Indeed, by the mid-nineteenth century, “the groundwork was laid for what would eventually assume the appearance of a single, ‘mass’ culture” (Poovey 2). I argue here that not only did Victorian humor assume a large role in this new mass culture, but that it played an important part in solidifying this groundwork. And while these authors may publicly seem to identify with the widely-encompassing label of “British” and promote National cohesion, by relegating non-English characters and cultural references to the periphery, they subtly, and even perhaps subconsciously, divisively distinguish the idea of English rather than British exceptionalism.
CHAPTER 2

FRAMING HUMOR: DICKENS AND COMIC SERIALIZATION

Few have had the chance to read Dickens’s novels as he wrote them—in serialized installments. I tried this once, but could not bear the month long text-less intervals and was too tempted to read “just one more chapter.” Yet even twenty-first century readers who are more patient than I and can experience the meted pleasures of reading in installments will still not be able to enjoy the topical and extra-textual references Dickens employs. (Some of the cheaper paperback editions even presume to omit Phiz’s illustrations!13) Those who read Dickens now must endure reading through a smudged and foggy lens of 150 years of literary criticism. Instead of narrating to us from a cozy seat next to our fireside, Dickens is now a distantly iconic (and, for some, infallible) idol on a pedestal. Since Dickens’s own *Pickwick Papers* was largely responsible for making serialization a popular format, it seems a disservice to read (or force upon students) its entire bulk in one unwieldy 800+ page tome. Rather than discovering in his works familiar green wrappers and ads for hair tonic, we must instead weave our way through scholarly introductions and footnotes. Despite how beneficial or groundbreaking these academic addendums may be, it is imperative that any study of a Dickens novel takes into account its original framework as a serial, for this was how he envisioned and planned his works to be read. Through close inspection of plot pacing and character appearances in individual numbers, I examine how Dickens’s method of serialization both influenced and supported his didactic humor.

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13 These illustrations are an integral part of Dickens’s narrative plan. Dickens worked closely with his illustrators, especially ‘Phiz,’ gave specific instructions for each illustration’s completion and proofread all illustrations before they were engraved and printed. See Butt and Tillotson pp.16-9.
Beyond the pages of his own writing, Dickens also preached what he practiced; Gerald Grubb notes that Dickens “was serialization conscious at every turn” and would not consider publishing submissions to *Household Words* that could not be easily and coherently broken into monthly installments (147). While there is little debate as to Dickens’s reliance on and preference for serialization, there is some debate as to whether Dickens wrote each monthly number on a whim—reflecting the most topical social issues of the moment—or if he pre-planned each number meticulously to fit in with the completed novel as a unified whole. Robert Patten favors the latter, stating that “even before he began publishing Dickens was thinking in terms of twenty parts…. He was therefore very conscious, in writing Number X, that it was the mid-point, and in it…he was able to indicate some of the structure that was evolving as the novel grew” (“Art” 365), although his use of the word “evolving” here indicates that Dickens did leave himself some leeway in planning each individual number. However, Dickens was also in “the practice of publishing the early parts of a story before the later parts were written” (Grubb 155) and “was rarely more than one number ahead of his readers” (Butt and Tillotson 14). I would argue that the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes: Dickens planned his novels as a unit in terms of plot but also anticipated making topical references within individual installments.

Monthly serialization allowed him to respond to readers’ interests directly—something the three-volume novel could not do. In their study *The Victorian Serial*, Linda Hughes and Michael Lund find that it was not only the text, but the “blanks” or spaces between installments that influenced readers’ perceptions of a work: “In that space between readings, their world continued to direct a barrage of new information and intense experience at readers; and that context complicated and enriched the imagined world when the literary work was resumed” (9). This periodic reading and the ensuing discussions which occurred around village lending
libraries allowed English readers to become active participants in the novel and in their culture.\(^{14}\)

The text of Dickens’s monthly installments combined with these reading “blanks” were so effective at garnering reader interest that Dickens’s audience “wrote letters advising the author to change his future course, and sometimes he did” (Patten, “Serialized Retrospection” 128).

Dickens, of course, would not accept any and all readers’ suggestions out of hand (he killed off Little Nell despite numerous pleas from readers to save her), but he would shape their suggestions to fit his vision; with each installment he was aiming to maintain reader interest, satisfaction, and enthusiasm. John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson refer to this as “hand-to-mouth writing” in that it offered “immediate sensitiveness to public response” (67). Dickens was particularly adept at facilitating this intimacy by weaving his unique brand of humor with domestic cultural nostalgia.

Many theorists have already noted the frequent intersections of humor and national/cultural identities. I draw on several of these to demonstrate how this causational relationship applies to Dickens’s serialized novels in particular. Henri Bergson emphasizes humor as a form of socio-cultural initiation stating that: “our laughter is always the laughter of a group” (64) and “comedy depicts characters we have already come across and shall meet with again. It takes note of similarities. It aims at placing types before our eyes” (166). Sigmund Freud indicates that a large factor in what makes a joke successful is “the ‘rediscovery of what is familiar’…the factor of topicality” (117). And Harold Nicolson notes that some “specific components of the English sense of humor” are “a common basis of sense and tradition,” and “self-protection”—specifically “against the unfamiliar” (36). By “placing [Victorian English]

\(^{14}\) While this merging of life and narrative was mostly a positive experience for readers, there were occasional frustrations. Mary Hogarth’s death in May 1837 happened to coincide with Mr. Pickwick’s stay in the Fleet, meaning that, for readers, his stay was extended through the missing installment—causing his interment to seem twice as lengthy as originally planned. (Dickens would later use this “cliffhanger” strategy intentionally in *Martin Chuzzlewit.*)
types before our eyes,” Dickens allows us the “rediscovery of what is familiar” and the use of this topical familiarity as “self-protection” in order to maintain political superiority, eugenic dominance, and ethno-cultural pride. In my Introduction, I specified that I would mostly be using the term “English” instead of “British.” Dickens, perhaps more so than any of his contemporaries, distinguishes between and highlights this English subgroup as both distinct from and distinctly superior to the more inclusive British category. The characters I discuss here are notably English, while the audience is presumably a more diverse mixture of British readers. So, while these Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and otherwise “Colonial” audiences can become dutiful British subjects, they can never aspire to the ranks of Englishness—a post reserved only for the most elite indigenous islanders. Dickens’s narrative nostalgia should remind Englishmen why (and how) to love their England, and encourage British subjects to respect and admire England while nevertheless presenting a constant reminder to them that they will never be Englishmen. After reading Dickens’s novels, the English should be proud to be English, and the British should be proud to be…so very close in proximity to the English.

In his novels, Dickens not only mirrored his readers’ existing concepts of “Englishness,” he created them. It is nearly impossible to imagine nineteenth-century England without Dickens, or at least one of his characters. Regarding this deep cultural infiltration, J. Hillis Miller suggests a reciprocity wherein not only does a culture “create” those who inhabit it, but those who inhabit it also “create” the culture: “Dickens’ own creative vision…in part determine[s] the ‘Victorian spirit’ itself” (ix). And yet, for being such an icon of his age, Dickens’s sense of patriotism is subtler than one would expect. Indeed, his overtly patriotic characters are frequently annoying blunderbusses of the worst kind, like *Our Mutual Friend*’s Mr. Podsnap, or *Nicholas Nickleby*’s
Mr. Gregsbury. Still, “Dickens was nonetheless patriotic. Love of country was important to him in the same way...that love of hearth and home was important” (Andrews 167). Thus, I shall seek to examine the ways in which he promoted this less abrasive “hearth and home” sentiment in his English (and British) readers. Patten suggests that Dickens “founds his communication on...the socially shared recollections of a common alphabet of mediated experiences” (“Serialized Retrospection” 133). I argue that Dickens promoted this “common alphabet,” this sense of ethnic pride and cultural cohesion within his readers, by crafting characters which represented an English nostalgic ideal. This “common alphabet” of English nostalgia necessarily includes serialized literature because “the serial embodied a vision, a perspective on stories about life, intrinsic to Victorian culture” (Hughes and Lund 1). This “intrinsic” Victorian-ness is precisely what Dickens’s novels promoted through their humor. Thus, serialization as well as Dickens’s serialized spacing of humor contributed to the creation of a twofold sense of “Englishness” within his readers: evoking both English-geographic and Victorian socio-cultural entities. Whether through humorous topical references which encouraged readers’ cultural cohesion, or periodic reading “blanks” which maintained readers’ interest, serialization complemented and supported Dickens’s patriotic purpose.

15 “My conduct, Pugstyles,” said Mr Gregsbury, looking round upon the deputation with gracious magnanimity—“my conduct has been, and ever will be, regulated by a sincere regard for the true and real interests of this great and happy country. Whether I look at home, or abroad; whether I behold the peaceful industrious communities of our island home: her rivers covered with steamboats, her roads with locomotives, her streets with cabs, her skies with balloons of a power and magnitude hitherto unknown in the history of aeronautics in this or any other nation—I say, whether I look merely at home, or, stretching my eyes farther, contemplate the boundless prospect of conquest and possession—achieved by British perseverance and British valour—which is outspread before me, I clasp my hands, and turning my eyes to the broad expanse above my head, exclaim, “Thank Heaven, I am a Briton!”

The time had been, when this burst of enthusiasm would have been cheered to the very echo; but now, the deputation received it with chilling coldness. The general impression seemed to be, that as an explanation of Mr Gregsbury’s political conduct, it did not enter quite enough into detail; and one gentleman in the rear did not scruple to remark aloud, that, for his purpose, it savoured rather too much of a ‘gammon’ tendency.

“The meaning of that term—gammon,” said Mr Gregsbury, “is unknown to me. If it means that I grow a little too fervid, or perhaps even hyperbolical, in extolling my native land, I admit the full justice of the remark. I AM proud of this free and happy country. My form dilates, my eye glistens, my breast heaves, my heart swells, my bosom burns, when I call to mind her greatness and her glory.” (191-2)
Selecting *Pickwick Papers*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *Martin Chuzzlewit* may seem arbitrary to some since all of Dickens’s novels are “comic,”—albeit some more grotesquely than others—but in these early novels, while Dickens was still writing monthly, not weekly, installments serialized humor is his main rhetorical tool. James R. Kincaid notes that “It is the primary—at least the most interesting—function of laughter to define that society and its values” (143) while “the second function of our laughter, after first creating the society, is to provide us a place in it” (138). In this chapter I demonstrate the various ways in which Dickens follows this pattern: carefully pacing his humor to create and define Englishness in *Pickwick*, correct Englishness in *Nickleby*, and celebrate Englishness in *Chuzzlewit* (thus providing readers their “place” as “Englishmen”).

*The Pickwick Papers*: Creating Englishness

That *Pickwick Papers* was instrumental in reinvigorating serial fiction and that it is a great comic novel are not in dispute. A connection between *Pickwick* and communal identity has also been drawn: “the Victorian age…secured social unity by the more democratic and communal device of shared laughter…. *Pickwick Papers* served this communal purpose better than any other works, and, for that matter, probably better than any other work of the century” (Ford 15). What has not been argued or explored is the connection between serialization, humor, and national character. This is what I attempt here—to outline Dickens’s clear and rhetorically planned connection between *Pickwick*s (and later *Nickleby*s and *Chuzzlewit*s) serialization and his readers’ “secured social unity” of “shared laughter”—the Englishness of their comedy.

When Dickens was negotiating the terms of his employment with Chapman and Hall to begin work on *Pickwick*, he “at once demanded and was conceded certain modifications so as to give him a ‘freer range of English scenes and people’” (Butt and Tillotson 64). So, from its very
beginnings, *Pickwick* was Dickens’s vehicle to mirror English behavior back to English readers. Dickens, in effect, uses *Pickwick* to create an image of Englishness which his readers will hopefully imitate (if they don’t already). Serialization was a decisive factor in producing this intimacy: “*Pickwick*'s relations of production, its format and its literary form, constituted the very commodity-text which could reach, as it produced, a mass audience” (Feltes 210). Thus serialization was the very medium through which Dickens could “reach” and “produce” the English. As the Pickwickians find their places in Dickensian England (and Dickensian Englishness), so, too, do readers. By intertwining humor with that which is nostalgically “English,” Dickens ensures that his readers habitually accept this version of Englishness as that which most closely mirrors their reality.  

In terms of serialized humor, the monthly installments of *Pickwick* are inundated with comic occurrences: in Chapter 4 Pickwick comically chases his hat, and upon encountering a military reenactment, “fairly turned his back and—we will not say fled; firstly, because it is an ignoble term, and, secondly, because Mr. Pickwick’s figure was by no means adapted for that mode of retreat—he trotted away, at as quick a rate as his legs would convey him” (52). In Chapter 7, Winkle superficially wounds Mr. Tupman while hunting; in Chapter 10 Dickens introduces us to the unforgettable wit of Sam Weller who is “the great symbol in English literature of the populace particular to England” (Chesterton 21) and “the specimen of London Life” (*Letters* I.154); in Chapter 13 we see the absurdity of the Eatanswill election; in Chapter 16 Pickwick has a very unfortunate experience at the Seminary for young Ladies; Chapter 19

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16 As Forster records: “‘It seems scarcely possible,’ continued [an] otherwise not too indulgent commentator, ‘to believe that there never were any such persons as Mr. Pickwick and Mrs. Nickleby and Mrs. Gamp. They are to us not only types of English life, but types actually existing. They at once revealed the existence of such people, and made them thoroughly comprehensible. They were not studies of persons, but persons’” (I.108-9).

17 As many Dickens scholars are aware, a chapter-numbering error occurred in the first-edition text producing two chapter 28s. I use the corrected numbering system found in later editions.
presents Pickwick’s incident in the wheelbarrow; in Chapter 22 Pickwick surprises the lady in curlpapers in her boudoir; Chapter 28 is one of the jolliest chapters in any Dickens novel—featuring the famed Pickwickian Christmas at Manor Farm; in Chapter 39, romance blooms between Mr. Winkle and Arabella Allen, and Sam Weller and Mary; in Chapter 45 the hypocritical clergyman Mr. Stiggins renounces the evils of drink while “staggering to and fro in the excitement of his eloquence” and then makes desperate attempts to “preserve his perpendicular” (620); and in Chapter 51 a spectacularly comic fight breaks out in which medical students Bob Sawyer and Ben Allen “dodge round the group, each with a tortoise-shell lancet in his hand, ready to bleed the first man stunned” (707).

These chapters numbers may seem meaningless at first glance, but imagine my surprise (and obsessive-compulsive delight) upon discovering an emerging pattern; each of these comic situations—many of the comic situations which occur in the novel, and a majority of the most memorable ones—occur in the middle chapter of their three chapter monthly installment. These installments are thus each anchored by incidents which combine humor and nostalgia. Besides their primary function as the comic “meat” of the monthly installments, what is amazing about these chapters is the way they gradually incorporate Dickens’s vision of Englishness as the narrative progresses. What I’m most interested in examining is Dickens’s increasingly subtle meshing of English nostalgia and culture within these comic chapters. As Dickens becomes more secure in his future career as a novelist and as he becomes more comfortable with the serial format, the connections he draws between humor and Englishness become clearer and more direct. In Chapter 4, the middle chapter of the second number, Dickens presents the comic scene

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18 Funnily enough, this incident takes place at the Bull Inn, and Pickwick is frequently pegged as a Victorian John Bull (see Andrews xvii).
of Pickwick and his hat—which, incidentally, is blown off during Pickwick’s retreat from a very nostalgically-English military reenactment:

There are very few moments in a man’s existence when he experiences so much ludicrous distress, or meets with so little charitable commiseration, as when he is in pursuit of his own hat….The best way is, to keep gently up with the object of pursuit, to be wary and cautious, to watch your opportunity well, get gradually before it, then make a rapid dive, seize it by the crown, and stick it firmly on your head: smiling pleasantly all the time, as if you thought it as good a joke as anybody else.

There was a fine gentle wind, and Mr. Pickwick’s hat rolled sportively before it. The wind puffed, and Mr. Pickwick puffed, and the hat rolled over and over as merrily as a lively porpoise in a strong tide; and on it might have rolled, far beyond Mr. Pickwick’s reach, had not its course been providentially stopped, just as that gentleman was on the point of resigning it to its fate. (53)

There are many elements of social unification at work in the humor of this passage. By first replacing Pickwick, the character, with a generic “man” and then anticipating “so little charitable commiseration,” Dickens temporarily numbs our sympathies. He then increases intimacy with readers by including valuable “advice” to help us avoid an identical situation; this assumes that the embarrassing predicament of chasing after one’s hat is a shared cultural experience. His indication that we should laugh at ourselves is especially telling: since self-unawareness is key to comic characters, a man who laughs at his predicament, who “[thinks] it as good a joke as

19 The degree to which a reader experiences an absence of feeling and where they then direct this absence of feeling is believed by many to be a crucial element in what is laughable. If a reader feels too much emotion for a character or situation, they cannot truly find it laughable. So, sympathy and empathy must be replaced, at least temporarily, by apathy. (See Cicero’s De Oratore, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “The Comic,” and Bergson Chapter 1—“laughter has no greater foe than emotion…step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy” (63).)
anybody else” is no longer comic and can thus deflect or absorb this ridicule; it appears that a certain level of self-ridicule is the ideal way to “keep calm and carry on.”

However, for the purposes of my argument, the most significant aspect of this passage is not Dickens’s personification of the hat, or his comic humiliation of Pickwick (who does not find it a good joke), but rather the way in which the hat’s course was “providentially stopped.” As narrative luck would have it, Pickwick’s hat comes to a stop beside the wheels of a carriage carrying, amongst others, Mr. Wardle, Mr. Tupman, and Joe, the boy who, in true Dickensian fashion, is identified only by his most prominent physical flaws: being both obese and narcoleptic. In the next few pages of the chapter, Wardle extends an invitation to Pickwick to visit Manor Farm in Dingley Dell—which, in the course of the novel, proves to be perhaps the most “English” building in all of Dickensian lore (tied only perhaps with Todger’s boarding house). This is the first inkling Dickens provides of a causational relationship between that which is unarguably humorous and that which is definitively English. As the novel progresses (and Dickens’s serialized timing matures), these connections become smoother, more subtle, and more closely intertwined. In Chapter 7 Winkle’s notorious hunting accident is closely followed by a cricket game—Dingley Dell versus All-Muggleton (a most English game with most absurdly faux-English names).

On most comic occasions Dickens dulls this newly inspired fellow-feeling through situations which are either quite harmless (like Mr. Mantalini’s “suicide” attempts) or in which the character brings misfortune upon him- or herself due to various preexisting vices (like Mr. Pecksniff). Even our loveable Pickwick cannot escape a bit of this harmless self-inflicted

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20 Our emotional distance from Joe, whose health conditions could very well be quite serious, stems from the fact that while Dickens’s characters use the name Joe when addressing him, Dickens-as-narrator only ever refers to “the fat boy.” Funnily enough, Joe so thoroughly enmeshed himself within popular culture that this sleep disorder (obesity hypoventilation syndrome) has became commonly known as “Pickwickian Syndrome.”
misfortune. To wit, in Chapter 19 (the middle chapter of Number VII), Pickwick ends up in a wheelbarrow in “the Pound” after a bout of excessive alcoholic merriment during a picnic:

…Mr. Pickwick had been wheeled to the Pound, and safely deposited therein, fast asleep in the wheelbarrow, to the immeasurable delight and satisfaction, not only of all the boys in the village, but three-fourths of the whole population, who had gathered round, in expectation of his waking. If their most intense gratification had been excited by seeing him wheeled in, how many hundredfold was their joy increased when, after a few indistinct cries of “Sam!” he sat up in the barrow, and gazed with indescribable astonishment on the faces before him. …

“Here’s a game!” roared the populace.

“Where am I?” exclaimed Mr. Pickwick.

“In the Pound,” replied the mob. …

“Let me out,” cried Mr. Pickwick. “Where’s my servant? Where are my friends?”

“You an’t got no friends. Hurrah!” Then there came a turnip, then a potato, and then an egg: with a few other little tokens of the playful disposition of the many-headed. (257)

In this scene readers are not laughing at Pickwick’s predicament alone; we become socially unified in laughing at the social unity of those laughing at Pickwick. We, the readers, suddenly find ourselves “the populace,” “the mob,” and “the many-headed” in our shared laughter—laughter which “reassures us of our social being (we are part of a chorus), but also, and perhaps more basically, of our own invincible and isolated ego” (Kincaid 14). It is precisely this ego Dickens wishes to un-isolate through humorous examples of (or supplements to) cultural communality. For example, during the Eatanswill election (Chapter 13, middle chapter of installment V):
Horatio Fizkin, Esquire, of Fizkin Lodge, shook his fist in the countenance of the Honourable Samuel Slumkey, of Slumkey Hall; upon which the Honourable Samuel Slumkey, his blood being up, defied Horatio Fizkin, Esquire, to mortal combat. At this violation of all known rules and precedents of order, the mayor commanded another fantasia on the bell, and declared that he would bring before himself, both Horatio Fizkin, Esquire, of Fizkin Lodge, and the Honourable Samuel Slumkey, of Slumkey Hall, and bind them over to keep the peace. Upon this terrific denunciation, the supporters of the two candidates interfered, and…the friends of each party…quarrelled in pairs, for three-quarters of an hour… (176)

Again Dickens gives the impression of a many-headed mob, albeit a comically organized one. Indeed, who else but the English (or Dickens’s manufactured mirror-image of the English) would make it a point to “[quarrel] in pairs, for three-quarters of an hour”? It would certainly be rude to quarrel in larger groups or to cause your opponent to miss his train. Also, that a mere verbal threat violates all known rules of order indicates a shared preestablished Englishness, a “common alphabet” of knowledge, experience, and social expectations.

This shared knowledge is directly embodied not in Pickwick alone, but also in Sam Weller. Dickens introduces Sam in Chapter 10 (the middle chapter of installment IV) after a lengthy description of time and place in order to situate Sam firmly within socio-geographic nostalgia:

There are in London several old inns, once the headquarters of celebrated coaches in the days when coaches performed their journeys in a graver and more solemn manner than they do in these times; but which have now degenerated into little more than the abiding and booking-places of country wagons. The reader would look in vain for any of
these ancient hostelries, among the Golden Crosses and Bull and Mouths, which rear their stately fronts in the improved streets of London. If he would light upon any of these old places, he must direct his steps to the obscurer quarters of the town, and there in some secluded nooks he will find several, still standing with a kind of gloomy sturdiness, amidst the modern innovations which surround them.

It was in the yard of one of these inns — of no less celebrated a one than the White Hart — that a man was busily employed in brushing the dirt off a pair of boots, early on the morning succeeding the events narrated in the last chapter. He was habited in a coarse, striped waistcoat, with black calico sleeves, and blue glass buttons; drab breeches and leggings. A bright red handkerchief was wound in a very loose and unstudied style round his neck, and an old white hat was carelessly thrown on one side of his head. There were two rows of boots before him, one cleaned and the other dirty, and at every addition he made to the clean row, he paused from his work, and contemplated its results with evident satisfaction (123-4).

What I find most nostalgically unifying here is not the use of terms such as “old” or “in the days when” but rather the indication that the White Hart is located in one of those “secluded nooks…standing with a kind of gloomy sturdiness, amidst…modern innovations.” This, to me, evokes a kind of communal geographic knowledge—the idea that, like Todger’s Commercial Boarding-House in _Martin Chuzzlewit_, one cannot find these places using maps, but only by using a street-wise guide who has been there before, a knowledge which is resistant to modern innovations or other outward changes. Also, Dickens could not have dressed Sam more appropriately to act as a representative for both the exclusive London-specific life and the more
inclusive and overarching British ego: the only colors on him besides what is black or “drab” are red, white, and blue.\textsuperscript{21}

In a letter to Chapman and Hall on November 1, 1836, Dickens wrote: “If I were to live a hundred years, and write three novels in each, I should never be so proud of any of them, as I am of Pickwick, feeling as I do, that it has made its own way, and hoping, as I must own I do hope, that long after my hand is withered as the pens it held, Pickwick will be found on many a dusty shelf with many a better work” (Letters I.189). Dickens was not egotistically out of line with this proud-parent sentiment; \textit{Pickwick} was a Victorian sensation and had indeed “made its own way” very well: “to the majority of nineteenth-century readers, \textit{Pickwick Papers} was the most likeable book ever written by Dickens. In the twelve years following his death, for example, when over 4,000,000 copies of his novels were sold, the sale of \textit{Pickwick} far outdistanced all the others” (Ford 3). This may have been immediately due to its humor, but \textit{Pickwick}’s lasting effectiveness relies on its evocation of cultural nostalgia and shared English experiences at the climax of each installment. Leslie Simon notes that \textit{Pickwick} was Dickens’s “tale of travel, exploration and movement toward some better understanding of what it means to be ‘at home’” (23) which Dickens achieved primarily by “restricting his hero’s journey to the frontiers of his own domestic space—that is, England” (33). Thus, funnily enough, the Pickwickians may perhaps be the first group of bachelors in a travel comedy who never really leave “home” (anticipating Jerome’s \textit{Three Men in a Boat}, which would appear fifty-three years later). One gets the distinct impression that if they were to go abroad, they would somehow manage to take

\textsuperscript{21} Although these colors signify the inclusive British rather than exclusive English flag, Dickens’s inclusion of blue here is empirically significant: “the English who unlike the Welsh, Scots and Irish, have traditionally identified themselves with the Union Jack, the composite flag of the United Kingdom, rather than what is technically their flag, the Cross of St George: thereby symbolically claiming possession of the whole kingdom” (Kumar 9). It would seem, then, that Sam Weller has Imperial rather than domestic undertones, representing how England wishes to appear to others rather than how Colonial others truly perceive her.
England with them. The Pickwickians not only mirror Englishness, they create it—mostly through their involvement in culturally relatable humorous scrapes and adventures. Ultimately, *Pickwick* is able to create a model of Englishness for its audience because of its metronomic bursts of humor and domestic nostalgia. Of course, this model was in no way a universal standard since Victorian society was still plagued with much “un-English” behavior—a flaw Dickens took it upon himself to humorously correct in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

*Nicholas Nickleby: Correcting Englishness*

Perhaps because it is so didactic in its aims, *Nicholas Nickleby* is not categorized as a comic novel in the same way as *Pickwick* or *Chuzzlewit*; however, *Nickleby* introduces some of the most memorably ridiculous comic characters of the Victorian era, resulting in a novel which evokes something innately patriotic in its readers: “[Nickleby’s] spirit seems to hark back, past Shakespeare, to Chaucer, enabling Dickens to embody something quintessentially and irrepressibly English” (Callow). In fact, the comicality of the Squeers, Mantalini, Kenwigs, and Crummles families frequently overshadows Dickens’s sentimental message of educational and industrial reform. But do the laughable aspects of Dickens’s works directly assist his social message or do they merely provide comic relief from the more somber plot points and characters? In fact, they fulfill both of these roles in *Nickleby* by providing examples of ridiculous behavior far inferior to the English standard—behavior which the reader must correct (and assert his racial superiority over) through laughter. While humor draws the reader into the plot and establishes emotional investment in the characters, at the same time “Dickens is a master at controlling our distance from the matter at hand in order to evoke laughter” (Kincaid 5). This distance is an integral part of Dickens’s social aim: it not only provides a welcome respite to a tragic-weary reader but also, when carefully juxtaposed with comedy (say, through
serialized installments), the social ills then appear greater in contrast. Through serialization, Dickens achieves a masterful balance of using humor both as a substantial plot device in itself (to draw readers in and create a sense of cultural community) and also as comic relief to contrast with more serious subject matter. Nowhere is this shift more apparent or more jarring than in *Nickleby*. I’m especially interested in examining not only how these shifts operate, but also where they occur within the monthly numbers.

Unlike *Pickwick*’s middle-chapter humor pattern, in *Nickleby* Dickens carefully positions humorous scenes in the final chapters of each number—especially in numbers containing extreme pathos. Using this method in *Nickleby*, Dickens is able to correct the Englishness he created with *Pickwick*; Dickens gives us examples of what not to do, of who not to be. He infuses humor into otherwise somber and bleak situations; the comedy he uses is frequently grotesque. We find ourselves laughing at situations which, by definition, should instead make us tremble in fear or cry in despair (temporarily blurring the lines of tragedy and comedy). The first, and perhaps most acute example of Dickens using humor to correct Englishness occurs in the last chapter of the first installment, when we are introduced to Headmaster Squeers only a few pages after Ralph Nickleby harshly informs Mrs. Nickleby, Nicholas, and Kate of their impending destitution:

Mr. Squeers looked at the little boy to see if he was doing anything he could beat him for: as he happened not to be doing anything at all, he merely boxed his ears, and told him not to do it again. …

Here the little boy on the top of the trunk gave a violent sneeze.

“Halloa, sir!” growled the schoolmaster, turning round. “What’s that, sir?”

“Nothing, please sir,” replied the little boy.
“Nothing, sir!” exclaimed Mr. Squeers.

“Please sir, I sneezed,” rejoined the boy, trembling till the little trunk shook under him.

“Oh! sneezed, did you?” retorted Mr. Squeers. “Then what did you say “nothing” for, sir?”

In default of a better answer to this question, the little boy screwed a couple of knuckles into each of his eyes and began to cry, wherefore Mr. Squeers knocked him off the trunk with a blow on one side of his face, and knocked him on again with a blow on the other. (44-5)

With Squeers Dickens emphasized the cause closest to his heart at the time: “to attack the Yorkshire schools was…Dickens’s only defined purpose when he began *Nickleby*” (Collins 110). The condition of education in England, especially the availability and quality of education for lower and working class children, was a question addressed by Dickens many times, but nowhere is the plight of those poorly educated addressed as humorously, as grotesquely comic, as in *Nicholas Nickleby*. But how exactly does Dickens manage in this particular scene to make child abuse humorous? Since this is our first introduction to Squeers, Dickens uses humor both to inform us that *Nickleby* will not be entirely sentimental, and to condition us to anticipate further Squeers-related episodes. Similarly, upon seeing Mantalini’s or Crummles’ name in the chapter title, we breathe a sigh of (comic) relief and chuckle in anticipation. In addition to Squeers’s comicality, Dickens masterfully controls our sympathetic distance from the abused boy: he has no name, no background, and no character. Unlike Smike, whom Dickens later uses in a strictly tragic sense, this mob of nameless boys both showcases Squeers’s overbearing absurdity and highlights Smike’s tragedy. Our laughing at these boys early on in the novel allows us to
sympathize with Smike later (knowing he underwent similar if not worse treatment). Philip Collins suggests that by emphasizing the humor of Squeers and Dotheboys Hall (both in his public readings as well as the novel itself), Dickens’s critique of English behavior is “more effective” than using tragedy exclusively: “The painful has been subsumed in the ludicrous, and even the later epidemics and deaths are so reported by Squeers and his wife as to amuse rather than disgust…. This technique is more effective, both as literature and as “message” than the pathetic attitude continually adopted towards Smike” (109). For example, in one paragraph Dickens describes the state of the boys in Dotheboys Hall with horrifically depressing detail and, in the paragraph which immediately follows, makes their situation somehow laughable:

There were little faces which should have been handsome, darkened with the scowl of sullen, dogged suffering; there was childhood with the light of its eye quenched, its beauty gone, and its helplessness alone remaining; there were vicious-faced boys, brooding, with leaden eyes, like malefactors in a jail; and there were young creatures on whom the sins of their frail parents had descended, weeping even for the mercenary nurses they had known, and lonesome even in their loneliness.…

And yet this scene, painful as it was, had its grotesque features, which, in a less interested observer than Nicholas, might have provoked a smile. Mrs. Squeers stood at one of the desks, presiding over an immense basin of brimstone and treacle, of which delicious compound she administered a large instalment to each boy in succession: using for the purpose a common wooden spoon, which might have been originally manufactured for some gigantic top, and which widened every young gentleman’s mouth considerably: they being all obliged, under heavy corporal penalties, to take in the whole of the bowl at a gasp…. Besides these, there was a long row of boys waiting, with
countenances of no pleasant anticipation, to be treacled; and another file, who had just escaped from the infliction, making a variety of wry mouths indicative of anything but satisfaction. The whole were attired in such motley, ill-assorted, extraordinary garments, as would have been irresistibly ridiculous, but for the foul appearance of dirt, disorder, and disease, with which they were associated. (97-8)

In this passage Dickens seems to satirize himself; he exposes his hidden comic motives by stating that the boys’ condition “might have provoked a smile” and “would have been irresistibly ridiculous” to a “less interested observer than Nicholas,” which is exactly what we are. He describes these terrible conditions and then gives us permission to laugh at the boys as long as we always remember “the foul appearance…with which they were associated.” In *Nickleby* Dickens not only consistently juxtaposes pathos with humor, but pathos routinely precedes humor within each installment. Unlike in *Pickwick* where humor was the central focus of most installments, here the pathos is the “meat” while humor is the “dessert.” In order for our laughter to effectively correct English behavior, Dickens must first highlight the behavior needing to be corrected. Perhaps he figured that dessert as a main course is acceptable if you have no tragic main course (as in *Pickwick*), but it would not work otherwise; if you give a reader his Squeers first, he may not finish his Smike.

