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Milton's Ill-Mated Marriages in *Frankenstein* and *Great Expectations*

DEBORAH SIDDOWAY

Abstract: This article expands on the existing understanding of the relationship between Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, by examining the ways in which both novels utilize thematic concerns embedded within John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, particularly those that are derived from Milton's political position in relation to the prevailing indissolubility of marriage in England as set out in his treatises on divorce. It argues that both Shelley in her depiction of Frankenstein's creature and Dickens with the corpse-like Miss Havisham, incorporated Milton's likening of a failed marriage to the torture of Mezentius, where a living person was roped to a dead body, arguing that in doing so, each of these novels became a locus advocating for the Miltonic needful divorce, which would allow a divorce to relieve an ill-made marriage on the sole ground of the incompatibility between a husband and a wife.

It has often been said that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* is a novel without equal, with Joyce Carol Oates commenting that it is "a remarkable work: a novel sui generis—if a novel at all—and a unique blending of Gothic, fabulist, allegorical, and philosophical materials" (106). It is known that Dickens owned a copy of this novel, and the profound influence it exerted over him as he crafted *Great Expectations* (1860–61) has long been recognized, with Iain Crawford arguing in 1988 that Dickens's novel was an "elaborate reworking" of *Frankenstein* (625). Crawford's contention is one that would be developed by Jerome Meckier, who argued that *Great Expectations* served as a "reply" to Mary Shelley's novel, while also identifying the importance of John Milton's great epic poem *Paradise Lost* to *Great Expectations* ("Dickens" 29). This paper seeks to further expand on Crawford's and Meckier's arguments, by examining the ways in which the themes of *Paradise Lost* as developed in *Frankenstein*, particularly those that derive from Milton's political position relating to divorce and his notion of a

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companionate marriage, can be seen from Dickens's earlier fiction, including *Oliver Twist*, *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield*, and *Hard Times*, as well as being threaded throughout *Great Expectations*. In doing so, this essay seeks to demonstrate that *Great Expectations* was more than just a reply to *Frankenstein*, but, like Shelley's tale of terror, was a locus advocating for the Miltonic needful divorce, which would allow for divorce on the sole ground of the incompatibility between the husband and the wife.[1]

The concept of needful divorce is one that Milton first set out some two decades prior to beginning *Paradise Lost*, in a series of impassioned political treatises on the subject of divorce which he began writing in 1643. In these treatises Milton advocated for facility of divorce at a time when marriage was considered to be an indissoluble union. The first of them was entitled *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, which he expanded and developed in a second edition in 1645. In his treatises, Milton rebels against the irrevocable act of matrimony and the illiberalism of the indissoluble marital bond, arguing it was "less of a breach of wedlock" to part with "wise and quiet consent," divorce being preferable to the forced continuance of an ill-made marriage (*Doctrine* 257–58). Alongside imagery of enslavement and captivity to represent the loss of agency that accompanies compelled protraction of marriage, Milton conflates the state of being entrapped in a fracturing or failed marriage as a kind of near-death. His contention is that where the "due conversation" between the parties is "inaccessible, […] the more estimable and superior purposes of matrimony" are rendered "useless and almost lifeless" (*Doctrine* 252).

Milton's overriding argument is that it would be less of a scandal to divorce a "natural disparity" than to link or chain together two "ensnared souls" who would kindle each other not with the "fire of love" but with hatred (*Doctrine* 273). The issue of disparity between a husband and a wife is one that begins to sound all-too familiar for those acquainted with both Dickens's works and his marital separation, where Dickens began pointing to the disparity that he believed existed between himself and his wife Catherine, prior to his formal separation from her in 1858, as a pre-emptive justification for his decision to do so. As he wrote to his trusted long-term friend John Forster in September 1857, his "incompatibility" with his wife—that he and Catherine "were not made for each other," being "ill-assorted" for the marital bond—made it "all but hopeless that [they] should even try to

1 This paper has been drawn from chs. 1 (Milton), 2 (Shelley), and 6 (Dickens) of my doctoral thesis, *"No Escape to be Had": Divorce and Divorce Law Reform in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel*. I would particularly like to express my gratitude to the late professor Jerome Meckier for his insights and generosity to me in discussing his paper on the connections between *Paradise Lost* and *Great Expectations*. This was instrumental in helping shape the direction of my doctoral research.

struggle on" (Dickens, *Letters* 8: 430). The language that Dickens deploys is redolent of Milton's divorce treatises.

