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The "Angels" in Dickens's House: Representation of Women in *A Tale of Two Cities*

I

A Tale of Two Cities is not a woman's text; indeed, there is little chance of its being mistaken for one. In his interpretation of the causes and effects of the French Revolution, Charles Dickens focusses on a patriarchal world of politics and historical development in which men dominate the scene, both privately and publicly. Yet several women characters factor rather importantly in the novel's develop-ment, and, as such, merit close scrutiny. The current body of criticism concerning *A Tale of Two Cities* concentrates mainly on the political and historical elements of the text, while conspicuously absent is a detailed examination of the female role in Dickens's representation of the Revolution. On the other hand, although various studies of the women in Dickens's fiction have been offered (for example, Michael Slater's *Dickens and Women* and Sylvia Jarmuth's *Dickens' Use of Women in his Novels*), most are general in nature and provide little more than a cursory examination of, if they explore at all, the women in *A Tale of Two Cities*. In this paper, therefore, I intend to present a detailed analysis of the women in this historical novel, particularly the two main female characters, Lucie Manette and Madame Defarge, as well as the most prominent secondary female character, Miss Pross.

Specifically, I am concerned with Dickens's manipulation of the angel in the house image as a Victorian representation which idealizes women

for their femininity. In terms of this ideal, these three women form a complex triangle; each woman corresponds to the other two either as some form of double or antitype. Lucie Manette and Madame Defarge, for example, represent England and France, middle-class lady and peasant, the perfect angel and her complete opposite. Miss Pross, on the other hand, is Lucie's lower-class comic counterpart, enough like her mistress to act as substitute and do what Lucie, as a middle class woman, cannot. Finally, Madame Defarge and Miss Pross, two women of similar social standing on opposite sides of the novel's personal conflict, appear to have little in common, yet are deceivingly similar. However alike or unlike these characters may seem to be, the one quality which links them all is an apparent lack of conventionality. As participants in the turbulent French conflict of 1789, these three representatives of Dickens's female characters are often seen in unconventional situations and positions, exposing social problems and exploring new spaces for women to inhabit. Yet, although Dickens appears to allow these women to adopt non-traditional female roles, he consistently reverts to granting them representation only as passive, silent, marginal figures. In fact, *A Tale of Two Cities* seems to allow women to break free from traditional sexual boundaries only to recontain them more forcefully in their traditional positions.

When discussing representations of women in Victorian literature, the angel in the house figure, of course, is far from unconventional; she is a most traditional female representation, her image largely reflecting the highly repressive conditions governing women's activity (or the lack thereof) during the period. Like so many of his contemporaries, Dickens often turns to this stereotypical figure in his fiction. Alexander Welsh explains how, while idealizing the home and hearth as alternatives to his vision of the dark and destructive nineteenth-century city, Dickens frequently reduces women to angel figures whose role is to fill the home with comfort and a sense of security (141-63). However, in *A Tale of Two Cities* Dickens moves beyond the specifically traditional metaphor to highlight the angel's supposedly innate redemptive and regenerative abilities, her capacity to function as a type of savior figure, and the consequent elevation she receives as a spiritual creature to be worshipped. In this manner, Dickens's portrayal of women as angels in *Tale* points to a progressive potential in this Victorian ideal. While the angel figure as

reflected in the women in the novel adheres to convention in its insistence on the female as the gentler, purer sex, it also emphasizes women's vital role as men's redeemers. Such a focus on women's determining capacity highlights an apparent transgression of conventional assumptions concerning the relations of gender, sexuality and activity by creating a possibility of women's intervention into history as agents of redemption and regeneration, agents who may reach beyond the novel's moral to its social sphere. To this end, Dickens presents a series of "resurrections," beginning with Dr. Manette's return to England after eighteen years of incarceration in a French prison, aided by his daughter, Lucie, who is the novel's most pronounced angel in the house.

Following the initial excitement of the Doctor's escape, Lucie reclaims her father from his mental abstraction, bringing him back to life from his living death in prison. It is Lucie's feminine attributes, her trust, her kindness, her unselfish concern, her willing self-sacrifice, which gradually coax the old man to rejoin the living world. In a description of Lucie's importance to her father, Dickens defines his feminine angel. He writes:

> Only his daughter had the power of charming this black brooding from his mind. She was the golden thread that united him to a Past beyond his misery, and to a Present beyond his misery: and the sound of her voice, the light of her face, the touch of her hand, had a strong beneficial influence with him almost always. Not absolutely always, for she could recal[l] some occasions on which her power had failed; but they were few and slight, and she believed them over. (110)

Dickens endows Lucie with "a power of charming," suggesting a sense of magic and mystery surrounding her unique restorative powers. His description renders her almost otherworldly in her capacity to transcend time, to erase the barriers of past and present for those who feel trapped within them. Although Dickens later admits that her powers of recall have limits (she is unable to reclaim her father from his relapse at the conclusion of the novel), he asserts that she "believes them [her failures] over," suggesting a religious framework of faith wherein the feminine approaches the semi-divine; in fact, by the end of the novel, Carton, her would-be lover, refers to Lucie as "Her." A woman whose very name suggests "light," Lucie's ability to redeem others depends upon her capacity to love them and sacrifice herself for them.