In addition to Squeers, another character whose purpose is to comically lure the reader into a tragic plot is Mr. Mantalini. The sad financial state of the Nickleby family and Kate Nickleby’s unfortunate vocational experiences (meant to draw attention to the cause of young working women everywhere) are both offset and emphasized by Mantalini’s extravagant lifestyle and flamboyant personality. We are confronted with *and* sheltered from Kate’s hopelessness
simultaneously. Dickens opens the final chapter of installment Number V by describing Kate’s new lot in life thusly:

It was with a heavy heart, and many sad forebodings which no effort could banish, that Kate Nickleby…threaded her way alone, amid the noise and bustle of the streets, towards the west end of London.

At this early hour many sickly girls, whose business, like that of the poor worm, is to produce, with patient toil, the finery that bedecks the thoughtless and luxurious, traverse our streets, making towards the scene of their daily labour, and catching, as if by stealth, in their hurried walk, the only gasp of wholesome air and glimpse of sunlight which cheer their monotonous existence during the long train of hours that make a working day. As she drew nigh to the more fashionable quarter of the town, Kate marked many of this class as they passed by, hurrying like herself to their painful occupation, and saw, in their unhealthy looks and feeble gait, but too clear an evidence that her misgivings were not wholly groundless. (203)

Dickens does not speak for Kate alone here, but “many sickly girls” in “their painful occupations.” However, in order not to depress us irrevocably, Dickens almost immediately introduces a lengthy scene of humorous squabbling between Mr. and Mrs. Mantalini wherein the former addresses the latter as “an ungrateful, unworthy, demd unthankful little fairy” and “a frightful, naughty, demd hobgoblin” (205), which then causes Mrs. Mantalini to threaten drinking poison, and Mr. Mantalini, seeing this expression of love and devotion, calms her down with hyperbolic terms of endearment such as “my existence’s jewel” and “my life and soul” (206). Once we are emotionally outraged and sympathetic to Kate’s occupational plight, Dickens quickly provides contrasting humor with the Mantalini’s ridiculousness. Mr.
Mantalini’s exaggerations of speech and Mrs. Mantalini’s overdramatic actions place Kate’s real troubles more solidly in perspective by comparison, and once again, Dickens ends an otherwise dismally depressing monthly number on a comic note. The fact that the Mantalinis are hyper-continental and so demonstrably un-English makes it easier for us to laugh at them. We get the impression that as bad as Kate’s fate is, it could always be worse—at least she isn’t ridiculously Italian.

While Dickens used Squeers and Dotheboys Hall to highlight the poor state of education in England and the Mantalinis to emphasize the dismal working conditions of urban women, he situated other comic characters and situations in the final chapters of their respective monthly installments purely to allow the reader temporary distance from these depressing topics. Although Kincaid argues that “the notion that the humor is somehow detached from major concerns or that it functions mainly as a holiday or relief…seem to me demonstrably false” (4-5), he seems to be overlooking the possibility that humor can emphasize major concerns by providing temporary (and necessary) periods of relief—relief which does not detract from the pathos, but instead supplements it. Dickens wanted to be sure that readers had a positive association with his work as they entered each textual “blank” between numbers.

In *Nickleby* several characters perform the role of Dickens’s comic relief, namely the Kenwigs and Crummles families. The timing and placement of the Kenwigs’ introduction is particularly significant. The Kenwigses are first introduced in Chapter 14: the final chapter of the fourth monthly number. The three chapters preceding it within the installment are quite dismal and gloomy in nature: Chapter 11 sees Newman Noggs pitifully escorting Kate and Mrs. Nickleby into their new lodgings, while Chapters 12 and 13 involve the emotionally charged breakup of Dotheboys Hall and several tearful Smike-filled moments. But then the pathos of
older, established characters is followed closely by the humor of newly introduced comic characters, and thus installment IV (like I and V) ends humorously. Immediately after this initial pathos the Kenwigs family jumps into the narrative, providing timely comic relief and momentarily allowing us to forget woeful Newman Noggs and miserable, wretched Smike. The Kenwigs’ first introduction takes place during a dinner party, during the course of which Mrs. Kenwigs bursts into tears over her daughters’ “combined beauty”:

“I can – not help it, and it don’t signify,” sobbed Mrs. Kenwigs; “oh! They’re too beautiful to live, much too beautiful!”

On hearing this alarming presentiment of their being doomed to an early death in the flower of their infancy, all four little girls raised a hideous cry, and burying their heads in their mother’s lap simultaneously, screamed until the eight flaxen tails vibrated again; Mrs. Kenwigs meanwhile clasping them alternately to her bosom, with attitudes expressive of distraction…

At length, the anxious mother permitted herself to be soothed into a more tranquil state, and the little Kenwigses, being also composed, were distributed among the company, to prevent the possibility of Mrs. Kenwigs being again overcome by the blaze of their combined beauty. (169)

As if this episode wasn’t humorous enough without a visual aid, in the next installment Phiz provides an illustration of what are arguably the ugliest children in recorded literature. While Mrs. Kenwigs’s actions provide corrective examples of how the English shouldn’t behave, her daughters’ genetically unfortunate exteriors compel us to exclude them from the English aesthetic ideal. We laugh to remind them that they are culturally lacking, and to assure ourselves that we are not. Much like the effect of Mr. and Mrs. Mantalini’s argument and exaggerated
drama after Kate’s tragedy, seeing Mrs. Kenwigs’s tearful overreaction after three chapters of truly depressing occurrences makes the scene all the more delightfully welcome in its humor. It prevents Dickens’s audience from becoming desensitized to tragedy from an oversaturation of pathos. Both the Kenwigses and the Mantalinis reappear later in the story, comically of course, but the context of the Mantalinis’ introduction in regards to Kate’s predicament and the fortuitous timing of Mrs. Kenwigs’s introduction at the end of an otherwise depressing monthly installment magnify the comic effect of each and make their first impressions the most memorable, and thus, the most effective at humorously critiquing and correcting Englishness.

Like the Kenwigs family, Mr. Crummles and his group of traveling performers afford the reader a much needed break from the tragedy of Smike, Newman Noggs, and Kate Nickleby. What is perhaps the most humorous exchange in the entire novel occurs in the last chapter of Number VII when Nicholas inquires after Mr. Crummles’s pony:

“Many and many is the circuit this pony has gone,” said Mr. Crummles, flicking him skilfully on the eyelid for old acquaintance’ sake. “He is quite one of us. His mother was on the stage.”

“Was she?” rejoined Nicholas.

“She ate apple-pie at a circus for upwards of fourteen years,” said the manager; “fired pistols, and went to bed in a nightcap; and, in short, took the low comedy entirely. His father was a dancer.”

“Was he at all distinguished?”

“Not very,” said the manager. “He was rather a low sort of pony. The fact is, he had been originally jobbed out by the day, and he never quite got over his old habits. He was clever in melodrama too, but too broad—too broad. When the mother died, he took the
port-wine business.”

“The port-wine business!” cried Nicholas.

“Drinking port-wine with the clown,” said the manager; “but he was greedy, and one night bit off the bowl of the glass, and choked himself, so his vulgarity was the death of him at last.” (279-80)

By allowing Nicholas and Smike to join his company on tour, Mr. Crummles provides them with a literal distance from their troubles at home (and simultaneously allows the reader that all important mental distance from the novel’s pathos). And, by once again closing an otherwise depressing monthly installment with a humorous scene, Dickens reiterates the idea that humor is the most effective way to maintain reader interest and evoke sympathy for the more tragic characters by comparison.

Dickens of course wished for his work to provide enjoyment but, more importantly, for it to act as a lesson in social awareness and responsibility to one’s fellow Englishmen. This social message was a direct response to English empiricism and patriotism. This is due both to a high level of domestic popularity during its initial run—“Sales held up remarkably…the initial circulation of 50,000 copies was nearly maintained; and the profits upon the numbers alone equaled those from Pickwick” (Patten, Charles Dickens and His Publishers 99)—and the fact that one particular reader contributing to said popularity was young Queen Victoria herself. The Queen brought attention to Dickens’s desire for educational reform and, according to Collins, “the Age of Victoria agreed with its Queen in admiring Dickens for his social exploration and social conscience” (112). However, while the lasting focus was on social reform, much of Nicholas Nickleby’s warm reception must be attributed to Dickens’s humor. To that end, I have suggested here that Dickens used strategically placed humorous episodes both to draw our
attention to social ills specific to England and also to alleviate the ensuing pain through racially
corrective comic relief.

*Martin Chuzzlewit: Celebrating Englishness*

*Martin Chuzzlewit*’s humor, while not as comically contrasting as *Nickleby*’s, or as
widespread throughout the narrative as *Pickwick*’s, is comparably intense when it does occur.
Several critics consider this Dickens’s funniest novel, while Stephen Marcus asserts that it is the
funniest novel in English literature (Marcus 213).22 And yet, *Chuzzlewit* is one of the most
overlooked and under-read of Dickens’s works: “The degree to which Marcus stands alone in his
high estimation of the novel may be measured by a glance at the recent MLA bibliographies, full
of considerations of various aspects of Dickensia, but almost totally empty of mention of
*Chuzzlewit*” (Hildebidle 53 n.4). Indeed, the list of criticism I was able to compile was
pathetically short. But whether this is because *Chuzzlewit*’s initial unpopularity and poor sales23
have somehow carried over into the twenty-first century, or because this is (perhaps with the
exception of *Barnaby Rudge*) the least likely of Dickens’s works to appear on school reading
lists and syllabi is anyone’s guess. However, I am not including *Chuzzlewit* here to “make up”
for lagging popularity, but to uncover the patriotic message within its humor. While *Pickwick*’s
humor is expressed through many various scenes and episodes, *Chuzzlewit*’s humor, like
*Nickleby*’s is attached to and filtered through certain pre-designated comic characters. Yet, like
*Pickwick, Chuzzlewit*’s humorous episodes are very carefully timed and allocated from
installment to installment in order to maximize pro-English sentiment in the audience—to effect

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22 Marcus adds that “nothing could shake [Dickens’s] conviction that *Martin Chuzzlewit* was his most accomplished
Baltimore, 1964, p.120; and William Boyd’s September 23, 2011 review in The Guardian celebrating Dickens at
23 “*Chuzzlewit* began with only 20,000 and never rose beyond 23,000” compared with the fact that “*Nickleby* had
begun with a sale of almost 50,000 copies” (Ford 43). See also Marcus 223 and Hildebidle 41.
a celebration of “Englishness.” For, in addition to being the “funniest” novel, this is, in my opinion, the most English—the nostalgic feelings Dickens evokes in the Christmas chapter of *Pickwick* he is able to maintain effortlessly throughout *Chuzzlewit*. His desire for readers’ intertextual interest and sympathetic involvement is particularly evident during the “American episode.” While in *Pickwick* and *Nickleby* we saw Dickens carefully place and alternate humorous episodes *within* installments, in *Chuzzlewit* Dickens alters this strategy and juxtaposes American and English experiences *between* installments: Numbers VII, IX, and XIII take place in America, while Numbers VIII and X-XII take place in England. This alternation serves several purposes: it allows Dickens to emphasize the barrenness and isolation of America’s “Eden” with the Todger’s-like teeming community of England; it compares the humor of the English chapters to the sentimental homesickness of the American chapters; and it allows Dickens to affect his readers extra-textually by implementing intense “cliffhanger” endings. While this “cliffhanger” strategy is not uncommon to Dickens and is certainly a familiar publicity tool in serialized novels, in the American chapters of *Chuzzlewit* these installment endings seem uncharacteristically emphatic and stagey. Number VII ends with Young Martin and Mark Tapley finding themselves homesick in America. The final paragraph of that number indicates that Dickens is now “Leaving them to blend and mingle in their sleep the shadows of objects afar off, as they take fantastic shapes upon the wall in the dim light of thought without controul, be it the part of this slight chronicle—a dream within a dream—as rapidly to change the scene, and cross the ocean to the English shore” (297). The ending of Number VIII is more melodramatic: “But at that moment a loud knocking was heard at the hall-door” (340). This is not the stuff of Dickens, but of Gothic horror novelists! So, why would Dickens use this type of suspense to “play” with his reader? Was it to help lagging sales? Or was there a deeper
rhetorical purpose? Whichever the case may be, Dickens’s alternating installments meant that these “cliffhanger” endings lasted their readers not one “blank” but two. Thus, Martin and Mark are left sleeping and the knock on the door goes unanswered for two months each.

Regarding Dickens’s organization and planning of these alternating numbers and breaks, Edwin B. Benjamin argues that *Martin Chuzzlewit* “was not planned as a unit from the beginning. It was written in serial form in Dickens’s somewhat haphazard fashion, the author not knowing from one installment to the next where the story was going to take him” (Benjamin 39-40). Although this is true to some extent—Dickens did allow himself leeway to change the course of the story as it was written—Benjamin’s use of “haphazard fashion” indicates that a certain level of disorganization and thoughtlessness was routine to Dickens. I heartily disagree with this. Even when pressed with deadlines, Dickens was a most meticulous and purposeful writer. John Forster defends this seemingly “haphazard fashion” of *Chuzzlewit*: “Beginning so hurriedly as at last he did, altering his course at the opening and seeing little as yet of the main track of his design, perhaps no story was ever begun by him with stronger heart or confidence” (I.314) and yet:

…never had his handling of character been so masterly as in *Chuzzlewit*. The persons delineated in former books had been more agreeable, but never so interpenetrated with meanings….Nothing nearly so effective therefore had yet been achieved by him. He had scrutinised as truly and satirised as keenly; but had never shown the imaginative insight with which he now sent his humour and his art into the core of the vices of the time.

(I.336)

Thus, as Dickens matured as a writer (and humorist) these more mature characters become “interpenetrated with meanings.” By effectively using humor to combat “the vices of the time,”
Dickens built on the patriotic foundation he established in *Pickwick* and corrected in *Nickleby*, hoping to celebrate and normalize an ideal version of “Englishness” in *Chuzzlewit*.

Another interesting outcome of these American/English chapter alternations is Dickens’s introduction of humorous(ly) English characters, specifically Mrs. Gamp and Mr. Pecksniff. Incidentally, these introductions appear to be remnants of Dickens’s Pickwickian strategy as Mrs. Gamp and Mr. Pecksniff are introduced in the middle chapter of a three-chapter installment (Chapter 19, Number VIII and Chapter 2, Number I, respectively). I would argue that, despite there being some comic incidents and characters in America, the most humorous and laughable characters appear exclusively in association with England. Any comic American characters are shockingly rude and negatively “other” while Dickens’s English characters find humor through sympathetic connection with Anglo-British readers. Although Pecksniff is indeed a “villain,” his villainy is ultimately impotent. He is more a Jingle than a Jonas. Dickens introduces Pecksniff both in a Pickwickian manner—during the second chapter of the first number, and in a Nicklebian manner—immediately following a sentimentally nostalgic rumination on English autumn in an English home:

The scared leaves only flew the faster…and a giddy chase it was: for they got into unfrequented places, where there was no outlet, and where their pursuer kept them eddying round and round at his pleasure; and they crept under the eaves of houses, and clung tightly to the sides of hay-ricks, like bats; and tore in at open chamber windows, and cowered close to hedges; and, in short, went anywhere for safety. But the oddest feat they achieved was, to take advantage of the sudden opening of Mr. Pecksniff’s front-door, to dash wildly into his passage; whither the wind following close upon them, and finding the back-door open, incontinently blew out the lighted candle held by Miss
Pecksniff, and slammed the front-door against Mr. Pecksniff who was at that moment entering, with such violence, that in the twinkling of an eye he lay on his back at the bottom of the steps…. (9)

The leaves significantly “clung tightly to…hay-ricks” and “cowered close to hedges,” clutching onto these touchstones of English country geography as a child hides between the legs of a parent and following a seemingly fate-driven path like that of Pickwick’s hat. It is also appropriate that Pecksniff is introduced using physical slapstick because he “has to be amusing all the time; the instant he ceases to be laughable he becomes detestable” (Chesterton 101-2). Although, like Squeers, Pecksniff eventually becomes the epitome of what is worst about society, he remains through it all so very recognizably English:

It has been remarked that Mr. Pecksniff was a moral man. So he was. Perhaps there never was a more moral man than Mr. Pecksniff: especially in his conversation and correspondence…. His very throat was moral. You saw a good deal of it. You looked over a very low fence of white cravat (whereof no man had ever beheld the tie, for he fastened it behind), and there it lay, a valley between two jutting heights of collar, serene and whiskerless before you. It seemed to say, on the part of Mr. Pecksniff, “There is no deception, ladies and gentlemen, all is peace: a holy calm pervades me.” So did his hair, just grizzled with an iron-grey, which was all brushed off his forehead, and stood bolt upright, or slightly drooped in kindred action with his heavy eyelids. So did his person, which was sleek though free from corpulence. So did his manner, which was soft and oily. In a word, even his plain black suit, and state of widower and dangling double eye-glass, all tended to the same purpose, and cried aloud, “Behold the moral Pecksniff!” (11-2)
Dickens’s comparison of Peckniff’s physiognomy to English geography and nostalgic places is quite telling here: Peckniff’s “low fence” of a collar houses his “serene and whiskerless” “valley” of a throat. And that all of these signs “tended to the same purpose, and cried aloud” indicate that Pecksniff’s physiognomy has become the English chorus, populace, and mob. In this, his first appearance in the novel, Pecksniff himself (or at least the outward image of Pecksniff his various features suggest) becomes England.

Mrs. Gamp’s introduction is similarly rooted in Englishness: “Her name, as Mr. Pecksniff gathered from a scrap of writing in his hand, was Gamp; her residence in Kingsgate Street, High Holborn. So Mr. Pecksniff, in a hackney cab, was rattling over Holborn stones, in quest of Mrs. Gamp” (310-1). The very London-ness of this introduction—and the fact that we are made familiar with Mrs. Gamp’s geography before we are made familiar with Mrs. Gamp herself—preemptively establishes Mrs. Gamp as inherently English. But this nostalgic association with Mrs. Gamp is quickly supplemented by a humorous one. Indeed, Mrs. Gamp’s physicality is no less caricaturish than any other Dickensian clown:

She was a fat old woman, this Mrs. Gamp, with a husky voice and a moist eye, which she had a remarkable power of turning up, and only showing the white of. Having very little neck, it cost her some trouble to look over herself, if one may say so, at those to whom she talked…. The face of Mrs. Gamp—the nose in particular—was somewhat red and swollen, and it was difficult to enjoy her society without becoming conscious of a smell of spirits…. (315)

While this is certainly not a desirable portrait of Englishness, the close proximity of her nostalgic geographic location with her comic physical depiction are a combination which alleviates the sympathetic and cultural tensions of the preceding and following American installments.
English cultural identity is a key element to understanding Gamp and Pecksniff; Dickens’s characters are memorable, and therefore effective, precisely because of their ethnic distinctiveness. And yet, while Dickens promotes a transition from autonomy to community for his heroes and his audience, his comic characters are comic precisely because they are so individual, so autonomous. Thus, like the lesson of Pickwick chasing his hat, we, the audience, can avoid being comic once we partake in this “community” constructed by Dickens. Those who do not participate, who remain autonomous, whether through delusion (Sairey Gamp) or snobbery (Pecksniff), become comic by default through their exclusion from the group. While Gamp and Pecksniff are English, they are not of the English—they are distinct from both the other characters and the audience. Malcolm Andrews points out that “The delight in eccentricity relies to a large extent on a confident consensus about what forms the ‘centre’…. [These characters] offer relief from the sobriety, conformity and drabness that seemed to be overtaking England in the middle of the nineteenth century” (173-4). But in order to ascertain this normative “centre,” we must first have the entire breadth and scope of an “other.” If the term “English” in this case refers as much to the reader as it does to any particular character then to find this “centre” “the characters of Martin Chuzzlewit…must leave their ambient milieus, the milieus that are so intimately fused with themselves, and seek in the outer world, the world that is alien and unfamiliar, some support from for their own beings….Martin Chuzzlewit must leave England altogether and go to America” (Miller 109). To celebrate that which is English, readers must first examine those who are demonstrably non- or un-English, and measure the difference—reveling in their racial superiority.

By using Martin and Mark’s sentimental homesickness to “centre” and celebrate English identity, the American chapters amplify the nostalgic comic effect of the English installments.
Even before they reach the desolation of Eden, Mark and Martin experience their first pangs of homesickness (and for self-centered and egotistical Martin, perhaps his first feelings of any type of sentimentality towards another person):

“Oh, Tom Pinch, Tom Pinch!” said Martin, in a thoughtful tone; “what would I give to be again beside you, and able to hear your voice, though it were even in the old bedroom at Pecksniff’s!”

“Oh, Dragon, Dragon!” echoed Mark, cheerfully, “if there warn’t any water between you and me, and nothing faint-hearted-like in going back, I don’t know that I mightn’t say the same. But here am I, Dragon, in New York, America; and there are you in Wiltshire, Europe…” (297)

This blend of person and place nostalgia—for Tom Pinch, and the Dragon, respectively—emphasizes not only the overt physical distance between New York and Wiltshire (the “water between you and me”), but more pointedly the cultural and sociological differences between Martin and Mark’s English “home” and this new American “other.” Also we must remember that as acute as their homesickness appears, they are still in (relatively) civilized geographic urbanity. Once they reach Eden, their nostalgia-induced homesickness for England deepens as the cultural and physical distance Dickens places between England and this “other” widens:

For all [Mark’s] light-hearted speaking, it was long before he slept himself. He wrapped his blanket round him, put the axe ready to his hand, and lay across the threshold of the door: too anxious and too watchful to close his eyes. The novelty of their dreary situation, the dread of some rapacious animal or human enemy, the terrible uncertainty of their means of subsistence, the apprehension of death, the immense
distance and the hosts of obstacles between themselves and England, were fruitful sources of disquiet in the deep silence of the night. (378)

Aside from the vulnerability of our English heroes compared with this unknown and dangerous “other,” what is most interesting about this scene is the order in which Dickens lists Martin and Marks “sources of disquiet”; it can be no accident that this list of “rapacious” and “terrible” things culminates in “distance…between themselves and England.” It is as if this distance trumps all other causes of sufferings. In a most telling, and perhaps heavy-handed, manner Dickens emphasizes that this malady has been brought on by geographic and cultural distance from “home;” after three months of English installments, Martin and Mark’s symptoms of homesickness soon metastasize into life-threatening physical illness:

Martin indeed was dangerously ill; very near his death. He lay in that state many days, during which time Mark’s poor friends, regardless of themselves, attended him. Mark, fatigued in mind and body; working all the day and sitting up at night; worn with hard living and the unaccustomed toil of his new life; surrounded by dismal and discouraging circumstances of every kind; never complained or yielded in the least degree. If ever he had thought Martin selfish or inconsiderate, or had deemed him energetic only by fits and starts, and then too passive for their desperate fortunes, he now forgot it all. He remembered nothing but the better qualities of his fellow-wanderer, and was devoted to him, heart and hand.

Many weeks elapsed before Martin was strong enough to move about with the help of a stick and Mark’s arm; and even then his recovery, for want of wholesome air and proper nourishment, was very slow. He was yet in a feeble and weak condition, when the misfortune he had so much dreaded fell upon them. Mark was taken ill. (523)
Dickens makes sure to emphasize that Martin and Mark are “fellow-wanderers”—a civilized society of two in the midst of un-English chaos. It is not so much the fact that there is death or villainy in America—Dickens never denies that these things are present in England too (Anthony and Jonas Chuzzlewit are examples of each!)—but that America lacks the “primarily protective, positive laughter” (Kincaid 143) which Dickens’s England and English characters evoke.

Because although many of these English characters are selfish, rude, and deceitful, one gets the distinct impression after reading Chuzzlewit that it is still infinitely better to be English than otherwise—that despite its vices, inclusion in this English community is the most desirable eugenic possibility.

When Mark and Martin return to England, Dickens’s description of the scene is one of his most sentimentally nostalgic, even more so perhaps than Pickwick’s Christmas:

It was mid-day, and high water in the English port for which the Screw was bound, when, borne in gallantly upon the fulness of the tide, she let go her anchor in the river.

Bright as the scene was; fresh, and full of motion; airy, free, and sparkling; it was nothing to the life and exultation in the breasts of the two travellers, at sight of the old churches, roofs, and darkened chimney-stacks of Home. The distant roar, that swelled up hoarsely from the busy streets, was music in their ears; the lines of people gazing from the wharves, were friends held dear; the canopy of smoke that overhung the town, was brighter and more beautiful to them, than if the richest silks of Persia had been waving in the air. And though the water, going on its glistening track, turned, ever and again, aside, to dance and sparkle round great ships, and heave them up; and leaped from off the blades of oars, a shower of diving diamonds; and wantoned with the idle boats, and swiftly passed, in many a sportive chase, through obdurate old iron rings, set deep into
the stone-work of the quays; not even it, was half so buoyant, and so restless, as their fluttering hearts, when yearning to set foot, once more, on native ground.

A year had passed, since those same spires and roofs had faded from their eyes. It seemed to them a dozen years. Some trifling changes, here and there, they called to mind; and wondered that they were so few and slight. In health and fortune, prospect and resource, they came back poorer men than they had gone away. *But it was home. And though home is a name, a word, it is a strong one; stronger than magician ever spoke, or spirit answered to, in strongest conjuration.*

Being set ashore, with very little money in their pockets, and no definite plan of operation in their heads, they sought out a cheap tavern….

Even the street was made a fairy street, by being half hidden in an atmosphere of steak, and strong, stout, stand-up English beer. …

It was one of those unaccountable little rooms which are never seen anywhere but in a tavern, and are supposed to have got into taverns by reason of the facilities afforded to the architect for getting drunk while engaged in their construction. It had more corners in it than the brain of an obstinate man; was full of mad closets, into which nothing could be put that was not specially invented and made for that purpose; had mysterious shelvings and bulk-heads, and indications of staircases in the ceiling; and was elaborately provided with a bell that rung in the room itself, about two feet from the handle, and had no connexion whatever with any other part of the establishment. (546-7, emphasis mine)

Many nostalgic elements are at work here: Dickens defines “home” as the “strongest” word, and indicates that the first thing Martin and Mark seek out is “a cheap tavern” for steak and “stand-up English beer.” However, what I like most about this passage are the tavern’s odd corners and
drunken construction—like Todger’s boarding house, and its “mad closets” and “mysterious shelvings and bulkheads” which reminded me of the “unfrequented places where there was no outlet” in the scene with Pecksniff and the swirling leaves (9). This indicates that the tavern, like Todger’s, operates as a microcosm of the English ego and readers’ status as Englishmen—impossible to obtain through self-learned knowledge and impossible to find in a concrete sense; Englishness, like Todger’s and this tavern, is only “real” through collective foreknowledge, the “common alphabet” of English experience.

While some view the American chapters as Dickens’s hope to boost declining sales, I suggest that the American chapters say as much about an English “home” as they do about a foreign “other.” America is, in large part, the catalyst for the characters’ celebratory self-discovery. And, once Martin experiences America, “the would-be colonist and apprentice American is then born again, not only as a wiser, less selfish man, but, like Dickens, as a bona fide Englishman, henceforth a grateful subject for Victoria’s England” (Meckier 277). So, just as Dickens’s American experiences allowed him to find his “centre,” Chuzzlewit allows readers (and Martin) to find theirs—a “centre” which just so happens to be their quintessential English self.

24 Indeed, there is a linguistic echo here: the “giddy chase” of English leaves (9) giving way later to the “sportive chase” of English water (546)—the transition from “giddy” to “sportive” perhaps denoting Martin’s and Mark’s new-found maturity and growth from leaving England as boys and returning as virile young men.

25 Hildebidle states that Dickens sent Martin to America “to capitalize on the popularity of books about that strange new world” and that “as a mere digression, the venture is oddly prolonged and peculiarly placed near the very center of the novel” (41). However, while Dickens hoped that sending Martin to America “might increase the number of his readers,” this was only one of several rhetorical reasons for the departure (see Forster I.327).

26 Dickens’s letters from America in the spring of 1842 disclose a distinct and acute nostalgia on his part: “Apart from my natural desire to be among my friends and to be at home again, I have a yearning after our English Customs and English manners, such as you cannot conceive” (Letters III.120). “As the time drawn nearer, we get FEVERED with anxiety for home….Kiss our darlings for us. We shall soon meet, please God, and be happier and merrier than ever we were, in all our lives….Oh home—home—home—home—home—HOME!!!!!!!!!!!!” (Letters III.248).
Despite its seeming unpopularity compared with smash-hits like *Nickleby* and *Pickwick*, *Chuzzlewit* effectively used humor to “centre” and celebrate the English sense of self. We must remember though that this society being created is constantly in flux (even if only from laugh to laugh and joke to joke) as is our place in it. This is why Dickens’s rhetorical efforts in *Chuzzlewit* are so significant. Once readers find this “centre” in themselves, they are more easily able to recognize it in others, and thus not only to identify themselves as “Englishman,” but to identify the larger group as “Englishmen.” Raphael Samuel points out that “the national ‘we’…is not an identity we are born with, but one which we learn, or, very often, which is thrust upon us” (“Preface” xv). With his strategic blending of humor and nostalgic sentiment for England, this is precisely what Dickens’s monthly serials did.
CHAPTER 3

THACKERAY, THEATRICALITY, AND SATIRIZING SENTIMENT

And having indulged himself in a chapter of the very finest writing, the author begs the attention of the British public towards it; humbly conceiving that it possesses some of those peculiar merits which have rendered the fine writing in other chapters of the works of other authors so famous.

—Catherine: A Story (“Another Last Chapter” 164)

I can’t imagine William Makepeace Thackeray would be too pleased following Dickens here, but much of Thackeray’s humorous context relies on a readership created by Charles Dickens. Thackeray had to have been acutely aware that he was writing in a post-Pickwickian world. And yet, far from being overshadowed, Thackeray used Dickens’s cultural preeminence to his advantage. If Dickens promoted patriotic sentiment by creating the Dickensian Englishman, Thackeray encouraged cultural cohesion by mocking these preceding creations and narrative forms which existed in English readers’ collective memory. Thus, for Thackeray satire “becomes a thoroughly self-conscious stance and the expression of far-ranging moral honesty” (Kernan 11); this self-conscious moral honesty frequently takes a reflexive turn to comment on English behavior and habits. If self-deprecation is now a common sign of an “English” sense of humor, this is due, in part, to Thackeray’s biting satire.

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27 Many critics have noted Thackeray’s complex feelings towards Dickens. Payne notes that Thackeray was “Dickens’s best critic and most serious rival at once” (x), and “strugg[e]d to escape the crushing weight of Charles Dickens” (46). Yet despite the complications of competitivenes and the residual sting of applying to illustrate Pickwick and being rejected by Dickens, Thackeray ultimately respected more than regretted Dickens’s presence, saying “Appy Dickens! But I love Pickwick and Crummles too well to abuse this great man” (Letters II:262). For Thackeray’s criticism of Dickens, see his essay “A Box of Novels.” Fraser’s 29 (Feb 1844): 153-69.
Thackeray’s views on humor are well recorded in several of his essays. In his lecture on “Charity and Humor” Thackeray asserts that humor is “wit and love” and “the best humour is that which contains most humanity” (196). With emphasis on collective “humanity” and “love,” it may seem counterintuitive that culturally self-deprecating mockery could act as a unifying social force, but Thackeray’s various methods of employing this mockery ensure that the humor relies on readers’ communal knowledge and cultural alphabet of inclusive English experiences. Thackeray—unlike Dickens’s comic verbosity—only tells half of the “joke” and leaves readers to fill in the blanks themselves. In doing so, the reader uses collective cultural memory to “complete” the joke. Thackeray’s narrative “we” in these instances is not mocking the royal “we” but acknowledging the emerging communal “we.”