In his personal correspondence, it seems Dickens was influenced, subconsciously or otherwise, by *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, where a "compulsive performance of marriage," of "forced cohabitation and counterfeit performance of duties" are cited as justification for a "needful divorce" (255). Milton advocated in favor of the freedom to divorce on the grounds of incompatibility, arguing that if love and companionship were dead, then the marriage should not be artificially prolonged (Macfarlane 158). This Miltonic philosophy can also be seen in what has become known as Dickens's "Violated Letter" of 1858:

> Mrs Dickens and I have lived unhappily together for many years. Hardly anyone who has known us intimately can fail to have known that we are, in all respects of character and temperament, wonderfully unsuited to each other. I suppose that no two people, not vicious in themselves, ever were joined together, who had a greater difficulty in understanding one another, or who had less in common. (*Letters* 8: 740–41)

This is a document that reads almost as if it had been prepared as an affidavit for use in a courtroom, testifying as to the incompatibility and lack of mutual understanding between himself and his wife. Despite his almost risible claim in a letter to Wilkie Collins that he had never authorized this letter being made public (*Letters* 8: 650),[2] the entirety of it reads as a plea to his adoring but scandalized public for compassion and understanding of his decision to part from his wife. With his focus on marital incompatibility, Dickens's entreaty within the "Violated Letter" was predicated on the Miltonic ethos of marital liberalism, where "different tempers, thoughts, and constitutions" between a husband and wife were argued as sufficient justification for the breaking of the marital bond between them (*Doctrine* 244).

The notion of disparity, however, is not the only aspect of Milton's divorce treatises that is of importance when considering the Miltonic commonality of influence on both Shelley and Dickens. It was with Milton's reference to Mezentius, an Etruscan despot reputed for his brutality, that Milton provided the most potent and enduring image of the horrors of forced continuance of marriage where there is no fit correspondence of the mind

2 As Phyllis Rose notes, Dickens drafted the letter and gave it to Arthur Smith, the manager of his public readings, to use as he saw fit. When the letter was "violated" by being made public, Dickens did not end his friendship with Smith, "as he had with so many others who contradicted his wishes about the public presentation of his private life" (185).

between husband and wife. Drawing on Virgil's account of the torture devised by Mezentius to inflict upon his enemies, "whereby living men were roped to dead bodies, tying them hand to hand and face to face to die a lingering death oozing with putrefying flesh in this cruel embrace" (*Aeneid* 8.179), Milton appropriated the imagery and superimposed it over unhappily married spouses: "instead of being one flesh, they will be rather two carcasses chained unnaturally together; or, as it may happen, a living soul bound to a dead corpse, a punishment too like that inflicted by the tyrant Mezentius" (*Doctrine* 296).

This likening by Milton of an ill-assorted marriage to being shackled for life to a cadaver is one that English novelists of the nineteenth century would turn to again and again as they used the forum of the novel to challenge the prevailing inaccessibility of divorce, an invocation of the underlying rationale and philosophy expounded by Milton. Significantly, this symbolic device to illuminate the cruelty of being trapped within an unhappy marriage can be seen both in *Frankenstein*, where Shelley fleshes out the terror of a man tied for life to a "demoniacal corpse" (58), and in *Great Expectations*, with Dickens's creation of the ghastly "corpse-like" Miss Havisham (60; ch. 8).

With the epigraph to *Frankenstein* originating in *Paradise Lost*, the Miltonic influence throughout the novel is incontrovertible and has been much discussed, with Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar commenting that "Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* [...] is at least in part a despairingly acquiescent 'misreading' of *Paradise Lost*, with Eve–Sin apparently exorcised from the story but really translated into the monster that Milton hints she is" (189). It is unsurprising that Milton's work influenced Shelley to the extent that it did, for when she began writing her tale of terror in the early years of the nineteenth century, as an unmarried mother with no prospect of marriage to her already married lover, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Milton's influence was both profound and omnipresent. As Ian M. Emberson observes, *Paradise Lost* "enjoyed a status that was little short of a holy writ" (208), a status that would continue throughout the nineteenth century, including the years when Dickens's works were penned.

