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Dickens and the Comedy of Camp

1. Comic Dickens

Dickens was a funny man; his novels, stories, travel accounts, letters and other writings attest to that fact. From the publication of the Pickwick Papers (1836) onwards, he became known as England's most eminent humourist. As early as 1836, an anonymous review in the Athenaeum refers to him as "a new favourite in the humorous department of literature" (Collins 1971, 32), and Charles Buller writes in a review in 1837: "the qualities for which everyone reads and admires him are his humour and his wit" (ibid., 52). More recent Dickens scholarship, however, has preferred to focus on the 'dark' Dickens; the social critic, the satirist and the 'panoptical' Dickens, as John Glavin christened him (1999, 133). The last scholar to assume unequivocally that Dickens wrote comedies was Northrop Frye (1968, 49). Since the 1960s, most critics have emphasised Dickens's realism, his social criticism, his active role in social and legal reform and his troubling portrayals of femininity. The most influential readings of his works by J. Hillis Miller (1998) and D. A. Miller (1988), Jeremy Tambling (1995), or David Paroissien (2011) all focus on a Dickens who is much more concerned with his society's shortcomings and injustices. This direction, which most Dickens scholars share, is so strong that one might feel inclined to speculate that to discuss Dickens seriously, one must focus on the serious Dickens. This might have something to do with Dickens's questionable reputation among academics stemming from the Leavises' early judgement, or it might equally be related to an intuitive skepticism towards his immense popularity and appeal to the masses during his time. In any case, among an immeasurable number of scholarly books and articles published over the past sixty years, there are only two notable works on the comic Dickens, James Kincaid's Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter from 1971 and Malcom Andrews's Dickensian Laughter from 2013. Andrews himself muses: "perhaps we think [...] that it was the serious Dickens, the darker Dickens, where the real genius of the man showed itself" (2013, viii).

In this article, I will focus on the comic Dickens and explore his use of the camp aesthetic for the creation of funny men. The camp man in Dickens considers himself removed from the reality of others and uses his role as a means to avoid the responsibility inherent in the role of the Victorian man. In his attempt to create the character whom he repeats in Dick Swiveller, Mr Micawber and Harold Skimpole, among others, Dickens interlinks gender and comedy, Victorian sexist notions and subversive performances. His camp man foreshadows Oscar Wilde's use of the same aesthetic and represents a notable deviation from his conservatism in other male and female characters throughout the novels. The camp man in Dickens is not only not obedient to Victorian gender roles, but also gets away with his transgressions, which makes him a perfect source for comedy. In the following, I will therefore focus on three major aspects. First, I will consider theories of laughter and humour, both in general and in specific reference to Victorian ideas of humour. I will then introduce Susan Sontag's mode of camp in order to demonstrate that Dickens anticipates the


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phenomenon long before the *fin de siècle*, where Sontag identifies its origins. And third, I will analyse Dickens's camp men and his implicit critique of Victorian gender ideology.

2. Theories of Laughter

In theories of comedy and laughter or humour, one encounters a catalogue of different explanations as to what induces people to laugh, which varies little. The notions most commonly included in this list are superiority, incongruity, relief and surprise, the last as a variant of disappointed expectation. In that sense, they are all closely related, but an additional censure is needed, for one has to distinguish whether we laugh *at* or *with* someone. Edward Berry has shown that this distinction is most crucial to Shakespearean and Renaissance comedy, which pits scapegoats to laugh *at*, such as Malvolio, against figures of identification to laugh *with*, such as Orlando (2001, 124). Berry identifies laughing at others as the stronger strategy in these comedies, relating this to a theory Thomas Hobbes outlines briefly in the *Leviathan* of 1651. There, Hobbes defines laughter as a feeling of "sudden glory," which is caused by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident to most of them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. (Hobbes 1996, 43)

Hobbes assumes, therefore, that it is most common to laugh *at*, not *with*, others, which has gone down in history as the theory of superiority. Such laughter is hierarchical and exclusive, rather than inclusive. The feeling of superiority in those who laugh results from the illusion of safety, superior knowledge and/or condemnation for the subject of their laughter. This is the laughter of the hegemony and its function is corrective. Henri Bergson, one of the most elaborate theorists of laughter, writes in 1900, "[o]ur laughter is always the laughter of a group" (1956, 64). Laughter therefore exposes the deviant, the social being whose behaviour does not conform to its society's norms and the group realigns such people through their laughter. For Bergson, laughter "must have a social signification," for it "corrects men's manners" (ibid. 65, 71).