To reinforce her spiritual elevation and yet grant her some measure of corporeal authenticity, Dickens includes domestic and physical references in the above description. He refers to Lucie as the "golden thread" that unites, an image which gestures toward a mythic connection with the Greek Fates as the weavers of destiny. This mention of the traditionally female activities of spinning and sewing suggests the novel's metaphor of redemption, or the feminine saint image, by highlighting the domesticity of feminine figures in their roles as preservers and reconcilers of the family. Calling upon an iconographical tradition which links a woman's physical appearance with her personal and moral worth, Dickens's reference to Lucie's voice, face and hand further confirms her femininity by exposing her beauty and the healing power of her touch as outward manifestations of her inner, angelic qualities. (He also repeatedly refers to her lovely forehead as indicative of her sincerity.) Throughout the novel, Lucie appears as a dutiful daughter and wife, unwilling to marry her greatest love, should her father disapprove, standing by her husband with level-headed practicality and emotional fortitude when he faces the French Tribunal, and always maintaining a beautiful home, whether in Soho or Paris. As an idealized feminine figure, Lucie is everything to everyone; she is innocent child to her father, loving (yet pure and non-sexual) wife to her husband, and compassionate friend and moral inspiration to those who love her. Through this firm affirmation of Lucie and her redemptive capacity, Dickens offers such feminine virtue, charitable love and self-sacrifice as alternatives to the violence and inhumanity which dominate his representation of the French Revolution.

Accompanying such overt praise of Lucie, Dickens further endorses this idealized representation of women through mockery of a comical, lower-class nonconformist. Miss Pross, Lucie's faithful servant, is an ugly, wild spinster who, in the absence of a husband, has become so strong in order to survive in a patriarchal society that Mr. Lorry, the Darnays' friend and epitome of English common sense, initially takes her for a man. Lorry first encounters the bizarre woman when Lucie faints in his presence at the news of her father's survival and release. Miss Pross flies into the room like a fury, the redness of her hair and dress representative of the wildness within, and physically throws Lorry across the room. Lorry responds to Miss Pross in a typically patriarchal fashion, fascinated by her oddity but repulsed, at least initially, by her apparent

masculinity. Without marriage or motherhood, supported by her strength, independence and passion, Miss Pross refuses to surrender to traditional standards of femininity, and Dickens presents her as a distortion of the feminine ideal in the novel by ridiculing the oddness of her physical appearance and her behavioral eccentricities.

Such derision, however, never becomes complete rejection because Miss Pross is masculine only in a superficial sense; in terms of her spiritual nature and moral sensitivity, she is another feminine angel. As Lorry grows to know Miss Pross, Dickens writes:

> Mr. Lorry knew Miss Pross to be very jealous, but he also knew her by this time to be, beneath the surface of her eccentricity, one of those unselfish creatures—found only among women—who will, for pure love and admiration, bind themselves willing slaves, to youth when they have lost it, to beauty that they never had, to accomplishments that they were never fortunate enough to gain, to bright hopes that never shone upon their own sombre lives. He knew enough of the world to know that there is nothing in it better than the faithful service of the heart; so rendered and so free from any mercenary taint, he had such an exalted respect for it, that in the retributive arrangements made by his own mind—we all make such arrangements, more or less—he stationed Miss Pross much nearer to the lower Angels than many ladies immeasurably better got up both by Nature and Art, who had balances at Tellson's. (126)

Dickens affirms Miss Pross's femininity by highlighting the unselfish disposition "found only among women" which she shares, her selfless, if somewhat pathetic, devotion to that which she desires but does not have: youth, beauty, accomplishment, hope. She is a woman of "pure heart," free of "mercenary taint" or self-concern, and her maternal dedication to Lucie and her untiring, sisterly support of her undeserving brother, Solomon, confirm her spiritual goodness. However distorted and masculinized she may appear to the naked eye, such feminine self-abnegation, incessant fidelity and unqualified compassion nullify the negative effect of her masculine idiosyncrasies and gain her respect and exaltation in the mind of Lorry who, with his strong sense of practicality and dedicated business mind, is an apt representative of the English patriarchy.

As something of a feminine aberration, Miss Pross receives further vindication in terms of the novel's construction of class relations.

References to her social position in the above quotation confirm her social acceptability. As a member of the English lower classes, Miss Pross knows her place and thus "binds" herself as a "willing slave" to Lucie, her social superior. She constrains herself to servitude without question, happily forfeiting her possible pleasures and goals, and in the end her hearing too, to fulfil her duty and save Lucie and her family. Although Miss Pross may love the younger woman like a daughter, Lucie remains, nonetheless, her employer, and in protecting the Darnays successfully while in France Miss Pross secures her own employment and financial security. In her "faithful service," even as an angel Miss Pross assumes her "station" among their "lower" ranks, confirming her moral superiority to those wealthy women who may have external beauty but lack this working woman's inner worth. It is in part because Miss Pross participates in Dickens's angelic ideal and happily accepts her status among the English servant classes that ridicule of her eccentricities stops short of repudiation.

