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CHARLES DICKENS
AND ELIZABETH
GASKELL: A LITERARY
MARRIAGE?

Carolyn Lambert



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Marriage in the
nineteenth century

The periodical market

The relationship between
Gaskell and Dickens

- A man and woman come together from some affinity, some partial accord of their nature which has inspired mutual affection. There is generally very little careful consideration of who and what they are, - no thought of the reciprocal influence of mutual traits, - no previous chording and testing of the instruments which are to make lifelong harmony or discord, - and after a short period of engagement, in which all their mutual relations are made as opposite as possible to those which must follow marriage, these two furnish their house and begin life together.

- Beecher Stowe, Harriet. *Little Foxes; or, the Insignificant Little Habits Which Mar Domestic Happiness*. London: Bell and Daldy, 1866, pp 12-13

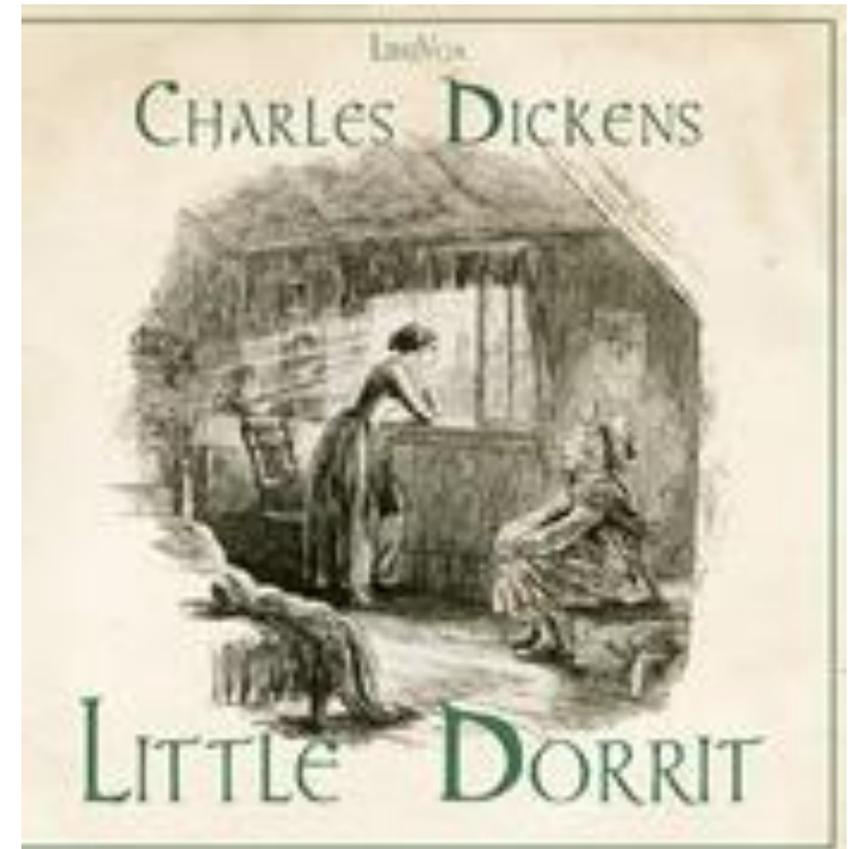


Key dates and texts

- Custody of Infants Act 1839
- The Langham Place circle: Barbara Leigh Smith: *A Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws of England concerning Women* (1854)
- Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act (1857)
- Married Women's Property Act (1870 and further Act of 1882).

- You ask for the petition back again without loss of time, so I send it you although today [...] I don't think it is very definite, and *pointed; or that it will do much good*, - for the Turnkey's objection (vide Little Dorrit)'but if they wish to come over her, how then can you legally tie it up' &c. will be a stronger difficulty than they can legislate for [:] a husband can coax, wheedle, beat or tyrannize his wife out of something and now law whatever will help this that I see. (Mr Gaskell begs Mr Fox to draw up a bill for the protection of *wives* against husbands who will spend all their earnings) However our sex is badly enough used and legislated *against*, there's no doubt of *that* - so though I don't see the definite end proposed by these petitions I'll sign."

- Elizabeth Gaskell to Eliza Fox, 1 Jan. 1856. *Letters*, p 379.
- *Little Dorrit*, Chapter 7.



THE
CORNHILL MAGAZINE.

JANUARY, 1862.

Philip.

CHAPTER XXVII.