Hobbes's theory of superiority is clearly consistent with his general misanthropic premises, and despite Bergson's emphasis of the social and communal aspect of laughter, many theorists shy away from accepting that human beings be so mean-spirited as to only truly laugh at others, not with them. It seems that the Victorians especially aimed at finding a different interpretation of laughter as both Stuart Tave and Robert Bernard Martin have shown at length. As the 18th century nears its end, the 'sympathetic turn' with its emphasis on empathy and fellow-feeling causes a growing discomfort with the theory of superiority, and several theorists begin to provide different explanations for laughter. Among those, the principle of incongruity rapidly gains prominence. Stuart Tave argues that "the emphasis shifts: it is the benign laughter that becomes the norm and the malevolent that is not properly called laughter; Hobbes's theory is attacked and another is erected in opposition" (1960, 55). As early as 1764, James Beattie writes in his "Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition":

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Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them. (Beattie 1971, 320)

The incongruity he identifies is a variant of what Kant describes as a kind of disappointed expectation. He refers to the 'inconsistent' as something "absurd, […] in which the Understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction" (qtd. in Martin 1974, 20).

In the following years, as both Tave and Martin insist, the theory of incongruity increases its foothold and substitutes the theory of superiority. In 1819, William Hazlitt lectures: "[m]an is the only animal that laughs and weeps, for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be" (1819, 1). The appeal of the theory seems to lie not least in the fact that there is no hierarchy, no laughing at, but rather mere incomprehension that is the source of laughter. Thus, our expectations are disappointed; what one assumes must follow does not, but its opposite does. In many ways, this seems to be a much more benevolent explanation for what causes laughter than the theory of superiority.

3. Comic Incongruity

Dickens the humourist is equally more benevolent than Dickens the satirist. Dickens's satire has been of much greater interest to critics than his humour in recent years, but his satire, I would argue, deliberately has his audience laughing at his characters, not with them. In the following, I will focus on Dickens the humourist, the Dickens who will have us laughing with, not at, his funny men. Moreover, the age's emphasis on incongruity is clearly palpable in all his works. The appeal of the notion of incongruity lies not only, but also in the levelling of two incongruous ideas without giving preference to either. Dickens employs such presumably 'neutral' incongruity to great comic effect in many of his novels, but one example shall suffice for the moment. It comes from one of his later works, Great Expectations (1860-1861), and captures Pip's visit of a lay production of Hamlet, starring his fellow countryman Mr Wopsle. This is not merely a bad production, but it is, in fact, so bad that the audience feels it is quite beyond their power not to participate:

Whenever that undecided Prince had to ask a question or state a doubt, the public helped him out with it. As for example; on the question whether 'twas nobler in the mind to suffer, some roared yes, and some no, and some inclining to both opinions said 'toss up for it; and quite a Debating Society arose. When he asked what should such fellows as he do crawling between earth and heaven, he was encouraged with loud cries of 'Hear, hear!' When he appeared with his stocking disordered […] a conversation took place in the gallery respecting the paleness of his leg, and whether it was occasioned by the turn the ghost had given him. On his taking the recorders […] he was called upon unanimously for Rule Britannia. When he recommended the player not to saw the air thus, the sulky man said, 'And don't you do it neither; you're a deal worse than him!' And I grieve to add that peals of laughter greeted Mr Wopsle on every one of these occasions. (GE, ch. 12, 217)

Dickens here creates comedy by incongruity. First, this type of heckling is unusual for the theatre, especially for Shakespeare. Second, the middle-class reader knows enough about Hamlet to know that he is not actually looking for a reply. The idea that Hamlet's numerous rhetorical questions posed in his soliloquies could be taken literally by
anyone is risible. Third, and most important, however, is that Dickens here lets his affinity for the theatre take over and play with what is commonly called the dramatic convention. The theatre can only function well if the audience agree to the unspoken contract that they do not expose theatre's strategies, but rather accept its shortcomings silently. As Shakespeare pleads in many plays, but most clearly in the prologue to *King Henry V*, the theatre obliges its audience to bring their own imagination to the table in order for the play to have its intended effect:

Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i'th' receiving earth.
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,
Turning th'accomplishment of many years
Into an hour-glass… (*King Henry V*, prologue, 26-31)

In reference to the neo-classical unities of time, place and action, the Chorus of *Henry V* thus urges the audience to allow for chronological and spatial inconsistencies and "piece out" theatre's imperfections "with their thoughts" (24). It is the refusal to do so which makes Mr Wopsle's audience such a riotous crowd. Dickens's joke is therefore based on the reader's intuitive understanding that the theatre creates an illusion that ought not be questioned by the audience. Answering Hamlet's rhetorical questions is incongruous with the play's highly philosophical themes and the result, in Malcolm Andrews's words, is an "unintentional travesty of an elevated original" (2013, 91).