In terms of both class and gender, then, Miss Pross valorizes the "thematics of suppression" (Kucich 130) in the novel and suggests the impossible position in which patriarchal society, with its hierarchical structure and masculine bias, places women. Despite their supposed elevation as agents with a redemptive, moral mission, women's subjugation to a patriarchal agenda frustrates their ability to act as feminine savior figures. In her examination of the woman-as-savior image, Nancy Klenck Hill explains: "the spiritual dimension of life which they [women] control is necessarily subservient to the material realm commanded by men, even though men recognize women's spiritual function as being higher than their own material one" (98-99). As second-class citizens, women are denied agency by a patriarchal order which demands passivity; however, hailed as idealistic, feminine redeemers, they are expected to effect salvation. Required to modify without governing, women in a patriarchal society cannot adequately meet such extravagant expectations. This impasse, in part, explains the dull and lifeless representation of Lucie in the text, because in order to survive under such circumstances Lucie must remain an "unconscious and happy" (227) heroine with little personality. By thus restricting his female characters within a patriarchal structure, Dickens places the women in his novel in an ambiguous, illogical position.

Although the effects of such ambiguity are largely masked by Lucie's initially secure, domestic happiness and by the predominantly comic treatment of Miss Pross, other similar figures in the lower classes who are represented in darker ways, grotesque rather than humorous, reveal some of the consequences of this unreasonable situation. As they attempt to fulfil their "duties" despite patriarchal constraints, women such as Mrs. Cruncher grow increasingly susceptible to male brutality. In his examination of Dickens's work in general, H. M. Daleski suggests that Dickens's characters are often related in complex patterns of analogy. Indeed, as already illustrated, Miss Pross, in many ways, can be viewed as Lucie's double, and a similar parallel can be drawn between the heroine and Mrs. Cruncher. Isolated from the main action except through the participation of her husband, Jerry, who works for Mr. Lorry in England and France, Mrs. Cruncher displays common feminine virtues such as domesticity, submissiveness and religiosity. In the end she helps successfully to redeem her husband through her example, so that he repents his unChristian disbelief and ill-treatment of her, but throughout the novel he abuses her emotionally, psychologically and physically for her "flopping," or prayer (184). Mrs. Cruncher, then, at least in some sense, acts as a feminine savior figure like Lucie; unlike Lucie, however, Mrs. Cruncher is brutalized by her husband for her efforts. The poor woman's experience exposes the universality of female insecurity in a patriarchal culture by demonstrating that a woman's safety and well-being largely depend upon the personality of her husband. Dickens may indirectly blame Lucie for Charles's quick return to England and partial renunciation of his title in France (he returns to be with her), but never is Lucie at risk because Charles loves her and is gentle of temperament. In contrast, Mrs. Cruncher's subordinate gentleness and subjugation to her husband's violence exposes the possibilities of victimization implicit in all feminine self-sacrifice.

Dickens forces such patriarchal oppression to an extreme in Dr. Manette's letter describing the events leading to his imprisonment: the rape and subsequent death of Madame Defarge's sister. In this letter, Dr. Manette quotes the girl's brother as he explains that, despite their father's despair for their future, his sister remained optimistic. He says:

> 'Nevertheless, Doctor, my sister married. He was ailing at that time, poor fellow, and she married her lover, that she might tend and comfort him

> in our cottage—our dog-hut, as that man would call it. She had not been married many weeks, when that man's brother [the Marquis] saw her and admired her, and asked that man [Charles's father] to lend her to him—for what are husbands among us! He was willing enough, but my sister was good and virtuous, and hated his brother with a hatred as strong as mine.' (354-55)

Exhibiting a family loyalty shared by the girl, the brother, the speaker in this passage, does not reveal the girl's name, and this partial anonymity underscores her position as a typical representative of her gender and class. As a "good," "virtuous" and, as the Doctor soon discovers, pregnant young woman, she is another idealized angel who marries the man she loves despite his illness, in order to "tend" or nurse him, to save and comfort him. The reference to the cottage as a "dog-hut" points to the poverty among the lower classes, and the disrespect shown towards the husbands by the Marquis and his brother highlights a sense of callous, aristocratic indifference which helps to create the class hatred identified by the Defarge brother. Unaffected by the girl's virtue, Charles's uncle cruelly rapes her, an abusive act which symbolizes the aristocratic exploitation of and barbarity toward the lower classes. Although this rape generates the action which comprises the novel, rather than affirming women's agency, this event denies their ability to act. Regarded as an object or piece of property to be "admired" and "lent" by the aristocracy, the girl lies immobile on her deathbed, unable to speak save in mad ravings, acted upon by the Marquis and the Doctor, and spoken for by her brother. Madame Defarge's sister represents the epitome of feminine innocence thrust into a hostile, masculine world, exploited by abusive men and initiating action only through her violation and her death.

Such a depiction of severe male violence against women pointedly questions the novel's advocacy of feminine self-sacrifice as a means of redemption and the proposed importance of women's endless love, forgiveness and submission. Certain critics (such as Albert D. Hutter, who examines the relations between father and sons in "Nation and Generation in *A Tale of Two Cities*"), suggest that Dickens indicts the patriarchal system in *Tale*, and it is true that Dickens levels much criticism against the hierarchical social and political world of his novel. However, any criticism of the patriarchy concerns women only in a narrow sense. Although Dickens's representation of women's exploitation indicates his

recognition of some of the difficulties women face and his interest in their plight, his investigation goes no further. In fact, Dickens may expose some of the ambiguities in his feminine ideal and acknowledge some of the dangers of women's subordination within a patriarchal system, but his text offers no relinquishment of its sentimentalized perception of women; rather, the novel continues to affirm and cherish a feminine ideal according to which women continue to be victims. Dickens may emphasize the angel's redemptive powers, thereby allowing for the possibility of her effective agency, but because she cannot meet the contradictory demands placed on her within a patriarchal system, she is rendered passive and silent.