Thackeray primarily sets up his narratives not as literary productions (or even historical accounts as he asserts they are several times throughout his novels) but as theatrical worlds wherein Thackeray is a sort of literary puppet master-God with supreme control and omniscience. In his preface to Vanity Fair (1847-8), aptly titled “Before the Curtain,” Thackeray refers to himself not as novelist or creator but “the Manager of the Performance” (6) who soon presents his “Becky Puppet,” “Amelia Doll,” and “Dobbin Figure”—“the whole accompanied by appropriate scenery and brilliantly illuminated with the Author’s own candles” (6). Greig duly notes that these candles “are not…tactfully concealed in the very structure of the novel; they are openly displayed” (74). This presents Thackeray as self-consciously God-like—not only all knowing, but all controlling. And, despite several subsequent assertions that this is fated history and not a work of fiction, Thackeray first reveals that:

Sick-bed homilies and pious reflections are, to be sure, out of place in mere story-books, and we are not going (after the fashion of some novelists of the present day) to
cajole the public into a sermon, when it is only a comedy that the reader pays his money
to witness….O brother wearers of motley! Are there not moments when one grows sick
of grinning and tumbling, and the jingling of cap and bells? This, dear friends and
companions, is my amiable object – to walk with you through the Fair, to examine the
shops and the shows there; and that we should all come home after the flare, and the
noise, and the gaiety, and be perfectly miserable in private. (VF 211)

With his self-deprecating “only a comedy,” and passive “walk with you through the Fair” we are
apt to ignore the implications that Thackeray will actually usher us through a pre-formed tableau.
This may initially suggest a certain level of uncontrollable destiny until we recognize that this
entire charade of Vanity Fair is not preexisting, but purposely formed by Thackeray. He is not
guiding us through any naturally occurring cultural phenomena, but rather a fun-house of his
own making. Thackeray’s satire holds a mirror before our faces but, as this is a “fun-house,” the
mirror will offer grotesquely distorted versions of “truth.”

Before Vanity Fair Thackeray exposed these satirical narrative frameworks to his readers
in his first novel Catherine: A Story (1839-40). However, this first attempt at novel writing has
since been overlooked by many critics, Catherine the heroine forgotten in Becky Sharp’s
shadow, and Catherine the novel sitting dusty on the critical bookshelf as “the most widely
unread of Thackeray’s stories” (Colby 383). Thackeray himself did not have many positive
things to say about this first novelistic effort. In various letters to his mother, he called
Catherine “a disgusting subject” (Letters I:421), “a mistake all through” (Letters I:433), and
admits “it is not generally liked and I think people are quite right” (Letters I:412). And to his
publisher, James Fraser, “I send the conclusion of Catherine, thank Heaven it’s over” (Letters
I:407). Yet despite Thackeray’s insecurity and scholars’ critical apathy, Catherine is an
important artifact in Thackerayan criticism as we can see the seedlings of his sarcasm and narrative playfulness beginning to emerge—its satire “anticipating the path that he was to follow” (Colby 381). Thackeray’s narrator (in this instance Ikey Solomons, Jr.) tells us “Catherine had no friend, as is usual in tragedies and romances” (C 41) which indicates that this is either (a) nonfiction (b) a comedy, and/or (c) unusual. With numerous references to its “historical” foundations in the “Newgate Calendar,” Thackeray would have us believe the first above all. But throughout the pseudo-history, the theme of finely-tuned and carefully controlled theatricality is ever present. An odd break appears mid-story when Thackeray/Solomons says: “All these things having passed between the acts, dingaring-a-dingaring-a-dinledingle-ding, the drop draws up, and the next act begins. By the way, the play ends with a drop: but that is neither here nor there.” But these overt theatrical cues are followed immediately by an even more overt (and oddly out-of-place) aside:

[Here, as in a theatre, the orchestra is supposed to play something melodious. The people get up, shake themselves, yawn, and settle down in their seats again. “Porter, ale, ginger-beer, cider,” comes around, squeezing through the legs of the gentlemen in the pit. Nobody takes anything as usual; and lo! the curtain rises again. “’Sh, ’shsh, ’shshshhh! Hats off!” says everybody.] (C 93)

Later we are told that “the end was coming quickly, and every one of our unknowing actors and actresses were to be implicated, more or less, in the catastrophe” (C 152). And, finally that “Mr. Isaac Solomons, junior, produced the romance of Mrs. Cat, and confesses himself completely happy to have brought it to a conclusion” (C 168). Thackeray’s use of the word “produced” here is especially telling. It indicates not only that this is merely a pseudo-history created by a writer, but also contributes to the novel’s theatricality. This is no longer a novel written, but a romance
And yet, despite highlighting the flaws of his characters and their imperfect society, Thackeray’s satiric production is ultimately unifying. Because British empire or no, there is still England—the “everybody” who yells “Hats off!” before the performance; it is not only the drama, but also the audience Thackeray is producing.

Thackeray’s satire produces this cohesive ethnocentrism in a variety of ways: by mocking realism, history, and narrative “truth,” by mocking the novel’s literary form through guided details and sarcastic asides to the reader (often breaking the theatrical fourth wall between creator/narrator and audience/reader), and, perhaps most effectively, by mocking his readers’ expectations and desires through selective omniscience and selective disclosure. By “selective omniscience” I mean the difference between the narrator’s knowing or not knowing certain facts; at times, the narrator is omniscient, yet at others he finds himself on the wrong side of a door and must rely on speculation. “Selective disclosure” indicates that when the narrator does know narrative details, an interesting dynamic develops between what Thackeray and/or his narrator will and will not disclose to the reader: at times divulging all and at other times evoking a ridiculously satirical censorship. This narrative selectivity questions the Victorian status quo while the ensuing humor affirms existing socio-literary norms. Thus, Thackeray’s humor outwardly mocks those very standards and forms which it perpetuates.

Mocking Realism: History, Nostalgia, and the “Real” Narrator

One of the ways in which Thackeray is able to evoke a sense of shared memory in his readers is by mocking realism, history, and nostalgia. *Vanity Fair*’s timeliness was a momentous factor in audiences’ receptions of its aims—“emerg[ing] in the signal year of 1848” when the country witnessed “pressured and destabilized notions of Englishness” (Wiltse 42). Also, the fact that both *Vanity Fair* and *Catherine* are set in the past gives Thackeray an opportunity to
evoke nostalgia with this past-narrative, effect “realism” within his present narrative world, and, of course, mock the very history he imitates.\footnote{Frank Palmeri suggests that while “the nineteenth century [was] the age of the realistic novel” (753), “the realistic novel” is a form “averse or resistant to satire” (774 n.17). True, George Eliot’s and Henry James’s novels are not particularly funny, but what about the real-ish novel? Or the novel which parodies realism? While pure realism may not be the best vehicle for satiric intent, any novel which openly flaunts and parodies the construction of its “realness” not only benefits from satire, but, in its self-consciousness, becomes innately satirical.}

In terms of realism, \textit{Vanity Fair} offers a unique situation wherein we seemingly encounter two narrators: Thackeray, the puppet-master, and a “real” narrator who (also acting as a puppet), fully enters the present action as an embodied character in Chapter 62. We are given hints throughout the novel that this narrator is personally connected to the plot, but when Dobbin, Amelia, and little Georgy embark on a summer tour to the Continent, our faceless, nameless narrator adds that “It was on this very tour that I, the present writer of a history of which every word is true, had the pleasure to see them first, and to make their acquaintance” (VF 729). The emphasis Thackeray places here on “history” and “true” satirically solidifies this Narrator persona. If what he writes and observes is real then he, too, must be equally real (or, as it turns out, equally staged).\footnote{Despite the fact that the narrators in both \textit{Vanity Fair} and \textit{Catherine} are fictional personas, Thackeray as an author emphasized truth and the truthful representations of (even fictional) character types, and asserted that the humorous writer should be “a commentator on every-day life and manners” (\textit{Charity and Humour} 195). An admiring reader wrote of \textit{Vanity Fair}: “the characters are neither devils nor angels, but living, breathing people” (\textit{Letters} 2.312). See also Colby 395-6.} Thackeray further emphasizes the “realness” of this narrator by creating a history for him:

Fifty years ago, and when the present writer, being an interesting little boy, was ordered out of the room with the ladies after dinner, I remember quite well that their talk was chiefly about their ailments and putting this questions directly to two or three since, I have always got from them the acknowledgment that times are not changed. Let my fair readers remark for themselves this very evening when they quit the dessert-table, and assemble to celebrate the drawing-room mysteries. (VF 484)
The age of this narrator of course prevents him from being the same person as Thackeray, but what is most interesting about this passage is not Thackeray’s oh-so-subtle attempt at creating a believable non-Thackeray narrator, but that immediately after giving us this bit of biography, Narrator (as he shall hereafter be known) challenges readers to “remark for themselves” that women spoke “chiefly about their ailments”—an interesting and humorous bit of collective social knowledge.\(^{30}\)

Of course not all readers possessed such splendid cultural signposts as “dessert-table” or “drawing-room.” Apparently working-class homes were not large enough to hold anything with a hyphenated name. And yet these references can still operate as a unifying measure; those who cannot personally identify with the “fair readers” addressed by Thackeray may find their own way of mocking their social superiors. Thackeray’s Narrator is a “sly mocker” (Sharp 330) who “winks at his audience over his shoulder” (Wheatley 57), and Payne suggests that: “this ventriloquistic technique” is useful because it “express[es] aggression by indirection: the puppet can say what the puppeteer cannot” (55). This slyness (ventriloquistic-ness) is especially apt in class-conscious mockery. Since lower- and working-class Britons could not overpower the upper-class economically or politically, they could empower themselves by finding the upper-classes (and those things which gave them their power—their rooms, furniture, and trinkets) thoroughly ridiculous.\(^{31}\) Yet, even this ridiculousness is always presented as real. When discussing Lord Steyne’s palace, Narrator discloses:

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\(^{30}\) Drawing from this repository of communal social experiences is essential to Thackeray’s satire which, more so perhaps than that of other satirists, is the type which “attacks any systematic view of life—any science, philosophy, or habitual way of doing things” whereby “even common sense and the reality of immediate perceptions…are called into doubt” (Kernan 15). This attack on systematic and habitual behavior is also called into question by Samuel Butler in _Erewhon_, which I discuss in Chapter 5.

\(^{31}\) This calls to mind John Lennon’s famous quip during a performance attended by the Queen: “For our last number, I’d like to ask your help. Would the people in the cheaper seats clap your hands. And the rest of you, if you’ll just rattle your jewelry.”
All I have ever seen of it is the vast wall in front, with the rustic columns at the great

gate, through which an old porter peers sometimes with a fat and gloomy red face – and

over the wall the garret and bedroom windows, and the chimneys, out of which there

seldom comes any smoke now. For the present Lord Steyne lives at Naples, preferring

the view of the Bay and Capri and Vesuvius, to the dreary aspect of the wall in Gaunt

Square. (VF 543)

By bringing his Narrator into the present tense, Thackeray makes this seem all the more real: the

peering porter, the now seldom smoke, the absent Steyne whom, if we are to believe Narrator

(and why shouldn’t we with his impressive “history”?), we could look up tomorrow in Naples for

a visit. Thackeray’s Narrator also notes that “As an observer of human nature, I regularly

frequent St George’s, Hanover Square, during the genteel marriage season; and though I have

never seen the bridegroom’s male friends give way to tears…I say it is quite common to see the

women present piping, sobbing, sniffling” (VF 177). There is an interesting duality at play here

wherein the Narrator’s “history” allows him to make a humorous social observation. His

fictional experience intermingles with the “quite common” experiences of many English readers

especially by offering a specific geographic locale. It is our collective memory—we have been

to this place; we have seen these women—that supports the joke and justifies the Narrator’s role

as historian.

Thackeray presents a similarly realistic biography for Ikey Solomons, Esq., Jr.32 in

_Catherine._ “I, Ikey Solomons, once had a dear little brother who could steal before he could

walk…and who, at four and a half years of age, having attacked my sister Rebecca on some

32 While Ikey Solomons Jr. is fictional, Ikey Solomons was “a well knows London criminal” (Cabot 410), and

“Thackeray thought him well enough known in 1839-40 to use the pen-name ‘Ikey Solomons Junior’” (Tobias 175).

Wheatley alternatively suggests that Solomons’s “Jewishness…indicate[s] the economic motives behind the

Newgate fiction” (42).
question of lollipops, had smitten her on the elbow with a fire-shovel, apologized to us by saying simply, ‘— her, I wish it had been her head!’ (C 91). While this anecdote contains an actual punch line, Solomons’s humor, like Narrator’s, also relies on collective cultural memory: “the reader, high or low, knows that when Mrs. Reader desires a thing, have it she will; you may just as well talk of avoiding her as of avoiding gout, bills, or gray hairs—and that you know is impossible. I, for my part, have had all three—ay, and a wife too” (C 94). Here, English readers are invited to agree along matrimonial-gender lines: “reader” vs. “Mrs. Reader”—with the majority of readers presumably able to identify with one of these viewpoints. Solomons, far from hindering the novel, contributes to its effectiveness: “most of Thackeray’s work depends on the correlation of external social data with the internal structural device of the narrative persona, who is a dramatic character in his own right. It is through the created author-narrator of the novella, Ikey Solomons, that Catherine achieves its success” (Kleis 50). As noted before, “success” is a relative term when applied to Catherine. But, while Thackeray and modern critics may not appreciate his first novel, it was successful in that Solomons provided a solid foundation for Narrator: “the historian of Vanity Fair is contained in the Newgate Chronicler” (Colby 396), and in Catherine we see Thackeray as “a literary bear-cub sharpening his satiric claws against the literary and social inanities of his time” (Dodds 163).

In addition to providing real (and culturally relate-able) backgrounds for his narrators, Thackeray suggests their “realness” by emphasizing their non-omniscience (this overarching knowledge being something reserved only for Thackeray—since he created it, he selects when to disclose or share this power). Narrator is frequently left on the wrong side of a closed door or has to get his narrative information through secondhand sources. It is interesting that in Vanity Fair, at times, we are allowed access to the characters’ innermost thoughts and motivations,
while at others times we become very aware that we are dealing with a human Narrator. At various points throughout the novel, we are told: “I don’t know on what pretext Osborne left the room, or why, presently, Amelia went away, perhaps to superintend the slicing of the pine-apple; but Jos was left alone with Rebecca” (45); “I can’t tell what [Dobbin’s] motive was” (51); “I believe George was playing billiards with Captain Cannon in Swallow Street at the time when Amelia was asking Captain Dobbin about him” (127); and “The present historian can give no certain details regarding the event” (758). (Solomons displays similar non-omniscience in Catherine: “I don’t know what thoughts entered into Mr. Wood’s brain…” (147).) In addition to stating outright “I don’t knows,” “I can’t tells” and “I believes,” Vanity Fair’s Narrator also asks the reader, perhaps facetiously, “What were [Becky’s] thoughts when [Rawdon] left her?” (624). We don’t know whether Narrator is teasing us here or really cannot access, and thus assess, Becky’s thoughts. But he articulates the point elsewhere by transforming the metaphorical veil between himself and Becky into a very real door: “some of the very greatest and tallest doors in the metropolis were speedily opened to [Becky] – doors so great and tall that the beloved reader and writer hereof may hope in vain to enter at them. Dear brethren, let us tremble before those august portals” (585). These self-imposed limitations literally unify us with Narrator (and, seemingly, Thackeray) in our collective ignorance while also mocking socially selective and self-imposed impediments.

These “real” narrators mock reality and blur the lines between fiction and history by creating a false present within the narrative. Because these novels are pre-dated, Thackeray takes the liberty of occasionally informing the reader what these characters are up to “today” (much like Lord Steyne’s present “reality” in Naples). Regarding a boy Little Georgy fought with in school, “Amelia has never forgiven that Smith to this day, though he is now a peaceful
apothecary near Leicester Square” (VF 536). The books given to Georgy from his mother, “are extant to this day, with the fair delicate superscription” (VF 541). Of the peak of Becky’s life in London society (the period of the “charade”): “Becky has often spoken in subsequent years of this season of her life…” (VF 589). Thackeray even takes time to create present realities for inconsequential characters: “Mr Osborne was the godfather of young Master Todd (who in subsequent life wrote Mr Osborne Todd on his cards, and became a man of decided fashion)…” (VF 661-2), and “(since Monseigneur’s death [Monsieur Fiche] has returned to his native country, where he lives much respected, and has purchased from his prince the title of Baron Ficci)” (VF 763). These illusions of reality didn’t end with Thackeray’s fiction. He frequently maintained the “realness” of his narrative spheres extra-textually. In a letter to the Duke of Devonshire: “My Lord Duke, — Mrs. Rawdon Crawley, whom I saw last week…now lives in a small but very pretty little house in Belgravia….There is no sort of truth in the stories regarding Mrs. Crawley and the late Lord Steyne…. Colonel and Mrs. W. Dobbin live in Hampshire, near Sir R. Crawley…” (Letters II.375-6). Thackeray’s respect for realism did not stop him from mocking it.

While attesting to the “realness” of his narratives, Thackeray also frequently invites readers to inspect matters for themselves. Narrator tells us that Dobbin bought George Osborne many gifts, including “romantic books, with large coloured pictures of knights and robbers, in many of which…you might read inscriptions to George Sedley Osborne, Esquire, from his attached friend William Dobbin” (VF 55). Also, after describing Sir Crawley’s proposal to Becky, Narrator adds:

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33 Thackeray firmly believed that “realness” was an essential tool of any novelist as “the Art of Novels is to represent Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality” (Letters II.772). This tendency towards realism recalls the original subtitle of **Vanity Fair**: “Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society.” Thackeray achieved this by “training himself to understand and judge the men and women whom he met” and thus he “built up the knowledge of human nature in society which informs his great fictional panoramas” (Ray 122).
And if you calculate the time for the above dialogue to take place – the time for Briggs and Firkin to fly to the drawing-room – the time for Miss Crawley to be astonished and to drop her volume of Pigault le Brun – and the time for her to come downstairs – you will see how exactly accurate this history is, and how Miss Crawley must have appeared at the very instant when Rebecca had assumed the attitude of humility. (VF 166, emphasis in original)

In each instance here, Thackeray, through Narrator, is inviting the reader to actively test and inspect “reality” by suggesting “you might read” or “if you calculate” and anticipating results by saying “you will see.” The emphasis on “must” is undoubtedly sarcastic; after all, this incident cannot be falsified or fictional if it is backed by such meticulous scientific experimentation.

Narrator and Ikey Solomons, Jr. also recall collective cultural knowledge in a projected future “reality” in attempts to unify readers in self-mockery. Narrator tells us that Joseph Sedley’s “name appeared, at the period of which we write, in the Bengal division of the East India Register, as collector of Boggley Wollah, an honourable and lucrative post, as everybody knows: in order to know to what higher post Joseph rose in the service, the reader is referred to the same periodical” (VF 28). There is a close and causal association here between that which “everybody knows” and the present “reality” of this fictional world. In collectively accepting Thackeray’s “reality,” we are more likely to unearth and see the satirical core within. Solomons draws a similar parallel between common knowledge and perceived fictional “reality” in his references to the “Newgate Calendar” and frequent reminders that Catherine is an “historical fiction”:

The “Newgate Calendar” (to which excellent compilation we and the other popular novelists of the day can never be sufficiently grateful) states that…For about six months
after their capture and release of Mr. Hayes, those noble gentlemen [Wood, Brock, and Macshane] had followed, with much prudence and success, that trade which the celebrated and polite Duval, the ingenious Sheppard, the dauntless Turpin, and indeed many other heroes of our most popular novels, had pursued or were pursuing, in their time.” (C 92, emphasis in original)

Thackeray, via Solomons, blurs the line between history (Newgate Calendar) and fiction (heroes of popular novels) here. Thackeray “fools his readers…by leading them to suppose that he is following his chronicle source slavishly” (Colby 390).34 Solomons later reiterates that “We are obliged, in recording this history, to follow accurately that great authority, the ‘Calendarium Newgaticum Roagorumque Registerium,’ of which every lover of literature in the present day knows the value…” (C 103). Again, Thackeray blurs the line between truth and fiction and directly references the England’s common alphabet of socio-cultural knowledge. We, as the reader, have no choice but to passively accept Narrator’s and Solomons’s (over compensatory) versions of reality. But we accept our place as puppets with easy hearts for we are not alone in this—we have thousands of fellow-puppet-patriots sharing this communal experience.

The easiest way for Thackeray to mock history and tap into his readers’ collective memory is by directly targeting middle-class English nostalgia. This can take the form of music: “[Becky] sang a French song…and then a number of those simple ballads which were the fashion forty years ago, and in which British tars, our King, poor Susan, blue-eyed Mary, and the like, were the principal themes” (VF 42-3); printed advertisements: “Varnished boots were not invented as yet; but the Hessians on [Jos Sedley’s] beautiful legs shone so, that they must have

34 Some may accuse Thackeray of taking too many fictional liberties here, but these accusations take for granted that the original sources are reliable. Cabot poses an interesting question to that end: “To what unknowable degree is the Catherine Hayes of The Newgate Calendar already a ‘fictionalized’ character?” (415 n.25). Thackeray fictionalizes her, yes. But to some extent, she is already a mythological “character” in England’s memory.
been the identical pair in which the gentleman in the old picture used to shave himself…” (VF 243); or social gossip: “At this time, as some old readers may recollect, the genteel world had been thrown into a considerable state of excitement by two events…” (VF 119). Thackeray’s unifying distinction of “genteel world” and “old readers” here seems especially mocking.

Perhaps the most acute way in which Thackeray evokes humorous nostalgia is through physical geography and popular buildings. At times, Thackeray’s geographical markers are brief asides to the reader: “One gusty, raw day at the end of April – the rain whipping the pavement of that ancient street where the old Slaughters’ Coffee-House was once situated…” (VF 241). While at others, this physical-place nostalgia overtakes the narrative and exposes Thackeray’s puppeteering from behind the curtain. The passage describing Sir Pitt Crawley and Rebecca’s journey from London to Queen’s Crawley is particularly nostalgic:

…how they passed the White Bear in Piccadilly, and saw the dew rising up from the market-gardens of Knightsbridge – how Turnham Green, Brentford, Bagshot, were passed – need not to be told here. But the writer of these pages, who has pursued in former days, and in the same bright weather, the same remarkable journey, cannot but think of it with a sweet and tender regret. Where is the road now, and its merry incidents of life? Is there no Chelsea or Greenwich for the old honest pimple-nosed coachmen? I wonder where are they, those good fellows? Is old Weller alive or dead? and the waiters, yea, and the inns at which they waited, and the cold rounds of beef inside, and the stunted ostler, with his blue nose and clinking pail, where is he, and where is his generation? To those great geniuses not in petticoats who shall write novels for the

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35 Here, “gentleman in the old picture” recalls “A famous advert by Cruikshank for Warren’s Blacking…” and is therefore possibly a jab at Dickens. See *Vanity Fair* p. 831, note 7.
beloved reader’s children, these men and things will be as much legend and history as

Nineveh, or Coeur de Lion, or Jack Sheppard. (VF 80-1)

The fact that these events “need not be told here” indicates a reliance on and assumption of collective memory, and that despite Thackeray’s emphasis on reality, “it is a world of memory, not of fact, that Thackeray creates” (Lougy 266). Thackeray then moves from the story at hand to reveal inner authorial musings—building trust through this demonstration of shared patriotic vulnerability, his “sweet and tender regret” for England as she used to be.\footnote{Of course, once we remember that these \textit{words} were not narrated straight from Thackeray’s mouth to the printed page, but went through several edits, we realize how contrived (and thus self-mocking) this is. His query “Is old Weller alive or dead?” is particularly mocking as “Weller” never was alive or dead…but is only a Dickensian character sentimentally ingrained in the collective cultural memory.} Similarly, after returning from India, Jos Sedley’s journey from Southampton to London is comically mapped out in terms of where he stopped to eat and drink: “a copious breakfast, with fish, and rice, and hard eggs, at Southampton,” a glass of sherry at Winchester, ale at Alton, a “light dinner of stewed eels, veal cutlets, and French beans, with a bottle of claret” at Farnham, and brandy-and-water at Bagshot Heath, so when he finally arrives in London “he was as full of wine, beer, meat, pickles, cherry-brandy, and tobacco, as the steward’s cabin of a steam-packet” (VF 691). Thus what should bring a patriotic tear to our eye—the homecoming of an emigrant—instead brings laughter as those with a collective knowledge of English geography realize that Jos is stopping to eat every thirteen to fifteen miles.

Occasionally Thackeray’s nostalgia extends to historical events like the Battle of Waterloo: “All of us have read of what occurred during that interval. The tale is in every Englishman’s mouth: and you and I, who were children when the great battle was won and lost, are never tired of hearing and recounting the history of that famous action” (VF 374). Incidentally, the narrator here could be Thackeray, who was just shy of four years old during the
Battle of Waterloo. (Narrator indicates later (see p.484) that he was a child fifty years ago (from the date of publication)—making him 18 during the Battle.) In Catherine, Thackeray similarly entwines history and fiction: in 1705 “it was evident that the war was to continue, and there was almost as much soldiering and recruiting, parading, pike and gun-exercising, flag-flying, drum-beating, powder-blazing, and military enthusiasm, as we can all remember in the year 1801, what time the Corsican upstart menaced our shores” (C 3). Although unlike in Vanity Fair where Thackeray slips into a remembrance of his own personal memories, here the phrase “we can all remember” indicates that this narrator must be Solomons and not Thackeray, as Thackeray was born in 1811. Lester notes that “Every reader of Thackeray has noticed what may be called the retrospective vision in his work, the fondness for looking backward, the glowing effects of nostalgic memory which he can command” (400). But, in addition to relying on his characters and narrators to create nostalgia in his readers, Thackeray is relying on readers’ collective nostalgia to create Solomons, Narrator, and their narratives. Nostalgia is at once the product and means of creation.

Although despite his rhetorical astuteness, I often wonder why Thackeray would take so many opportunities to establish (and practically beat his readers over the head with) Narrator’s realness if only to undermine Vanity Fair’s realistic credibility by indicating that the entirety of it came to Narrator from various second-hand sources, most notably Tom Eaves: “many a little close carriage has stopped at that door, as my informant (little Tom Eaves, who knows everything, and who showed me the place) told me….Tom Eaves, who knows everybody’s affairs” (VF 544); also, other characters within the work: “The bride was dressed in a brown silk pelisse (as Captain Dobbin has since informed me)…” (VF 244); and an informant by the nickname of “Tapeworm”: “Tapeworm, who of course knew all the London gossip…poured out
into the astonished Major’s ears such a history about Becky and her husband as astonished the querist, and supplied all the points for this narrative, for it was at that very table years ago that the present writer had the pleasure of hearing the tale” (VF 783, emphasis mine). Why would Thackeray undermine the realism and historicity of his narrative in this way after promoting its truthfulness for a surprising seven-hundred-odd pages? Is this the ultimate mockery of realism, or mockery of the reader’s faith in Narrator? Payne describes “Thackeray’s distinctive rhetoric” as “the skillful deflation of the very illusion he has created” (52). In this deflation, Thackeray essentially constructs his audience as he de-constructs his characters. Thackeray perhaps attempts to atone for the fact that the narrative is based on hearsay and second-hand gossip by “procuring” tangible documents as evidence to support his “reality.” In Catherine, “Mr. Macshane produced a letter in the handwriting of young Hayes, of which we have had the good luck to procure a copy. It ran thus:—” (C 74). And in Vanity Fair, regarding Georgy’s school essay: “This great effort of genius, which is still in the possession of George’s mother, is as follows:” (VF 686). We seem to have a strange mix here of gossip and tangible proof. However, by undermining and mocking the reality of his own narrative, Thackeray reasserts control as supreme creator of this fictional world in destroying and rebuilding his readers’ expectations of narrative forms.

Mocking Literature: Selective Omniscience and Narrative Fate

If Thackeray used Narrator and Solomons to mock realism and the “history” of the plots, then he used his own omniscient narration to mock the novel as a literary form—often showing the reader his plans for the novel and, although omniscient, controlling which facts he disclosed to the reader. Thackeray frequently acknowledges not only the reader as reader, but the novel as novel. In his use of guided details and direct asides to the audience, Thackeray breaks the
theatrical fourth wall by hinting at what the next act will be and, on occasion, drawing our attention to the ropes and pulleys at work backstage which make the façade of his Curtain possible. It is here that we see Narrator and Ikey Solomons not as knowledgeable historians, but as wearied actors, perpetually taking their cues from Thackeray.

Where Dickens is verbose in his humor, Thackeray is terse and, although indulging in the occasional digression, his descriptions are usually limited and to-the-point—telling the readers what they need to know and nothing more. When Thackeray does provide details they are often what I refer to as “guided details”; he not only controls our observations of the scenes, but makes us acutely aware of this control. Regarding Miss Crawley, he commands: “Picture to yourself, O fair young reader, a worldly, selfish, graceless, thankless, religionless old woman, writhing in pain and fear, and without her wig. Picture her to yourself, and ere you be old, learn to love and pray” (VF 151). Thus, when Thackeray does give humorous descriptions (albeit much more brief that the three to four-page narrative frenzy Dickens might have had with this character), and when he mocks sentimentality, it is contextualized by specific guided instruction—through repeated orders to “picture to yourself.” These guided commands appear throughout the novel, at times even allowing Thackeray to skip over “unimportant” parts of the narrative: “Suppose some twelve months after the above conversation took place to have passed in the life of our poor Amelia…we who have been watching and describing…Tread silently round the hapless couch of the poor prostrate soul. Shut gently the door of the dark chamber wherein she suffers” (VF 415). Thackeray here demands that his readers “suppose” through guided details and chronological leaps then leads them by hand through his narrative “house.” Thackeray is at once the architect and the tour-guide—creator and controller of what we perceive.
At other times, Thackeray’s guided details reveal secrets about the novel’s progress. He tells us of Mr. Hayes in *Catherine*: “this gentleman’s words and actions should be carefully studied by the public, as he is destined to appear before them under very polite and curious circumstances during the course of this history” (14). And regarding Becky’s appearance at the charade, Thackeray notes: “we must take leave to introduce the reader to this brilliant réunion, and with a melancholy welcome too, for it will be among the very last of the fashionable entertainments to which it will be our fortune to conduct him” (VF 595). In essence, the reader “is taken by the lapel when the narrator wants to stress the obvious” (Sharp 332). These “hints” mock the impression of organic spontaneity novels are supposed to impart. English readers expect novels to occur as they read; to indicate or reference a novel’s “life” in the author’s brain before or after the present moment is to mock standard forms of literary decorum. Our expectations constitute what Vlock calls “a ‘theater of popular assumptions’” in which “both [Victorian readers] and their novels were born into an agreement about certain types of character and story” (Vlock 169). It is precisely this “agreement” which Thackeray’s narrative voice nullifies. To further mock readers’ expectations of fiction, Thackeray offers frequent “spoilers” of future action stating: “A time came when [Amelia] knew [Dobbin] better, and changed her notions regarding him; but that was distant as yet” (VF 274); “Certain it is, that if [Becky] had had all the money which she was said to have begged or borrowed or stolen, she might have capitalized and been honest for life, whereas – but this is advancing matters” (VF 594); and “But we are not going to leave these two people [Mr. Sedley and Amelia] long in such a low and ungenteeel station of life. Better days, as far as worldly prosperity went, were in store for both” (VF 669). Especially in *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray continually keeps Victorian readers on their toes by recreating and refashioning what “fiction” means. Kendra observes that parodists aren’t
necessarily mocking the original texts themselves, but rather “the original text is established as the ideal or norm from which the new text departs” (194) , and thus “the relationship between parody and original text is not antagonistic; rather, the texts are mutually dependent” (211). So, not only are Thackeray’s texts dependent on a set of “originals” ingrained in the cultural memory, but these standardized texts are, in turn, dependent on parodies! Whether the original texts achieve greater pathos and sentimentality by comparison to the anti-sentiment of Thackeray’s parodies, they at least achieve greater popularity by Thackeray’s homage.

If Thackeray mocks the form of the novel by forcing our attention to certain points, he also mocks it by forcing our attention away from others. These forced shifts in focus essentially act as stage directions to the reader—we become puppets alongside his characters. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray tells us “We shall go no farther with the —th than to the city gate: and leaving the Major O’Dowd to his duty, come back to the Major’s wife, and the ladies, and the baggage” (334); and “We must suppose little George Osborne has ridden from Knightsbridge towards Fulham, and will stop and make inquiries at the village regarding some friends whom we have left there” (444). In *Catherine*, this control is more forceful, perhaps due to the novel’s grittier subject matter, or perhaps because Thackeray was still finding his voice as a novelist:

In this woful [sic] plight, moneyless, wifelless, horseless, corporalless, with a gag in his mouth and a rope round his body, are we compelled to leave the gallant Galgenstein, until his friends and the progress of this history shall deliver him from his durance. Mr. Brock’s adventures on the Captain’s horse must likewise be pretermitted; for it is our business to follow Mrs. Catherine…. (49)

In each of these instances, the “leaving,” “stop[ping],” and “follow[ing]” are very literal and we are made to suppose that the characters left behind are still waiting there indefinitely…until we
find them somewhere in a future chapter. Several critics have noted Thackeray’s controlling omniscience: “He looks with an Olympian view on his characters and events, and sees the course of his story laid out as it were in panorama before him. Over this panorama he can look before and after, moving backwards and forwards freely in time, selecting detailed scenes here or there as he chooses” (Lester 393); and “[Thackeray] never lingers long over any one character or event, but swivels his gaze rapidly from dunce to dunce and scene to scene. He will stop from time to time to deliver a brief sermon and then suddenly pass on to attack something else” (Kernan 97). It is precisely because Thackeray “chooses” and “swivels” his attacks, that his audience is overcome by a sense of helpless bystander-ness. He shows us that strings are not only attached to his actor-puppets, but his reader-puppets as well. Exposing the framework of the novel in this way—reminding us that these are not organic incidents, but planned literary “chapters”—is another way in which Thackeray mocks conventional literary forms: “I know that the tune I am piping is a very mild one (although there are some terrific chapters coming presently)…” (VF 59); “And here, at this lock, we shall leave the whole company until the next chapter, which may possibly explain what they were” (C 58). This self-referential mockery is most obvious in the Vauxhall scene from *Vanity Fair*:

> My readers must hope for no such romance, only a homely story, and must be content with a chapter about Vauxhall, which is so short that it scarce deserves to be called a chapter at all. And yet it is a chapter, and a very important one too. Are not there little chapters in everybody’s life, that seem to be nothing, and yet affect all the rest of history?