Frankenstein does not just draw on aspects of *Paradise Lost*, but also on Milton's arguments on the issue of divorce, with Victor and his creature becoming a manifestation of the torture of Mezentius, a living allegory of a failed marriage, Shelley layering her tale with repeated references to chains, bonds, dungeons, and prisons, all in the context of the dominant relationship of the novel, as Victor begins to realize the unrelenting horror of the unbreakable bond tethering him to his monster. Even in his dreams, Victor cannot free himself from the oppressive hold his creature has over him: "I felt the fiend's grasp in my neck, and could not free myself from it" (184). Both creator and his creation find themselves trapped in a relationship

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in which, though they are united, they are each absolutely, intolerably solitary and alone, a living metaphor of the horror of an impelled union of two disparate souls.

Shelley uses her novel as a forum to test and challenge the indissolubility of an attachment that, as she so potently put it through her miserable wretch of a monster, tethered "one human being to another in mutual bonds" (121). As noted by Mary Lowe-Evans, "More than most young women of her day, Mary Shelley was, through the circumstances of her birth and by her own choice, caught up in controversies about marriage […]. *Frankenstein* […] is very much affected by her involvement in complicated nuptial relationships." Lowe-Evans goes on to argue that Shelley's "own eventual marriage and the marriages, near-marriages, and failed marriages of those around her illuminate the essentially conservative themes of the novel" (ix). Throughout her reading of *Frankenstein*, Lowe-Evans focuses on "the question of marriage, arguing that it is an important subject of the novel. Until recently, this emphasis would have seemed eccentric, and in fact it deviates from the norm of *Frankenstein* criticism. That norm, though somewhat amorphous, has traditionally centered on the relationship between Victor Frankenstein and his Creature" (73). Lowe-Evans asserts she gives prominence instead to minor characters, especially the women, with, as David Ketterer notes, "male-female relations in the novel at the centre of her interpretation" (113). However, the conclusion that Lowe-Evans reaches in relation to the novel and marriage should be further extended, for when viewed in the context in which her novel was created, the relationship between Frankenstein and his creature should itself be seen as a monstrous marriage, with the male–female relations explored within the novel acting as a confirmation of the central premise: a compelled union of alienated minds leads only to unhappiness, misery, and is a distortion of the true purpose of marriage. The relationship between the creator and his creation becomes a symbolic representation of all that was wrong with marriage as an indissoluble institution in the nineteenth century. The entirety of Shelley's novel should be seen as a literary depiction of the torture of Mezentius, with a living soul tethered to a corpse by an intangible unbreakable bond. Shelley's novel thereby becomes a dynamic endorsement of Milton's approach to needful divorce, as expounded in *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. This was no less a radical suggestion in Shelley's time than it had been in Milton's.

The creation of the monster in *Frankenstein* becomes the definitive moment where Victor irrevocably shackles himself, this act being akin to a deviant wedding ceremony giving rise to obligations similar to those which exist between a husband and a wife. Victor's awareness of this, however, comes only as he is close to death, with his confession to Walton that, "In a fit of enthusiastic madness I created a rational creature, and was bound towards