II

As Dickens rather abruptly shifts the novel's focus from England to France, from the private, relatively ordered world of the Manettes and Darnays in London to the public disorder of Paris, the accompanying contrast in nationality and class presents an opportunity for a somewhat different representation of women. Although Miss Pross and several other, more minor English characters are of a lower class, Dickens mainly focusses his attention on the middle classes in England, while he concentrates on the lower classes in France and their oppression by the aristocracy. Through depiction of these French working-class women in the Revolution, Dickens's text apparently overcomes some of the limits of the woman-as-savior ideal already described by granting women an active role in public life.

From an historical perspective, the vastly different views expressed by critics regarding the positions of working women during the period serve as some indication of the complexity of women's roles in the French Revolution. Jane Abray, for instance, in "Feminism in the French Revolution," insists on the existence of a feminist movement during France's political upheaval, claiming that, "While it [revolutionary feminism] lasted it was a very real phenomenon with a comprehensive program for social change, perhaps the most far-reaching such program of the Revolution" (62). She asserts that, although revolutionary feminism began with a burst of enthusiasm, it failed as a result of tactical and strategical errors (such as the easy distraction of its members from their main

concerns), political and managerial inexperience (or leaders acting in isolation from one another), and because women's general acceptance of the status quo and eighteenth-century definitions of femininity rendered feminism a minority movement (61-62). In an apparently contradictory but equally extreme view, Olwen Hufton, in "Women in Revolution 1789-1796," sees working women as responding to the Revolution solely in terms of their traditional roles as mothers and wives bereft of a feminist or political agenda, seeking involvement only when famine threatens their families with destitution (90-108).

In a sense, Hufton's conservative and chauvinistic analysis gains support from a comparative examination of women before and after the Revolution, since the minimal and often illusory gains in their social and political status seem to deny any possibility of positive feminist assessment. Mary Durham Johnson explains, for instance, that despite the rapidly changing governments and administrations from 1789-1796, women remained subject to persistently traditional, patriarchal values (132). Her description of women in pre-revolutionary France as economically dependent, legal minors, exploited in the workplace, control of their person and property transferred from father to husband upon marriage, existing to perform conjugal duties and bear healthy children (107-110), recalls conventional roles assigned women in any patriarchal system. Although the Revolution may have raised hopes for change in the status of women, governmental retaliation for female protests reasserted a paternalistic demand for obedience and dependence in order to reinforce traditional sex roles. When Napoleon came to power, his reversal of any legal and civic progress made during the Revolution regarding women's social position (in education and divorce laws, for example), and the implementation of even more sophisticated mechanisms for controlling women's behavior than had existed in the *ancien régime*, confirmed the continuation of patriarchal standards (Johnson 130-31). Such uninterrupted repression seems to illustrate a continuing failure of women's political influence.

Yet, despite their social subordination and lack of overt socio-political advancement, working women did have an impact during the Revolution, taking roles which were not strictly traditional. Harriet Branson Applewhite and Darline Gay Levy, for example, approach the period from women's perspectives in order to demonstrate that, while institutions may

not have changed during the period, women's political awareness did. Finding a middle ground between Abray and Hufton as a basis for interpretation, Levy and Applewhite suggest that French revolutionary women "were not feminists, and their goals were often the age-old concerns of wives and mothers for the survival of their families, but they learned to use revolutionary institutions and democratic tactics to secure political influence" ("Women of the Popular Classes" 9). In the October insurrections of 1789, for instance, when they marched to Versailles in order to demand a stable supply of bread at affordable prices, women played an instrumental role in helping to topple the monarchy by bringing the king back to Paris with them (66). As the Revolution wore on, women made use of petitions, clubs and assemblies to gain a forum for their political views, they resorted to *taxation populaire*, or confiscation of merchants' goods to be sold at reasonable prices, and they even obtained a short-lived institutional base for their political influence in the form of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women. Employing untraditional methods to voice traditional grievances, revolutionary women seemed to evolve from submissive subjects to participating citizens who had an impact on their government as they gained a new outlook toward themselves and their roles in society (Applewhite, Johnson and Levy 312). Even if such women were unaware of the political implications of their actions, their ability merely to act and influence public events within a patriarchal system confirms their untraditional social position.

Of course, such historical reconstructions of women's roles in the Revolution are quite recent. As for *A Tale of Two Cities* and the material to which Dickens might have been exposed when writing his novel, most scholarship confirms that Dickens's historical perspective was greatly informed by Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution*. The two main studies which explore Dickens's influences, Michael Goldberg's *Carlyle and Dickens* and William Oddie's *Dickens and Carlyle: The Question of Influence*, demonstrate that Dickens relied on Carlyle's text, as well as the resource material Carlyle used in writing it, as research for his historical novel (Goldberg 101; Oddie 61-63). (Oddie also leaves room for other sources, although he does not define these possibilities clearly.) L. M. Findlay explains, furthermore, that in his historical book, Carlyle portrays the women of the Revolution in a highly conservative and repressive

manner, a representation which helps define the limits of his political radicalism (130-34). Nevertheless, Dickens's representation of revolutionary women in his version of the French insurrection appears strikingly modern; in fact, in many ways, it seems to echo Applewhite and Levy's discussion.