> Let us then step into the coach with the Russell Square party, and be off to the gardens…. (60)

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37 Much like Dickens’s “cliffhangers” but without the reassurance of regular, systematic reoccurrence.
Thackeray anticipates that his reader desires a traditional romance. But by denying us this up front, Thackeray openly mocks our perceived preference for “popular” fiction. While critics argue that *Catherine* is “his novel-on-novels” (Colby 388) partially because Thackeray “saw no literary treason in parodying the palpable absurdities of his fellow writers” (Dodds 167), as is the nature of parody, Thackeray’s novels are effective “only when the target text is established well enough to be familiar to the audience” (Kendra 192). Thus, even while being mocked for enjoying them, the audience is unified in their collective knowledge of these “palpable absurdities.” In the passage above, Thackeray somehow attempts to deny the fictional nature of “no such romance” and yet emphasizes and defends chapter-organization of novel, rambling off into a bit of comically trite and very Dickens-like metaphysical sentimentality before forcibly lurching us back “into the coach.”

Thackeray’s use of the coach here, in addition to allowing the characters to reach Vauxhall, allows us to travel with them through narrative space. These geographic jumps are yet another way in which Thackeray guides us through the created world of his novels. At times this geography is physical: “The astonished reader must be called upon to transport himself ten thousand miles to the military station of Bundlegunge, in the Madras division of our Indian Empire…” (VF 502)\(^{38}\), and at times metaphysical: “The Muse, whoever she be, who presides over this Comic History must now descend from the genteel heights in which she has been soaring, and have the goodness to drop down upon the lowly roof of John Sedley at Brompton, and describe what events are taking place there” (VF 575). And, occasionally, Thackeray’s mockery of narrative form (and physics?) takes a less specific turn. After a paragraph “preaching” the dangers of Vanity Fair, Thackeray announces: “I say, brother, the gifts and

\(^{38}\) The fact that Thackeray presumes a male English reader here supports Wiltse’s idea that there is a “normative category” of English masculinity ever present in nineteenth-century literature. See Wiltse 48.
pleasures of Vanity Fair cannot be held of any great account, and that it is probable … But we are wandering out of the domain of the story” (446); and after a paragraph of divergent gossip on Becky’s fashion the night she met the king: “But we are wandering too much” (557). Of course the words “wandering,” and “domain,” indicate a play upon narrative form, geography, and, indeed, the tendency of authors to digress (the ellipsis is Thackeray’s original text).

But, of course, Thackeray does not mock his narrators, his characters, and his culture while leaving the reader unscathed. “The observant reader, who has marked our young Lieutenant’s previous behavior, and has perused our report of the brief conversation which he had just had with Captain Dobbin, has possibly come to certain conclusions regarding the character of Mr Osborne” (VF 137). Thackeray continues to bow insolently to “the observant reader” throughout his novels. Dickens frequently addressed his reader as “observant,” “intelligent,” and “thoughtful,” but unlike Dickens, Thackeray compliments derisively. He lets his readers know that, “observant” as they may be, they are still at the narrative mercy of the puppet-master. At times Thackeray playfully goads the reader, referring over several pages in Vanity Fair to “The young companion of Miss Crawley” (145), “A stranger,” “an odious Miss…,” “Miss Crawley’s new companion,” “the new nurse,” “the young person” (146), “the person,” “the young lady,” “the other” (147), and facetiously asking “Who could this young woman be, I wonder?” (146), before revealing “Miss Rebecca Sharp (for such, astonishing to state, is the name of her who has been described ingeniously as ‘the person’ hitherto)” (148). Here, of course, his uses of “astonishing” and “ingeniously” indicate Thackeray’s characteristic self-mockery.

At other times, Thackeray’s mockery is less playfully subtle: “And I trust there is no reader of this little story who has not discernment enough to perceive that the Miss Eliza Styles...
(an old schoolfellow, Rebecca said, with whom she had resumed an active correspondence of late, and who used to fetch these letters from the saddler’s), wore brass spurs, and large curling mustachios, and was indeed no other than Captain Rawdon Crawley” (VF 174); and occasionally, Thackeray is directly confrontational: “The reader, if he does not now understand why it was that Mr. Hayes agreed to drink the Corporal’s proffered beer, had better just read the foregoing remarks over again, and if he does not understand then, why, small praise to his brains” (C 17, emphasis in original). It is certainly a far cry from the “observant reader” to giving “small praise to his brains.” This insult, far from alienating readers, causes any who considered themselves previously “observant” to take pride in their “underand[ing].” Readers, so accustomed to nineteenth-century fiction pandering to their patronage, now instead crave Thackeray’s approval. A non-comprehending reader used to being “observant” will likely reread these “foregoing remarks” and then uniformly join Thackeray in scoffing at those still in the category of “unobservant.” Thackeray’s overarching narrative control ensures that his readers not only find themselves subconsciously craving his respect, but then taking pride in their inclusion in the created/imagined category of “observant.”

But occasionally, rather than address this “observant reader” directly as such, Thackeray instead creates an ethno-culturally-based unity and solidarity within his audience through sarcastic asides to the reader. At times Thackeray does this by comically assuming who his readers are and what they think: “it is with grief and pain, that, as admirers of the British aristocracy, we find ourselves obliged to admit the existence of so many ill qualities in a person whose name is in Debrett [a directory of the peerage]” (VF 97). Here Thackeray tongue-in-cheekily assumes that his audience is “admirers…” who are “obliged to admit the existence” of
rottenness within the upper-class. Thus, in back-handedly mocking these supposed admirers, he is able to create unity among those laughing—those who do not admire.

Thackeray makes his asides even more obvious by literally setting them apart from the rest of his sentence using parentheses. These breaks in the narrative can be quite jarring and disruptive—making them all the more humorous in their mockery. For now, not only is Thackeray mocking cultural mores and norms but also expected literary forms. In *Vanity Fair* he breaks his narrative stride several times to mock shared social experiences: “(All old women were beauties once, we very well know.)” (VF 105); to mock cultural priorities: “Besides these honest folks at the Hall (whose simplicity and sweet rural purity surely show the advantage of a country life over a town one)…” (VF 107) and “(nor does the Continental domestic like to be treated with insolence as our own better-tempered servants do)” (VF 346); to reveal sarcastic character details: “Rebecca took such a tender leave of Amelia as became two women who loved each other as sisters…and waved the handkerchief (which was quite dry, by the way) out of the window” (VF 288); or to maintain a sense of faux-sentimentality: “(…you may be sure Dobbin opened [Amelia’s letter] before any one of the other packets which the mail brought him)” (VF 507). Greig argues that “the serious novel…depends upon a sustained illusion of human life” (79) and that it is “always dangerous for a novelist to annotate his fiction…since the annotations often shatter the illusion on which everything hangs” (73). But Blodgett refutes this: “The critics who object to Thackeray’s ‘illusion-breaking’ narrator typically assume the invariable rightness of dramatic presentation—even at the expense of Thackeray’s satirical intentions” (211 n.2). I am, of course, in agreement with the latter assertion; if the serious novel depends on “a sustained illusion,” then a satirically parodic novel depends upon shattering this illusion—in Thackeray’s case, through frequent annotations and other breaks in his theatrical “fourth wall.”
To this end, an interesting contradiction occurs in Thackeray’s presentation of himself as “novelist.” He alternates between asserting his omniscience as supreme puppeteer, and being powerless to a larger narrative destiny or Fate. Not only do these shifts mock fiction as a literary form, they also mock the readers’ trust in Thackeray as novelist. He entreats our trust in his omniscience multiple times in *Vanity Fair*: “(for novelists have the privilege of knowing everything)” (32); “The novelist, who knows everything, knows this also” (378); and “The novelist, it has been said before, knows everything…” (419). He demonstrates this by exposing select bits of information through characters’ inner thoughts and in private documents. Oddly enough, perhaps mocking sentimental novels, Thackeray’s female characters are more “transparent” in this way than his male ones: “As Mrs. Cat did not utter these sentiments, but only thought them, we have a right to clothe her thoughts in the genteeelest possible language; and, to the best of our power, have done so” (C 142); “Rebecca lay awake for a long, long, time, thinking of the morrow, and of the new world into which she was going, and of her chances of success there” (VF 79); even delicate Amelia’s thoughts become transparent when she has suspicions about Rebecca and George (VF 277-8). Thackeray also demonstrates an overpowering omniscience by exposing private information: “In the course of the evening Rawdon got a little family note from his wife, which, although he crumpled it up and burnt it instantly in the candle, we had the good luck to read over Rebecca’s shoulder” (VF 282). Thackeray teases us here with the idea of a closed narrative world wherein characters are allowed the free will to do things while he can only read over their shoulders. We are led to believe that this “note” really was written by Rebecca and not Thackeray, the novelist. The puppet-strings are momentarily invisible.
He continues this pseudo-suspension of control by suggesting a larger narrative Destiny or Fate which is more powerful than the novelist’s pen. Since *Catherine* was based on real events, this narrative Fate plays a more defensible role. Thackeray points out that “If the landlady had allowed the Captain and the maid to have their way…it is probable that no harm would have been done, and that this history would never have been written” (C 23), and “perhaps [Mr. Brock] never would have peached at all; and perhaps, therefore, this history would never have been written” (C 36). Again, Thackeray mocks not only the literary form of (historical) fiction here, but also history itself. He renders this mockery more clear in direct philosophical hypotheticals to the reader: “had we been writing novels instead of authentic histories, we might have carried them anywhere else we chose” (C 71); “by an unlucky ordinance of fate, [Tom Billings] was made a tailor, and died a —— never mind what for the present” (C 104); “But why pause to speculate on things that might have been? why desert reality for fond imagination…?” (C 105). Thackeray has more leeway to use, and blame, control-less “fate” and “reality” in *Catherine*, since this is “history,” but, mockingly enough, he carries this faux-destiny forward into *Vanity Fair*. This *is* a novel (as Thackeray, the novelist who knows everything, repeatedly reminds us), and yet Thackeray does not “carry[y] [it] anywhere else we chose” and often “pause[s] to speculate on things that might have been.”

These mocking hypotheticals frequently take the form of “if…then…” scenarios in which Thackeray pretends to relinquish control as omniscient, controlling novelist. I say “pretends” because despite frequent assertions to the contrary, Thackeray is never not in control: “as creator of his fictional world, Thackeray cannot *not* know what is going on in it, as if it had a life of its own entirely” (Wilkinson 386, emphasis in original). And yet, Thackeray maintains the façade that his novels have “a life of [their] own,” primarily, I maintain, to mock Victorian fictional
conventions and his English readers’ expectations: “[I]f George and Miss Sedley had remained; according to the former’s proposal, in the farther room, Joseph Sedley’s bachelorhood would have been at an end, and this work would never have been written” (VF 43-4); “[T]he pair [Rawdon and Becky] might have gone down on their knees before the old spinster, avowed all, and been forgiven in a twinkling. But that good chance was denied to the young couple, doubtless in order that this story might be written” (VF 178). What is most interesting about these instances is that Thackeray indicates Fate is actively involved in denying these characters’ chances. The entire existence of Thackeray’s narrative is here dependent on a real, fated “history” of actions and decisions seemingly beyond Thackeray’s control. Wheatley astutely notes that “to consider causation, in this novel which claims to be without a hero, is to be confronted with an almost endless reach of causal factors conceived to be external, and to be acting on one another” (82). But if the novel only “claims” to be without a hero, who is the hidden hero or heroine? I maintain that, if there is a hero, it is Thackeray himself, occasionally taking the form of a controllable narrator or uncontrollable Fate; all is Thackeray.

Occasionally Thackeray extends this faux-Fate to identifying a singular “beginning”: “That bowl of rack punch was the cause of all this history. And why not a bowl of rack punch as well as any other cause?” (VF 64). But, seemingly contradictory to his multiple assertions of novelistic omniscience and control, Thackeray’s mocking seems to be aimed at those reading *Vanity Fair* as a fictional novel. He asserts that some readers “like to lay down the History-book, and to speculate upon what might have happened in the world, but for the fatal occurrence of what actually did take place (a most puzzling, amusing, ingenious, and profitable kind of meditation)…” (VF 315, emphasis in original). In doing so, Thackeray exposes the narrative
puppet-strings that he worked so hard to conceal at other times through “realism.” In Catherine he is more direct when mocking genre:

Nay, nor would this history have ever been written; for if Count Galgenstein had not married the rich widow, Mrs. Catherine would never have ———

Oh, my dear Madam! you thought we were going to tell you. Pooh! nonsense,—no such thing! not for two or three and seventy pages or so—when perhaps, you may know what Mrs. Catherine never would have done.” (89, emphasis in original)

In anticipating a given number of pages, Thackeray exposes the form and framework of the novel. But what is most interesting here is his emphasis on “may.” This piques readers’ interest and anticipates Thackeray’s ongoing trend of omissions. For Thackeray asserts control not only by revealing, but also omitting key details.

Mocking Readers: Narrative Omissions and “Filling-in-the-Blanks”

One of Thackeray’s narrative trademarks is his ability to unify readers by openly mocking readers’ preconceived literary expectations, either through omissions which force readers to “fill-in-the-blanks” in order to complete the “joke,” or by calling attention to that which is “unnecessary” or “unimportant” to the narrative. In doing so, Thackeray calls attention to the boundaries of the narrative sphere, revealing a manufactured and selectively determined microcosm. Again, we see Thackeray exposing the underlying framework of his narrative—a framework hidden by other, more discreet, authors. This type of exposure may offer contradictions in a “realist” novel, but in a novel which mocks realism, it proves to be a suitable strategy. In fact, Thackeray frequently “skips over” many characters and plot developments which other authors would have described in detail (further foiling his readers’ expectations). Occasionally this neglect is direct: “I daresay [Amelia] thought of the dress she was to wear as
bridesmaid, and of the presents which she should make to her nice little sister-in-law, and of a subsequent ceremony in which she herself might play a principal part, etc., and etc., and etc., and etc.” (VF 66). Every etc. here calls to mind Thackeray laughing at the reader for bothering to care about simple Amelia’s thoughts. More frequently, characters and situations are ignored quietly and succinctly. When we first meet Amelia, Thackeray says “As she is not a heroine, there is no need to describe her person” (VF 11). Also, “How [Rawdon and Rebecca] were married is not of the slightest consequence to anybody” (VF 175), “[Becky and Lord Steyne] had a long conversation, driving round and round the Regent’s Park in Mrs Crawley’s carriage together, a conversation of which it is not necessary to repeat the details” (VF 612), and “Mrs. Catherine went on to speak of several humble personages of the village community, who, as they are not necessary to our story, need not be described at full length” (C 12). By sweeping these characters under the narrative rug, Thackeray insinuates that these personages lack literary value in their unnecessary-ness and are therefore not a sound narrative “investment” for Solomons, Narrator, and/or Thackeray. What the reader desires or expects is not taken into account; Thackeray remains in complete control over his characters and his audience. Wilkinson maintains that Thackeray (or his narrator) “becomes a barrier which keeps us looking over at the scenes in a middle and far distance where we cannot see what ‘really’ is going on” (372), which is problematic as “our unspoken trust in the writer is based on the assumption that he will, indeed, let us see all that is there, not trying to trick us in some violation of the convention of fiction” (373). In Catherine, Thackeray continually reasserts the boundaries of this controlled narrative microcosm—cyclically breaking and regaining this trust. Regarding Catherine’s initial conversation with the Captain and Corporal at the Bugle Inn (certainly an important scene, considering later developments), Thackeray breaks his novelistic format and sets the scene as a
drama, giving his characters lines and stage directions, and concluding with “This little specimen of the conversation must be sufficient” (20). He indicates these narrative boundaries in *Vanity Fair* when he says “Our business does not lie with the second generation and Master Rawdon’s life at school, otherwise the present tale might be carried to any indefinite length” (608). Any readers who have become emotionally attached to little Rawdon and would like to know how his story ends are thus not only disappointed, but are accused of attempting to stretch the narrative beyond the novel’s preset boundaries. By repeatedly foiling and rebuilding our expectations as readers, Thackeray “creates” his audience in the same way he “creates” his characters. Thus, Thackeray’s readers, like the fiction they read, and the era and country in which they live, become an Andersonian “imagined community.”

And yet, what is contained within these rigid (albeit imagined) boundaries—what Thackeray simultaneously mocks and relies upon—is a familiarity and communal cultural knowledge of sentimental literature. Satire, of course, is not “original” humor; in order for the mocking message to take root, it must tweak a plot or character type the audience already knows. Thackeray does this, again, not through verbosity, but rather a noted lack of words. When Amelia and Becky left Miss Pinkerton’s, “Then came the struggle and parting below. Words refuse to tell it….and there was such a scuffling, and hugging, and kissing, and crying…as no pen can depict, and as the tender heart would fain pass over” (*VF* 13). Thackeray is mocking literary sentimentality here in two ways: by his pen (not Thackeray, mind you, but the pen, who has apparently become the third narrator in this charade) “refus[ing] to tell” of the scene, and by equating departure from Miss Pinkerton’s Academy with other examples of Victorian sentiment. There are no dying orphans or noble characters worthy of our sentiment in *Vanity Fair* or
Catherine. We see no Paul Dombey or Maggie Tulliver; only vain, insipid (and, yes, therefore “real”) people whom Thackeray has satirically raised to a comically high level of sentiment. Thackeray focuses most of this “sentiment” on Amelia, forcing us away from her inner thoughts lest we frighten her and send her fluttering into narrative oblivion. On multiple occasions, Thackeray implores us: “Let us respect Amelia and her mamma whispering and whimpering and laughing and crying in the parlour and the twilight” (296); “[Amelia’s] sensibilities were so weak and tremulous, that perhaps they out not to be talked about in a book” (450); “She could say nothing more, and walked away silently to her room. Let us close it upon her prayers and her sorrow. I think we had best speak little about so much love and grief” (581); “Have we a right to repeat or overhear her prayers? These, brother, are secrets, and out of the domain of Vanity Fair, in which our story lies” (298). In the latter instance, Thackeray clearly places Amelia outside the boundaries of the narrative (the “Fair”); he informs us regularly that she is of no concern to us, and yet these repeated reminders to “close [the door] upon her” or “respect Amelia” in her grief call attention to the very subject he is marginalizing. With the amount of conscious control Thackeray exerted over his “puppets,” I must assume that these passive-aggressive, unmentionable-mentionings are purposeful and, by mocking both readerly expectations and readerly sentiment, actively contribute to Thackeray’s satirical aims. This mockery is especially evident in Amelia’s relationship with her father. Thackeray seemingly negates Mr. Sedley in a manner similar to Amelia: “We are not going to follow the worthy old stockbroker through those last pangs and agonies of ruin through which he passed before his commercial demise befell” (197). However, before readers assume that this is genuine sentiment or that Thackeray is “not going to follow” due to a sense of duty to either Amelia or her father,
he informs us later that if he ignores the Sedleys, it is not because he wishes to avoid sentiment, but because he would rather mock those readers who expect it:

Then all her time and tenderness were devoted to the consolation and comfort of the bereaved old father, who was stunned by the blow which had befallen him and stood utterly alone in the world. His wife, his honour, his fortune, everything he loved best had fallen away from him. There was only Amelia to stand by and support with her gentle arms the tottering, heart-broken old man. We are not going to write the history: it would be too dreary and stupid. I can see Vanity Fair yawning over it d'avance. (664)

Many critics have found Thackeray’s relationship to and use of Amelia problematic. He at once seems to worship and mock her. Ray suggests that since “Thackeray’s favoritism [of Amelia] irritated readers into protest,” that “they interpreted his praise of Amelia as ironical” (36). These readers were not far off the mark. In a letter to his mother, Thackeray confessed: “Of course you are quite right about Vanity Fair and Amelia being selfish…. My object is not to make a perfect character or anything like it” (Letters II.309). While in another letter Thackeray mocks the reality of his narrative world while cutting Amelia down to size: “I am going to day to the Hotel de la Terrasse where Becky used to live, and shall pass by Captain Osbornes lodgings where I recollect meeting him and his little wife who has married again somebody told me…Mrs. Dobbins or some such name she is now: always an overrated woman I thought – How curious it is!” (Letters II.407). As in his novels, Thackeray is continually mocking the boundaries of “reality” and has teasingly received his uncertain (“some such name”) details from “somebody”—concealing the puppet-strings and “creating” an audience even in his personal correspondence!
We see a similar, though inverted, favoritism for Catherine and Becky Sharp: “Over this part of Mrs. Cat’s history we shall be as brief as possible; for, to tell the truth, nothing immoral occurred during her whole stay at the good Doctor’s house; and we are not going to insult the reader by offering him silly pictures of piety, cheerfulness, good sense, and simplicity” (C 55); “What were the circumstances of the interview between Rebecca Crawley née Sharp, and her Imperial Master, it does not become such a feeble and inexperienced pen as mine to attempt to relate” (VF 559); and “Of the other illustrious persons whom Becky had the honour to encounter on this her first presentation to the grand world, it does not become the present historian to say much” (VF 569). It seems strange that Thackeray would “protect” Catherine and Becky in the same way he “protects” Amelia, until we realize that the person he is feigning to protect is the reader—from over-sentimentality with the latter, and boredom with the former. But I say “feigning” because Thackeray needed these omissions in order to achieve his purpose as a humorist. Thackeray believed that a pathetic image “leaves you to make your own sad pictures – We shouldn’t do much more than that I think in comic books” (Letters II.424-5). And, despite any negative qualities these characters may possess, part of Thackeray’s desire to “protect” them derives from their innate Victorian domesticity: “however insipid that paragon of English womanhood, Amelia, may be, at least she is no O’Dowd, and however much a ’spooney’ Dobbin may be, he is an English spooney and deserves an English angel in his house” (Wiltse 52). So if readers did resent these characters, it is more likely because they recognized them as poor representations of “Englishness” than due to any particular personal faults.

In his omissions, Thackeray also mocked piety as well as sentimentality. He frequently expressed a desire to “protect” his readers from exposure to unsavory or explicit material. But again, his methods were purposefully self-defeating. In calling our attention to what we should
not see or hear, Thackeray allows us to imagine much worse by filling in these blanks ourselves. Occasionally these omissions concern foul or otherwise un-readerly language. “[Jos] broke out into a volley of bad language, which we will not repeat here…” (VF 676), and “When Sir Pitt Crawley heard that Rebecca was married to his son, he broke out into a fury of language, which it would do no good to repeat in this place, as indeed it sent poor Briggs shuddering out of the room; and with her we will shut the door upon the figure of the frenzied old man, wild with hatred and insane with baffled desire” (VF 183). The language in the latter example is so horrific as to be beyond unrepeatable—it forces us out of the room and onto the “safer” side of the now closed door. Thackeray even takes these “polite” omissions so far as to break the narrative fourth wall and blame his editors: “The curses to which the General [Tufto] gave a low utterance, as soon as Rebecca and her conqueror had quitted him, were so deep, that I am sure no compositor in Messrs Bradbury and Evans’s establishment would venture to print them were they written down” (VF 324). Omissions could also be used to evoke a kind of foul-mouthed nostalgia: “People were accustomed in those days to use much more simple and expressive terms of language than are now thought polite; and it would be dangerous to give, in this present year 1840, the exact words of reproach which passed between Hayes and his wife in 1726” (C 139). O what words would be too “dangerous” to disclose!?!—Our minds race with hilariously vulgar possibilities.

In addition to omitting foul language, Thackeray also omits unseemly actions—mainly regarding Rebecca and Catherine. Many times these omissions gloss over what readers would consider key details. “How was it that [Becky] had come to that little town? How was it that she had no friends and was wandering about alone?…Let us skip over the interval in the history of her downward progress” (VF 769), similarly “It will not be necessary, for the purpose of this
history, to follow out very closely all the adventures which occurred to Mrs. Catherine from the period when she quitted the ‘Bugle’ and became the Captain’s lady…the reader might possibly be disgusted at such descriptions” (C 28), and “Seven years of country carpentering, or other trading, on the part of a husband, of ceaseless scolding, violence, and discontent on the part of a wife, are not pleasant to describe: so we shall omit altogether any account of the early married life of Mr. and Mrs. John Hayes” (C 92). And regarding what should have been a lengthy and very pathetic fight between Catherine and Hayes, Thackeray teasingly averts our eyes: “All this scene—a very important one of our drama—might have been described at much greater length; but, in truth, the author has a natural horror of dwelling too long upon such hideous spectacles; nor would the reader be much edified by a full and accurate knowledge or what took place” (C 140). Thackeray mocks his readers in several ways here: primarily by ruining their novelistic expectations in omitting a “very important” scene, and also by forcing them into moralizing self-reflection. In these repeated omissions, we begin to realize that we want to see the fights and murders; we want to hear every scrap of foul language Thackeray’s Pen has to offer. His omissions act as a mirror for his readers’ ego—and when he takes this foulness away from us (a foulness which we outwardly feign to purge from our imagined “England”), we pout like petulant children, caught in our own bluff. Thackeray is especially mocking when he explains why he must omit:

We must pass over a part of Mrs Rebecca Crawley’s biography with that lightness and delicacy which the world demands….and it has been the wish of the present writer, all through this story, deferentially to submit to the fashion at present prevailing, and only to hint at the existence of wickedness in a light, easy, and agreeable manner, so that nobody’s fine feelings may be offended. (VF 747)
In these satirical mirror images of the “fashion at present prevailing” and “fine feelings” of his readers, Thackeray “allows man to perceive his own foibles and the degree to which he falls short of that vision of man beyond his own immediate reflection” (Lougy 257). This “vision of man” to which readers compared themselves when reading Catherine and Vanity Fair was the normative category of “Englishness” underlying each novel. They were forced to speculate: to what degree am I an Englishman? and encouraged to answer in a resolutely positive degree by thoughts of inclusion in Thackeray’s humorous good graces.

When Thackeray does give a few comic details, it is through what I call unmentionable mentionings—he pretends to draw our attention away from the scene, emphasizing its unimportance or impropriety, but then proceeds to give details anyway. For instance, “Finally came [Becky’s] parting with Miss Amelia, over which picture I intend to throw a veil…a scene in which one person was in earnest and the other a perfect performer…” (VF 72). The “veil” Thackeray throws here is so entirely sheer that we are able to see plenty of puppet-strings underneath. Perhaps the most passive-aggressive instance of this concerns Miss Crawley:

The causes which had led to the deplorable illness of Miss Crawley, and her departure from her brother’s house in the country, were of such an unromantic nature that they are hardly fit to be explained in this genteel and sentimental novel. For how is it possible to hint of a delicate female, living in good society, that she ate and drank too much, and that a hot supper of lobsters profusely enjoyed at the Rectory was the reason of an

39 Burch notes the importance of this centralized norm to satire: “Satire depends implicitly upon either a shared set of values which we can employ in order to interpolate its normative ideal or a willingness to let the author bracket his subject so that he can steer his readers towards the implied center” (278). In Thackeray’s case, the latter occurs, although the word “willingness” may be out of place. Thackeray’s overarching control frequently forces these “brackets” and “implied center” upon us—whether we are willing followers or not.
Thackeray acts as though his “genteel and sentimental novel” could not withstand any “unromantic” minutiae regarding Miss Crawley’s health, and yet he proceeds to “hint” several humorous details which describe nothing short of an old woman’s extremely bloated gassiness. But even when Thackeray divulges these details, it is under the pretense that he isn’t. His narrative power of omission is ever present, even when lying dormant under unmentionable mentionings.

It is perhaps one of Thackeray’s clearest narrative signatures that he breaks his theatrical “fourth wall” so frequently and incorporates the audience into his story: whether through direct asides to the reader, selective omniscience (turning the reader into a puppet), or omissions which leave the reader to fill-in-the-blanks with common knowledge. The latter cases are perhaps the most humorous: “The next morning…found Sedley groaning in agonies which the pen refuses to describe” (VF 66). Not only do we project the agonies of a massive hangover, pulled from our own personal experience, but we are forced to do so by the pen which “refuses” to take part. In this manner Thackeray mocks the literary process and the concept of “pen” as independent from pen-wielding author. But we know better—if Thackeray ever gives the impression that he is no longer in control of his narrative, we suspect this is a false lead and, if we try, can just see Thackeray’s smug face directing his Pen from the stage wings.

Ultimately, the goal of Thackeray’s satire was to educate and entertain; however, these two are not mutually exclusive categories, but causal: Thackeray educated by entertaining. While critics identify Thackeray as a “citizen preacher” (Wheatley 60) whose goal is a “comic education” (Simon 133), Thackeray justifies his motives when he writes that: “What I mean
applies to my own case & that of all of us – who set up as Satirical-Moralists – and having such a vast multitude of readers whom we not only amuse but teach” (Letters II.282). Thackeray’s novels established a category of normative “English” behavior and fictional expectations, then disobeyed the very “rules” he established—whether by creating unruly anti-social characters, or, more subtly, by breaching the conventions of fiction and foiling readerly expectations.
CHAPTER 4

LAUGHING THE ANGEL OUT OF THE HOUSE:

DISRUPTIVE HYSTERIA AND THE ENGLISH PATRIOTESS

Nationality, like class, is doubly mediated for women. They have been defined not as soldiers or citizens, nor yet as subjects of the Crown, but in the first place by sexual difference, as wives and mothers, daughters and spinsters. … Ideologically they were the objects rather than the subjects of patriotism: those for whom wars were fought; those whom legislation protected; those whom “the nation” honoured precisely because of their exclusion from the public sphere.

--Raphael Samuel (Patriotism xiv)

Women’s writing of comedy is characterized by its thinly disguised rage…but clearly decorum disguises mutiny. Like a handgun hidden in a handbag, the woman writer often obscures her most dangerous implements by making use of her most feminine attributes

--Regina Barreca (Untamed and Unabashed 21)

[W]omen have not only no humor in themselves but are the cause of the extinction of it in others…they are the unlaughing at which men laugh.

--Reginald Blyth (Humor in English Literature 14-5)

Because I’ve (unconsciously) segregated women to their own separate chapter within this study some readers might accuse my thesis of overlooking women writers and their contributions to Victorian humor, thereby limiting their perceived importance. However, the sad truth is that the few scraps of information on female humorists during this period are very meager compared
to the wealth of information on Titans like Dickens and Thackeray.  The lack of attention this subject has received intrigues me, largely because “The laughing woman is the least remembered woman of the Victorian period. …New Women writers are probably the least remembered authors of the Victorian period. And so—to follow out this formula—New Women writers who employed the comic mode are the most forgotten among the forgotten…” (Stetz 219). And, in addition to this comic marginalization, Victorian women of course experienced marginalization as English subjects—by dint of being non-male they were relegated, along with non-whites, to the social periphery. It is precisely for these reasons that I would like to examine female Victorian humorists and their unique contributions to a patriotic and, at times, ethnocentric rhetoric: both how they used humor compared to male humorists and the types of humor they were allowed to use by male editors and publishers. If the social “dread of too much laughter…sprang from a desire to shield the innocent” (Martin 8), and this label of “innocent” certainly included women (or, perhaps more accurately, the idea(l) of the Victorian woman) then how, exactly, could women both participate in and use this laughter to eke out and possess their own slice of empire? Must they limit themselves to laughing only at “appropriate” things? Perhaps, as Nancy Walker suggests, female laughter is acceptable but only through male agency: “The lady laughs at men’s jokes; she does not invent her own” (59). There is an important distinction being made here between woman as audience and woman as humorist; my work focuses on the ways in which the latter affected and shaped the former. Those few Victorian women who chose humor as their weapon of rebellion provide integral insight into the larger relationship between humor and ethnic identity in the nineteenth century. Barreca notes that: “Comedy is a way women writers can reflect the absurdity of the dominant ideology while

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40 Regina Barreca recognizes this frustrating double standard when she states that humor critics “do not deny that women have tried to write comedy. They argue instead that women have not been able to do it nearly so well as men” (Last Laughs 5).
undermining the very basis for its discourse” (*Last Laughs* 19), while Gagnier adds: “Victorian women used humor neither for disparagement nor temporary release, but rather as a prolonged anarchic assault upon the codes constricting them” (138). As revolutionary and disruptive as these critics make Victorian female humorists appear, I examine several novels spanning the era (Frances Trollope’s *The Widow Barnaby* (1839), Margaret Oliphant’s *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866), Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1851-3), and Amy Levy’s *Romance of a Shop* (1888)) in order to demonstrate that these novelists did not desire to undermine or reject British imperialism itself, only the gendered double-standards which excluded them from equal participation in this system.