In accordance with Victorian ideas on the cause of laughter, Dickens uses incongruity to create the comedy, but although Mr Wopsle is being laughed at by his audience, the reader laughs rather benevolently, not maliciously, with Pip. Due to the fact that the perception of incongruity is an intellectual exercise, many theorists have argued that it is more neutral, and both Stave and Martin have shown that it is this neutrality and logic that made the notion most appealing to the Victorians. Thus, Martin claims, "the distinctive mark of the theory of incongruity is that it substitutes an intellectual perception for a moral one" (1974, 19). Like several other theorists, Martin presumes that one can laugh at an incongruous notion without judging or condemning the object of this laughter: "Both parts of the incongruous, whether persons, ideas, or actions, may be perceived objectively without direct reference to ourselves" (ibid.). Yet, this presumption is slightly at odds with the commonly shared position that laughter is a social activity. In other words, laughter always happens as part of a particular society, which shares certain norms and values. The fact that one can perceive two notions as incongruous means that there is a rather firm frame of reference in place that lets one understand that these notions are incongruous. The laughter's expectations can only be disappointed if they have been hegemonically formed. As James English writes, "[c]omic practice is always on some level or in some measure an assertion of group against group, an effect and an event of struggle, a form of symbolic violence" (1994, 9). Comedy depends on what is discursively perceived as 'normal' in a given society, so that deviants can be easily identified. The comic against the background of the norm is therefore most apparent when it comes to the equation of comedy and gender.
Comedy and gender go together well, since a certain society's normative understanding of masculinity and femininity is a fruitful source for creative incongruities. Numerous comedies are based on conservative and sexist notions of what men and women ought to be, for many heterogeneous audiences can easily spot the incongruities the jokes are based on. For this reason, comedy also runs the risk of consolidating such conservative and sexist views. Andrew Stott points out, "we may view comedy's representations of male and female gender roles, especially in narratives that conclude in marriage, as confirmations of culturally orthodox views of the nature of men and women" (2005, 63). Literary creations of men and women who deviate from such "culturally orthodox views" therefore bear profound comic potential and many authors have made use of the possible incongruities that arise between what their audience expect from masculine or feminine behaviour. Dickens is no exception. In Nicholas Nickleby (1838-1839), an early and popular, yet critically contested novel, he creates a comic vignette that is not only, but also based on gendered expectations. Mrs Nickleby, the hero's widowed mother, construes a social interaction as a marriage proposal. Her mentally incapacitated neighbour, who is treated for an illness quite probably resulting from syphilis (Phiz's drawing shows abnormally blemished facial skin) in the establishment next door, has begun lopping fruit and vegetable over the garden wall:

[A] large cucumber was seen to shoot up in the air with the velocity of a sky-rocket, whence it descended, tumbling over and over, until it fell at Mrs Nickleby's feet. This remarkable appearance was succeeded by another of a precisely similar description; then a fine vegetable marrow, of unusually large dimensions, was seen to whirl aloft, and come topping down; then, several cucumbers shot up together; and, finally, the air was darkened by a shower of onions, turnip-radishes, and other small vegetables, which fell rolling and scattering, and bumping about, in all directions. (NN, ch. 41, 497-498)

Given the enthusiasm and the virility of the delivery, the extraordinary size of the cucumbers and the sigh 'Be Mine' from behind the wall, Mrs Nickleby not only construes this action as a proposal, but actually feels inclined to reciprocate. In her opinion, the gentleman expresses himself "respectfully, and in quite poetical language, [...] making offers with so much thought, and care, and prudence" (NN, ch. 41, 505).

Once again, there is more than one incongruity and more than one difference between what things are and what they ought to be. First, it is easily conceivable that the aerial delivery of fruit and vegetable, even if it is phallically shaped, does not constitute a marriage proposal. Dickens parallels the neighbour's irrationality with Mrs Nickleby's, suggesting that she must be equally mad if she even considers reciprocation. Second, the gendered frame of reference emphasises her female vanity and his lecherous virility. The comedy is further enhanced through the neighbour's keeper's comment, "[n]othing will prevent his making love" (NN, ch. 41, 504), thereby drawing on the stereotype of the dirty old man, whose age will not stand in the way of his sexual urges. Contrarily, Dickens makes fun of Mrs Nickleby for considering to return the affections, suggesting that she is much past the age in which a woman may express romantic, let alone sexual, desires. Thus, incongruity is neither neutral nor objective. Even the comedy inherent in a fruitful proposal such as this is rooted in a normative discourse concerning what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in men and women, especially of a certain age. Dickens thus uses a hegemonic understanding of
both femininity and masculinity to create incongruity and thereby achieve a comic effect. While this may be a case of laughing at, more strongly than laughing with, the comedy is nevertheless far from malicious or satirical. Mrs Nickleby is simply created as an easy target, as so many of Dickens's women are.