As the main representative of the French women in this rebellion, Dickens presents Thérèse Defarge, valued and trusted confidante of her husband, Ernest, and his circle of lower-class conspirators. Dickens removes Madame Defarge from a typical, domestic feminine realm to place her in the midst of the turbulent Revolution. Thus, because of her combative posture, she seems to renegotiate or redefine Dickens's feminine contradiction; as a dynamic revolutionary, she is neither submissive victim nor saintly savior. Madame Defarge demonstrates her capacity as a politically active woman responding to class suppression, for example, in the storming of the Bastille episode, when she stands out as a leader of women, forcefully declaring female equality in her sadistic cry, "We can kill as well as the men when the place is taken!" (245). Such determination, near-perfect self-control and consistency of purpose render her hateful yet admirable. Although Dickens makes no attempt to indicate Madame Defarge's political awareness, instead rendering women's involvement in the Revolution a result of hunger or a sense of personal wrong, his acknowledgement, through Madame Defarge, of women's participation and what appears to be their often powerful influence, seems to recognize the progressive nature of their role. As a politically determined and apparently determining being, Madame Defarge appears to avoid some of the restrictions placed on other women in the novel.

This inclination toward decisive action, however, finally leads Madame Defarge to seek the execution of Lucie and her family, and as she travels the Paris streets on her way to realize her desire, Dickens writes:

> There were many women at that time, upon whom the time laid a dreadfully disfiguring hand; but, there was not one among them more to be dreaded than this ruthless woman, now taking her way along the streets. Of a strong and fearless character, of shrewd sense and readiness, of great determination, of that kind of beauty which not only seems to impart to its possessor firmness and animosity, but to strike into others

> an instinctive recognition of those qualities; the troubled time would have heaved her up, under any circumstances. But, imbued from her childhood with a brooding sense of wrong, and an inveterate hatred of a class, opportunity had developed her into a tigress. She was absolutely without pity. If she had ever had the virtue in her, it had quite gone out of her.
>
> It was nothing to her, that an innocent man was to die for the sins of his forefathers; she saw, not him, but them. It was nothing to her, that his wife was to be made a widow and his daughter an orphan; that was insufficient punishment, because they were her natural enemies and her prey, and as such had no right to live. To appeal to her, was made hopeless by her having no sense of pity, even for herself. (390-91)

In this passage, Dickens singles out Madame Defarge as a magnified representation of the unnatural horror of revolutionary violence; he also pointedly connects her with Lucie Manette. He begins by suggesting that Madame Defarge, like the other women of the Revolution, is disfigured by the "time." This statement implies that Madame Defarge is negatively distorted by her environment, that, had she been exposed to different circumstances, she might have turned out quite differently, perhaps even like Lucie herself. But the years leading to the Revolution turn her into a ruthless, strong, fearless, shrewd woman. Her readiness and determination render her wholly unfeminine, and the reference to her "beauty" secures her position as the fair, angelic Lucie's dark-haired antithesis. She substitutes her knitting needles of revenge, which she uses to denounce traitors, for Lucie's golden thread of harmony, and in lieu of the compassionate emotions to which Lucie often succumbs, Madame Defarge is utterly devoid of the "virtue" of pity. Certainly, she derives motivation from fidelity to her natural sister, but she distorts that devotion in order to seek vengeance and death rather than forgiveness and life. While Lucie gives birth to angelic creatures like herself and tends them with love and concern, Madame Defarge has no children, an absence which ironically connects her with the aristocratic women whom Dickens also criticizes for lacking maternal affection. (He suggests that, although upper class ladies give birth, peasant women raise the children and are, thus, more deserving of the exalted title of "Mother," 137). In short, Dickens depicts Madame Defarge as a woman of distorted potential, a woman of powerful feelings who, as the result of a lifetime of pain and oppression, turns to destruction. Because he connects her so obviously

with Lucie, Madame Defarge represents a perversion of Dickens's feminine-savior figure.

The above reference to Madame Defarge's physical appearance, furthermore, while contrasting with Lucie's comeliness, also asserts that the older woman's beauty is of a different "kind," one that imbues her with, or which she transforms into, power and violence. Because only instinct can recognize the firmness and animosity behind her beauty, and because her "brooding sense of wrong" derives from her childhood, a time of innocence and lack of worldly understanding, Dickens underscores the primal nature of her desires and her basic animality. Although Dickens grants her small personal and political justification for her "inveterate hatred" in the forms of her sister's rape and her own subjection to class suppression, Madame Defarge is a "tigress" who hunts her "natural enemies" and her "prey." The way in which she toys with Foulon, for example, letting the captured aristocrat go then pulling him back several times before he is finally executed, confirms her catlike nature. (Again, Madame Defarge is connected to the aristocracy; Dickens underscores the equally brutal and basic ferocity of the upper classes by referring to the Marquis as a "refined tiger," 156). The gender-specificity of Dickens's reference to Madame Defarge as one of the "women" rather than one of the people disfigured by the times highlights female brutality as being even more disturbing than the barbarity of male revolutionaries, since such savagery contrasts so greatly with the novel's idealized perception of women's potential as realized in Lucie.