**Rejecting Conformity: The Widow Barnaby as Anti-Heroine**

“Miss Martha Compton, and Miss Sophia Compton, were, some five-and-twenty years ago, the leading beauties of the pretty town of Silverton in Devonshire. The elder of these ladies is the person I propose to present to my readers as the heroine of my story…” (I:1). In the second sentence of *The Widow Barnaby* (1839) Frances Trollope makes it perfectly clear that Martha Compton (who eventually becomes Widow Barnaby) is the person on whom the author will devote her undivided attention. While this is not inauspicious to someone who has only read two sentences—so far, Martha Compton seems to be as suitable a heroine as any other—this selection soon seems to be a misgiving on Trollope’s part. Martha Barnaby (nee Compton) is continuously vulgar, vain, competitive, unsentimental, power-hungry, and raucous. Heroines of course, least of all Victorian ones, should not be any of these things. So why, when Mrs. Barnaby’s niece Agnes appears as a gentle, kind, sentimental, and humble alternative, does Trollope continually insist on bringing our attention back to *her* heroine Martha Barnaby? Why indeed make such a ridiculous woman the focal (and moral) point of the novel, unless it is to mock, ridicule, and reject the entire notion of “heroine” and every physical and sociological
aspect that label entails? This is precisely what I suggest: that Frances Trollope posits the Widow Barnaby as an anti-heroine purposely to make her nineteenth-century English readers cringe, laugh (nervously and uncomfortably), and call into question the patriarchal value system which could produce such a woman. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note in their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic*: “It is debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters” (53, emphasis in original). In creating the Widow Barnaby and hefting her substantially Rubenesque frame onto the pedestal of “heroine,” Trollope actively questions this problematically simplistic social dichotomy and offers a humorous alternative to the staid ideal of feminine Englishness.

The root of Trollope’s parody lies in the fact that Mrs. Barnaby presents herself as the epitome of traditional womanhood. She informs her mother that “if she had children, (and of course she should, as everybody else had,) they were to have their share” (I:75) of her Aunt Betsy’s fortune. And because “everybody else had [children],” Martha invents some for herself throughout the novel (comically increasing in number and desperation) whenever she is trying to garner sympathy or protection from a potential suitor. This comical overcompensation highlights the more somber reality that childlessness greatly signified a woman’s lacking. Martha further recodes her unpatriotic uterus by encouraging hyper-femininity in others, berating Agnes numerous times for reading/studying rather than working to develop more delicate skills:

“Now, only see, Agnes, what a thing it would have been for you, if you had learned to work satin-stitch!” she said. “Here am I, happy and amused, and before I go to bed I dare say I shall have done a good inch of this beautiful collar … And only look at yourself! What earthly use are you of to anybody? … I wonder you are not ashamed to sit idle in that way, while you see me hard at work.”
“May I get a book, aunt?”

“Books, books, books! …. If there is one thing more completely full of idleness than another it is reading,—just spelling along one line after another …. And what comes of it? Now, here’s a leaf done already, and wait a minute and you’ll see a whole bunch of grapes done in spotting. There is some sense in that: but poring over a lot of rubbishly words is an absolute sin, for it is wasting the time that Heaven gives us, and doing no good to our fellow-creatures.” (I:319-20)

Martha makes direct connections between intellectual pursuits and idleness while affirming that her needlework leaves her “happy and amused.” In doing so, she is echoing the patriarchal status quo for middle-class English women. Feminine (i.e. “proper”) women should find fulfillment in service “to our fellow-creatures” rather than perceived idleness (i.e. academic work that may overrun their tiny, underdeveloped brains). There are many reasons why “Women humorists entering the male-dominated field of humor have often perpetuated stereotyped roles of women” (Sheppard 44), possibly to gain editorial acceptance or to demonstrate the ability to “laugh at oneself” that women were frequently accused of wanting. Yet, I firmly believe that by using such a ridiculous and unlikeable character to express these sentiments Trollope is not affirming these stereotyped roles, but parroting/parodying them for comic effect. Judy Little emphasizes this useful and didactic mimicry: “Those women writers who have a sense of a woman’s peripheral yet invested position within a male-dominated culture have given their sentences the license of carnival, a license to overturn, to mimic, and to ‘deconstruct.’ Especially in the sentences of women who write comedy, there is a double-voiced tension…which immerses the piece in a subtle rebellious mockery” (“Humoring the Sentence” 19). This “double-voiced tension” is evident when we view Mrs. Barnaby not merely as a witless drama queen, but also as Trollope’s
mouthpiece to question, possibly to reject, Victorian gender standards. In professing to adhere to these standards rigorously, Martha instead demonstrates how not to behave. Little also notes that “Subversive comic imagery may give us portrayals of the disillusioned and the oppressed as they mock the hypocritical or the tyrannous. … On the other hand the more conservative comic statements take the very opposite approach; they direct our laughter against the outsider, against the one who deviates from a norm of beauty or appropriate behavior” (*Comedy* 1). By using Mrs. Barnaby as her heroine, Trollope achieves both of these levels of comedy. We, and the characters in the novel, initially react to Mrs. Barnaby’s antics as a case of the latter—that which is “other,” deviant, and inappropriate. But there is a deeper layer at work here wherein Trollope stages Mrs. Barnaby as a microcosmic embodiment (albeit a ridiculously exaggerated one) of “the woman question” in order to mock “the tyrannous” male standards of female Englishness.

This narrative ventriloquism is perhaps most evident when Martha Barnaby tells Major Allen, after he has made (faux)passionate love to her, “Alas! Major Allen, there is so much weakness in the heart of a woman, that she is hardly sure for many days together how she ought to feel…. We are all impulse, all soul, all sentiment, …. and our destiny must ever depend upon the friends we meet in our passage through this thorny world!” (II:88). Of course this melodrama concludes predictably: “here one of the widow’s most curiously embroidered pocket-handkerchiefs, delightfully scented with musk, was lightly and carefully applied to her eyes” (II:89). We, the readers, find this laughable knowing that Martha is only stalling the Major’s lovemaking until she can slyly ascertain whether or not his status and financial situation do indeed match the biography he has presented. Martha’s repetition of “all” either indicates that womankind, as a species, has these qualities collectively, or that each individual woman’s constitution is made up entirely of impulse, soul, and sentiment (mixed with a fair amount of
weakness). However, her insincere and self-promotional eye-dabbing proves this is not the case with our anti-heroine. Perhaps the most comic example of Mrs. Barnaby’s theatrical pseudo-femininity occurs when she and Major Allen encounter a young bull:

Major Allen, by no means approving the style in which the animal appeared inclined to charge them, had instantly perceived...that the only means of getting effectually out of its way was by jumping down the bank, which at that point was considerably higher than it was a few hundred yards farther on; nevertheless, though neither very light nor very active, he might have achieved the descent well enough had he been alone. But what was he to do with Mrs. Barnaby? She uttered a piercing cry, and threw herself directly upon his bosom, exclaiming, “Save me, Major!—save me!”

In this dilemma the Major proved himself an old soldier. ...he cried out manfully, “Now spring!” And spring they did, but in such a sort, that the lady measured her length in the dust, a circumstance that greatly broke the Major’s fall; for, although he made a considerable effort to roll beyond her, he finally pitched with his knees full upon her, thus lessening his descent very materially.

When the young people reached them, they had both recovered their equilibrium, but not their composure. Major Allen was placed with one knee in the dust, and on the other supporting Mrs. Barnaby, who, with her head reclining on his shoulder, seemed to have a very strong inclination to indulge herself with a fainting fit. ...

“Are you hurt, aunt?” said Agnes, approaching her.

“Hurt!...am I hurt?...Gracious Heaven! what a question! If my life be spared, I shall consider it little short of a miracle....Oh Major Allen,” she continued with a burst of sobbing, “where should I have now been....but for you?....”
“Trampled or tossed, Mrs. Barnaby….trampled or tossed to death decidedly,” replied the Major…. (II:130-3)

In addition to the raw physical humor of this scene, Trollope demonstrates (through Mrs. Barnaby) how easily “the feminine” allows itself to be “trampled and tossed” not by animals, but by men. Indeed, acting the damsel in distress is the very cause which effects Mrs. Barnaby’s falling flat and being used as a cushion for the Major’s knees. That we then see her (quite puppet-like!) on the Major’s knee with “a very strong inclination” to faint indicates that this fainting fit, if it did ensue, would be staged. Martha Barnaby does not indulge in innate instinct, but manipulatively ponders at every turn which actions will achieve the greatest social and pecuniary result; ever aiming to be the “typical” woman, she ironically becomes a very atypical Victorian heroine. Ann-Barbara Graff pinpoints the successfulness of using this type of comic inversion as a marketing tool:

…if it was bawdiness the public wanted—and would pay for—then it was bawdiness she would provide…in The Widow Barnaby (1839), Trollope pens a comic novel about a recent widow “fair, fat and forty” who unabashedly seeks her fortune and sexual gratification. … What she wrote about reflects a growing awareness of the needs and problems in the society surrounding her, coupled with a growing dissatisfaction with the constraints of women’s prescribed role. (54)

Thus Mrs. Trollope knowingly (and Mrs. Barnaby unknowingly) exposes the hypocrisy of male standards—standards which determine that the particular brand of furtive economics exhibited
by the widow is acceptable for English men in the boardroom, but not for English women in the bedroom.  

In addition to acting the distressed damsel, Mrs. Barnaby is frequently found doing her best to look (and sound) the part. Though she hasn’t yet nabbed a wealthy replacement husband, she is well-known for the richness of two things: her rouge and her laugh:

Now her rouge had been decidedly sufficient before, and moreover...she had touched up her bloom to the point she deemed to be the most advantageous...; so that, when she re-entered the drawing-room, she looked precisely like a clever caricature of what she had been when she left it,—the likeness not lost, but all that touched upon the ridiculous or outré brought out and exaggerated. (I:291-2)

A look of happiness is very becoming to many faces, it will often indeed lend a charm to features that in sorrow can boast of none; but there are others on which this genial and expansive emotion produces a different effect, and Mrs. Barnaby was one of them. … She shook her curls and her feathers with the vivacity of a Bacchante when tossing her cymbals in the air; and her joyous laugh and her conscious whisper, as each in turn attracted attention from all around, were exactly calculated to produce just such an effect…. (II:61-2)

What is significant here is that Mrs. Barnaby’s rouge is maneuvered to be “the most advantageous” and her demeanor is “conscious” and “exactly calculated” to attract attention resulting in her becoming a “clever caricature” of Woman. Trollope could not make her aims more clear than in this first passage. Mrs. Barnaby is no longer a woman; she has become a caricature, a mockery of “woman” as Anglo-andro-social construct. Regina Barreca argues that

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41 Several comic female characters have displayed this type of money-mindedness well before Mrs. Barnaby—perhaps most notably Mrs. Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*, but Martha Barnaby is perhaps the first to occupy the novel’s central focus as “heroine.”
although there exists a “cliché of the unlaughing woman” (*Untamed and Unabashed* 16), that “we do laugh—and laugh with a vengeance. Much of women’s comic play has to do with power and its systematic misappropriation… Humor allows us to gain perspective by ridiculing the implicit insanities of a patriarchal culture” (12). Trollope’s widow actively confronts this, imbuing her laughter into every social crevice; although, ironically perhaps, this laughter is not “very becoming” to her face. Both Mrs. Barnaby’s rouge and her laughter are signifiers of unnatural (i.e. calculated) attempts to manipulate English masculinity. Whether we like her choice of heroine or not, Trollope leaves charming, demure Agnes behind and maintains focus on Mrs. Barnaby. And, despite her overt displays of vanity and manipulativeness, Mrs. Barnaby remains our “heroine” through not one, but three novels—*The Widow Barnaby* was followed by *The Widow Married* (1840) and *The Barnabys in America; or, Adventures of the widow wedded* (1843). Large, brash, and cold-hearted, Mrs. Barnaby is the comic antithesis of her Dickensian contemporaries (the Florence Dombeys and Kate Nicklebys of the world)—so perfectly opposite as to be singularly satirical.42 Trollope’s renegade rhetoric, so popular among her contemporaries, is perhaps the very reason some recent readers and scholars have swept it under the critical hearthrug; it just isn’t “Victorian” enough.

Because of this, there exists a certain amount of residual discomfort surrounding Trollope’s choice of Martha Barnaby as “heroine,” possibly arising from her being perceived as a threat to the very culture current scholars have built as “Victorian.” While perhaps discomfort among Trollope’s contemporaries arose from her placing a woman in a man’s role: “Henry

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42 Heineman further suggests that Martha Barnaby was somewhat of a trailblazer: “In making so disreputable a woman powerful and appealing, Frances Trollope had enlarged the possibilities for the nineteenth-century portrayal of the heroine” (91). This is precisely why I believe that, although she lost fame over time, Mrs. Barnaby did leave a lasting legacy by inspiring the creation of Becky Sharp eight years later. Interestingly enough, although Dickens resented Trollope’s success (Neville-Sington 20), Thackeray only cared for the works of two lady-novelists: Gore and Trollope (Neville-Sington 19).
Fielding, Dickens, and Thackeray had dominated the comic novel” but in Mrs. Barnaby Trollope “created the female picaresque, with a woman ready to travel anywhere if she could expand the potential of her own, defiantly middle-aged destiny” (Heineman 88). Trollope threatened dominant English masculinity by using Mrs. Barnaby to question men’s dominion of the comic novel. Martha Barnaby is ultimately discomforting because she is more hero than heroine, and hilarious because she is so real. Dickens would create many characters like her (Mrs. Jellyby and Sairy Gamp spring readily to mind), but the grotesque horror of Mrs. Barnaby comes not from her vulgarity, but from Trollope’s placing this vulgarity on the heroine’s pedestal, rather than safely on the periphery as comic relief. And yet this uneasiness is didactic. Martha Barnaby shows us what English femininity will (continue to) become as long as English masculinity continues to impose ridiculous “standards” of insipid meekness. If Victorian men wanted to “other” women, Martha Barnaby would show them just how unpleasantly different “other” could be. In epitomizing the anti-heroine, she demonstrates that asserting women writers’ and characters’ position in empire begins by controlling the novel on their own terms.

Rejecting Idleness: Miss Marjoribanks takes charge

Margaret Oliphant’s novel Miss Marjoribanks (1866) features a heroine not unlike the Widow Barnaby. Lucilla Marjoribanks is manipulative, power-hungry, and robust, but poses a considerably larger threat to the feminine status quo; unlike Mrs. Barnaby, Lucilla is infinitely likeable. Nearly thirty years after Mrs. Barnaby presents a ridiculous example of the anti-heroine, Lucilla Marjoribanks achieves what she could not—legitimacy as a heroine. Although Lucilla possesses many of the same indelicate characteristics as Mrs. Barnaby, by also possessing intelligence and an acute aptitude for rhetoric, she stakes a stronger claim to her cultural status as English and her social status as an independent woman. In The Female
Imagination Patricia Meyer Spacks suggests that “Nineteenth-century women, if women novelists are to be believed, share a dream of dependency…these novels reflect woman’s difficulty in accepting her condition—but also the ways in which she can exploit to her own purposes the consequences of social oppression, finding freedom and power in the most unlikely situations” while, more specifically, “Marriage, for a woman, means dependency” (77).

Although Mrs. Barnaby seems to fit this description perfectly, Lucilla presents an exception to this rule; her “dream of dependency” is an illusion, but she knows perfectly well that pretending to share in this “dream” will garner her greater status and power with the dominant male demographic. Like many Victorian women, Lucilla understands that she must climb the social ladder through expressions of humility and carefully orchestrated requests for patriarchal aid and consent.

The first indication that Lucilla is more in earnest concerning her socio-political independence is that, unlike Mrs. Barnaby who is forever scheming for a husband, Lucilla repeatedly reminds us that she does not plan to marry for at least a decade (at which time she will be 29). “‘Dear papa,’ said Lucilla, ‘if he had the Bank of England, it would not make any difference to me….I said ten years, and I mean to keep to it,—if nothing very particular happens,’ Miss Marjoribanks added prudently. ‘Most likely I shall begin to go off a little in ten years. And all I think of just now is to do my duty, and be a little comfort to you’” (187). While this may appear to suggest that she is acting as a submissive wife-figure for her widowered father, her continued repetition of this sentiment immediately before or after taking control of the household and/or making his decisions for him instead gives her words a humorously ironic twist and reveals that “a little comfort to you” means a little more “independence for me.” Although her prudent addition of “if nothing very particular happens” indicates her tacit acknowledgement
of nineteenth-century English sexual standards, it also implies that Lucilla will be the judge of her own domestic fate—she subtly demonstrates that a woman’s exhibiting control of her sexuality is more threatening than her denying it altogether. In “Humoring the Sentence,” Judy Little notes that “It is comedy that speaks a woman’s voice even in a male culture and playfully overturns that culture in a deconstructive dialogue” (31) and that “In order to carnivalize the voice of authority and power, the rebel comic voice must use that authoritative voice, must parody or mimic it” (20). Lucilla’s constant repetition of her desire to be a “comfort to poor/dear/sweet/etc. papa” acts as a parodic mimicry of Victorian social expectations while her hidden desire for control also inverts the domestic power structure. Lucilla repeats her dutiful daughterly sentiment when a neighbor nervously questions her matrimonial prospects. Lucilla promptly responds: “Dear Mrs. Chiley!...it is so good of you to care; but if it had been that I was thinking of, I need never have come home at all, you know; and my object in life is just what it has always been, to be a comfort to papa” (291, emphasis in original). By setting the ideas of “home” and “that” (i.e. marriage) as diametric opposites, Margaret Oliphant rebuffs the contemporary idea of “domestic bliss” while Lucilla devoutly rejects her role as a Patmorian “angel in the house.” In fact, Lucilla indicates that her participation in “Englishness” will be achieved through personal education and travel, not matrimony (to a white British male of the appropriate class, of course) and procreation: “She was going abroad…to complete her education, and fit herself, by an examination of the peculiarities of other nations, for an illustrious and glorious reign at home” (18). By establishing her domestic identity not through self-realized superiority as English, but through “an examination of the peculiarities of other nations,” Lucilla essentially inverts imperial markers of identity—Englishness (“home”) is now defined by how it functions as “other” when compared to a foreign (albeit “peculiar”) standard.
Through Lucilla, Oliphant also mocks the idea of feminine “duty” to a dominant patriarch—whether a husband, or a father. Lucilla “was not a person, when she knew a thing was right, to hesitate about doing it; and in Miss Marjoribanks’s mind duty went before all, as has already been on several occasions said” (321). What makes this ironic (and surely troublesome to several Victorian readers), is that Lucilla’s “duty” becomes less domestic/private and more political/public on an increasingly larger scale as the novel progresses. She makes it her duty at first to run the Marjoribanks household, then Carlingford society, then, by becoming involved in an election for a Member of Parliament, national politics. By continually expanding her duties concentrically outward from the idea of “home,” Lucilla humorously redefines woman’s “duty” in society and her ethnic role as Englishwoman. From almost the first page of the novel, Oliphant playfully suggests Lucilla’s unruliness:

Lucilla had a mass of hair which, if it could but have been cleared a little in its tint, would have been golden, though at present it was nothing more than tawny, and curly to exasperation. She wore it in large thick curls, which did not, however, float or wave, or do any of the graceful things which curls ought to do; for it had this aggravating quality, that it would not grow long, but would grow ridiculously unmanageably thick…. (5)

And, in terms of personality, she “was not a mild young lady, easy to be controlled; but, on the contrary, had all the energy and determination to have her own way, which naturally belonged to a girl who possessed a considerable chin, and a mouth which could shut, and tightly curling tawny tresses, which were still more determined than she was to be arranged only according to their inclination” (13). This is certainly not the fainting, consumptive, timid mouse-wife praised by many of Oliphant’s contemporaries, especially Dickens. It is perhaps because Oliphant expressed a particular appreciation for Thackeray’s “spiteful humour” (Rubik 173) that Lucilla
mirrors Becky Sharp rather than Florence Dombey or Dora Spenlow. Many Victorian novelists, “in order to shape some discursive insurance that Britain’s heart continues to tick steadfastly, regularly, and in rhythm with the pulse of imperial expansion, appropriate culturally available images of women as suffering, salvational figures” (David 44). Unhappy to idle away as “Britain’s heart,” Lucilla instead wishes to make herself an active participant in this imperial expansion, but more so to liberate a sexual other—the colonized woman—than any cultural foreigner.

This sexual opposition and imperial reappropriation is most obvious when Lucilla arrives home after a year of Continental travel with schoolmates: “There were times during the past year when Lucilla had with difficulty restrained herself from snatching the reins out of the hands of her hosts, and showing them how to manage. But, impatient as she was, she had to restrain herself, and make the best of it. Now all that bondage was over. She felt like a young king entering in secret a capital which awaits him with acclimations” (26). Here we see Lucilla not only freeing herself from “bondage,” but doing so through a male guise; she not only exhibits dominance, but assumes a male embodiment in doing so. Other humorously over-exaggerated examples of Lucilla’s Anglo-imperial power abound. After she plays the piano at a social soiree: “[Lucilla] knew by instinct what sort of clay the people were made of by whom she had to work, and gave them their reward with that liberality and discrimination which is the glory of enlightened despotism. Miss Marjoribanks was naturally elated when she had performed this important and successful tour. She got up from the piano, and closed it in her open, imperial way” (36). And, after Lucilla’s father dies and she decides to remain in the house as an independent woman, Oliphant uses similarly ethno-political language: “Carlingford knew its Lucilla. As long as she remained in Grange Lane, even though retired and in crape, the
constitutional monarch was still present among her subjects; and nobody could usurp her place or show that utter indifference to her regulations which some revolutionaries had dreamed of. Such an idea would have gone direct in the face of the British Constitution” (417). In these passages, we see Lucilla’s true “duty.” She is sacrificial, yes, but not in the same way as a traditional heroine. Rather, Lucilla’s sacrifices come in the form of the “enlightened despotism” of a “constitutional monarch.” Her “duty” is not to a singular patriarch, but to her “people.” She refuses to be a mother of England, because she is the Mother of England (or at least the microcosmic Grange Lane). Oliphant’s patriotic rhetoric here also exposes a deeper level of satire. If Lucilla cannot fully participate in Victorian society as it currently exists (despite her oft-expressed desire to “be a comfort,” her father laments frequently that Lucilla was not born a boy), she will create her own society, her own empire, and declare herself monarch of *that*. By positing Lucilla as an imperial monarch, Oliphant ironically subverts the “British Constitution” and its expectations of female power(lessness) while also exposing the hypocrisy of a Patriarchal nation under Matriarchal rule through her sly nod to Victoria.43

The monarchial power Lucilla assumes, however, did not extend beyond the pages of the text to assist Margaret Oliphant in her career as a Victorian woman writer. Oliphant experienced many power struggles in her dealings with male editors and publishers. In an article Oliphant wrote for *Blackwood’s Magazine* (the same publisher of *Miss Marjoribanks*) titled “Scottish National Character,” she describes several relationships as inherently matrimonial/filial, among them Scottish/English and author/publisher: “Oliphant images Scotland as the repressed ‘wife’ in a marriage to the dominant brutish ‘husband’ of England (Scriven 27); “In her role as ‘wife’ to

43 Aptly enough, Oliphant was Queen Victoria’s favorite novelist (see Langland 136). While the stereotypical Victorian woman “was well-mannered, self-effacing, demure and devoid of passion, Queen Victoria was so far from the stereotype as to be almost its opposite” (Langland 129). Similarly, “Lucilla is a Victorian anti-heroine, large, strong, unsentimental, insubordinate to men and with a hearty appetite” (Leavis 2).
Blackwood’s, Oliphant is refused emancipation and kept in a lesser role in the marriage” (Scriven 33); and “As the ‘marriage’ wears on, Oliphant becomes more challenging of the views of her ‘husband’” (Scriven 32). Oliphant is rebelliously “other” on two counts then: both as non-English and non-male. In each case Oliphant recognizes that the oppressed minority, while desirous of autonomy, must accede to the patriarchal “norm”—whether by Scots accepting the overarching label of “British” or women accepting the label “Mrs” and their husbands’ surnames. In Lucilla, Oliphant creates a wife who redefines these labels and thus, herself—she, like Oliphant, marries a first cousin and thus manages to “keep” her name/identity intact and by maintaining possession of her home, she retains her geo-cultural Englishness. And yet, “not only did a nineteenth-century woman writer have to inhabit ancestral mansions (or cottages) owned and built by men, she was also constricted and restricted by the Palaces of Art and Houses of Fiction male writers authored” (Gilbert and Gubar xi). Gaskell successfully mocked these latter “Houses of Fiction” with her pseudo-submissive characters, but as an author, she was continuously dealing with publishing houses “owned and built by men.” Oliphant, using unruly Lucilla to bridge these precarious sexual divides also desires to “operate within a conservative ideological framework emphasizing British unity and a single national identity” (Finkelstein 329). Oliphant cannot afford to alienate her English male publishers or readers or their rhetoric of “a single national identity.” By marrying her cousin Tom, Lucilla does manage to “outsmart” the system, but even this is a sexual compromise as her surname was patronymic to begin with:

In her Autobiography Oliphant reiterates the self-consciousness she felt early in her writing career while learning how to navigate these complex gender rules: “John Blackwood sent me back paper after paper and driven half desperate I dashed at the first story of the Chronicles of Carlingford and wrote it in two or three days feeling as if it was my last chance. It was the turning-point. How sore and wounded and humbled and unsatisfied I was—what hard work I had to keep the tears within my eyes that time when they told me they did not want any story from me, lest the hard men—who were very kind notwithstanding, and friendly and just—should see I was crying and think it an appeal to their sympathies” (3). Her protective and apologetic language here—especially her excuses for critical editors—is especially revealing.
“That Lucilla’s ‘own’ name…remains her father’s attests to Oliphant’s willingness to play both
with and within the conventions of traditional patriarchy” (Cohen 109).

Despite these compromises, Oliphant is not shy or subtle when mocking Victorian
English masculinity in *Miss Marjoribanks*; the men of Carlingford (while more “present” than
the men of Cranford) continually find themselves on the verge of making very poor decisions
and must continually be rescued by Lucilla’s superior social aptitude. Men here are referred to
as the “inferior half of creation” (242) and this sentiment is evident in the fact that Lucilla and
Mrs. Chiley frequently refer to them with the genderless, disempowered pronoun “they”: “what
fools They were, and what poor judges, and how little to be depended on, when women were
concerned” (245, emphasis in original); “‘Many a girl whom we could not put up with is quite
popular with Them,’ said Miss Marjoribanks, with a certain mild wonder at the inexplicable
creatures whom she then condescended to discuss” (290); “‘My dear, I don’t know what They
mean,’ [Mrs. Chiley] said with indignation; ‘everybody knows men are great fools where women
are concerned…’” (291); “‘It is curious why They should be so vain. They talk of women!’
Lucilla added, with natural derision” (315). Through this repetition, Oliphant further inverts the
domestic power structure—now the men of Carlingford are marginalized into a faceless,
country-less other, a singular “them” who have not the privilege of being “us.”

Lucilla also inverts Victorian domestic expectations in several ways when she says to her
father: “I was only measuring to see how much carpet we should want…. You are so much
down-stairs in the library that you don’t feel it; but a lady has to spend her life in the drawing-
room – and then I always was so domestic. It does not matter what is outside, I always find my
pleasure at home” (44-5). The idea of “home” contains a double meaning here—not only
signifying the architectural and geographical boundaries of Lucilla’s family home, but, perhaps
to a greater extent, the ideological boundaries of English femaleness; Oliphant restructures the meaning of “home” so that the drawing-room becomes a greater seat of power than the library. Of course, this “pleasure at home” exposes a more subversive irony once Lucilla proclaims herself monarch of Carlingford; this is not the expected feminine pleasure of marital or filial submission, but rather a pleasure of domestic dominance. “In giving shape to what nineteenth-century society sought to deny or exclude, [women writers] threatened…to wreak havoc on hierarchy” (Michie 172-3). By not only giving shape to these exclusions, but having them supersede the nineteenth-century status quo, Oliphant and Lucilla “wreak havoc” in spectacular fashion. And, just as Lucilla inverts the power inherent in these gendered “rooms” of her house, so too does she invert the power of politics and the powerlessness of domesticity. By redirecting the emphasis of Carlingford’s parliamentary election away from the candidates’ policies on Reform and onto Mr. Ashburton’s personal respectability as being the “right man” (essentially making this election a race in public relations), Lucilla demonstrates that “politics is nothing but domesticity” (Cohen 108). Julie Sochen notes the disparity in comedies between male priorities and female ones: “Men avoid the kitchen and the nursery, the cleaning and the cooking in the home, as much as they can. Their work is surely superior. Humor associated with politics, business, and other male pursuits ranks higher in the hierarchy of humor than women’s domestic humor” (11). 45 In Miss Marjoribanks these “male pursuits” are now mockingly (and shockingly) relegated to the periphery of humor. If we accept the idea that “comedy which implies, or

45 Sochen continues: “Twain makes fun of politicians and current events; [Frances Miriam] Whitcher jokes about gossipy women and the annoyances of homemaking. Guess whose humor is preserved?” (11). Barreca agrees: “When it can be seen, comedy written by women is perceived as trivial, silly and unworthy of serious attention” (Untamed and Unabashed 19, emphasis in original). Perhaps it is too simplistic to conclude that Gaskell’s Cranford is the only work of the four I study here which has withstood the scholarly test of time precisely because it (seemingly) only concerns itself with “trivial” (i.e. unthreatening) femininity. Langland seems to think so: “If we read canons as, in part, repositories of a culture’s professed values and self-representations, we must ask if Oliphant’s domestic novels have been consigned to obscurity, if not oblivion, for challenging so many Victorian sacred cows – romance, angels, feminine duty, innocence, passivity, and the separation of home and state” (134).
perhaps even advocates, a permanently inverted world, a radical reordering of structures, a real rather than temporary and merely playful redefinition of sex identity, a relentless mocking of truths otherwise taken to be self-evident or even sacred…can well be called subversive, revolutionary, or renegade” (Little, *Comedy* 2), then unlike Martha Barnaby, whose sexual threat is “temporary” and “playful,” we understand that Lucilla Marjoribanks’s is real, permanent, and radical. Using various comic inversions, Oliphant (through Lucilla) threatens Anglo-masculine dominance by upending the existing Victorian power structure of male and female roles and priorities.

Although, for all the irony she produces, Lucilla never ceases to remind us of her apparent lack of a sense of humor. She first mentions this three times in one paragraph: “I never have had a great sense of humour. … I always get on very well with anything else, but I never had any sense of humour…it is so odd I should have no sense of humour” (41). And Lucilla continues to remind us of her humorlessness throughout the novel: “I have always thought it very strange that I never had any sense of humour…but it would not do, you know, if all the world was like me; and society would be nothing if everybody did not exert themselves to the best of their abilities” (141); “Lucilla had no sense of humour, as she candidly admitted, with that consciousness of her own faults, and slight disposition to consider them virtues” (226); “Miss Marjoribanks did not laugh, for her sense of humour, as has been said, was not strong, but she kissed her friend with protecting tenderness” (315). Because Oliphant repeats this sentiment so often, and yet infuses *Miss Marjoribanks* with such biting irony and inversion, perhaps this testament of humorlessness in her heroine signifies something more physiological. Lucilla self-avowedly lacks the ability to laugh at appropriate times; might this, along with her cool head and even temper, indicate that the root of her feminine hysteria—her uterus—is not functioning
properly? Or does it signify Lucilla’s conscious rejection of participating in society on patriarchal terms? Oliphant (or her narrator) notes that Lucilla’s un-hysteria causes larger problems:

…is it a little hard for her to find a “sphere.” And Lucilla, though she said nothing about a sphere, was still more or less in that condition of mind which has been so often and so fully described to the British public – when the ripe female intelligence, not having the natural resource of a nursery and a husband to manage, turns inwards, and begins to “make a protest” against the existing order of society, and to call the world to account for giving it no due occupation – and to consume itself. (389)

Because she cannot laugh, Lucilla has no outlet for this “ripe female intelligence” and the resulting nervous energy begins to “consume” her. In an act of self-preservation, Lucilla redirects her energies towards creating her own sphere; however, this sphere remains singular and therefore limited in its didactic scope. While the mockery of one woman is remediable, the collective laughter of unified womankind is exponentially dangerous.