4. Dickens and Gender

The men and women that populate Dickens's novels have made many a critic uncomfortable, and for a long time, his sexism was regarded as fairly unquestionable. As Natalie McKnight puts it, "Dickens has suffered a good deal of negative press about his stereotypical portrayals of angelic young women […] and earnest young men" (2011, 186). Dickens often seems complicit in Victorian gender ideologies, promoting female domesticity and male earnestness, writing for a conservative middle class and making his men and women fit the established social order. In an age that many theorists have described as a period of crisis when it comes to ideals of masculinity (Adams 1995, 3-7), Dickens has seemed to many anachronistically conservative. Most of his men are gentlemen, which makes them compatible with a masculinity understood as a strenuous psychic regimen, which could be affirmed outside the economic arena, but nonetheless would be embodied as a charismatic self-mastery akin to that of the daring yet disciplined entrepreneur. (ibid., 7)

Dickens's ideal manhood, like that of so many of his contemporaries, seems to rely firmly on the Victorian norm of self-mastery. Often, Dickens condemns excessive self-fashioning, fully complicit with a society in which "a theatricality readily accommodated in earlier constructions of aristocratic manhood is disavowed as the sign of a socially mediated identity, which betrays both religious integrity and the social autonomy fundamental to manhood" (ibid., 10). He tends to punish deviant behaviour and fallen women severely and his true heroes and heroines are sometimes so very good that they completely lack personality. While his young men, such as Nicholas Nickleby or Martin Chuzzlewit, are so earnest that they are completely humourless and hardly likeable, his young women are so good that they literally seem to be out of this world. According to James Eli Adams, Dickens's "celebration of other-worldly or childlike femininity, with its corollary anathema of 'fallen' women, has often seemed the quintessence of a fabled Victorian repression, which evaded the complexities and the satisfactions of adult sexual life" (2018, 357).

Dickens's worlds seemed exclusively heteronormative and a long way away from the sexual anarchy, as Elaine Showalter (1992) has it, that broke out towards the end of the century. However, as critics such as Natalie McKnight (2011), Catherine Waters (1997) and Natalie B. Cole (2009), among others, have shown, more recent scholarship on Dickens and gender frequently emphasises that only seeing Dickens's sexism equally results in stereotyping. Ever since Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ground-breaking reading of Our Mutual Friend (Sedgwick 1985, 161-179), there have been increasingly more attempts to queer the text (Cole 2009, 32-72), which all show that a closer look at the novels reveals a much higher degree of ambivalence towards gender and sexuality than was hitherto thought. In this article, I too would like to suggest that the comic
Dickens does not banish gendered self-fashioning from his texts, but anticipates the theatricality of the camp man long before Wilde immortalised the character.

There are different groups of men in Dickens, but his funny men are almost exclusively minor characters. His heroes are rarely funny. David Copperfield might prove an exception to the rule, but due to his narrative position there is no easy distinction between the comedy that is his and the comedy that belongs to those he tells the reader about. All the other young male leads are too earnest to be funny and they never remain at odds: easily paired off in heterosexual relationships, they eventually become successful patriarchs. The sexually awkward young men, such as Smike or Tom Pinch, are impossible to pair off, although they are full to the brim with heterosexual desire. They remain tragicomic figures at best. The older, pompous and often lecherous men are created by Dickens the satirist, mostly for social criticism, and the pirates – also older, slightly paternal, physically impaired men – border on the grotesque. The truly funny man is the camp man. Dickens creates the figure several times over the course of his career in different variants and different degrees of complexity. While Dick Swiveller is an early representative, the characters of the middle Dickens gradually bring the type to perfection. Characters such as Mr Micawber and Mr Skimpole create most of the comedy in the novels of the early 1850s by a continuous deviation from their prescribed gender performance.

5. The Camp Aesthetic

In colloquial 21st-century English, the word 'camp' is mostly used to describe supposedly hyperbolically effeminate behaviour in men – sometimes queer, sometimes not. In aesthetic theory, the term originates with a different meaning. Camp is simply not natural, highly artificial, the opposite of authentic, but it denotes no sexual orientation. It is an art form closely related to kitsch, yet with a higher degree of self-reflexivity. The most influential attempt to define camp as an aesthetic phenomenon stems from Susan Sontag's essay "Notes on Camp," written in 1964. Sontag closely relates her premises to Oscar Wilde's theory of aesthetics, grounding her definition of camp on his view of art and artificiality. Wilde famously quipped, "[t]he first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is, no one has yet discovered" (2003, 1244). The ironic detachment from any notion resembling authenticity is, of course, clearly palpable in all of his works. His characters are always once removed from their storyworld, identification is impossible as they are absurdly aware of their own existence as artificial beings. At the same time, they play roles within roles, never fully developing a coherent identity. For Sontag, this is the mode of camp: "To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater" (2009, 280). Thus, "[c]amp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon" (ibid., 277).