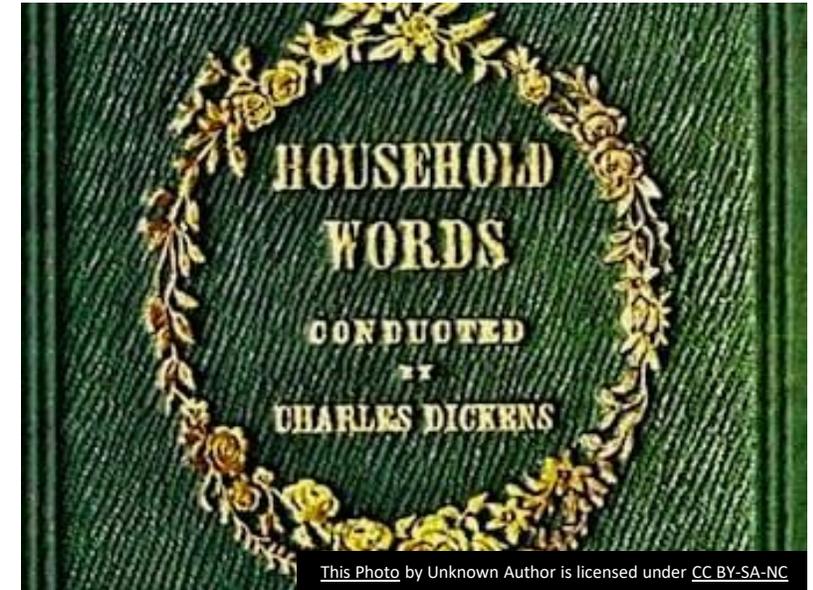
I CHARGE YOU, DROP YOUR DAGGERS!



GENERAL RAYNES began the story which you and I have heard at length. He told it in his own way. He grew very angry with himself whilst defending himself. He had to abuse Philip very fiercely, in order to excuse his own act of treason. He had to show that his act was not his act; that, after all, he never had promised; and that, if he had promised, Philip's atrocious conduct ought to absolve him from any previous promise. I do not

wonder that the general was abusive, and out of temper. Such a crime as he was committing can't be performed cheerfully by a man who is habitually gentle, generous, and honest. I do not say that men cannot cheat, cannot lie, cannot inflict torture, cannot commit racially actions, without in the least losing their equanimity; but these are men habitually false, knavish, and cruel. They are accustomed to break their promises, to cheat their neighbours in bargains, and what not. A rigorous word or action more or less is of little matter to them: their remorse only awakens after detection, and they don't begin to repent till they come sentenced out of the dock. But here was an ordinarily just man withdrawing from his promise, turning his back on his benefactor, and justifying himself to himself by maligning the man whom he injured. It is not an uncommon

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THE PERIODICAL PRESS

The law of coverture

- By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing; and is therefore called in our law-French a feme-covert; is said to be covert-baron, or under the protection and influence of her husband, her baron, or lord; and her condition during her marriage is called her coverture. Upon this principle, of a union of person in husband and wife, depend almost all the legal rights, duties, and disabilities, that either of them acquire by the marriage. I speak not at present of the rights of property, but of such as are merely personal. For this reason, a man cannot grant any thing to his wife, or enter into covenant with her: for the grant would be to suppose her separate existence; and to covenant with her, would be only to covenant with himself: and therefore it is also generally true, that all compacts made between husband and wife, when single, are voided by the intermarriage.
- William Blackstone: *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Vol 1, chap 11.

The impact of coverture on women

- Women could not:
 - Sign contracts
 - Make a will
 - Hold property
 - Have their own money
- Marriage was a “nefarious custom” by which women when they married were “despoiled of their money, goods, and chattels [...] and condemned to prison for life”.
- *Remarks on the Law of Marriage and Divorce*: London: James Ridgway, 1855, 4.

COMMENTARIES
ON THE
LAW S
OF
ENGLAND.

BOOK THE FIRST.

BY
WILLIAM BLACKSTONE, Esq.
VINERIAN PROFESSOR OF LAW,
AND
SOLICITOR GENERAL TO HER MAJESTY.

OXFORD,
PRINTED AT THE CLARENDON PRESS.
M. DCC. LXV.

THE ROLE OF THE EDITOR

‘[t]he particular house styles of individual periodicals either reaffirm the prevailing text of gender ideology (that is the separation of men into active, public lives and women into passive, private lives) – despite the way in which women’s and men’s lives were clearly changing – or alternatively subvert and challenge the status quo’

Fraser Hilary, Green, Stephanie and Johnston, Judith. *Gender and the Victorian Periodical*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 79.



Do you know they sent me 20£ for Lizzie Leigh? I stared, and wondered if I was swindling them but I suppose I am not; and Wm has composedly buttoned it up in his pocket. He has promised that I may have some for the Refuge’.

Elizabeth Gaskell to Eliza Fox, April 26, 1850 in *Letters*, 113.



DICKENS ON GASKELL

'I will receive you, ever, (if Mr Gaskell will allow me to say so) with open arms'

Charles Dickens to Elizabeth Gaskell, 13 April 1853.

Mrs Gaskell – fearful – fearful! If I were Mr G. O Heaven how I would beat her!'

Charles Dickens to William Wills, 17 September 1855.