Rejecting Isolation: Cranford, Collective Memory, and Solidarity

Many critics have argued that Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford (published in nine installments between December 1851 and May 1853) presents a gynocentric utopia—a country town seemingly run exclusively for (and by) women. While I don’t disagree with this point, per se, the majority of these analyses focus on the symbolic absence of men rather than the emblematic solidarity of the Cranford “Amazons.” Their criticism is based on what is not there rather than what is. And, while the (near) absence of masculinity is certainly a significant detail in a mid-Victorian domestic text, seeing only this absence belies the greater significance of the female characters’ cohesion and the female readers’ reimagined group identity. I further suggest
that Gaskell did not mean for the absence of males to be a cause for this cohesion, but an effect. The men do not lump the women together in their absence, rather the women coalesce first and subsequently disbar male penetration into their strata. While contemporary reviewers found *Cranford* to be “an innocently nostalgic work” (Ingham xiv), if we view this male exclusion as effect rather than cause, *Cranford* is much more comically subversive in terms of Englishwomen’s ethnic identity than it first appears. Gaskell implants within this subversiveness a unique type of feminine, domestic humor since comedy, more so than other genres, “permits, and prepares women for, rebellion” (Barreca, *Untamed and Unabashed* 25). For years, the humor/laughter of the white, English male has acted as an active restraint to maintain ethno-sexual control and social prestige: “The ‘gags’ directed at women in masculinist humor have for too long served exactly that purpose: to shut women up” (Barreca, *Untamed and Unabashed* 17). Through this rebellious humor, Gaskell’s female collective is able to rediscover, redefine, and reassert their dual identity as English Women and thus remove the “gag.” In terms of cultural identity, Gaskell presents “Cranford as a representative English village” and implies that “what gives value to any geographical place is its Englishness, and Englishness and by extension the English nation is defined by and confirmed through the cultural authority of its authors” (Recchio 29). I examine how Gaskell uses a combination of humor and collective memory to establish this cultural authority for her female characters (and readers)—ultimately to prove that they, as women, are not second-class Britons.

Defining the relationship between the Cranford Amazons and men has been a continuing thorn in scholarship’s craw. In “The Last Generation in England” (a “prequel” of sorts for *Cranford*), Gaskell informs us that “I have made no mention of gentlemen at these parties.

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46 The people and events of *Cranford* first began to take shape in an observational essay of Gaskell’s: “The Last Generation in England” which appeared in the American publication *Sartain’s Union Magazine of Literature and*
because if ever there was an Amazonian town in England it was ——” (Cranford, Appendix I, 192). Men are not absent from Cranford altogether (there is Captain Brown, Thomas Holbrook, Signor Brunoni, Peter Jenkyns, Jem Hearne, and Mr. Hoggins, the surgeon), they are merely unworthy of mentioning here. What Gaskell insinuates in Cranford is not that society can, or should, function without men (for indeed Miss Matty’s bankruptcy is remediated by Mr. Smith, the narrator’s father, and her desire for a child is aided by the procreative prowess of Jem Hearne and her maid, Martha). Instead, Gaskell is “responding to the model of gender difference which constrains her by seeking not to criticize the masculine position that excludes her but to redefine or resist the definition of femininity that imprisons her” (Michie 15). Unlike Trollope though, Gaskell does not “redefine or resist” female Englishness through mockery alone; she instead suggests that women, by finding common ground, can explore and redefine how their “otherness” may serve a patriotic purpose, and how childless widows and spinsters can also find their place as “mothers of Empire.”

Frequently Gaskell achieves this common ground through invocation of collective memory and “inside jokes”—humor specific to middle-class women and their singular behaviors and values. Cranford’s narrator, Mary Smith, remarks:

My next visit to Cranford was in the summer. There had been neither births, deaths, nor marriages since I was there last. Everybody lived in the same house, and wore pretty nearly the same well-preserved, old-fashioned clothes. The greatest event was, that the Miss Jenkynses had purchased a new carpet for the drawing-room. Oh the busy work

_Art_ in July 1849. It is a non-fiction account of characters and events recalled from Gaskell’s childhood. Setting Cranford several years in the past (in the first chapter, Captain Brown is eagerly awaiting the next number of _Pickwick_) allows Gaskell to target her audience using humorous nostalgia and collective memory (the very tactic Dickens used in _Pickwick_ which I examined in chapter two). The essay’s title portends the subversive aims of Cranford by referring “to either the preceding generation or the last generation of its kind” (Ingham xiv). I suggest that the Cranford Amazons are both of these things: the preceding generation and the last of its kind. In the essay, Gaskell notes that “the old ladies were living hoards of family tradition and old custom” (Cranford, Appendix I, 194).
Miss Matty and I had in chasing the sunbeams, as they fell in an afternoon right down on this carpet through the blindless window! We spread newspapers over the places, and sat down to our book or our work; and, lo! in quarter of an hour the sun had moved, and was blazing away on a fresh spot; and down again we went on our knees to alter the position of the newspapers. We were very busy, too, one whole morning before Miss Jenkyns gave her party, in following her directions, and in cutting out and stitching together pieces of newspaper, so as to form little paths to every chair, set for the expected visitors, lest their shoes might dirty or defile the purity of the carpet. Do you make paper paths for every guest to walk upon in London? (20)

Several significant satirical elements are at work in this passage. What is perhaps most evident is the perceived divide between the femaleness of Cranford and England’s more masculine industrial cities like London and Drumble (Mary Smith’s fictive home). Mary begins by relating her chronology in what I would refer to as “sentimental time.” She does not say how many days or months have passed nor does she give any other reference to a more standardized linear calendar, but rather, she measures time in seasons (here, summer), and sentimental events: births, deaths, and marriages, of which there are none. This humorous stagnation is further amended with domesticity (“everybody lived in the same house”), and fashion (“the same…clothes”), with the greatest event of all being one of interior decorating. I am inclined to agree with Margaret Smith’s assertion that in Cranford “Mrs. Gaskell’s skill lies in the tongue-in-cheek narration” (86) since, beneath its serious guise, Mary Smith’s narration is both self-aware and self-mocking. Gaskell’s use of newspaper in this paragraph is also an interesting narrative touch. Surely there are other types of paper available in Cranford (stationary, packaging, tissue, butcher, etc.) but the Jenkyns sisters select newspaper, which, although cheaper than the others and more readily
available, given its penchant to smear ink all over the reader’s fingers, seems an odd choice to use in keeping a carpet clean. Choosing newspaper here symbolizes not only that the women have no interest in reading news from the masculine world (business, current events, politics, etc.) but that the only practicality of this masculine signifier lies in the women’s treading it literally beneath their feet. Thus the masculine realm and the geographic world outside Cranford are reappropriated and made subservient to the immediate feminine domestic needs of a new carpet. This desire to protect a new carpet at whatever ridiculous costs, while certainly comic, was also common enough to most middle-class English women to evoke the cohesive ethnic identity that was Gaskell’s aim. Nancy Walker explains why female group identity, especially in the nineteenth century, was especially problematic:

unlike other oppressed groups, women do not constitute a group in the usual sense but instead are isolated from one another by their intimate relationships with men and, traditionally, by their habitation in the private sphere of homemaking and child rearing. Efforts to promote a sense of group solidarity have therefore been resisted by cultural realities that have dictated women’s separation not only from the policy-making mainstream but also from one another. (57)

Gaskell fulfilled middle-class English women’s need for this cultural solidarity. In portraying Cranford as an isolated but also communally cohesive town of Amazons, she fortuitously provided a singular unified sphere of Victorian femininity. The characters’ (and readers’) shared experiences, and penchant for gossip, makes this “private sphere of homemaking” more public. Also, one technique for “establishing an impression of women as a group is the author’s direct address to the reader—an inclusion of the reader in the concerns of the writer, assuming shared values and problems” (Walker 68). Mary Smith does this in her address to her reader: “Do you
make paper paths for every guest to walk upon in London?” However, while the passage to this point has meant to unify female readers, I believe this final question is another example of Gaskell’s tongue-in-cheek humor. When we take the question at face value, Mary Smith is merely asking her (presumably female) friends/readers in London if they have had the same shared experience. But, if instead we take London to represent that which is masculine, commercial, and mercenary, then the question becomes satirically rhetorical. Of course men/capitalism/London will assuredly answer “no” to this question and thus experience exclusion from the “joke.” Nancy Reincke asks “Can women laugh men out of power?” (29) and answers: “Women’s laughter counteracts dominance when it constructs a counterknowledge, a counterknowledge that is collectively produced through female bonding….The threat to male dominance isn’t women laughing at men; the threat is women laughing with women” (35-6, emphasis in original). This female bonding is precisely what we find in both Cranford and Cranford.

Another example of the Cranfordians’ self-mocking and sexually exclusive domestic humor occurs when Miss Matty is reminiscing about the Napoleonic wars and tells Mary Smith: “I know I used to wake up in the night many a time, and think I heard the tramp of the French entering Cranford. Many people talked of hiding themselves in the salt-mines; – and meat would have kept capitally down there, only perhaps we should have been thirsty” (60). Gaskell transforms something as collectively politically memorable as the Revolution to a feminine household concern; here, success against foreign invasion boils down to the happy medium between food supply and necessary hydration. This is another example of Gaskell’s (double-edged) tongue-in-cheek humor. We laugh primarily at the exponentially wide divide between the andro-militaristic concerns of war and the gyno-domestic concerns of salted meats. But in
not allowing her humor to stray too far from the proverbial kitchen, Gaskell addresses a more recent concern while portending similarities between the two—the French concern and the “Woman question.” This lends a more didactic and forceful aspect to Mary Smith’s adorable little stories.

Nancy Walker makes clear a distinction between domestic humor and feminist humor by suggesting that they are mutually exclusive: “To write amusingly about cooking, cleaning, and children, and particularly to point to one’s failures and frustrations in these areas, is to appear to occupy the subordinate role mandated by the dominant culture. But humor that openly advances a feminist cause challenges that dominance and posits a sense of solidarity which threatens its hegemony” (60, my emphasis). If only openly direct humor is threatening, *Cranford* cannot be. But, Walker’s argument becomes applicable if we understand that *Cranford* is operating on two layers: the surface level which the “other” (i.e. male) reader sees, and the level of the “inside jokes” which Gaskell’s female audience will more readily understand. So while I agree that humor must “openly advance” a cause in order to build solidarity and pose a threat to the oppressive majority, I ask: “open” according to whom? And, if these Cranfordian Amazons only “appear” to be subordinate, then what are they really? Is it possible they are waging a revolution of their own, beginning not by launching single, one-woman assaults on the oppressor, but by first unifying their troops? If there is a power in “female laughter to challenge the social and symbolic systems that would keep women in their place” (Rowe 3), it seems odd that Gaskell would limit her humor to the domestic “sphere.” Perhaps to make jokes about feminine constraints while still safely constrained, is the first step to self-liberation. Perhaps laughing about the kitchen is the first step to leaving it. The only safe place to laugh/rebel is somewhere away from a watchful patriarchal eye. The seemingly innocuous plot of *Cranford* is the perfect
breeding-ground for this furtive attack. If men are dismissive of women’s writing as being trivial and domestic (as of equally miniscule concern to the Napoleonic wars as salt-induced thirst might be), what better place to secretly organize a revolution than within these pages? Mary Smith tells us: “Things that many would despise, and actions which it seemed scarcely worthwhile to perform, were all attended to in Cranford” (22). This may refer to those trivial, “womanly” tasks like cooking, cleaning, and knitting, or it could signal the stirrings of a more subversive ethnocentric discourse. In emphasizing the daily details of Victorian domesticity, “Gaskell is working to disrupt the ideological script that encodes the detail as trivial because of its association with the feminine” (Langland 130). An Englishwomen’s revolution is certainly something that “many would despise” and may seem “scarcely worthwhile to perform.” So while a daily minutiae of inconsequential tasks “were all attended to in Cranford,” ideological warfare was being attended to in Cranford. One glaring example of the sexual struggle taking place here extends beyond the socio-geographic boundaries of the former and into the publishing sphere of the latter.

Cranford was scheduled to appear in Household Words, Charles Dickens’s periodical, and Gaskell, being a consummate humorist, chose to include several lighthearted references to Dickens and his works within the text. For instance, Captain Brown asks Miss Jenkyns “‘Have you seen any numbers of “The Pickwick Papers?”’...(They were then publishing in parts.) ‘Capital thing!'” (13). Miss Jenkyns then expresses lukewarm feelings for Dickens and a preference for the works of Dr. Johnson, and Mary Smith notes that Captain Brown continued to argue his case: “He read the account of the ‘swarry’ which Sam Weller gave at Bath. Some of us laughed heartily. I did not dare, because I was staying in the house” (14). After this scene, “Captain Brown and Miss Jenkyns were not very cordial to each other,” possibly because “He
was rather ostentatious in his preference of the writings of Mr. Boz; would walk through the street so absorbed in them, that he all but ran against Miss Jenkyns” (20). And, at the pinnacle of Gaskell’s mockery, Captain Brown is hit by a train only moments after being “deeply engaged in the perusal of a number of ‘Pickwick,’ which he had just received” (24). These references to Dickens and *Pickwick* operate on multiple levels of humor. *The Pickwick Papers*, as a text recording the various travels and adventures of a group of men, seems diametrically opposite to *Cranford*, a text recording the tedious home-lives of a group of women. Perhaps this is what makes it so appealing to one of the few gentlemen trapped within the womb of Cranford. But these references also function as a meta-textual joke when we consider the context in which *Cranford* was being published. *Household Words* published articles anonymously, so Gaskell’s name would not appear anywhere on the text—thus, readers may have suspected that Dickens himself wrote *Cranford* and was tooting his own train-whistle, so to speak. What a remarkably humorous jab at the masculine publishing machine…or, at least, it would have been, if Dickens hadn’t removed all references to himself (and *Pickwick*) before publication (replacing his name with Thomas Hood’s). Gilbert and Gubar suggest that one challenge female authors faced was that “the pen has been defined as not just accidentally but essentially a male ‘tool,’ and therefore not only inappropriate but actually alien to women” (8) and ask “If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ can females generate texts?” (7). In presuming to make editorial changes without Gaskell’s permission, Dickens essentially castrates her by reminding her that she does not have control over her own pen(is). Gaskell “must surely have regretted that his substitution of Thomas Hood for the references to himself dulled her double-edged joke a little” (Margaret Smith 88). Eileen Gillooly concurs and insinuates that rather than making these changes in order to avoid improper flattery (as Dickens claimed) he removed all references to himself because he
refused to be lampooned in his own paper: “Dickens’s substitution…constituted a blatant affront to Gaskell’s authorship” (905). In one fell swoop, Gaskell was reminded that, though given much creative freedom, her brain-children were still subject to men’s final judgments. Michie reminds us that in the nineteenth century, “gatekeepers to the world of publishing, tended to be men” (2), and so “Elizabeth Gaskell found that she was excluded from active participation in the literary marketplace; she could publish her writing but had no means of controlling its appearance and reception” (3-4). In this way, Gaskell came to resemble the spinsters of Cranford: very nearly autonomous, but ultimately subject to masculine rule. These power struggles are evident in her letters. On April 25, 1855, she wrote to publisher Edward Chapman, regarding plans to print Cranford as a single volume:

Mr Gaskell consents to a trial of the cheap plan of publication of Cranford….What he wishes to know is what number you would propose to publish in the first instance?, and how soon you think the returns on that number are likely to be made?...I shall write by this post to Mr Dickens to ask for his formal consent for the republication of the H[ousehold] W[ords] Tales.…There is a piece in ‘North & South’ printed twice over….Mr Gaskell, in returning one of the proofs, requested you to ask the printer to look whether there was not a repetition. (Letters 340, emphasis in original)

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47 Gillooly goes on to note that “In the first book edition of Cranford, Gaskell was able to reinstate Boz, but there, without the contextual frame of her anonymous article appearing underneath the rubric ‘Charles Dickens’—of her voice subsumed by and thereby undermining that of the Father—some of the complexity of her humorously subversive treatment of Dickens and of the cultural authority he represented was inevitably lost” (906). Elsie Michie notes the troublesome relationship that frequently occurred between female authors and male editors: “When Dickens asked writers to contribute to his periodicals, he was implicitly inviting them to think of their own work as valuable property. … In being asked to write for Household Words, Gaskell is invited to think of herself as a property owner but finds instead, in the course of her editorial dealings with Dickens, that she is defined as property and that even her stories do not remain under her control” (174). This is all too similar to Margaret Oliphant’s “marriage” to Blackwood’s Magazine. Too frequently, the work of women writers becomes wifely “property” of their husband-editor.
What is most striking here is the utter absence of any control or authority on Elizabeth Gaskell’s part. The only first-person pronoun we see (“I shall write by this post to Mr Dickens…”) resembles a child asking for her father’s permission. It would appear that the only people authorized to giving “consent” to publication here are her husband and her publisher. If I didn’t know better, I would assume from this letter that Mr. Gaskell was the author and Mrs. Gaskell his acting secretary. When Gaskell does take responsibility for her work, she must still mediate this with feminine humility and deference. She wrote to Charles Dickens, regarding *North and South*: “I dare say I shall like my story, when I am a little further from it; at present I can only feel depressed about it, I meant it to have been so much better. …Mr Gaskell has looked this piece well over, so I don’t think there will be any carelessnesses left in it, & so there ought not to be any misprints; therefore I never wish to see it’s [sic] face again…” (*Letters* 323). Gilbert and Gubar explain this continued submission as an annoying but necessary maneuver. “[U]ntil the end of the nineteenth century the woman writer really was supposed to take second place to her literary brothers and fathers. If she refused to be modest, self-deprecating, subservient, refused to present her artistic productions as mere trifles designed to divert and distract readers in moments of idleness, she could expect to be ignored or (sometimes scurrilously) attacked” (61-2). 48 Because of this requirement that women must acquiesce to male control, Gaskell and others were continually made aware of their “otherness.” They were not English, but English women, not writers but women writers. Even as citizens of the greatest Empire on Earth, these authors were reduced to modifiers and subcategories—linguistically and literally on the periphery.

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48 This deference is glaringly obvious in Gaskell’s letter to Dickens in January 1850, two years before she would attempt to mock him in his own newspaper: “My Dear Sir, In the first place I am going to give you some trouble, and I must make an apology for it; for I am very sorry to intrude upon you in your busy life. But I want some help, and I cannot think of any one who can give it to me so well as you” (*Letters* 98).
Although the right kind of woman (i.e. white, indigenous, and of a certain economic class) could enjoy the cultural label of Englishness, she could not legally partake in many of the benefits. Gaskell first encouraged a rebellious cohesion among her female characters (and readers) in *Cranford*, and then used this collective laughter to confront what she viewed as a double-standard of “Englishness.” The few males who have a presence in Cranford, in addition to presenting a sexual “other,” are quite often associated with being ethno-culturally “other.” Mr. Brown adopts an Italian persona, Signor Brunoni, for his conjuring act and “was a serjeant in the 31st…when the regiment was ordered to India” where his wife lost six children (129). And while Mr. Holbrook has not been to the farthest reaches of empire, Mary Smith indicates that he “looked more like my idea of Don Quixote than ever” (41) and had decorated his simple home with “only a small Turkey carpet in the middle of the flag-floor” (41). Peter Jenkyns, however, best demonstrates the especially strong connection Gaskell draws between humor, gender, and empire. We find out that Peter “was too fond of mischief” (61), “could never resist a joke” (61), and had a reputation “of being the captain of the school in the art of practical joking” (62). But his prank against Miss Jenkyns’s reputation (dressing like her and pretending to nurse a baby), was not deemed an “acceptable” joke. Miss Matty recalls that “he seemed to think that the Cranford people might be joked about, and made fun of, and they did not like it; nobody does” (63), and yet she adds “I could hardly keep from laughing” (63). But Miss Matty’s laughter does not always indicate cultural understanding and acceptance; at times it signifies feminine powerlessness, seen (heard?) when Miss Matty remembers this exchange, which occurred after Peter ran away from home:

“I have borrowed the nets from the weir, Miss Matty. Shall we drag the ponds tonight, or wait for the morning?”
“I remember staring in his face to gather his meaning; and when I did, I laughed out loud. The horror of that new thought – our bright, darling Peter, cold, and stark, and dead! I remember the ring of my own laugh now.” (68)

Peter was not dead, though, only “ordered off to India” (71). His improper joking (and subsequent evocation of improper laughter/release in others) forces him to relinquish his status of “Englishness.” This cultural demotion is further evinced by the fact that “he had had his letters returned from England with the ominous word ‘Dead’ marked upon them” (178). This singular word: ‘Dead’ ironically leads Peter to believe that he is “the last of his race” (178), when it could instead signify that his race has hereafter excluded him. He, not they, is ‘Dead.’

Through Peter Jenkyns’s excessive joking and subsequent exclusion from participation in “Englishness,” Gaskell subverts the masculine penchant of directing jokes at women. Not only does Cranford feature women laughing with each other, it insinuates that any man who laughs against them will be geographically removed and stripped of his citizenship. Peter eventually returns, but only after Miss Matty has set up her own tea shop; in fact, Gaskell has him return in the guise of a customer. Thus, she suggests that sexual difference in Cranford can only be mediated through economic equality. Only when Miss Matty is given her pecuniary slice of empire (selling foreign teas), is Peter allowed to regain his ethnicity. The women of Cranford also demand equal participation in “Englishness” through their refusal to marry. By boycotting their expected matrimonial (and procreational) duties, the Amazons become an example of “disruptive female sexuality…the figures of the prostitute, the mad or bad mother, and the degenerate or hysterical female who is unable to marry, refuses marriage or, having married, refuses maternity or rejects her children” (Pykett 81). By banding together in their shared laughter and their shared refusal to fulfill their expected roles as Sarah Stickney Ellis’s “Wives”
and “Mothers of England,” the Cranfordian Amazons remove hysteria from their uteruses and place it firmly in their mouths. They do not seek to gain cultural validation by passively extending the race, but by mocking the patriarchal empire which does not condone their full and active participation.

Rejecting Silence: Amy Levy’s Laughing (New) Women

When regarding Amy Levy’s novel *The Romance of a Shop* (1888), much criticism tends to focus on young women’s experience in the business world, or female photographers inverting the “masculine gaze.” However, what strikes me most about Levy’s Lorimer sisters, the heroines of the novel, is not their business-minded fiscal autonomy and independence or their careful reconstruction of a gendered “gaze,” but rather, the sheer amount of laughter they emit. Despite losing their father, teetering on the brink of financial insolvency, and making the socially dangerous decision to go into business for themselves, the Lorimer sisters seem to be laughing (or desperately trying to restrain laughter) at least every two or three pages. They are not fainting, or knitting, or rouging; no, their primary activities are laughing (frequently at inappropriate times) and working (in a male-capitalistic rather than female-domestic capacity).

In certain aspects the Lorimer sisters’ laughter is more threatening to masculine hegemony than Lucilla Marjoribanks’s stoicism, the Cranfordians’ solidarity, or Mrs. Barnaby’s ostentatious ridiculousness, possibly because “it seems that historically men have preferred women’s tears to their more threatening laughter…men desire to control women’s humor just as they desire to control women’s sexuality” (Gagnier 137). And, because Levy’s sisters often laugh where there is no joke to “get,” their laughter is bewildering as well as threatening.

When deciding how she and her sisters should earn a living, Gertrude Lorimer says: “Think of all the dull little ways by which women, ladies, are generally reduced to earning their
living! But a business—that is so different. It is progressive; a creature capable of growth; the very qualities in which women’s work is dreadfully lacking” (55). Wishing to avoid the “dull little ways” of traditional femininity in favor of business certainly would have ruffled conservative feathers, but by saying that their business venture is a “creature capable of growth” Gertrude openly confronts the most vocation for Victorian women: motherhood. Their business will grow and prosper; as a separate “creature” it will take on a life of its own—much like a child, but without the pesky necessity of male involvement. Defining the New Woman, Iveta Jusova notes that: “Contesting and defamiliarizing the hegemonic Victorian definitions of gender and sexual identities, the New Woman further fueled the anxieties and fears that already circulated among the middle-class British population at the time” (1). Mirroring this New Woman, Gertrude inverts gender identities by expressing a desire to leave the privacy of domesticity and occupy a place of public commercialism, and indicates that she will do this while simultaneously redefining woman’s most basic purpose. The Lorimer sisters will mother the next generation of Englishmen by giving birth to ideas, not babies.

Their laughter in the novel usually occupies one of two types: laughter as a show of support for their vocation, and laughter as a rejection of traditional domestic/romantic ties. In order to gain the readers’ sympathy and support for these seemingly devious Lorimers, Levy also uses laughter to diffuse tension and display the sisters’ humanity. We first see this as the sisters mourn the death of their father: “‘Now that we are all grouped,’ [Phyllis] said, ‘there is nothing left but for Lucy to focus us.’ It was a very small joke indeed, but they all laughed, even Fanny. No one had laughed for a fortnight, and at this reassertion of youth and health their spirits rose with unexpected rapidity” (53). After which they make a resolution to live independently and open a photography studio: “Thus, with laughing faces, they stood up and defied the Fates” (67).
Laughter does more in this instance than provide a “reassertion of youth”; by physiologically altering the Englishman’s “stiff upper lip” to Englishwomen’s “laughing faces,” Levy mischievously subverts culturally ingrained codes of behavior.

Gertrude and Lucy, the primary photographers and most business-minded sisters, progress from laughing at the prospect of opening their own studio to laughing whenever financial matters arise, signifying not only that the sisters are moving further into the masculine-public sphere, but that in their laughing they continue to defy, mock, and question it. “That first wave of business, born of the good-natured impulse of their friends and acquaintance, had spent itself, and matters were looking very serious indeed for the firm of G. and L. Lorimer. ‘We couldn’t go on taking Fred’s guineas for ever,’ [Gertrude] thought, a strange laugh rising in her throat” (90); “[Gertrude and Lucy] both laughed; they could, indeed, afford to laugh, for, regarded from a financial point of view, the morning had been an unusually satisfactory one” (98); and, while fielding questions from the cynically traditional Aunt Caroline: “‘Now, how much money have you naughty girls been making lately?’ Lucy stoutly and laughingly evaded the question, and Aunt Caroline drove off smiling, refusing, like the stalwart warrior that she was, to acknowledge herself defeated” (102). Although it is decorous to invoke feminine discretion in instances of commercialism and to “laughingly evade” financial questions, when men do offer their aid it becomes a source of ungrateful mockery. Gertrude’s “strange” suppressed laugh insinuates that “taking Fred’s guineas” is the best joke of all. And once the studio is financially stable, this suppressed laughter is released—G. and L. Lorimer can, both literally and figuratively, “afford to laugh.” But this laughter does more than mock contemporary standards, it also functions as the feminist weapon Rowe cites as “a powerful
means of self-definition” (3). The laughter mockingly directed at who they aren’t reaffirms who they are.

Using laughter as both offensive and defensive weapons in their quest for financial and commercial autonomy, the Lorimer sisters also laugh at romantic ties and traditional domestic roles in their search for social independence. Frequently, this rebellion manifests itself through laughing at the nearest man:

“Miss Lucy,” [Fred] said, solemnly, looking at her with all his foolish eyes, “I’ll come every day of the week to be photographed, if I may, and so shall all the fellows at our office!”

He was a little hurt and disconcerted, though he joined in the laugh himself, when every one burst out laughing; even Lucy, to whom he had addressed himself as the least puzzling and most reliable of the Miss Lorimers. (62)

Or by causing him to laugh:

“Our business,” answered Lucy demurely, “is conducted on the strictest principles. We always let a gentleman know when he has had as much as is good for him.”

“Oh, I say!” Fred appeared to be completely bowled over by what he would have denominated as this “side-splitter,” and gave vent to an unearthly howl of merriment. (88)

Or, perhaps most progressively, laughing together in unison, as equals, as with Lord Watergate and Gertrude:

“Oakley has been telling me about the great success in photography of you and your sisters.”
“I don’t know about success!” Gertrude laughed.

“You look so tired, Miss Lorimer; let me find you a seat.”

“No, thank you; I prefer to stand. One sees the world so much better.”

“Ah, you like to see the world?”

“Yes; it is always interesting.” …They both laughed. (115)

Nancy Reincke suggests: “That women can be active joke-tellers is less threatening than that they can be active joke-getters” (34); while Walker adds: “laughter with others is evidence of shared values and perceptions…. Humor can trivialize and even wound, but it can also bring us together in a feeling of common humanity that is necessary to work for full liberation” (77, emphasis in original). Thus, this evolution of relationships with men: laughing at, to making laugh, to laughing with, signifies the extent to which laughter is a socio-cultural equalizer for English women. We see a similar progression in the novels I’ve discussed here: Trollope’s ridiculously mimicking feminine standards prepares Oliphant’s defiantly inverting them, and Gaskell’s women who laugh to discover shared identity anticipates Levy’s women who laugh to actively progress their shared cause.

The Lorimer sisters, like Gissing’s “Odd Women,” are made very aware of their “otherness” and the looming probability of spinsterhood. These reminders of their single-ness elicit the same reaction as reminders of their financial instability. Aunt Caroline, the voice of the

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49 A quality they shared with their creator: “Levy was distinctly one of the ‘odd women,’ like the heroines of George Gissing’s 1893 novel of that title and like the four sisters in her own first novel, The Romance of a Shop. She regarded herself as singular in a world of the paired and, because she was a Jew and an unmarried woman, as an outsider and virtual foreigner in English society” (Nord 740). Like Oliphant, Levy’s ethnic identity made her doubly “other”: “The Jewish matrilineal custom (determining who would and who would not be considered a Jew) further complicated Levy’s place within the English community since this circumstance effectively excluded her from the one extolled function reserved by the Victorian nation for its women—her motherhood of the next English generation. Thus irrespective of her family’s longstanding British roots, simply by being born an Anglo-Jewish woman, Levy would be considered a renegade even before she wrote a single page of text” (Jusova 132).
traditional, mid-century Victorian assumes that they are only vocationally demeaning themselves because they can’t find husbands.

“It is a pity that none of you has married; girls don’t seem to marry in these days!...but India works wonders sometimes in that respect.”

“Oh, let me go to India, Gerty!” cried Phyllis, in a very audible aside, while Gertrude bent her head and bit her lip, controlling the desire to laugh hysterically, which the naïve character of her aunt’s last remark had excited. (64-5)

Aunt Caroline’s earnest concern that they seek marriage in India suggests that race, or class, is a secondary concern to motherhood, that even the possibility of miscegenation is better than the sureness of spinsterhood. While Gertrude’s “desire to laugh hysterically” confronts the hypocrisy of this attitude. Jusova suggests that Levy’s “otherness” as a Jewish woman allowed her to view more objectively this patriotic rhetoric: “the ironic treatment of issues with such grave implications for the Victorians as British colonialism suggests the author’s distance from the hegemonic English discourse” (147); while simultaneously mocking through mimicry: “Using irony thus enabled Levy to emulate both the formulas of the Victorian literary tradition and the concerns of the English nation, making sure her texts would reach the intended audience, and to express (in a more or less encoded way) a certain level of contempt for these conventions and concerns” (147). Gertrude succinctly shares a “contempt for these conventions and concerns” with her sisters regarding a possible suitor, Mr. Darrell: “‘Ah, you are all laughing at me. But can one be expected to think well of a person who makes one feel like a strong-minded clown?’ They laughed more than ever at the curious image summoned up by her words” (117). As a Victorian woman writer and a Jew, Levy “was highly aware of her marginalization” (Beckman 7). I cannot help but think then, that Gertrude is speaking for Levy here as much as for herself; Levy,
Despite their independent spirit, occasionally this laughter bespoke a deeper conflict between what the Lorimer sisters desired and what was expected of them—allowing them to navigate the treacherous ideological (and generational) gap between the Victorian feminine and the New Woman. There was a dizzying disparity consequent to falling on the wrong side of this gap felt by all late nineteenth-century women, including Levy: “Levy’s bouts of depression appear to have been exacerbated by identity conflicts stemming from her position as a New Woman (a woman who, instead of centering her attention on home and family, strived for an autonomous, achievement-oriented existence); in her time the domestic ‘angel’ was still the ideal” (Beckman 7). To demonstrate this, Levy frequently qualifies the sisters’ laughter, insinuating that laughter is not exclusively synonymous with happiness. We often see this in Gertrude’s “laughing ruefully” (110) or “laugh[ing] at herself, half ashamed” (137). For all of their rebellious and confrontational laughter, the sisters, and Gertrude especially (as Levy’s “mouthpiece”), express an ambivalence to their social independence that seems strangely out of place and contradictory to the idea of the “New Woman”—intoning that even the most autonomous nineteenth-century Englishwoman finds it difficult to abandon the “domestic dream” for which she has been conditioned. Perhaps the clearest example of this ambivalent laughter occurs in a conversation between Gertrude and her friend Conny:

“One day you are going to be very happy.”

“Never, Gerty. We rich girls always end up with sneaks—no decent person comes near us.”
“There are other things which make happiness besides—pleasant things happening to one.”

“What sorts of things?”