him, to assure, as far as was in my power, his happiness and well-being" (Shelley 217). Victor's madness, his desire to infuse life into an inanimate body, is depicted as a perverse kind of romance, a courtship of seduction where Victor is filled with a lust to achieve his aim: "For this I had deprived myself of health and rest. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" (57). Victor's description is evocative of post-coital satiation. Having expended his "unremitting ardour" (54) by infusing the creature with the "spark of being," infusion itself implying a filling or saturation of the "inanimate body" (57), Victor is filled with remorse and regret, as Shelley draws on imagery that Milton deployed in favor of divorce in *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, as well as how he explored the concept of true love and companionate marriage in *Paradise Lost*. In his creation of the monster, Victor, driven only by the need to satiate his "passion or a transitory desire" (55), failed to consider the ongoing and lasting consequences of his creative act, effectively contracting a marriage of alienated minds between himself and his creation, an indissoluble union predicated not on "true Love" but from expended passion, "sunk in carnal pleasure" (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 8, lines 588–93). Having metaphorically "tasted … the nuptial bed" (Milton, *Doctrine* 244) in making his creature, Victor is not content but filled only with the "bitterness of disappointment; dreams […] now become a hell" (Shelley 58–59). His union with the creature, forged in an attempt to fulfil an immediate, almost sexual urge, heralds the beginning of Victor's descent into misery and ruin, prevented as he is from freeing himself from that bond of his own creation with "the demoniacal corpse to which [he] had so miserably given life" (Shelley 58). As Milton argues, the cruelty of such an impelled union "will be either the undoing or the disheartening of his life" (*Doctrine* 269).

One of the earliest criticisms of *Frankenstein*, published in an 1844 volume edited by R. H. Horne, Dickens's friend and a contributor to *Household Words*, recognized that the monster created by Frankenstein was "an illustration of the embodied consequences of our actions. As he, when formed and endowed with life became to his imaginary creator an everlasting, ever-present curse, so may one single action, nay a word, or it may be a thought, thrown upon the tide of time become to its originator a curse, never to be recovered, never to be shaken off" ("Mrs Shelley" 227). The similarities of this criticism of *Frankenstein* to Pip's observation in *Great Expectations* are striking: "Pause you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day" (Dickens, *Great Expectations* 72; ch. 9).

Great Expectations was not the first case of Dickens alluding to

Frankenstein. In *Dombey and Son*, the depiction of Edith as she prepares to retire to her room in "the dead time of the night," on the eve of her wedding to Dombey, is evocative of Frankenstein's monster, with the darkness of her hair, "shaken down" so that it falls long, like a veil, set against the whiteness of her bosom (Dickens, *Dombey*, 475, 474; ch. 30), just as in *Frankenstein*, the monster is described with his "lustrous," "flowing" black hair set against the "pearly whiteness" of his teeth (57). In describing Edith in this manner, Dickens is evoking the idea that the union between Dombey and Edith will be no less monstrous than that of Frankenstein and his creation, both Frankenstein and Dombey effectively being tethered for life to corpses of their own making, though Frankenstein ties himself to a corpse through his own creative act, while Dombey does so through the act of marriage, both being representations of the ill-mated marriages depicted by Milton.

Dickens was not the only canonical novelist of his time who engaged with the Miltonic symbolic portrayal of a failed marriage. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, first published in 1848, the same year as the final monthly instalments of *Dombey and Son*, also demonstrated an intimate knowledge of, and profound engagement with, Milton's work, including his *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. As Tessa C. Parslow observes in her critical consideration of Brontë's engagement with the law of divorce through Miltonic ideas, the marriage between Rochester and "the creature" Bertha (Brontë 254) "is tantamount to the 'living soule bound to a dead corps'" (Parslow 202), becoming, like Frankenstein and his creature, another literary portrait of the torture of Mezentius that Milton had deployed as a symbolic image of a failing marriage.

Milton's philosophy in relation to divorce was well known, even notorious, at the time Dickens was writing, becoming more prominent following the establishment of the Royal Commission to examine the laws of divorce in 1850. Indeed, by the mid-nineteenth century, Milton's treatises would be infamous, and informed much of the debate surrounding divorce law reform. W. E. Gladstone, who was against greater facility of divorce even while being an advocate for law reform more generally, referred in an 1857 article to Milton's "powerful pen," with the wry comment: "In studying these pieces at the present day, the mind may well be divided between admiration of the force and grandeur of their language, and thankfulness that England was found proof against the seduction of the pestilent ideas they convey [...]. Nowhere is he more a Poet, whether for music or for majesty, than in his prose" (91). Additionally, there were frequent re-publications of Milton's poetry and other writings throughout the nineteenth century, resulting in his work being familiar in respectable middle-class circles. Despite this, as recently noted by Giles Whitely, "while individual critics and editors have noted Dickens's allusions to Milton's poetry throughout his works, it is a

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matter of some surprise to note that the extent of Dickens's engagement with Milton has yet to be the subject of sustained critical attention" (88).