Famously, Wilde saw the world only as an aesthetic phenomenon, and it is this sensibility that Sontag defines as camp. Camp art is not interested in the 'nature' of the world, but in its potential for artificiality. The surface gains dominance over the content, appearance trumps reality: "Camp is decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content" (Sontag 2009, 278). Style and stylisation lie at the heart of what is camp. Camp always plays a role, camp "sees everything in
quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman" (ibid., 280).

Camp is therefore not necessarily a gender performance, as the contemporary use of
the word would have one believe, but it is nevertheless always a performance, an
artificial stylisation of the Self. In Dickens, both performances come together. His camp
men put themselves in quotation marks, understand being-as-playing-a-role, but they
do so quite deliberately in order to subvert Victorian norms of masculinity, a 'norm of
manliness," as Adams has it, "identified above all with honest, straightforward speech
and action, shorn of any hint of subtlety or equivocation" (1995, 14). As camp men,
these characters relieve themselves of the responsibilities resulting from Victorian
expectations of middle-class men – such as the duties to provide for the family, to prove
earnest and hard-working, to accumulate money and to strive for an influential position
in society. By constructing them as camp, Dickens emphasises the rigidity of the gender
norms of his time and creates an incongruity between the norms and his characters'
performances for comic effect.

Dick Swiveller in The Old Curiosity Shop (1840-1841) is an early variant of the
type, but he is admittedly less complex. Dick's two defining characteristics are his
cunning attempts to avoid his debtors and his excessive consumption of alcohol – a
comic ingredient to be found in many of Dickens's novels (Michie 2018, 602). Both are
used by Dickens to enhance the character's artificiality, creating an early version of the
dandy that Wilde would professionalise. Significantly, Dick is financially dependent
on his aunt and frequently 'performs' a role in order to enforce payments:

[T]he average number of letters it takes to soften her is six, and this time we have got as
far as eight without any effect at all. I'll write another tomorrow morning. I mean to blot
it a good deal, and shake some water over it out of the pepper-castor, to make it look
penitent. 'I'm in such a state of mind that I hardly know what I write' – blot – 'if you could
see me at this minute shedding tears for my past misconduct' – pepper-castor – 'my hand
trembles when I think' – blot again – if that don't produce the effect, it's all over. (TOC,
ch. 8, 60)

Dick has mastered the melodramatic performance. He knows that a great amount of
tears has to be involved, he knows that excessive emotions are necessary, and he knows
that there is no more moderate end than absolute and utter devastation and destruction.
His propensity to declare that all is over foreshadows Mr Micawber's delight for the
same conclusion. Dick's performance is geared towards avoiding all responsibility,
mishandling his accounts and escaping his debtors, which makes him the earliest
version of this type in Dickens. He plays a role within a role, creating an artificial self
that lives at one remove from the rest of his storyworld. He puts himself in quotation
marks and creates the comedy in this early novel. Unfortunately, since this is the early
Dickens, Dick cannot succeed as a camp man. The novel still owes too much to
Dickens's own affinity for the theatre and melodrama. In accordance with the moral
logic of early 19th-century melodrama, Swiveller has to be redeemed and reborn
through a severe illness and is not allowed to persevere as a harmless scoundrel. He
must be improved and so he is by the help of the healing hands of the female. However,
the later Dickens returns to this funny man in a more complex manner, allowing him to
be camp without punishment.
Mr Micawber from *David Copperfield* (1850) is an equally melodramatic camp man, but by now, Dickens himself has developed such an ironic distance towards the overbearing morality of melodrama that he uses Micawber to ridicule this art form. Like Dick Swiveller, Micawber is chronically in debt, but unlike Dick, he is married with several children, increasing their number in quite regular intervals. He is also constructed after Dickens’s love of the theatrical – he is not a man, but a ‘man.’ He is a melodramatic camp man, living in comedy and tragedy, prosperity and adversity. He is always the life of the party, but he keeps a razor on him at all times in case he might be required to cut his throat spontaneously. Micawber is in all respects true to Wilde’s dictum and fulfils his duty in life to be as artificial as possible. The character conceives of himself as if he were the hero in a melodrama, and Dickens makes him appear in almost every act for the comic effect of the novel. From his first introduction of the character, Dickens emphasises Micawber’s propensity for emotional excess. When his creditors call, David observes:

