

2014

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Recommended Citation

Lorio, Melissa (2014) "David Copperfield: Marriage, "Power", and the Angel in Light of Foucault's Ideas," *Ellipsis*: Vol. 41 , Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46428/ejail.41.18>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/ellipsis/vol41/iss1/18>

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David Copperfield: Marriage, “Power”, and the Angel in Light of Foucault’s Ideas

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David Copperfield is an anti-marriage novel that culminates in a marriage. It is David’s second marriage, and a happy ending, on the surface, but there may be more here than meets the eye. Dickens takes us through many problematic marriages in this novel, especially that of David to Dora. Some of these marriages fail because of abusive partners, some due to unsuitable partners hugely divergent in age or temperament to that of their spouse. There is an incestuous element in some of them as well. After a march through a litany of marital problems, Dickens finally gives the reader David’s happy ending and marriage to his “Angel,” his “sister,” the one Dora has given permission to marry him. This complicates the resolution of the story, because David marries Agnes only after Dora is gone, after having had both of them in his life in a very real way for years. He finally realizes that Agnes is the one he should have married. Is this the societal discourse that has been working on him for a while? Has he finally absorbed and internalized what he is supposed to look for in a wife? What is Agnes’s power over him? Certainly the idea of marrying a “sister” was not then what it is now. Is this an ideal “happy ending,” or a compromise to society?

Marriage in *David Copperfield* is usually not rosy. The first one the reader learns of is that of Miss Betsey. She married a man younger than her who was very abusive, and bordering on murderous, if one takes into account the talk that he had planned to “throw her out of a two pair of stairs’ window” (2). She is lucky, however, in that she has the finances to pay this husband off (although it does become an ongoing bill) to separate from him and live in peace thereafter.

The next marriage we see is that of Clara, David’s mother, to Mr. Murdstone, and the beginning of a dubious theme in the book, that of “firmness.” Mr. Murdstone, from the beginning, instructs Clara to “control” herself, with respect to David (22). He discourages her displays of affection toward her son, and is, in fact, abusive to him, beating him for not mastering his studies. He tries to mold Clara into a woman who is a disciplinarian, and even cruel, like himself. Mr. Murdstone and his sister take over the household, not allowing Clara any decisions of her own, with respect to herself or her son. Charles Dickens’s description of this attitude would be funny if it wasn’t sad:

The creed, as I should state it now, was this. Mr. Murdstone was firm; nobody in his world was to be so firm as Mr. Murdstone, nobody else in his world was to be firm at all, for everybody was to be bent to his firmness. Miss Murdstone was an exception. She might be firm, but only by relationship, and in an inferior and tributary degree. My mother was another exception, She might be firm, and must be; but only in bearing their firmness and firmly believing there was no other firmness upon earth. (24-25)

As much as David views this as tyrannical, he will absorb some of this, and try to apply it to Dora, albeit in a much more benign and kindly way. Clara, in marrying Mr. Murdstone, has lost her autonomy *and* her property, as upon marriage everything the woman owns now belongs to the man. One of the only times Clara tries to stand up for herself to the Murdstones she mentions how hard it is to have no say in her own house. Mr. Murdstone's reponse: "'My own house?' repeated Mr. Murdstone. 'Clara!' 'Our own house, I mean,' faltered my mother, evidently frightened—'I hope you must know what I mean, Edward—it's very hard that in *your* own house I may not have a word to say about domestic matters'" (25). Clara cannot even call it her own house when the Murdstones have just moved in. She has lost every right she once had.

The marriage of Peggotty to Barkis is not ideal, although certainly not as bad as those that have so far been mentioned. Peggotty does not wish to get married while Clara is alive, and maybe not at all. But she has to think of practical concerns, and must find a place after she dies. It is a true testament to the times that someone could propose marriage to a person they did not know at all! Barkis sends a message with David—"Barkis is willin" (54). This marriage, at least, does not turn out to be a nightmare, and although Mr. Barkis is tight with his money, Peggotty seems to have a decent life with him. It is not a love match, but Peggotty does not have to go be anyone else's servant and she seems to be treated at least fairly.