Gertrude paused a minute, then said bravely: “Our own self-respect, and the integrity of the people we care for.”

“That sounds very nice,” replied Conny, without enthusiasm, “but I should like a little of the more obvious sorts of happiness as well.”

Gertrude gave a laugh, which was also a sob.

“So should I, Conny, so should I.” (132)

This laugh/sob belies an inner desire for traditional domesticity which seems incongruous with the other aspects of Gertrude’s New Woman-ness. Does this simultaneous laugh and sob demonstrate that crying and laughing perform the same function? Or does Gertrude laugh to disguise her lingering discontent as a woman caught between worlds? Lucy Lorimer experiences an identical struggle with this duality after an awkward and failed proposal: “There was no mistaking the situation. At one of the red-legged tables sat Fred, his arms spread out before him, his face hidden in his arms; while Lucy, with a troubled face, stood near, struggling between her genuine compunction and an irrepressible desire to laugh” (142). But after Fred storms out, “something between a laugh and a sob rose in her throat…and sinking to her knees by the table, she buried her face in her hands and burst into bitter weeping” (143-4). Despite achieving their primary aims set forth within the first few chapters—commercial success and social independence—the Lorimer sisters cannot escape the requirements of conventional Victorian femininity residual from previous generations. They are free to reject these qualities, but their
autonomy is earned at the expense of domestic security. It is perhaps to reconcile these spheres (or perhaps to assuage conservative readers) that

the entire last third of the novel…begins to resemble a cheap *Pride and Prejudice*—all four sisters searching for the appropriate mate…. After the struggle for independence is essentially won in the novel, Levy cannot sustain it, at least in part because she understands that independence is painful, precarious, and exhausting and because, as a fledgling novelist, she shies away from writing the kind of book that will tell an uncomfortable truth. (Nord 751)

Although Levy avoids writing the probable loneliness facing her commercially and intellectually self-sufficient New Women, she mocks the need to evade this “uncomfortable truth” in popular literature. After Frank Jermyn, Lucy’s fiancé, disappears on an African expedition, the following exchange occurs: “‘People always come back in books,’ Fanny had said, endeavouring, in all good faith, to administer consolation; and Lucy had actually laughed” (163). The ridiculous literary expectations of conventional romance, rather than the realism of impending spinsterhood, is the “uncomfortable truth” which Lucy confronts with laughter.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, English women writers—particularly when acting as a public “voice” for so many of their silenced sisters—began to see the patriotic power and control latent within them. Intellectual women realized that, despite being labeled “strong-minded clown[s],” they were literally the producers of Empire; while men produced rhetoric, women produced citizens. Yet, besides causing or emitting laughter, the single unifying characteristic of each character studied here is her voluntary and selective childlessness. The decision of a spinster/widow not to procreate represents more than progressive family planning; it signifies a rejection of Victorian woman’s position as nation-swaddler. This conscious
barrenness acts as a threatening protest of English femininity. Their overt control of humor, a form of misplaced hysteria, reminds us (and, I’m sure, many uneasy contemporary Anglo-male readers) that these uteruses are busy producing disruptive laughter, rather than English sons.
CHAPTER 5

THE THOUGHTFUL PATRIOTISM OF TRAVEL HUMOR:
LOCATING SELF AND QUESTIONING THE EGOTISM OF “HOME”

…from a geographic and social point of view the place of origin is a fundamental factor in the psychology of the individual and a force that accompanies the person, perhaps unconsciously, for the rest of his life.

—Elena Liotta (On Soul and Earth 41)

Those who know the English colonies abroad know that we carry with us our pride, pills, prejudices, Harvey-sauces, cayenne-peppers, and other Lares, making a little Britain wherever we settle down.

—William Makepeace Thackeray (Vanity Fair 754)

You cannot be amused at a thing and at the same time want to kill it.

—Jerome K. Jerome (Three Men on the Bummel 263)

While travel writing and geography each have well-drawn connections to ethno-cultural sentiment, in my final chapter, I would like to examine how humorous Victorian travel writings in particular contribute to creating and reinforcing collective socio-geographic memory. I examine travel humor and its effect on English ethnocentrism in Alexander Kinglake’s *Eothen: Traces of Travel Brought Home from the East* (1844), Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* (1872), Jerome K. Jerome’s *Three Men in a Boat* (1889), and its sequel, *Three Men on the Bummel* (1900). Although these works offer more differences than similarities to each other, I examine how each
of them, in their own way, exposes and appeals to a collective geographic and cultural memory of “Englishness” and, in doing so, begins to chart the changes of English patriotism and sentiment as the nineteenth-century drew to a close. Travel humor frequently take involves comically questioning our nostalgic connections with the physical landscapes around us as well as existing patriotic ideals in literature and history, and how we categorize “types” of people (i.e. the “typical” Englishman, Arab, or German).

Despite the fact that travel writing offers an unique reader-centric experience, “allow[ing] the reader to accompany the traveler and to be influenced and perhaps even transformed by his or her experience” (Korte 7), and the fact that technological and industrial developments in the nineteenth-century meant that “travel was becoming open to more and more sectors of society” (Korte 84), the travel narratives themselves occupy a problematic literary genre: the geographic and historical details make them not entirely fictive, but the narrators’ interpretations of these details are too subjective to be entirely nonfiction; the authors of these travel narratives navigate this grey area with various (and mostly satirical) definitions and defenses of “truth.” Jerome’s preface to Three Men in a Boat espouses that: “The chief beauty of this book lies not so much in its literary style…as in its simple truthfulness. Its pages form the record of events that really happened. All that has been done is to colour them” (preface, n.p.). Here, Jerome appeals to the Victorian concept of “truthfulness” (i.e. earnestness), but indicates that he has made efforts “to colour” this truthfulness. This distinction seems doubly humorous as Jerome later mocks the “truthfulness” expected from travelogues saying: “Just when we had given up all hope – yes, I know that is always the time that things do happen in novels and tales; but I can’t help it. I resolved when I began to write this book, that I would be strictly truthful in all things; and so I will be, even if I have to employ hackneyed phrases for the purpose” (128-9). Also, after Harris
has soaked several dozen people with a hose, Jerome employs a humorously self-referential defense as the “truthful” narrator: “I wish this book to be a strict record of fact, unmarred by exaggeration, and therefore have shown my description of this incident to Harris, lest anything beyond bald narrative may have crept into it. Harris maintains it is exaggerated, but admits that one or two people may have been ‘sprinkled’” (246). In calling attention to his story’s difference from “novels and tales” Jerome denounces subjectivity only to then call our attention directly to the subjective nature of narratives by comparing his narrative truth with Harris’s. Jerome’s recorded version of events would appear to be only one of multiple “truths.”

Alexander Kinglake takes a similarly defensive approach regarding his reliability as a narrator:

My excuse for the book is its truth: you and I know a man, fond of hazarding elaborate jokes, who, whenever a story of his happens not to go down as wit, will evade the awkwardness of the failure by bravely maintaining that all he has said is pure fact. I can honestly take this decent though humble mode of escape. My narrative is not merely righteous in matters of fact (where fact is in question), but it is true in this larger sense,—it conveys—not those impressions which ought to have been produced upon any “well-constituted mind,” but those which were really and truly received at the time of his rambles by a headstrong and not very amiable traveler….As I have felt so I have written… (xxii, emphasis in original)

However, is it possible to remain “righteous in matters of fact” while also describing not what has been seen or heard, but instead, even more subjectively, “as I have felt”? Similarly, what is the purpose of Jerome’s “coloring”? Why did he feel the need to fictively enhance his travel tales while Kinglake “bravely maintain[s] that all he has said is pure fact”? Do humorously “colored”
geographic and historical references more effectively appeal to English collective memory than “truthfulness” only, or, like Kinglake, should we attempt to ignore those “impressions which ought to have been produced” in favor of truth? Contrary to my either/or questioning here, these alternatives are not as disparate as they may appear; in any travel narrative, complete objectivism is arguably impossible and some degree of “coloring,” whether conscious or not, has been added. Barbara Korte notes that “Travel writing…provides us not only with an impression of the travelled world, but the travelling subject is always also laid bare: accounts of travel are never objective; they inevitably reveal the culture-specific and individual patters of perception and knowledge which every traveler brings to the travelled world” (5). Heather Henderson concurs: “no one can see with innocent eyes” (35), and because “The travel writer inevitably interposes his own text between the sight and the reader…Textual mediation is inescapable: the writer cannot act as a transparent or self-effacing medium” (37). So, if truth is always mediated through the previous experiences and cultural norms of the traveler, then it stands to reason that humor, perhaps the most subjective genre, is an ideal medium for these mediated cultural experiences.

In addition to an insistence on the “truthfulness” of the story, which is “characteristic of travel literature” (Henderson 36), perhaps the most striking feature of Victorian travel narratives is what Alexander Kinglake refers to in *Eothen* as “this egotism of a traveler” (xxiv) and demonstrates thusly: “the dry sand was heaped up outside round the skirts of the tent, and so the wind that everywhere else could sweep as he listed along those dreary plains, was forced to turn aside in his course and make way, as he ought, for the Englishman” (228, emphasis mine). This narcissism is due, in large part, to the ever-present traveler’s ego. Just as he mocks the idea of
“truthfulness” throughout both *Three Men* novels, Jerome also satirizes this egotism when ruminating on the joys of an early-morning swim:

They seem to keep a specially cutting east wind waiting for me when I go to bathe in the early morning; and they pick out all the three-cornered stones; and put them on the top, and they sharpen up the rocks and cover the points over with a bit of sand so that I can’t see them, and they take the sea and put it two miles out, so that I have to huddle myself up in my arms and hop, shivering, through six inches of water. And when I do get to the sea, it is rough and quite insulting.

One huge wave catches me up and chucks me in a sitting posture as hard as ever it can, down on to a rock which has been put there for me….Just when I have given up all hope, a wave retires and leaves me sprawling like a star-fish on the sand, and I get up and look back and find that I’ve been swimming for my life in two feet of water. I hop back and dress and crawl home, where I have to pretend I liked it. (21)

Jerome comically addresses a common social experience, but does so through the lens of a “They”-antagonist vs. “me, me, me”-egoist situation. He exposes our inherently self-involved social expectations (the sea has a personal grudge against *me*, why does this always happen to *me*, etc.), and in doing so, reveals a hidden truth about his readers. This “egotism of travelers,” especially English ones, could stem from what Edward Lytton-Bulwer describes in *England and the English* as a vanity of country: “The Englishman then is vain of his country! Wherefore? because of the public buildings? he never enters them.—The laws? he abuses them eternally.—The public men? they are quacks.—The writers? he knows nothing about them. He is vain of his country for an excellent reason—IT PRODUCED HIM” (Bulwer 22). However, in the novels discussed here, this is a faux-vanity, with authors consciously questioning rather than blindly
accepting this vanity of country. And yet, despite each novel’s cultural introspection, this vanity is never completely nullified; we get the distinct impression that no matter the level of self-criticism, it is still preferable to be English than otherwise. English travel narratives’ comparisons with a foreign “other” ultimately serve to highlight the advantages of England. This persistent Anglophilia evoked a scathing criticism of Eothen from Edward Said: “Kinglake’s undeservedly famous and popular work is a pathetic catalogue of pompous ethnocentrism and tiringly nondescript accounts of the Englishman’s East. His ostensible purpose in the book is to prove that travel in the Orient is important to ‘moulding of your character—that is, your very identity,’ but in fact this turns out to be little more than solidifying ‘your’ anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and general all-purpose race prejudice” (193). Yet, it is not Orientalism (how the English view an Asiatic-Other) but precisely this Anglophilism (how the English view themselves) I wish to investigate, not their obsession with a foreign other, but their narcissistic (and yes, many times xenophobic and prejudicial) love of self. Pritchett notes that in Jerome’s novels, “What the German tour does is to point to the reason for the superiority of the book about the Thames” (“The Tin-Openers” 638); and similarly, “like many travelers before him, Kinglake discovered that with all its shortcomings English society was more acceptable than its alternatives” (Dunlap 78). Because these narratives manage to be both self-deprecating and self-promotional they expose the role travel fulfills in revealing the “self” more so than discovering any “other” we may encounter on our journey. While Kinglake’s Eothen apparently investigates an Oriental “other,” it, like Jerome’s novels, instead appears to reveal how the English viewed England (and themselves). Butler’s Erewhon is singular in that it is not a travelogue of a real place (domestic or “other”), but rather presents a nineteenth-century utopian view of a mythical foreign region. But despite this difference, I believe Butler’s utopian-fantasy
offers an equally insightful look into both how the English viewed real Others and how they wished to portray themselves as “English” on a world stage. In fact, in these satirical and humorous travelogues, it is the narrator’s personal and subjective journey, not the exploration of an objective foreign “other” which occupies most of the narrative.

Jerome offers a humorous example which seemingly denounces self-criticism, but actually questions why these English social norms are in place:

Harris is inclined to be chronically severe on all British institutions. …

George, the opposite to Harris, is British to the core. I remember George quite patriotically indignant with Harris once for suggesting the introduction of the guillotine into England.

“It is so much neater,” said Harris.

“I don’t care if it is,” said George; “I’m an Englishman; hanging is good enough for me.” (243-4)

Partly because “I’m an Englishman” is George’s comically knee-jerk reasoning and partly because of the macabre subject matter (basically citing hanging as a national pastime), George’s “patriotic indignation” is reflected back on the English self. Bulwer cites this type of self-indignation as an English-specific tendency: “We may observe the different form of the national vanity in the inhabitant of either country by comparing the eulogia which the Frenchman lavishes on France, with the sarcastic despondency with which the Englishman touches upon England” (Bulwer 21). Kinglake echoes this sense of ethno-cultural ennui: “there comes to [an Englishman] a time for loathing the wearisome ways of society—a time for not liking tamed people—a time for not sitting in pews—a time for impugning the foregone opinions of men, and haughtily dividing truth from falsehood—a time, in short, for questioning, scoffing, and railing—
for speaking lightly of the very opera, and all our most cherished institutions” (154-5). But is criticism of and indignation with one’s own country still patriotic? How can this “patriotic indignation” and “sarcastic despondency” still promote positive and sentimental associations in English readers?

This seemingly-paradoxical patriotism is precisely what I explore in these works—more specifically, how each author uses humor to achieve this effect. Moreover, I examine the ways in which these authors, especially the late-Victorian writings of Butler and Jerome promoted what I call “thoughtful patriotism.” Peter Mudford suggests that Butler’s common enemy in Erewhon is “blind adherence to attitudes inculcated in childhood or handed down from past generations” (13) and “he makes it clear that the danger of a new a creative idea consists in the tendency for it to harden into a popular orthodoxy, accepted without question or scrutiny” (15). Does this imply that one’s ethnicity, like religion, should be (l)earned and not accepted passively as an automatic birthright? By satirically questioning and scrutinizing geo-historical, and thus seemingly “inborn,” characteristics of Englishness, these authors restructure the concept of ethnic identity: from a category thrust upon us at birth, to one we must actively, consciously, and thoughtfully pursue.50

Maps, Landscapes, and Geographic Nostalgia

50 In *Three Men on the Bummel*, Jerome astutely mocks the temperamental nature of political geography and the ridiculousness of determining national identity based on map lines:

> Whom he belonged to, and what he was, the dweller in Alt Breisach could never have been quite sure. One day he would be a Frenchman, and then before he could learn enough French to pay his taxes he would be an Austrian. While trying to discover what you did to be a good Austrian, he would find he was no longer an Austrian, but a German, thought what particular German out of a dozen must always have been doubtful to him. One day he would discover that he was a Catholic, the next an ardent Protestant. The only thing that could have given any stability to his existence must have been the monotonous necessity for paying heavily for the privilege of being whatever for the moment he was. But when one begins to think of these things one finds oneself wondering why anybody in the Middle Ages, except kings and tax collectors, ever took the trouble to live at all. (318)
The Oxford edition of Jerome K. Jerome’s comic novel *Three Men in a Boat* does not begin with a joke; it begins with a map—“The River Thames, from Kingston to Oxford.” Ultimately, in situating his characters on the Thames, Jerome demonstrates that fin de siècle Britannia, while gradually losing influence over the oceans, can still rule her own domestic waves. Many chapters of *Three Men in a Boat* also begin with some nod to quintessential English landscapes and geography. On the first page of Chapter 1, our narrator J. muses “I remember going to the British Museum one day…” (1); the first sentence of Chapter 2 is “We pulled out the maps, and discussed plans” (10); Chapter 6 finds us in view of “the quaint back-streets of Kingston, where they came down to the water’s edge…quite picturesque in the flashing sunlight, the glinting river with its drifting barges, the wooded towpath, the trim-kept villas on either side…” (40); Chapter 13: “Marlow is one of the pleasantest river centres I know of” (108); and Chapter 14: “Wargrave, nestling in the river bends, makes a sweet old picture as you pass it, and one that lingers upon the retina of memory” (120), to name only a few. Readers’ familiarity with extra-textual references is essential in any parody, satire, or otherwise self-critical bit of humor; and while *Three Men in a Boat* does not explore distant lands or exotic foreign countries, it is replete with touchstones of domestic identity. Henderson explains: “There are two kinds of travelers: those who seek to fill in the ‘white spaces’ on the map, and those who travel to see places that have been previously visited and described. Some are looking to inscribe themselves upon a blank page, others to reread an already written landscape” (30). Regionally reduced to a love of city or love of a particular two-mile-stretch of river, this love of country is more heavily concentrated in Jerome’s fiction than Butler’s or Kinglake’s. Yet, even this extreme specificity is rhetorically apt: “the contemporary popularity of *Three Men in a Boat* depended to some extent on its presentation of a world with which many of its readers would be familiar” (Harvey
Thus, infusing humorous commonplaces into a Thames narrative is the perfect way to promote positive patriotic sentiment among native-English readers.

That being said, it is not remarkable at all that a travel writer would begin his chapters with a solid point of geographic reference—a point with which most English readers are familiar (either through personal experience, or common cultural knowledge). However, what is unusual in this travel narrative is that many of these geographic references are directly associated with a humorous past occurrence or are immediately followed by a comic scene. Jerome notes in the first sentence of Chapter 7: “It was while passing through Mousley lock that Harris told me about his maze experience” (50). Now, readers will forever associate this section of the river with Harris’s comic escapade of getting his party thoroughly lost in a hedge maze—an error blamed, incidentally, on a faulty map: “the map was once more consulted, and the thing seemed simpler than ever, and off they started for the third time. And three minutes later they were back in the centre again….Harris drew out his map again, after a while, but the sight of it only infuriated the mob, and they told him to go and curl his hair with it” (49).

Chapter 8 begins: “We stopped under the willows by Kempton Park, and lunched” (58) during the course of which Jerome reminisces about Harris’s various failed attempts to sing comic songs—“you don’t look for much of a voice in a comic song. You don’t expect correct phrasing or vocalization….But you do expect the words” (60); similarly with Chapter 17: “We stayed two days at Streatley, and got our clothes washed. We had tried washing them ourselves, in the river, under George’s superintendence, and it had been a failure…the river between Reading and Henley was much cleaner, after we had washed our clothes in it, than it was before. All the dirt contained in the river between Reading and Henley we collected, during that wash, and worked it into our

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51 In addition to adding a comic sentimentality to Mousley lock (and traditional English hedge mazes), Harris demonstrates that in order for maps to be useful, you must first define yourself (i.e. “You are here.”) before you can locate or navigate an “other.”
clothes” (147). By directly associating English geography with socially-unifying humorous experiences, Jerome solidifies the causality of this relationship; these experiences are funny because they are recognizably English. Kinglake achieves a similar result in Eothen when he sardonically describes the death of an eccentric ex-patriot’s (Lady Hester’s) uncle: “In the bitterness of his despair, he cried out to his niece, and bid her ‘ROLL UP THE MAP OF EUROPE;’ there was a little more of suffering, and at last, with his swollen tongue (so they say) still muttering something for England, he died by the noblest of all sorrows” (109). Not only does this satiric hyper-sentimentality mock English readers’ expectations of fiction, it also uses a map of Europe as a direct metaphor for self-will, identity, and life. This man’s last request was not “draw the blinds” or “snuff the candle” or any other tried-and-true death metaphor, but instead “Roll up the map of Europe.” In this instance, the map of Western Civilization becomes a primary signifier of one’s identity and life-force.

These novels continually reiterate that place and geography create identity. For English writers, the Thames seems to be a particularly important meme of sentiment and collective memory:

If you are wise, you will not look upon the long period of time thus occupied in actual movement, as the mere gulf dividing you from the end of your journey, but rather as one of those rare and plastic seasons of your life, from which, perhaps, in after-times, you may love to date the moulding of your character—that is, your very identity. Once feel this, and you will soon grow happy and contented in your saddle home. As for me and my comrade, however, in this part of our journey we often forgot Stamboul, forgot all the Ottoman empire, and only remembered old times. We went back, loitering on the banks of the Thames—not grim old Thames, of “after-life;” that washed the Parliament Houses
and drowns despairing girls,—but Thames the “old Eton fellow” that wrestled with us in our boyhood till he taught us to be stronger than he. (Kinglake 25-6)

Here, Kinglake emphasizes the travelling process itself, the “actual movement,” more so than the destination, as the identity-creating force. And, in asking us to recognize that “the moulding of your character” is created not by the Thames as river, but by the Thames as “the ‘old Eton fellow,’” Kinglake recalls not only a geo-specific English memory, but an overtly sentimental and personal one. And although many readers may not have experienced an Eton boyhood, there is a sense of collective cultural familiarity and understanding in this “type” of person described, as well as a personal familiarity with the river itself: “stories of the river had always been popular, and in Victorian fiction the Thames afforded a mechanism for bridging the abysses of class, sex, and race” (Harvey xiv). In terms of creating identity, Jerome notes that the river promotes personal growth: “Being out in a boat on the River Lea, especially on Saturday afternoons, soon makes you smart at handling a craft,…But it does not give you style. It was not till I came to the Thames that I got style” (135); is the glue of English social cohesion: “They are picturesque little spots, these locks….You meet other boats there, and river gossip is exchanged. The Thames would not be the fairyland it is without its flower-decked locks” (155); and speaks to a collective memory inborn in every Englishman: “in the pauses of our talk, the river, playing round the boat, prattles strange old tales and secrets, sings low the old child’s song that it has sung so many thousand years – will sing so many thousand years to come, before its voice grows harsh and old – a song that we, who have learnt to love its changing face, who have so often nestled on its yielding bosom, think, somehow, we understand” (11). This pride seems to extend beyond patriotic idealism (“the fairyland”) or personal sentiment (Kinglake’s “old Eton fellow”); there is a sense of ethnocentric territoriality here, as though these “strange old tales and secrets,”
this “yielding bosom,” are meant only for the truly English—those “who have learnt to love its changing face.”

Bulwer identifies this possessive nostalgia as “sentiment of property” and believes that it is an inherently English quality: “…the French and the English are both eminently vain of country….The vanity of the Frenchman consists…in belonging to so great a country: but the vanity of the Englishman exults in the thought that so great a country belongs to himself. The root of all our notions, as of all our laws, is to be found in the sentiment of property” (21). Jerome K. Jerome satirizes this feeling (and also critiques the uneven distribution of this property) in *Three Men in a Boat*:

The selfishness of the riparian proprietor grows with every year. If these men had their way they would close the River Thames altogether. They actually do this along the minor tributary streams and in the backwaters. They drive posts into the bed of the stream, and draw chains across from bank to bank, and nail huge notice-boards on every tree. The sight of those notice-boards rouses every evil instinct in my nature. I feel I want to tear each one down, and hammer it over the head of the man who put it up, until I have killed him, and then I would bury him, and put the board up over the grave as a tombstone.

I mentioned these feelings of mine to Harris, and he said he had them worse than that. He said he not only felt he wanted to kill the man who caused the board to be put up, but that he should like to slaughter the whole of his family and all his friends and

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52 Jerome just as quickly (and not too subtly) mocks this English pride of the Thames. One of the most humorous moments of *Three Men in a Boat* occurs when J. recalls a previous river trip and his attempts to hire a boat aptly named *The Pride of the Thames* which turns out to resemble “a Roman relic of some sort, – relic of what I do not know, possibly a coffin” (162) while his friend thinks it is possibly “the fossil of a dead whale” that “must have belonged to the pre-glacial period” (162). After being informed that it is neither of these, but instead *The Pride of the Thames*, J. and his companion assume it is a joke: “We thought this a very humorous answer on the part of the boy at first, and somebody gave him twopence as a reward for his ready wit; but when he persisted in keeping up the joke, as we thought too long, we got vexed with him” (162-3).
relations, and then burn down his house. This seemed to me to be going too far, and I said so to Harris; but he answered: “Not a bit of it. Serve ’em all jolly well right, and I’d go and sing comic songs on the ruins.” (59)

Jerome’s criticism of the “selfishness of the riparian proprietor” confirms Bulwer’s claim that an Englishman’s vanity of country springs from his “sentiment of property”; Butler concurs: “We cannot seriously detract from a man’s merit in having been the son of a rich father without imperiling our own tenure of things which we do not wish to jeopardize; if this were otherwise we should not let him keep his money for a single hour; we would have it ourselves at once. For property is robbery, but then we are all robbers or would-be robbers together…” (120, emphasis in original). Property in both cases here is defined not as private ownership, but as communal entitlement: “Running counter to Jerome’s gypsy spirit, and his evident irritation with the crowdedness of the river, is his nostalgic, Utopian feeling for a shared landscape” (Harvey xviii). One Englishman cannot decide that this particular bit of Thames is his and his alone; the Thames, as an identity-creating force, is fundamentally public. Uneven distribution could therefore imply that the owner of the larger share is more “English”—a notion Jerome grotesquely mocks (“he should like to slaughter the whole of his family”) and Butler tacitly accepts (“but then we are all robbers or would-be robbers together”).

Because these bits of English geography (the Thames in particular) seem to be such inherent hallmarks of cultural identity, English travel writers frequently impose their idea of home on an ethnic “other,” often superimposing familiarity on that which is foreign. Indeed, the humor in “nineteenth-century English travel writing…can be read as an index of Western cultural assumptions” (Piers Michael Smith 242). This sort of psychological colonialism
regularly occurs when J., Harris, and George cycle through Germany in *Three Men on the Bummel*:

A singularly English atmosphere hovers over Hanover, especially on Sundays, when its shuttered shops and clanging bells give to it the suggestion of a sunnier London. Nor was this British Sunday atmosphere apparent only to myself, else I might have attributed it to imagination; even George felt it. Harris and I returning from a short stroll with our cigars after lunch on the Sunday afternoon, found him peacefully slumbering in the smoke-room’s easiest chair.

“After all,” said Harris, “there is something about the British Sunday that appeals to the man with English blood in his veins. I should be sorry to see it altogether done away with, let the new generation say what it will.” (238-9)

Similarly, in *Eothen* Kinglake notes that “our road lay through scenes like those of an English park. … In one or two spots the hanging copses look down upon a lawn below with such sheltering mien, that, seeing the like in England, you would have been tempted almost to ask the name of the spendthrift or the madman who had dared to pull down ‘the old hall’” (27), reports that the Sea of Galilee was “less stern than Wastwater—less fair than gentle Windermere” but “had still the winning ways of an English lake” (149), describes a river flowing toward the Dead Sea as “a body of waters, about equal to the Thames at Eton, but confined to a narrower channel” (169), and recalls an auditory Anglo-sentimental memory: “after a while I was gently awakened by a peal of church bells—my native bells—the innocent bells of Marlen, that never before sent forth their music beyond the Blaygon hills! … Since my return to England it has been told me that like sounds have been heard at sea, and that the sailor, becalmed under a vertical sun in the midst of the wide ocean, has listened in trembling wonder to the chime of his own village bells”
In the dreamy utopia of *Erewhon* this foreign familiarity takes the form of a quintessentially English sight—the pub sign: “The village was just like the one we had left, only rather larger. The streets were narrow and unpaved, but very fairly clean. The vine grew outside many of the houses; and there were some with signboards, on which was painted a bottle and a glass, that made me feel much at home” (78-9). (Indeed, there is an “ironic thoroughness with which metropolitan Erewhon mimics contemporary England” (Zemka 449).) This traveler’s egotism, then, is perhaps what is the greatest mediator of sensory perception. And yet, in humorous travel writings at least, these perceptions of self-in-other are sentimental markers of ethnic pride while also masking, or perhaps softening, the self-criticism around them.

Piers Michael Smith suggests that “[l]aughter in colonial travel writing is often seen by postcolonial critics as a sign of assumed cultural superiority or mockery” (241), but this mockery is most often directed inward—satirically or parodically reflecting Victorian English values, beliefs, and mannerisms. Seeing ourselves in an “other” can inversely mean seeing ourselves as Other: “The English actions become re-coded as culturally limited, foreign and funny. Mastery of the gaze is turned back on itself” (Piers Michael Smith 246-7). In *Three Men in a Boat*, this inward gaze takes the form of anti-imperialist, anti-colonial satire: “The antics and exploits of Jerome’s antiheroes…suggest that civilization along the Thames can be strange and barbaric…Jerome’s adventurers set out to explore the upriver environs of the Thames as if they were on an expedition into an unknown land…Jerome’s narrator details the rituals and activities of the natives along the Thames. He does so with the curiosity of a stranger in a strange land” (Scheick 408). An English writer is bound to view an unfamiliar land through English eyes but, after returning home, cannot then help viewing England through foreign lenses. And, rather

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53 To this end, Jerome points out an interesting cultural phenomenon—the moment, after you have been abroad for some time, when you suddenly encounter a fellow-Briton and his apparent “otherness” is jarring, discomforting, and
than alienating English readers, travel humorists make a geographically-mediated nudge toward thoughtful patriotism, proving that satirically questioning, and thus perhaps un- or re-coding, the most familiar landscapes (England’s own physical self) can lead to more genuine (rather than knee-jerk or genealogically-automated) patriotism.

Landmarks, *Genius Loci*, and Socio-historical Nostalgia

While satirizing maps and geographic landscapes does promote conscientious patriotic sentiment, travel writers often used an even more Anglo-centric personalized rhetoric: mocking historical landmarks and the popular culture and common experiences connected with them.

Regarding the various uses of humor, Alvin Kernan asserts that “satire originates in the dullness of men” and is “a perfectly ground and uncompromisingly honest mirror” (5). Many others have latched onto this definition, especially when referring to *Erewhon*; critics again and again invoke the “mirror” metaphor to describe Butler’s satire of Victorian society: “Erewhon combines elements from the tradition of Utopian fiction with that of the imaginary voyage….the voyage is an integral part of the narrative’s significance, as well as the means by which the satirist chooses to position and distance his ‘mirror’” (Mudford 9); similarly, “Erewhon is not an idealized picture of Victorian society at its best or its worst; rather it is a work which holds a mirror up to that society, presenting it recognizably as it is, but in a strangely reversed perspective” (Remington 33). However, as is the nature of mirrors, those in humorous travel narratives seem to reflect more of the self/traveler than they do of an “other”; but the travel writers here welcome this self-critique and either deny or ignore claims of hypocrisy. And although the mirror always possibly comical: “At Waldshut, one of those little sixteenth-century towns through which the Rhine flows during its earlier course, we came across that exceedingly common object of the Continent: the travelling Briton grieved and surprised at the unacquaintance of the foreigner with the subtleties of the English language…. The true inwardness of the situation lay in the indignation of this Britisher at finding a German railway porter unable to comprehend English” (308-9). Suddenly and objectively confronted with our own egotism (the fellow-Englishman is here reduced to nothing more than a “common object”), we now find this English self-righteousness ridiculous and laughable.
reflects the self as well as the Other, this reflection is not inherently self-loathing. After all, because the mirror is also a beloved companion of the self-addicted egoist, a certain level of narcissism is inherent in satire. If Butler uses his mirror to mock, he also uses it to preen.

At times this self-reflexive humor takes the form of mocking common literary knowledge, as when Jerome slyly inserts a Wellerism: “everything has its drawbacks, as the man said when his mother-in-law died, and they came down upon him for the funeral expenses” (20), but more often, travel humor mocks Anglo-specific historic legends and icons. Jerome frequently slips into historical musings, intertwining the action currently at hand with events which happened “on this very spot” X number of years ago:

I mused on Kingston, or “Kyningestun,” as it was once called in the days when Saxon “kings” were crowned here. Great Caesar crossed the river there, and the Roman legions camped upon its sloping uplands. Caesar, like, in later years, Elizabeth, seems to have stopped everywhere: only he was more respectable than good Queen Bess; he didn’t put up at public-houses.