> At these times, Mr Micawber would be transported with grief and mortification, even to the length (as I was once made aware by a scream from his wife) of making motions at himself with a razor; but within half an hour afterwards, he would polish up his shoes with extraordinary pains, and go out, humming a tune with a greater air of gentility than ever. (*DC*, ch. 11, 179)

Micawber goes through the motions like every good melodramatic actor, quickly losing composure, especially when reminded of his pecuniary difficulties:

> 'My love,' said Mr Micawber, much affected, 'you will forgive, and our old and tried friend Copperfield will, I am sure, forgive, the momentary laceration of a wounded spirit, made sensitive by a recent collision with the Minion of Power – in other words, with a ribald Turncock attached to the water-works – and will pity, not condemn, its excesses.' Mr Micawber then embraced Mrs Micawber, and pressed my hand; leaving me to infer from this broken allusion that his domestic supply of water had been cut off that afternoon, in consequence of default in the payment of the Company's rates. (*DC*, ch. 28, 460)

David's emphasis that he has to "infer" the meaning of Micawber's emotional monologues alerts the reader to the character's artificiality, his preference of style over content. He constructs his own life according to the plot of a melodrama. As Dickens himself writes in *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839), "[i]t is the custom on the stage: in all good murderous melodramas: to present the tragic and the comic scenes, in a regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky, well cured bacon" (*OT*, ch. 17, 271). This is the structure of Micawber's performance as a melodramatic camp man. Full of pompous optimism, frequently breaking into tears, cheerfully pursuing pointless career paths and regularly declaring the end of it all by letter, Micawber deviates from any expected gender performance, creating comic incongruities based on expectations of masculinity. William Makepeace Thackeray himself complained; he thought Micawber was "an exaggerated man" (Collins 1971, 260). This is exactly what he is: "Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style – but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the 'off,' of things-being-what-they-are-not" (Sontag 2009, 279). Micawber, like Dickens's other camp men, is what he is not, and through this deviant performance he is the main source of comedy in the novel.

Micawber's camp performance is enhanced through his characteristic letter writing. Dickens plants numerous dramatic epistles as comic relief at strategic points of the plot.
These letters significantly allow Mr Micawber to refer to himself in the third person. They let him discuss himself as an artefact that he has created himself. He is a creation of a creation in a creation. After a splendid party, attended by a Micawber in the highest of spirits, David receives the following letter – delivered after, but composed before the evening's get-together:

The die is cast – all is over. Hiding the ravages of care with a sickly mask of mirth, I have not informed you this evening, that there is no hope of remittance! Under these circumstances, alike humiliating to endure, humiliating to contemplate, and humiliating to relate, I have discharged the pecuniary liability contracted at this establishment, by giving a note of hand, made payable fourteen days after date, at my residence, Pentonville, London. When it becomes due, it will not be taken up. The result is destruction. The bolt is impending and the tree must fall.

Let the wretched man who addresses you, my dear Copperfield, be a beacon to you through life. He writes with that intention, and in that hope. If he could think himself of so much use, one gleam of day might, by possibility, penetrate into the cheerless dungeon of his remaining existence – though his longevity is, at present (to say the least of it), extremely problematical. This is the last communication, my dear Copperfield, you will ever receive.

From

The Beggared Outcast,

WILKINS MICAWBER

(DC, ch. 17, 296-297)

Micawber thus intertwines the comic and the tragic in his life, but Dickens uses him almost exclusively for comic purposes. He balances Micawber's excesses with David's increasingly dry observations to emphasise the character's artificial performance:

I was so shocked by the contents of this heart-rending letter, that I ran off directly towards the little hotel with the intention of taking it on my way to Dr Strong's, and trying to soothe Mr Micawber with a word of comfort. But, half-way there, I met the London coach with Mr and Mrs Micawber up behind; Mr Micawber, the very picture of tranquil enjoyment, smiling at Mrs Micawber's conversation, eating walnuts out of a paper bag, with a bottle sticking out of his breast pocket. (DC, ch. 17, 297)

As a camp man, Micawber can subvert society's expectations of him and live life free from all responsibility. He is a funny man, because he enacts an identity that is incongruous with gendered expectations, but it is important to note that true to the Victorian idea of laughter, the reader laughs with Micawber, not at him, encouraged through David's compassionate and loyal narrative position. This is benevolent humour that does not sanction or condemn Micawber's deviance from normative notions of masculinity.