Another example of marriage in *David Copperfield* is the Micawbers. Mr. Micawber is always egregiously in debt, and Mrs. Micawber has to live with the results of his carelessness with money. The Micawbers, even the children, all go to the debtor's prison so they can be together. They make the best of it, but Mrs. Micawber has to wait until the end of the narrative for Mr. Micawber to really get himself together, when they go to Australia. Up until then, she is stuck with a man who is not adequately providing for his family, which was of the utmost importance for a man in this era. Mrs. Micawber went against her family to marry Mr. Micawber, and at times seems to show her regret by protesting too much that she will never leave him:

"I will never desert Mr. Micawber. Mr. Micawber may have concealed his difficulties from me in the first instance, but his

sanguine temper may have led him to expect that he would overcome them. The pearl necklace and bracelets which I inherited from mamma, have been disposed of for less than half their value; and the set of coral, which was the wedding gift of my papa, has been actually thrown away for nothing. But I never will desert Mr. Micawber. No!" cried Mrs. Micawber. More affected than before, "I will never do it! It's of no use asking me!" (85)

It is amusing that David is the only one who witnesses this speech, and he certainly wasn't asking her to desert her husband. She comes up with that herself.

The marriage of Dr. Strong to Annie is certainly problematic as well. Annie's mother, the "Old Soldier," loves to tell the tale of how Dr. Strong asked for Annie's hand in marriage and the subsequent conversation she has with her daughter about it. She talks about how she was surprised that Dr. Strong thought of Annie that way, as he had known her since she was a baby and was a friend of her father's. Nevertheless, she speaks to Annie, and encourages her to accept his proposal. Annie's mother tells her that he will be her husband and represent her "late father" as well as taking the helm of the family (120). Clearly the "Old Soldier" is happy about what she will gain from her daughter's marriage to Dr. Strong, and it was very common in the Victorian era for a very young woman to marry a much older man. Annie agrees, out of duty and respect for Dr. Strong. She likes him, but without pressure from society via her mother, she never would have married him. She has a youthful infatuation with her cousin at this time. The age difference and the appearance that Annie is marrying Dr. Strong for security end up becoming a problem when Uriah Heep decides to "expose" her improprieties with her cousin Jack Maldon. Everyone but Doctor Strong had believed something to be going on between the two of them, and it *was* believable because she had been pressured to marry such an older man while her cousin Jack is her own age. When Dr. Strong learns of everyone's doubts, he only blames himself, for asking such a young woman to marry him in the first place. It turns out that nothing happened between Annie and Jack, and her marriage to Dr. Strong probably saved her from a bad situation with her cousin; however, the age disparity and doubt about Annie's motivation to marry him cast a pall over the marriage for a while. Also, Annie lives the life of an old woman to be with Dr. Strong. She very seldom ventures out so that she can spend time with him at home.

Finally, the marriage of David to Dora is not successful because David is not happy, not really. Dora is completely inept with regard to anything relating to managing the household. David tries to mold Dora into a more competent person, but Dora is unwilling, and in some ways, unable to do so. One could argue that David has been warned, often, that Dora was not only impractical and childlike, but had no desire whatsoever to be any other way. When David finds out that his

aunt has lost her money, he tries to talk to Dora about it, and although she wants to remain engaged to David, she doesn't want to have to do anything differently herself, or for him to have to work any harder than he already does. She tells David that he still has her heart, but that "Jip must have a mutton-chop every day at twelve, or he'll die!" (269). She asks him not to be so practical because it frightens her, and tells him that she has no strength at all (269). When they do get married, their little house is often cluttered, with Jip's big house taking up a large amount of room and things strewn about. Dinner is often late or inedible. Dora cannot and will not manage their servants, and they are robbed continuously by their help. David alternates between wistfully wishing she would help to feeling like he shouldn't ask: "And Dora returned, looking such a lovely little creature, that I really doubted whether she ought to be troubled with anything so ordinary" (270). When they are married for a while, however, David does try to "form Dora's mind" a bit (345). Nothing done to this effect works at all. David comes to the same conclusion that Miss Betsy and Annie do: that it is a mistake to love with an "undisciplined" heart (347). Miss Betsy married an abusive man because of hers, and Annie would have probably married her cousin if not for marrying Dr. Strong.