She was nuts on public-houses, was England’s Virgin Queen. There’s scarcely a pub of any attractions within ten miles of London that she does not seem to have looked in at, or stopped at, or slept at, some time or other. (41)

Here, Jerome fuses Historical “facts” with humorous irreverence, cultural iconography (the public-house), and geography (the river and its “sloping uplands”). He also mentions later that: “At ‘Corway Stakes’ – the first bend above Walton Bridge – was fought a battle between Caesar and Cassivelaunus. Cassivelaunus had prepared the river for Caesar, by planting it full of stakes (and had, no doubt, put up a notice-board). But Caesar crossed in spite of this. You couldn’t choke Caesar off that river. He is the sort of man we want round the backwaters now” (67).
addition to English history, Jerome also satirizes current and contemporary topics in English culture. I have a feeling he was thinking of Lucilla Marjoribanks, the Lorimer sisters, and their ilk of New Women when he penned this: “The girls that have lovers never want them. They say they would rather be without them, that they bother them, and why don’t they go and make love to Miss Smith and Miss Brown, who are plain and elderly, and haven’t got any lovers? They themselves don’t want lovers. They never mean to marry. It does not do to dwell on these things; it makes one so sad” (43).

And yet, despite his occasional ennui, Jerome’s nostalgia for historical landmarks and legends is generally soothing: “I got out and took the tow-line, and ran the boat on past Hampton Court. What a dear old wall that is that runs along by the river there! I never pass it without feeling better for the sight of it” (46). Like the calming effect of Jerome’s “dear old wall,” Kinglake is similarly eased by the sensory impressions of Englishness he finds abroad. When he describes being cured of a fever by a quintessential English icon, the pot of hot tea, his nostalgia is so comically hyperbolic it possesses physiotherapeutic powers: “I had a feeling that tea would be a capital thing for me…. The effect was almost instantaneous. … The hot tormenting weight which had been loading my brain was slowly heaved away. The fever was extinguished. I felt a new buoyancy of spirits, and an unusual activity of mind” (276-7). He also mentions that “the love of tea is a glad source of fellow-feeling between the Englishman and the Asiatic…the fragrant steam ascended; and soon this little circlet in the wilderness grew warm and genial as my lady’s drawing room” (162). This gastro-nostalgic connection to “home” literally rejuvenates (and figuratively re-encodes) Kinglake’s Englishness, while simultaneously imposing an English domesticity onto the “wilderness.” Samuel Butler also questions the
importance of socio-collective memory and nostalgia in Erewhon—particularly in relation to historic events and recurring actions:

…Each stage of development brings back the recollection of the course taken in the preceding stage, and the development has been so often repeated, that all doubt – and with all doubt, all consciousness of action – is suspended.

But an objector may still say, “Granted that the linking between all successive generations has been so close and unbroken, that each one of them may be conceived as able to remember what it did in the persons of its ancestors – how do you show that it actually did remember?”

The answer is: “By the action which each generation takes – an action which repeats all the phenomena that we commonly associate with memory – which is explicable on the supposition that it has been guided by memory – and which has neither been explained on any other theory than the supposition that there is an abiding memory between successive generations.” (239-40)

Elena Liotta echoes this sentiment, not mentioning the innate cultural knowledge of succeeding generations which Butler contends exists, but recognizing what she suitably terms a “particular presence of place”:

It is as if certain places had, or autonomously assumed, a special evocative quality. It is not an uncommon experience and gave rise to the idea, and as a result also the name, of the genius loci, that is of a particular presence of the place. Conceptually grouped together are the identity characterizing a place, consisting of historical values and previous existences, natural and artificial factors and symbolic meanings shared by the
inhabitants…and personal experiences, solitary or shared, of the sacrality or specialty of a place, a represented by poets, artists, mystics. (Liotta 77)

It is precisely this *genius loci* that Kinglake, Butler, and especially Jerome question, confront, and satirize—not with the aim of nullifying it altogether, but merely restructuring it, encouraging change, growth, and “new”-ness as the twentieth century approached.

Many times this recoding/restructuring takes the form of explicit satirical critique on the “home” society and culture; lurking behind the Englishman’s hypocritical vanity, his ethnocentric egotism, is an overcompensation for something more innately and universally human—the need for change, the need to escape the very civilization which he is otherwise expected to promote. Occasionally this mocking is veiled in parody, such as when Butler’s narrator condescendingly describes Erewhon’s “schools of Unreason” as being “where a boy is taught upon hypothetical principals…spending years in being incapacitated for doing this, that, or the other (he hardly knows what), during all which time he ought to have been actually doing the thing itself…” (177); at other times, Butler’s cultural criticism is specific, direct, and biting, such as when he later adds:

And yet perhaps, after all, it is better for a country that its seats of learning should do more to suppress mental growth than to encourage it…genuine work would become dangerously common. …No doubt the marvelous development of journalism in England, as also the fact that our seats of learning aim rather at fostering mediocrity than anything higher, is due to our subconscious recognition of the fact that it is even more necessary to check exuberance of mental development than to encourage it. There can be no doubt that this is what our academic bodies do, and they do it the more effectually because they
do it only subconsciously. They think they are advancing healthy mental assimilation and digestion, whereas in reality they are little better than cancer in the stomach. (193)

By supplanting England’s socio-academic body with a literal one, and then giving it stomach cancer, Butler’s narrator bashes the very society to which he is trying so desperately to return. Why? Because he has now seen its alternate, an “other” through which to gauge its performance, a performance that suddenly appears lacking and in need of a rhetorically didactic corrective.

Thomas Remington notes that “In many ways these colleges [of Unreason] are simply parodies of Oxford and Cambridge rather than true reversals” (43)—parody of course implying that there remains some level of admiration for the originals in question, even if it is admiration for hypothetical potential. Although we criticize what they are, there is still cultural pride in what could be.

Both of Jerome’s novels begin with characters expressing a need for change; more specifically, a “change of scene…whence the surging waves of the nineteenth-century would sound far off and faint” (5). In Erewhon, Butler’s narrator expresses this need even more concretely: “I could not help speculating upon what might lie farther up the river and behind the second range. …I would remain in doubt no longer, but saddle my horse, take as much provision with me as I could, and go and see for myself. But over and above these thoughts came that of the great range itself. What was beyond it? Ah! Who could say?...Could I hope to cross it? This would be the highest triumph that I could wish for” (43-4). But perhaps Kinglake captures the dire and pressing reality of this sentiment most clearly: “You are yet in this smiling England, but you find yourself bending your way to the dark sides of her mountains…. Civilization is watching to throw her lasso; you will be surely enclosed, and sooner or later brought down to a state of mere usefulness….but first come Continental tours, and the moody longing for Eastern
travel: the downs and the moors of England can hold you no longer” (155). Here the very home-
geography itself is at best an impediment to be overcome and at worst a malicious captor. Korte
notes that: “Not until the nineteenth century draws to its close do travelogues appear in large
numbers which, like Kinglake’s Eothen, present the attraction of travel per se and which
emphasize the opportunities of escape which travel affords. Increasingly, this tendency is
accompanied by open criticism of civilization, as well as anti-tourist and anti-imperialist
attitudes” (101). Each of these travel writers—at some point in their respective narrative(s)—
expresses this anti-civilization attitude and need to escape the weight of his own culture. In
Eothen Kinglake continues to confront the English middle-class reader directly:

It is so sweet to find one’s self free from the stale civilization of Europe! Oh my dear
ally, when first you spread your carpet in the midst of these Eastern scenes, do think for a
moment of those your fellow-creatures that dwell in squares, and streets, and even (for
such is the fate of many!) in actual country-houses; think of the people that are
“presenting their compliments,” and “requesting the honour,” and “much regretting,”—of
those that are pinioned at dinner-tables, or stuck up in ball-rooms, or cruelly planted in
pews,—ay, think of these, and so remembering how many poor devils are living in a state
of utter respectability, you will glory the more in your own delightful escape. (24)

The sarcasm here is palpable as Kinglake hits each touchstone of English middle-class domestic
leisure—reimagining eating, playing, and praying as things which trap and confine.

Since the action in Three Men in a Boat never leaves England, Jerome invokes time,
rather than place in his critique of civilization, complaining that he lives in “this overcrowded
nineteenth century” (159), otherwise known as “the prosaic present, with all its misery and sin”
(97), wherein “that fretful haste, that vehement striving…is every day becoming more and more
the bane of nineteenth-century life” (137). And when passing Magna Charta island, he muses:

“Little was in sight to remind us of the nineteenth century; and, as we looked out upon the river in the morning sunlight, we could almost fancy that the centuries between us and that ever-to-be-famous June morning of 1215 had been drawn aside, and that we, English yeoman’s sons…were waiting there to witness the writing of that stupendous page of history” (93). But why would authors continually reassert this need to escape what is elsewhere touted to be the superior society, unless self-reflexively calling into question this very superiority?

Barbara Korte notes the seeming incongruity here: “The Victorian explorers became national heroes if their expeditions could be claimed for the imperial cause. These travelers…were commonly considered to bring the blessings of British civilization to the ‘wilderness’” (90, emphasis in original), and yet “for Kinglake, the value of travel lies in a temporary escape from the treadmill of ‘Civilization’” (99). Rather than claiming their travels “for the imperial cause” these three humourists seem to reject this idea. Their narratives are mock-missionary and faux-imperial; thoughtful patriotism is promoted through sustaining the home/self, not governing or ruling others.

54 Elena Liotta notes that this type of dissatisfaction with the present is merely another type of nostalgic longing, and it would seem that the “inaccessible present” she describes is also exactly what Samuel Butler’s dystopian world mourns:

Nostalgia that focuses on the past can also become perpetual mourning for an idealized nucleus, which cannot delude because it is distant. This time we might say, yes, it is nostalgia for the realm of the Mother, a utopian place, a pre-verbal paradise, landscape of senses and emotions, that absorbs the soul and makes it impossible to live on the earth of the present.

But there are also other types of nostalgia.

There is the nostalgia for an inaccessible present. Nostalgia of what it should and could be, the languor of the unrealizable, like that of an impossible love. (Liotta 154)

55 This criticism could stem from a post-Darwinian recognition of man as innately savage: “We prate about our civilization and humanity, but those of us who do not carry hypocrisy to the length of self-deception know that underneath our starched shirts there lurks the savage, with all his savage instincts untouched” (Jerome 329). Erewhon similarly “argues for the necessity of recognizing man as a primitive creature” (Mudford 20).
Again, this inner rebelliousness and rejection of cultural expectations would appear to be an English characteristic; V.S. Pritchett identifies a “claustrophobia of island life” as the main catalyst for the prolific amount of English travel writers:

Why has English literature so many masterpieces of travel? The answer does not lie simply in the love of adventure or the curiosity of the British, nor in their romantic temperament. Other nations have these qualities and have produced great explorers and wanderers. The reason is to be found in the deep English feeling for idiosyncracy in our travelers, whether their journeys have been into the unknown or the commonplace. … They are all strange, eccentric, or crusty beings who live by the restless gaiety of the eye. They find freedom in getting away from the claustrophobia of island life and, above all, from the pressures of a country that is obsessed by itself as a coherent society. Such a country produces a large quota of solitary rebels who are determined to go their own way, carrying nothing but their characters with them. (Introduction vii-viii)

But why do Kinglake, Butler, and Jerome choose to confront the “pressures of a country that is obsessed by itself as a coherent society” with instances of humorous geographic and historic nostalgia that only serve to increase this very cohesion? For them, this perceived genius loci, while a potential catalyst for unification, is itself a target of satire. Ever questioning blind adherence to entrenched cultural commonplaces, these travel humorists use “typical” English experiences to challenge the status quo; although in many instances this method simultaneously evokes the very commonplaces it professes to subvert. In other words, by describing a situation that “always” happens or a character who “generally” behaves in a certain way, the humorist forces us to use our own cultural experiences to confront why these values and actions are “typical” at all. Warburton pinpoints what is perhaps the most comically Anglo-centric
typification, as recorded in *Eothen* after Kinglake silently encounters a fellow English traveler: “The two Englishmen, in the midst of the primeval desert, could not but conduct themselves towards each other as if their encounter had been under the bow-window of White’s. These gentlemen could not speak—for they had never been introduced” (74). We have all been in this situation or have seen this type of person before, so we laugh in agreement; yet this agreement is more a signal of acknowledgement of existence than complicity in a specific system of values. In overusing qualifiers such as “always,” “generally,” “same,” and “never,” these humorists (Jerome in particular) ask us to see the absurdity of thoughtless concurrence to any value system and ask that we instead adopt a more thoughtful and conscious cultural identity, even if occasionally it is not Anglo-specific. For example, after experiencing problems with a tow-line, Jerome laments:

> It is always the same, and the same sort of thing always goes on in connexion with it.

> The man on the bank, who is trying to disentangle it, thinks all the fault lies with the man who rolled it up; and when a man up the river thinks a thing, he says it…..

> On the other hand, the man who wound it up thinks the whole cause of the muddle rests with the man who is trying to unwind it. …

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56 Jerome’s *Three Men* novels especially are replete with these generalizations regarding countries and their citizens: “Our road lay over a mountain, and from inquiries made in the village it appeared to be one of those roads you cannot possibly miss. I suppose everybody knows this sort of road. Generally, it leads you back to where you started from; and when it doesn’t, you wish it did, so that at all events you might know where you were” (300); “Many stout City gentlemen lived at Ealing in those days – I believe some live there still – and caught early trains to Town. They all started late; they all carried a black bag and a newspaper in one hand, and an umbrella in the other; and for the last quarter of a mile to the station, wet or fine, they all ran” (216-7). V. S. Pritchett suggests that this comic commonality, rather than being antithetical to realism, is only humorous if we perceive it also to be real:

> The humour of life’s little troubles was called the “too real,” the joke lying in deadly and misleading accounts of humiliating trivia. …It is “too real” that the tin-opener (new emancipating gadget of democracy) has been forgotten. It is “too real” that George and Harris have to share the same bed; that the bed is two foot six wide and that they have to tie themselves together with the sheets in order to keep themselves from falling out….The packing, the rain, the clubbing together to hire a cab, the mockery of small boys, the troubles with towropes, laundry, butter, the belief that the banjo is a lovely instrument and that “Two Lovely Black Eyes” is a beautiful song are the vulgarities of life. There is nothing surreal about the “too real”; it is the chronic. (“The Tin-Openers” 634-5)
And they feel so angry with one another that they would like to hang each other with the thing. Ten minutes go by, and the first man gives a yell and goes mad, and dances on the rope, and tries to pull it straight by seizing hold of the first piece that comes to his hand and hauling at it. Then the second man climbs out of the boat and comes to help him, and they get in each other’s way, and hinder one another. They both get hold of the same bit of line, and pull at it in opposite directions, and wonder where it is caught. In the end, they get it clear, and then turn round and find that the boat has drifted off, and is making straight for the weir. (70-1)

In using not Harris and George, but nameless and country-less Everymen, Jerome portrays an infinitely looping charade of mishap—this scene, if “always the same,” is continually occurring on every river in every country and has been since the invention of boats and tow-lines. Jerome continually emphasizes the universal commonality of humorous events related to river travel:

Of all experiences in connexion with towing, the most exciting is being towed by girls. It is a sensation that nobody ought to miss. It takes three girls to tow always; two hold the rope, and the other one runs round and round and giggles. They generally begin by getting themselves tied up. They get the line round their legs, and have to sit down on the path and undo each other, and then they twist it round their necks, and are nearly strangled. They fix it straight, however, at last, and start off at a run, pulling the boat along at quite a dangerous pace. At the end of a hundred yards they are naturally breathless, and suddenly stop, and all sit down on the grass and laugh, and your boat drifts out to midstream and turns round, before you know what has happened, or can get hold of a scull. …

There is never a dull moment in the boat while girls are towing it. (74-5)
Again, the “always,” “generally,” and “never” here are not English-specific, but aim at exposing the hilarious commonalities of being human, or, at least, the social class of human who can afford these types of leisure activity. This is perhaps why, for being so quintessentially “English,” Jerome’s novels were widely translated and appreciated:

One of the nice things about foreigners is their faithful regard for English light humour.

…millions have read a book like Jerome K. Jerome’s *Three Men in a Boat*, and in all the languages of Europe and Asia. One would hardly have thought that this modest little tale of the misadventures of three tin-opening suburban clerks on the Thames would stand up to American connoisseurs of Mark Twain’s Mississippi, but it did. Pirated at once, the book conquered America as it amused the students of Bombay, Peking and Valparaiso.

(Pritchett, “The Tin-Openers” 634)

But Pritchett also questions this unexpected universality: “The odd thing is that [*Three Men in a Boat*] could be appreciated in Bombay. Is the tale of Uncle Podger a universal domestic myth?” (“The Tin-Openers” 635). The answer perhaps lies, strangely enough, not in the universal Everyman comic scenes, but in the most English scenes. In these instances, Jerome links this cultural knowledge to specific English cities, such as when describing Maidenhead in terms of history, contemporary literature, and commonality: “The London Journal duke always has his ‘little place’ at Maidenhead; and the heroine of the three-volume novel always dines there when she goes out on the spree with somebody else’s husband” (106). Similarly, regarding their hotel, Jerome remarks: “Its low-pitched gables and thatched roof and latticed windows give it quite a story-book appearance, while inside it is even still more once-upon-a-timeyfied. It would not be

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57 One of Jerome’s trademarks seems to be carrying comic generalizations from *Three Men in a Boat* to its sequel: “In a boat, I have always noticed that it is the fixed idea of each member of the crew that he is doing everything” (132) and yet, similarly, “There is always unpleasantness about this tandem. It is the theory of the man in front that the man behind does nothing; it is equally the theory of the man behind that he alone is the motive power, the man in front merely doing the puffing. The mystery will never be solved” (192).
a good place for the heroine of a modern novel to stay at. The heroine of a modern novel is always ‘divinely tall,’ and she is ever ‘drawing herself up to her full height.’ At the ‘Barley Mow’ she would bump her head against the ceiling each time she did this” (158). Just as Eothen can give us a glimpse (or “feeling”) of the Middle East and Erewhon a glimpse of a utopian/dystopian Other, Three Men in a Boat, when translated and circulated in other countries, gives non-English readers a “feeling” of England: “books condition travelers’ choices and shape their perceptions….The observer’s relationship to the scene is indirect, filtered through the literary representation by which he first came to know it” (Henderson 31). We can all laugh at the universal humorousness of Uncle Podger or a man becoming entangled in a tow-rope, but when Jerome uses Anglo-specific cultural and literary references (the “Maidenhead” type of three-volume novel heroine), what then? Well, I believe that these culturally specific references do not alienate non-English readers, but rather increase their Anglophilia. Because the universal humor of other scenes has solidified our receptiveness, even if/when we don’t “get” a joke or cultural reference, it’s enough that we want to. Despite the translations or international distributions, English travel books still support an essentially Anglo-centric world-view—revealing more about England and English life than any “other.”

Finding Self in the “Typical” Other

Despite the self-obsession and inherent egotism of the traveler, each travel writer discussed here gives ample description of the socio-cultural other they are surveying; still, whether Arab, Erewhonian, or German, the emphasis for all is on whatever is glaringly un-English. The field notes and observations we are given usually take the form of explaining differences or problems with this non-English other—situations that are “strange” or conversations that become lost in translation. And, just as they enjoy describing the “typical”
Englishman, writers of travel narratives, especially humorous/satirical ones, seem equally to enjoy typifying citizens of the alien culture in question. Although Kinglake, Butler, and Jerome encounter only a minuscule fraction of the native population in their respective travels, we get an overwhelming impression of the typical Arab, the typical Erewhonian, and the typical German, respectively. Funnily enough much of this typicality has to do with humor and the given race’s ability (or inability) to laugh. Regarding Arabs Kinglake notes that “they were more like the best class of Englishmen than any whom I have seen in other countries…for they had most of them a keen sense of humour” (158). Again reminding us of the innate traveler’s ego, it is interesting that Kinglake not only judges other cultures by their humor, he also uses the English sense of humor as the quality standard. On the other hand, Jerome reports that “The German policeman does not understand a joke, which is perhaps on the whole just as well, for I believe there is a heavy fine for joking with any German uniform” (283). Here, the Germans in question are not only typical—they are literally (and linguistically) more “uniform” than individual; like Kinglake’s depiction of fellow English traveler as “common object,” Jerome’s Germans are hereby objectively reduced to their outward commonalities. Jerome’s friend Harris also details a comic incident further emphasizing this “typical” German inability to laugh:

“These Germans have no sense of humor.”

“What makes you think that?” I asked

“Why, this afternoon,” he answered, “I jumped on one of those electric tramcars….and in the course of that journey, I must have fallen against every one of [the other passengers] at least three times. You see,” explained Harris, “they knew when the corners were coming, and in which direction to brace themselves. I, as a stranger, was naturally at a disadvantage. The way I rolled and staggered about that platform, clutching
wildly now and this man and now at that, must have been really comic. I don’t say it was high-class humor, but it would have amused most people. Those Germans seemed to see no fun in it whatsoever – just seemed anxious, that was all. There was one man, a little man, who stood with his back against the brake; I fell against him five times, I counted them. You would have expected the fifth time would have dragged a laugh out of him, but it didn’t; he merely looked tired. They are a dull lot.” (Jerome 256-7)

Once again the English sense of humor is the yardstick from which to measure all others. It is German dullness, not English hysteria which is the flaw here. 58

One of the most humorous examples of problematic cross-cultural exchange is a scene featuring the Pasha (a foreign dignitary) and the Dragoman (the English traveler’s translator) in *Eothen*—a scene Eliot Warburton (the “close friend” addressed by Kinglake) hyperbolically describes in his review as: “worth all the so-called comedy that has been written in England during the last twenty years” (64). Questions of Warburton’s (im)partiality aside, the Pasha-Dragoman exchange is undeniably funny and exposes the common problems of linguistic as well as cultural mistranslations:

*Traveller.*—Give him my best compliments…and say I’m delighted to have the honour of seeing him.

*Dragoman* (to the Pasha).—His Lordship, this Englishman, Lord of London, Scorer of Ireland, Suppressor of France, has quitted his governments, and left his enemies to

58 Jerome extends this broad typicality and categorization anthropomorphically to German animals as well:

The German loves birds, but he likes tidy birds. A bird left to himself builds his nest just anywhere. It is not a pretty object according to the German notion of prettiness. …

In Germany one breathes in love of order with the air, in Germany the babies beat time with their rattles, and the German bird has come to prefer the box, and to regard with contempt the few uncivilized outcasts who continue to build their nests in trees and hedges. In course of time every German bird, one is confident, will have his proper place in a full chorus. This promiscuous and desultory warbling of his must, one feels, be irritating to the precise German mind; there is no method in it. The music-loving German will organize him. (251)
breathe for a moment, and has crossed the broad waters in strict disguise, with a small but
eternally faithful retinue of followers, in order that he might look upon the bright
countenance of the Pasha among Pashas—the Pasha of the everlasting Pashalik of
Karaghloolokoldour.

_Traveller_ (to his Dragoman).—What on earth have you been saying about London?
The Pasha will be taking me for a mere cockney. Have not I told you _always_ to say, that
I am from a branch of the family of Mudcombe Park, and that I am to be a magistrate for
the county of Bedfordshire, only I’ve not qualified; and that I should have been a deputy-
lieutenant, if it had not been for the extraordinary conduct of Lord Mountpromise; and
that I was a candidate for Boughton-Soldborough at the last election, and that I should
have won easy if my committee had not been bribed. I wish to heaven that if you _do_ say
anything about me, you’d tell the simple truth! …

_Dragoman_ (growing sulky and literal).—This friendly Englishman—this branch of
Mudcombe—this head purveyor of Boughton-Soldborough—this possible policeman of
Bedfordshire—is recounting his achievements and the number of his titles.

_Pasha._—The end of his honours is more distant than the ends of the earth, and the
catalogue of his glorious deeds is brighter than the firmament of heaven!

_Dragoman_ (to the Traveller).—The Pasha congratulates your Excellency.

_Traveller._—About Boughton-Soldborough? The deuce he does!—but I want to get at
his views in relation to the present state of the Ottoman empire. Tell him the Houses of
Parliament have met, and that there has been a speech from the Throne pledging England
to maintain the integrity of the Sultan’s dominions.
Dragoman (to the Pasha).—This branch of Mudcombe, this possible policeman of Bedfordshire, informs your Highness that in England the talking houses have met, and that the integrity of the Sultan’s dominions has been assured for ever and ever by a speech from the velvet chair. … (10-2, emphasis in original)

In this new translation the divine orders of a British monarch become “a speech from the velvet chair,” while the bedrock of Imperial democracy is reduced to “talking houses.” But the Dragoman is not the only one mocking the English ego here; Kinglake himself is not short of puns (bought-and-sold-borough). Piers Michael Smith believes because the dialogue in this scene “recalls burlesque” that “the scene vulgarizes…nineteenth-century travel discourse” (244); however, this vulgarity (if the comedy does indeed “vulgarize,” which is questionable) is not necessarily synonymous with outright disapproval. Kinglake mocks “travel discourse,” yes, but his mockery is not as confrontational as Butler’s or as impishly self-critical as Jerome’s. There is still affection for the genre underlying Kinglake’s mid-century optimism. If Kinglake’s narrative vulgarizes, it is not yet completely disillusioned.

Butler’s narrator in Erewhon notes that while individual jokes may not translate, laughter is universal, though this may be the laughter of cynicism: “one of them pointed to the mountain, in the direction of the statues, and made a grimace in intimation of one of them. I laughed and shuddered expressively, whereon they all burst out laughing too, and chattered hard to one another. I could make out nothing of what they said, but I think they thought it rather a good joke that I had come past the statues” (72). Many of the differences noted between cultures directly concern humor and/or laughter. What makes this other laugh? How does the other joke? In Eothen it is grotesquely morbid:
You smile at pretty women…she sees and smiles; then, presently, with a sudden movement, she lays her blushing fingers upon your arm, and cries out “Yumourdjak!” (Plague! meaning, “There is a present of the plague for you!”) This is her notion of a witticism: it is a very old piece of fun, no doubt—quite an oriental Joe Miller; but the Turks are fondly attached not only to the institutions, but also to the jokes of their ancestors; so, the lady’s silvery laugh rings joyously in your ears, and the mirth of her women is boisterous and fresh, as though the bright idea of giving the plague to a Christian had newly lit upon the earth. (42)

Although laughter is universally understood, here again we see that the traveler must contextualize his observations using English cultural references, i.e. “oriental Joe Miller.” Thus the unreachable, unknowable other is made ever so slightly more familiar.

Aside from the untranslatability of jokes, perhaps the best example (and certainly the most comic) of an inaccessible “other” is the tinned-pineapple scene in *Three Men in a Boat*. As J., Harris, and George struggle to open a tin of pineapples we are first struck with the physical hilarity of their predicament, but then cannot help notice Jerome’s astute choice of food. This scene would have been equally funny with a can of anything: baked beans (probably the most English choice), meat, peas, pears, gravy, etc.; but Jerome selected pineapple, an exotic and foreign delight which the boys cannot quite maneuver their way into. Initially the very idea of the pineapple sparks hyperbolic elation:

> It cast a gloom over the boat, there being no mustard. We ate our beef in silence. Existence seemed hollow and uninteresting. We thought of the happy days of childhood, and sighed. We brightened up a bit, however, over the apple-tart, and, when George
drew out a tin of pineapple from the bottom of the hamper, and rolled it into the middle of the boat; we felt that life was worth living after all. (104)

But after discovering that they have forgotten the tin-opener, their plans for gastro-imperial domination are dashed:

…Harris tried to open the tin with a pocket-knife, and broke the knife and cut himself badly; and George tried a pair of scissors, and the scissors flew up, and nearly put his eye out. While they were dressing their wounds, I tried to make a hole in the thing with the spiky end of the hitcher, and the hitcher slipped and jerked me out between the boat and the bank into two feet of muddy water, and the tin rolled over, uninjured, and broke a teacup. (105)

No matter what they do, the three Englishmen cannot “get at” the exotic other. Does this mean that these men must reluctantly acknowledge the impending end of empire? Or that forcing it open without diplomatic tools will only end in injury and self humiliation? Whichever the case may be, the exotic other remains “uninjured” throughout the ordeal and, in fact, goes on to destroy a quintessentially English signifier—the teacup.

Although these travel narratives offer detailed views of an exotic and different other, they actually “say” most about the “typical,” “usual,” or otherwise generalized and normative Englishman. Several critics note this self-discovery inherent in travel and travel writings: “the Grand Tour…as an institutional form of educational travel, was intended to lead the traveler safely back to the bosom of his mother country, whose values and customs he was expected to readopt. In no way was the Grand Tour intended to estrange him from his homeland” (Korte 45); and “Eothen is translated as ‘from the East’—not towards it; and, as with many travelers, it is Kinglake’s discovery of his own culture that is more significant than what he found abroad”
(Dunlap 89). Butler notes that one quality of the typical Englishman is that of socio-cultural colonialism: “What could it matter to me how many absurdities the Erewhonians might adopt? Nevertheless I longed to make them think as I did, for the wish to spread those opinions that we hold conductive to our own welfare is so deeply rooted in the English character that few of us can escape its influence” (175). Here we see the ironic discrepancy between Butler’s narrator and Butler himself; after all, following Butler’s larger argument, we should regard anything “deeply rooted” in national character as inherently suspicious and question our unquestioning adherence, valuing and promoting each quality or characteristic on its own merit. Although our values should be thus independently formed, it is interesting to note the varying ways in which travel narratives use the “other” to locate (and, at times, create) the English “self”—like the scene in which J., Harris, and George misread a map and end up walking in circles, we find that after taking a scenic tour of unfamiliar territory, we frequently find ourselves where we began:

We walked for half an hour, then emerging upon an opening, we saw below us, about two miles away, the village through which we had passed that morning. …

The sight of it made me sad. We had been walking hard for three hours and a half, and had accomplished, apparently, about four miles. But Harris was delighted.

“My, at last,” said Harris, “we know where we are.” (Jerome 303)

So, even though you have seemingly made no forward progress, the familiarity of your surroundings is comforting enough to have made the trip worthwhile. After writers like Kinglake and Butler continuously remind us of the accuracy and truthfulness of their observations, Jerome warns us very straightforwardly that Three Men on the Bummel is not to be used as a travel book, or to expect it to provide accurate or useful information: “There will be no useful information in this book. Anyone who should think that with the aid of this book he would be
able to make a tour through Germany and the Black Forest would probably lose himself before he got to the Nore. That, at all events, would be the best thing that could happen to him. The farther away from home he got, the greater only would be his difficulties” (226). And, while professing truthfulness, Butler’s narrator expresses a similar homesickness in Erewhon: “I felt comparatively happy, but I can assure the reader that I had had a far worse time of it than I have told him; and I strongly recommend him to remain in Europe if he can; or, at any rate, in some country which has been explored and settled, rather than go into places where others have not been before him” (60). In many ways these are not travel books, but homing books—drawing readers deeper into their Anglophilic selves.

Taking England for granted as the normative or standard social pinnacle of civilization is common in these travel narratives. Butler’s narrator finds this the easiest method when dealing with a foreign other: “I began to be nervous as to my reception; but I had got on very well so far, and resolved to continue upon the same plan as hitherto – namely, to behave just as though I were in England until I saw that I was making a blunder, and then to say nothing till I could gather how the land lay” (98-9). And, when Butler pretends as though this reflection/connection to Englishness is not present, he appears overtly sarcastic: “These people say further, that the greater part of the illness which exists in their country is brought about by the insane manner in which it is treated. …I have perhaps dwelt too long upon opinions which can have no possible bearing upon our own…” (124-5). With the subtextual eye roll and snide emphasis on “no possible bearing,” Butler actively confronts nineteenth-century English readers with their own self-normalizing rhetoric.59 The world he describes is “other” only in name, but the actions,  

59 Both Schmeller and Korte note the prevalence of self-discovery when making comparisons: “Travel writing lends itself well to studies of national identity because the traveler constantly compares home with abroad….In moments when the travelers compare and contrast themselves with others, their own theories about their specific nationality become clearer” (Schmeller 2); “More acutely than any other genre…travel writing is defined by the interaction of
beliefs, and mannerisms of the Erewhonians must have seemed uncomfortably self-critical to many nineteenth-century English readers. In defining, categorizing, and, in some cases, colonizing and subverting these “others,” we are also defining ourselves as “self”—normative, non-other. The thought that we could ever appear “other” to another is jarring and precisely the type of “thoughtful patriotism” and self-conscious ethnicity Butler’s novel forces us to consider: “I had fallen upon a set of people who, in spite of their high civilization and many excellences, had been so warped by the mistaken views presented to them during childhood from generation to generation, that it was impossible to see how they could ever clear themselves” (135).

Butler’s carefully chosen words incite readers not only to question their present culture, but also to be wary of the ways in which this culture (and that of future generations of Englishmen) is created.

the human subject with the world. Naturally, is world will often be ‘foreign,’ but the traveler’s own country may equally be the object of his or her investigation. Accounts of travel let us participate in acts of (inter)cultural perception and cultural construction, in processes of understanding and misunderstanding. These processes are undergone by the traveler…they are also, however, experienced by the reader as he or she is perusing the text” (Korte 5-6).
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