It is certainly noteworthy that Dickens does send Micawber to the colonial margin, to all those other Others, where he sends everyone he cannot kill (Moore 2004, 13). He does suggest thereby that while Micawber's deviant performance deserves no punishment, it cannot function in England's social system that depends on earnest men and women. Yet, the benevolence towards the character is so clearly palpable that while he could never be the novel's hero, he can certainly be its source of humour without satire. His performance is incongruous with Victorian expectations, but it is comedy
nevertheless. He cannot be compared to those fallen women whose excess Dickens always punishes more or less severely. Micawber successfully avoids his responsibilities as a Victorian man, but he is also allowed to cause the heroic overthrow of the villain Uriah Heep, thereby emerging like the phoenix from the ashes and continuing his success by becoming an important flourishing figure in the colony.

Dickens’s next variant of the camp man is slightly more sinister. Dick Swiveller and Mr Micawber return in the figure of Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House* (1852–1853). Also chronically in debt, like Micawber married with several children, yet unable to support them financially, Skimpole creates an existence for himself as a work of art. He is a funny man because he puts style over content, understanding his being as an aesthetic performance. He is not a man, but a ‘man.’ Accordingly, he mostly refers to himself in the third person. He invents an identity for himself that differs significantly from the middle-aged gentleman married with several daughters.

> 'Now, my dear Miss Summerson, and my dear Mr Richard,' said Mr Skimpole, gaily, innocently, and confidingly [...]. 'Here you see me utterly incapable of helping myself, and entirely in your hands! I only ask to be free. The butterflies are free. Mankind will surely not deny to Harold Skimpole what it concedes to the butterflies?' (*BH*, ch. 6, 66-67)

Skimpole is funny because he is notably not a person, but a role. Esther, who is rarely so pithy, remarks that Skimpole continues to speak of himself "as if he were not at all his own affair, as if Skimpole were a third person, as if he knew that Skimpole had his singularities, but still had his claims too, which were the general business of the community and must not be slighted" (*BH*, ch. 6, 62). The fact that Skimpole exploits others makes him a bit of a scoundrel, not as harmless as Micawber or Swiveller, but he is also clearly a predecessor of Wilde’s dandies, inventing himself as both Skimpole and Bunbury in the same person. While Wilde would immortalise the figure, Dickens clearly already anticipates the aesthetic movement through him [Skimpole] – the signs were there already to be read by an acute observer of the literary and social scene […]” (Leavis and Leavis 1973, 150). While this view might seem a little too teleological, the parallel is unmistakable. Wilde’s theory is Sontag’s reference, but she could have constructed her theory of the camp aesthetic just as easily on the basis of Dickens's funny men. Like Wilde, Dickens uses the incongruity of the camp man in Victorian society for comic effect without trying to correct them or realign them with a hegemonic ideology of masculinity. It has to be said that Skimpole, like Micawber and Swiveller, cannot perfectly elude society’s judgement – in this case spoken through Esther’s narrative voice:

> If I felt at all confused at that early time, in endeavouring to reconcile anything he said with anything I had thought about the duties and accountabilities of life […], I was confused by not exactly understanding why he was free of them. That he was free of them, I scarcely doubted; he was so very clear about it himself. (*BH*, ch. 6, 62)

The camp man is not fully compatible with Victorian society, and Skimpole apparently evoked rather severe reactions. An anonymous reviewer of the novel calls him "a monstrosity," writing with disgust that this character represents "nothing which we have ever seen, or heard, or dreamt of," a character whom they should like to see "pruned away" (Collins 1971, 287). The comparison is interesting: the monstrous is usually associated with 19th-century’s women’s deviant behaviour. Dickens, however,
certainly does not treat Skimpole as a monster. He uses the arising incongruity between Skimpole's camp performance and his male gender as a source of comedy in one of his funniest novels.

6. Afterword: A Funny Woman

It is certainly difficult, if not impossible, to clear Dickens fundamentally from the suspicion of sexism and gender stereotyping. His ideal men and women cannot be argued away, and the dark Dickens especially can be severely sexist and harsh in his judgement of deviant gender performances. However, as Natalie McKnight warns, "it is easy to overemphasize Dickens's reliance on Victorian gender stereotypes, but to do so is to miss the richness of his fictional characterizations" (2011, 197). The focus on the comic Dickens reveals that despite his hegemonic complicity, he also astutely anticipates the gender trouble that would await Victorian society towards the fin de siècle. Yet, one cannot help but notice that camp is still a male prerogative in Dickens. By way of a conclusion, it seems appropriate to spend a couple of words on the contrast between his camp men and funny women. Dickens writes not only funny men, but also funny women. Mrs Nickleby, introduced at the beginning of this article, is one such example. Only laughter at Mrs Nickleby might come a little uneasily, as she is one of his many bad mothers, whose concern for herself has often been read autobiographically and therefore as vengeful. Another funny woman, Mrs Gamp in Martin Chuzzlewit (1843-1844), has the same love of alcohol as Dick Swiveller and in her intoxicated state borders on both the grotesque and the monstrous. But Dickens also writes likeable funny women and his comic strategies for them are quite opposed to the camp aesthetic.