Of course, one thing that David has is his Agnes to talk to, to supplement some of the things that he doesn't get from silly Dora. She is always there, his confidant. Agnes is wise, peaceful, loving, and unselfish, and Dora loves her too. In fact, Dora holds Agnes's hand *during* the wedding ceremony as she is reciting her vows to her husband. As mentioned earlier, Dora, on her deathbed, tells Agnes that she is the only one who has permission to marry David. Maia McAleavey calls this "simultaneous marriage," referring to the fact that "Agnes is a constant alternative to Dora, even during his first wife's lifetime" (202). Another facet of this simultaneous remarriage: "The death of the first spouse is preceded by the knowledge of who will replace him or her, rendering even proper remarriage figuratively bigamous" (McAleavey 194). There are times when David speaks to Agnes of wishing to see no one more than her, and has to correct himself to put Dora first, but Agnes in next. David really has two "Angels in the House." As McAleavey points out, "The image of Agnes pointing upward, as she did when she informed him of Dora's death, pointing up both to Dora's room and to heaven, suggests Agnes's role as his moral guide and "better angel," but also continually calls up the memory of his first wife" (207).

So if David has two wives, it would seem natural that he would marry the phantom one when he is left alone after the legitimate one dies. The problem here is that David sees Agnes as a sister. The transition from sister to wife might not be such a strange one when you look at the other relationships in *David Copperfield*, however. Dr. Strong is a father-figure to Annie, Dora is David's "child bride," and Agnes's relationship to Mr. Wickfield was more like a Victorian marriage

than the relationship of a father to a daughter, with all of its wifely responsibilities. These were acceptable relationships, even though a man could not marry his sister-in-law after the demise of his wife. David's thinking about Agnes does shift in this narrative from sister to wife, however, and it is interesting to look at why that might be.

Gareth Cordery argues that David's entire life has been a process of social conditioning, that in Foucault's terms his disciplining started with the Murdstones and continued on throughout his school years, even after he was living with Aunt Betsey. As Cordery says, "David simply exchanges one form of social discipline that is openly repressive and corporeal for another that is covert and internal" (71). In David's early life he was beaten and punished; later he had the threat of losing the comfort of his life and his aunt's approval. Aunt Betty, like the Murdstones, was fond of "firmness," but she "talks [it] into him" (Cordery 73). Cordery's way of reading *David Copperfield* is that he did not discipline his heart; he went through "social disciplining and education" (71). David learns to be firm. He learns what is expected of him. He learns what he should look for in a marriage, and knows that Agnes is the perfect gatekeeper of "the home." This cannot be underestimated. He married for romantic love the first time, and attraction, and that didn't work out well. Social discourse instructs him to marry for more practical reason.

More importantly, though, is Agnes's power over David. She is what has come to be known as the "Angel in the House" for the way that she is domestic and competent without a flurry. She knows things that David doesn't, such as the fact that Steerforth is not a good person. She is selfless, and all about David, always. She makes David feel like home wherever he is, and guides him to do the right things. Cordery suggests that Agnes's "invisible influence" is a part of his disciplining, leading him toward the "values and practices of mid-Victorian bourgeois liberalism" (72). Agnes falls into Foucault's category of "mechanisms of power that frame the everyday lives of individuals" (Foucault 77). She is always there, and she is always watching David, in her own way. On a humorous note, David runs into Agnes when he gets completely drunk, and she disapproves of him. She is there for the important events in his life, like his first wedding and Dora's death. She is there whenever he needs her. She gives him love, and surveillance, and in the end it seems to change him, along with the cues he learns to take from society about what he should want and what kind of marriage he should have.

Although Dickens gives the reader many bad or problematic marriages in *David Copperfield*, this one seems like it will stand the test of time. Even though, for David's part, there may be a lack of romance, David gets what he wants in the end, or learns to want. His real desire, however, seems to be to have two Angels in his house.

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