In fact, this description of Madame Defarge recalls Nina Auerbach's monster in its horrified representation of women's latent powers let loose upon the world. In her comprehensive examination of Victorian female stereotypes, Auerbach suggests that, while Victorian men traditionally valued women for their sense of morality and purity, these men also feared the metamorphic power implicit in female spirituality (1-24). Auerbach goes on to claim that literary evidence for this fear of women directly reveals itself in the dark side of the angelic metaphor, taking, for example, the form of monsters, witches, sorceresses and demons (4). In terms of Auerbach's argument, then, Madame Defarge represents one such threatening monster. Although, as the above citation indicates, she is fully cognizant of and blindly driven by patrilineal ties, seeking restitution for "the sins of his [Darnay's] forefathers," Madame Defarge

heedlessly attempts to subvert the familial bonds which help support a patriarchal system in her desire to kill Charles, an act which would render Lucie and her child defenceless widow and orphan. She dares to defy time and death through her unconcern, confirming her demon-like, irrational evil in her absolute lack of pity "even for herself." As a woman she achieves status among the revolutionaries, but she does so only at the expense of human compassion and remorse. Depicting her persistent and insatiable brutality, Dickens portrays Madame Defarge as a force of nature as well as an animal, identifying her as an elemental, and hence unconquerable presence; she says to her husband, "tell Wind and Fire where to stop . . . but don't tell me" (370). Such appeals to nature dehistoricize Madame Defarge, removing her from her culture and from the Revolution in order to render her effectively non-feminine and non-human, a mythic Fury.

As exaggerated as this description of Madame Defarge may appear to be, her representation echoes legends surrounding actual women of the Revolution. In *Carlyle and Dickens*, Michael Goldberg connects the activities of Madame Defarge with those of Théroigne de Méricourt (118), and Linda Kelly, in *Women of the French Revolution*, discusses various myths which grew around Théroigne as a revolutionary figure (11-23, 48-59). According to Kelly, Théroigne, who intoxicated the Revolution with her beauty, became famous for flashing through crowds in a blood-red riding habit with a sabre and pistol in hand, leading a mob to the Bastille. She subsequently came to personify the fury of the Revolution as well as women's desires to show solidarity and help in the Revolution's defense (90). However, although Théroigne apparently supported radical ideas such as a women's armed battalion, Kelly asserts that she did not help storm the Bastille, and that, in fact, much of her story is myth (11), since her eccentricity and exhibitionism denied her much revolutionary impact (35). Nevertheless, Théroigne's celebrity snowballed until she was imprisoned in connection with an attempted assassination of the Queen (47), only to be released for lack of evidence. Soon thereafter, she reportedly went mad (59). Other women such as Charlotte Corday (whose single act, the assassination of a radical journalist, Marat, supposedly performed with the intent of saving thousands of lives from the brutal measures he advocated, earned her legendary status, 100-102), Marie Antoinette (114) and Olympe de

Gouges (who wrote *The Rights of Woman and the Citizen* in response to the omission of women's rights from the Revolutionary document, *The Rights of Man and the Citizen*, 122-6) were commonly depicted as monsters similar to Théroigne (102). According to such historical descriptions, therefore, the exaggeration with which Dickens depicts the brutality and inhumanity of Madame Defarge seems to owe a debt to legends concerning such revolutionary women.

More importantly, Dickens's treatment of Madame Defarge recalls the actual recontainment experienced by women in the Revolution. In the years following 1789, many men seemed to fear politically active women as subversive of male authority, suggesting that they were susceptible to manipulation by counter-revolutionary factions (Graham 247). In fact, government reaction to women's only organized seat of political power, the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, acted upon such an apprehension. In response to public disturbances with which the Society was associated, Jacobin Deputy Amar of the Committee of General Security reportedly informed the Revolutionary Convention that women do not have the physical or moral strength to discuss political considerations and recommend resolutions; consequently, the government passed a law to restrict women from holding public meetings, from exercising political rights and from taking active roles in governmental affairs (Blum 213). As a first step in a series of repressive measures which multiplied through the reign of Napoleon, the government attempted to justify its actions through idealization of family cohesion and women's "natural" functions within the home. The political establishment promoted Rousseau's ideal of pregnant and nursing women as personifications of the regeneration of France, appealing to marriage and motherhood, to women's roles as educators within the home and family, in order to deny women political rights while exalting them as goddesses of reason (Graham 250). In partial demonstration of the limits of France's initial test of democracy (Applewhite and Levy, "Women, Democracy and Revolution" 64), the patriarchal government silenced women by legalizing female subservience in 1793.

By dismissing the unfeminine Madame Defarge as other than human and portraying women revolutionaries as beasts, Dickens apparently endorses this type of denial of women's moral and intellectual suitability for public affairs. Dickens impedes women's access to power in his

representation of the Revolution by focussing on a disfigured monster whose influence is more primal than political. He thereby contains female subversion and denies women access to effective political agency by characterizing their social activities as aberrant rather than "natural" behavior. Furthermore, by endorsing only those women, such as Lucie, who do not disturb the patriarchal agenda or threaten men's supremacy, Dickens reconfirms women's subordinate status. As a half-French woman, Lucie serves as an example for her French "sisters" because she embodies Rousseau's ideal, constantly remaining a politically submissive complement to the patriarchy represented in her husband and father. Through this acceptance of Lucie and rejection of Madame Defarge, Dickens affirms the exclusion of women from political life and reveals a patriarchal fear of women becoming equal partners in the Revolution.