GASKELL ON DICKENS

‘Mr Gaskell has looked this piece well over, so I don’t think there will be any carelessnesses left in it’, ‘& so there ought not to be any misprints’; therefore I never wish to see it’s face again; but, *if you will keep the MS for me, & shorten it as you think best for HW.* I shall be very glad. Shortened I see it must be’.

Elizabeth Gaskell to Charles Dickens, [?] 17 December 1854.

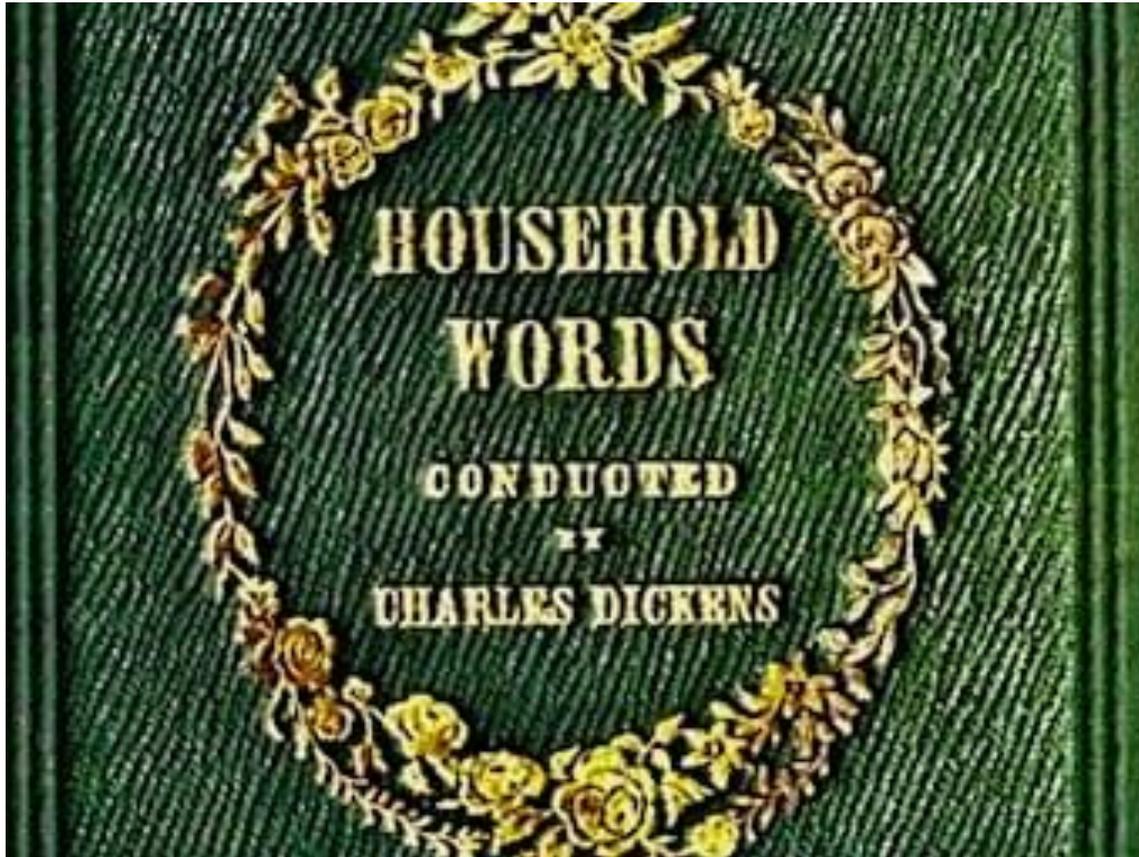


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GASKELL'S 'DEBT' TO DICKENS

[...] I was extremely annoyed & hurt by their conduct in Janry – they published a ‘Chip’ called ‘*Character-Murder*’ alluding to & quoting from a paper of mine called ‘Disappearances’ – published long ago in J W, & since/with my [?leave] republished with Lizzie Leigh &c. [...] All this time I was writing my third story, - to pay off my debt to them, - whatever it is; [...] I received a circular, saying that (on account of matters connected with Mr & Mrs Dickens’ separation, Mr Dickens was giving up Household Words, and starting a new periodical [...] I wrote directly to Mr Wills, to ask again how much I was indebted to Household Words, & who was the real personal creditor to whom I owed the money, which I shd be very glad to repay with interest &c

Elizabeth Gaskell to Charles Eliot Norton. March 9th [1859].



MORALITY AND THE MARKET

When Household Words began publication in 1850:

‘it was the only publication to offer respectable, good-quality serialised fiction to a middle-class audience, at a low price, under the aegis of a celebrated novelist known in part for his depictions of idealised domesticity’

‘the raising up of those that are down, and the general improvement of our social condition’

Lorna Huett, ‘Among the Unknown Public: Household Words, All the Year Round and the Mass-Market Weekly Periodical in the Mid-Nineteenth Century’. *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol 38, Spring 2005.



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