Miss Betsey Trotwood from David Copperfield (1850) is the opposite of camp, the opposite of artificial. The key to her character as Dickens conceived of it lies in her very refusal to play any role, be it social or gendered or both. In fact, she is completely earnest, thereby transcending her gender role as a woman, and David frequently emphasises the admirability of her deviant performance. She is funny, but it is impossible to laugh at her: both David and the reader can only laugh as an expression of their highest respect and admiration. Her earnest refusal to perform according to her gender role makes her a classic comic character in Bergson's sense: "a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself" (1956, 71). Dickens gives Miss Trotwood an inflexibility towards her social surroundings that Bergson refers to as rigidity, which causes a risible automatism: "There was an inflexibility in her face, in her voice, in her gait and carriage, amply sufficient to account for the effect she had made upon a gentle creature like my mother; but her features were rather handsome than otherwise, though unbending and austere" (DC, ch. 13, 218). Miss Trotwood's ignorance of conventional femininity does not expose her to ridicule, however, but rather makes her a centre of affection in the novel. David relates her dismissal of public opinion as authoritative and admirable:

My aunt, who was perfectly indifferent to public opinion, drove the grey pony through Dover in a masterly manner; sitting high and stiff like a state coachman, keeping a steady eye upon him wherever he went, and making a point of not letting him have his own way in any respect. (DC, ch. 15, 244)
Miss Trotwood is earnest, stern and inflexible, and she is prone to outbursts of violence, not shying away from physically assaulting the villain Uriah Heep or the offending boys that ride donkeys across her lawn:

> In whatever occupation she was engaged, however interesting to her the conversation in which she was taking part, a donkey turned the current of her ideas in a moment, and she was upon him straight. Jugs of water, and watering pots, were kept in secret places ready to be discharged on the offending boys; sticks were laid in ambush behind the door; sallies were made at all hours; and incessant war prevailed. (DC, ch. 13, 219-220)

'War' is a metaphor Dickens employs frequently to describe the character and Miss Trotwood's vendetta with the donkeys creates an automatism in the text, which has great comic effect. Her frequent war cry, "Janet! Donkies!", occurs in regular intervals and the repetition controls the reader's expectations. At the same time, Dickens deliberately juxtaposes Victorian conceptions of femininity with Betsey's masculine deviance:

> These interruptions were the more ridiculous to me, because she was giving me broth out of a table-spoon at the time […], and, while my mouth was yet open to receive the spoon, she would put it back into the basin, cry 'Janet! Donkies!' and go out to the assault. (DC, ch. 13, 220)

Once again, Dickens uses incongruity for comedy: her tender, maternal, feminine care of the hurt child and her violent, belligerent masculine vendetta with the donkeys.

In contrast to his funny men, however, Dickens makes Miss Betsey Trotwood a highly rational character, who never shies away from responsibility or conflict. A victim of domestic violence at the hands of her husband, she has paid him off and sent him to the colonies, subsequently reporting him dead to be able to live the life of an independent woman. David relates that she makes it her mission to employ female servants like Janet to provide them with an alternative to marriage. She sees through David's malicious stepfather, through the villain Uriah Heep and through David's infatuation with his first wife Dora. She finds a solution for Mr Micawber's pecuniary difficulties and makes a responsible young man out of the novel's hero. She is in every respect the voice of reason in the novel and a moral signpost within her diegetic world and beyond. Her insistence, made against the donkeys and their equestrians, "I won't be trespassed upon! I won't allow it!" (DC, ch. 14, 232) transfers quite clearly from her wish to protect herself from patriarchal oppression and male violence, and Dickens creates an atmosphere of admiration around her for her self-determination and affection for others. Thus, although Betsey clearly deviates from ideals of femininity, her behaviour is given to the reader as laudable in every respect. She does not have to leave to be 'herself' at the other end of the world. In contrast to the camp men, she is a figure of absolute admiration. She is not a monster, just a funny woman, because her character is incongruous with Victorian ideas of femininity. Famously, Dickens said, "I think it is my infirmity to fancy or perceive relations in things which are not apparent generally" (qtd. in Andrews 2013, 77), but in the end, this is just a self-deprecating way of saying that he had an eye for the incongruities in this world and saw their comic potential.
Works Cited