Beyond this bestial, demon-like version of women, at the height of the Revolution Dickens digresses even further from his ideal to blur sexual differentiation altogether. In "The Grindstone" chapter (287), for example, Dickens presents "men devilishly set off with spoils of women's lace and silk and ribbon" (291). As both sexes gather to sharpen their weapons, the general cover of blood and physical disguises prevents the accurate and easy determination of gender and identity. More pointedly, in his description of the Carmagnole, a musical celebration performed by the revolutionaries, Dickens writes:

> Men and women danced together, women danced together, men danced together, as hazard had brought them together. . . . No fight could have been half so terrible as this dance. It was so emphatically a fallen sport—a something, once innocent, delivered over to all devilry—a healthy pastime changed into a means of angering the blood, bewildering the senses, and steeling the heart. Such grace as was visible in it, made it the uglier, showing how warped and perverted all things good by nature were become. The maidenly bosom bared to this, the pretty almost-child's head thus distracted, the delicate foot mincing in this slough of blood and dirt, were types of the disjointed time. (307-308)

The participants in this revelry recall the French peasants who rejoice in the streets at the beginning of the novel when a wine cask is spilled; however, in the Carmagnole, these people celebrate the destructive spirit of the Revolution rather than the life-giving nourishment provided by the wine. Dickens underscores the horror of this spectacle as a perversion of

a religious, Christmas dance by referring to the lack of discrimination and the irrelevance of sexual distinction in the selection of dance partners. In the fever of revolutionary passion, extremes collide to enforce a disruption of the presence, or at least of the usual importance, of sexual identity.

Nevertheless, despite this temporary disintegration into androgyny, the language of this passage identifies the Carmagnole as a decidedly feminine sport. Although men participate, a woman, La Vengeance, who is Madame Defarge's second-in-command and a personification of the revolutionary spirit in the novel, leads the "terrible" dance. Dickens represents the Carmagnole as a "fallen" sport, in a reference which suggests a traditional description of prostitutes or supposedly unchaste women as having "fallen" from grace and respectability (Hutter 457). His insistence on the transformation that occurs during the dance, a conversion of what was innocent, full of grace and "good by nature," into something warped, perverted and ugly, lends further support to this conventional image of an impure woman who has distorted and abused her feminine attributes. Moreover, Dickens's reference to the celebration as affecting the blood, senses and heart suggests that this dance appeals to human emotions rather than the mind, and such feeling is conventionally recognized as the feminine equivalent of masculine intelligence. He then reduces the dancers to types, all of whom are described in feminine terms: maidens, pretty children and dancers with "delicate" feet. Sexual difference may carry little import in the Carmagnole, but Dickens's description of the event appeals to an underlying sense of gender specificity.

In fact, Dickens seems to break down sexual barriers only to re-create a negative image of the Revolution itself as feminine. L. M. Findlay suggests that Carlyle defines femininity in *The French Revolution* in part by means of Maenadic reference, a depiction which helps to perpetuate patriarchal domination (135-40).[1] Here is a point where Dickens's and Carlyle's women begin to meet, since Dickens emulates this type of representation in his historical novel. Greek mythology characterizes Maenads, or the women worshippers of the god, Dionysus, largely by their shared capacity for irrationality, for their uncontrollable, emotional, senseless, and therefore feminine, dancing and singing, and Dickens's portrait of the feminine figures in the Carmagnole echoes this description.

Additionally, unreasonable and passionate French women such as Madame Defarge and La Vengeance tend to characterize most revolutionary scenes (Hutter 457), exceeding men in their savagery and strength, and dominating Dickens's representation of insurrection. It is important to note, however, that, despite their energy and fervor, and like the Maenads who depend upon their relationship to Dionysus to define their identity (Findlay 138), Dickens's women rely on men, or the circle of Jacques, to direct their activities. Therefore, while women are marginalized through denial of their independence, excessive revolutionary activity and its agents are negatively represented by reference to the feminine.

The two prevailing images which symbolize not only the effects, but also the causes of the Revolution in Dickens's analysis are, accordingly, female. Dickens presents Medusa, or "The Gorgon's Head" (149), as a symbol of the corrupt aristocracy whose misrule helps to create conditions which demand retaliation on the part of the oppressed. As a mythological female figure who turns those who look at her to stone, Medusa represents the stone-like, upper class indifference to the poor, the legacy of social and personal repression which the Marquis attempts to pass on to Charles through the "Gorgon's spell" (Frank 137).[2] Of course, Dickens includes male embodiments of the mythological figure, in particular, the Marquis, who represents the evil in the French patriarchal system, but the image itself remains female. On the other hand, Dickens personifies the consequent peasant response to this exploitation in the form of an ironic feminine savior or goddess. He says that, "Above all, one hideous figure grew as familiar as if it had been before the general gaze from the foundations of the world—the figure of the sharp female called La Guillotine" (302). Dickens raises La Guillotine to near mythic status by suggesting her timelessness and universal familiarity, and clearly identifies as female this symbol of the bloodthirstiness of revolutionary vengeance. Just as his extreme portrayal and rejection of Madame Defarge and his exaggerated depiction of Lucie as a desired feminine form demonstrates patriarchal anxiety about powerful women, so Dickens's use of feminine and female symbols to represent the French Revolution, its causes and effects, underscores a need for containment of such convulsion and a fear of revolution itself.

A careful examination of the women in Dickens's novel, therefore, clearly reveals the underlying patriarchal bias of his text. Thus, it seems

rather ironic that, as the novel draws to a close, women instead of men take part in the final, decisive, climactic battle. In a revolution in which men govern activity even when women are participants in it, patriarchal traditions anticipate male orchestration and enactment of decisive action; yet Dickens allows Miss Pross and Madame Defarge to decide whether the Darnays' final flight to England will succeed. As their contest begins, Dickens writes:

> Miss Pross had nothing beautiful about her; years had not tamed the wildness, or softened the grimness, of her appearance; but, she too was a determined woman in her different way, and she measured Madame Defarge with her eyes, every inch.
>
> 'You might, from your appearance, be the wife of Lucifer,' said Miss Pross, in her breathing. 'Nevertheless, you shall not get the better of me. I am an Englishwoman.'
>
> Madame Defarge looked at her scornfully, but still with something of Miss Pross's own perception that they two were at bay. (395)

The potential irony involved in representing a physical battle between women rather than men is subdued by a recognition that these combatants are the two most masculine women in the novel, and Dickens reinforces this perception by restating Miss Pross's lack of beauty, her wildness and grimness which even time can neither tame nor soften. Once again, Dickens connects women with animals, indicating the primal nature of these two opponents in their powers of "perception," or their intuitive abilities to understand one another while "at bay" and despite their language barrier. In fact, Miss Pross's reference to Madame Defarge as the "wife of Lucifer," contrasting as it does with her own appeal to Heaven several paragraphs later, suggests that these two figures represent elemental forces more than individual women, symbolizing a revolutionary battle between evil and good, inhuman barbarity and selfless devotion. Certainly Lucie is the more obvious female embodiment of goodness, but as a woman of higher class and angelic purity, her participation in such barbaric activity would be inappropriate, so Miss Pross serves as an adequate stand-in. By suggesting that Miss Pross is determined "in her different way," a distinction which affirms her basic femininity in spite of her masculine eccentricities, Dickens carefully differentiates her from her opponent; thus, when the English woman kills

Madame Defarge "with the vigorous tenacity of love, always so much stronger than hate" (397), through masculine agency Miss Pross is able to confirm the efficacy of feminine values in her certain victory over the non-feminine. (As an "Englishwoman," she also affirms England's superiority and dissociation from France's revolutionary violence.) Consequently, their individual fates pay homage to paternalistic demands for the pacification of women, as Madame Defarge, a woman who affronts femininity, experiences ultimate silencing in her death, while Miss Pross, whose feminine goodness cannot wholly atone for the murder she commits, must withdraw into the mute world of her own deafness. (Lucie, too, travels in a carriage to England in silence and passivity.) Dickens thereby allows two women to perform the climactic battle in the text without compromising patriarchal expectations.

Through manipulation of the angel in all of her various manifestations, then, Dickens is able to present women as representative of both solution and problem in the events surrounding the French insurrection of 1789 and the devastation which follows, as a source of redemption (Lucie and, to a certain extent, Miss Pross) and a symbol of revolutionary insanity (Madame Defarge). Through his paternalistic and chauvinistic polemics, he simultaneously exalts and denigrates women, exposing their ideal femininity, or lack thereof, as a measure of possible social amelioration. By twisting and distorting seemingly unconventional feminine images, Dickens recontains the women in his novel, restricting their movements and influence by forcing them to assume illogical and untenable positions in a patriarchal society. This circumscription of a potentially progressive depiction of women by a chauvinistic need for their repression and confinement underscores Dickens's gender bias.

NOTES

1. In Book Seven, chapters four through eleven of *The French Revolution* (251-89), Carlyle describes women as Maenads in reference to the October days insurrections. He refers to them as "angry she-bees" or "desperate flying wasps" (254) who need guidance and find it in the form of a man, Maillard, around whom they cluster. Carlyle paints the scene as a wild spectacle enlivened by uncontrollable women

whose "inarticulate fury" Maillard miraculously manages to translate into coherent speech in order to communicate with the government and the king. In this description of the event, Carlyle displays a consistently patronizing attitude toward women and their activities, thereby somewhat restricting their revolutionary impact.

2. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous refers to the Medusa figure as a metaphor for women's uniqueness which Cixous insists needs to be expressed and released through oral and written language (245-64). As she calls for a revaluation of women's difference, she suggests that Medusa need not seem ugly or destructive; on the contrary, in her attempt to incite women to "laugh" or speak their differences, Cixous asserts that women need to explore Medusa, look at her and recognize her beauty. Cixous suggests that Medusa is traditionally rejected as a horrible creature only because men, who fear women's uniqueness and powers as a threat to their supremacy, describe and represent her as a monster (255). To apply Cixous's argument to *A Tale of Two Cities*, then, because Dickens employs the image of Medusa in its conventionally negative connotation, the "Gorgon's head" reinforces his participation in a patriarchal fear and rejection of women.

   I also find it worth noting that Medusa is destroyed by a man, Perseus, who with the aid of the gods cuts off her head with a magic sickle. This proposed resolution to the myth confirms the appropriateness of Dickens's use of the Medusa image in terms of the guillotine and his affirmation of male dominance and control over threatening women.

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