There can be no doubt that Dickens was familiar with Milton. For example, the name of Urania Cottage, founded with Dickens's participation in 1847 as a "home dedicated to the discipline and reformation of fallen women from the working classes" (Nader 141), alludes to the Muse invoked in book 7 of *Paradise Lost*. We know that Dickens had access to the six-volume poetical works of Milton published in 1835, which included an early biography of Milton, setting out the details of his marital problems and his views on divorce.[3] More importantly, Milton's symbolism and imagery surrounding his discourse on the philosophical imperative of needful divorce can clearly be seen in Dickens's fiction even before his separation from his wife, as in *Oliver Twist*, written some two decades prior to Dickens's formal separation from Catherine. In that novel, when describing the marriage of Monks's parents, Brownlow recalls

> the misery, the slow torture, the protracted anguish of that ill-assorted union. I know how listlessly and wearily each of that wretched pair dragged on their heavy chain through a world that was poisoned to them both. I know how cold formalities were succeeded by open taunts; how indifference gave place to dislike, dislike to hate, and hate to loathing, until at last they wrenched the clunking bond asunder, and retiring a wide space apart, carried each a galling fragment, of which nothing but death could break the rivets … (326; ch. 49)

As Kelly Hager notes in her study of Dickens's work in the context of divorce, as she traces a trajectory that begins with *Oliver Twist* and ends with *Hard Times*, Brownlow's description of this marriage calls attention to its monstrosity (57). However, Hager's study, while being one of the few works to examine the failed marriage plot in the context of divorce law in the novels of Dickens, is limited in its analysis. While Hager identifies a correlation between the ill-assorted union of the young Leefords and the souls in Dante's *Inferno* who endure life in hell (57), she does not identify a similar correlation with Milton's writings in relation to divorce. In fact, she makes no reference to Milton at all.

Milton's relevance as a revered poet and thinker within nineteenth-century society cannot be overstated, as evidenced by the adulation with which he is treated in the preface to the 1820 edition of *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, published in the year in which George IV was attempting to

3 See *Dickens Library Online*, which shows that Dickens owned this edition of Milton's *Poetical Works*.

unravel his failed marriage to Caroline of Brunswick: "of Milton himself it is no longer necessary to speak either in the language of censure or applause. He has gained the summit of the immortality to which he knew the justice of mankind would one day advance him" (Civilian xiv). Benjamin Haydon's candid thoughts, as expressed in his diaries, also point to Milton's influence. On 2 August 1825, on reading Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana*, he comments that he does "not care what theologists think. They are warped. But a Man of Genius like Milton coming out with his opinions of Religion is an absolute blessing" (3: 34).

In *David Copperfield*, written from May 1849 to November 1850, just as public discourse around the irrevocability of marriage and divorce became more urgent, with the establishment of the Royal Commission examining the law of divorce, Dickens's strong thematic concern with the idea of companionate marriage becomes more pronounced, as he uses his novel to support the notion that there "can be no disparity in marriage like unsuitability of mind and purpose" (668; ch. 45). This idea, stated first by Annie Strong, is repeated twice by David, so that Dickens emphasizes Milton's underlying rationale in advocating for facility of divorce.

By the time he was writing *Hard Times*, it is evident that Dickens was more overtly drawing on the ideas expressed in Milton's *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. In that novel, when a despondent Stephen Blackpool retreats after his failed mission to find a way to be free of his unwanted wife, the narrator observes, "He thought of the waste of the best part of his life, of the change it made in his character for the worse every day, of the dreadful nature of his existence, bound hand and foot to a dead woman, and tormented by a demon in her shape" (70; bk. 1, ch. 12). This depiction of Stephen's marriage is not only redolent of Frankenstein's bond with his demoniacal monster but is itself a clear reference to the torture of Mezentius. In evoking such a horrific and powerful image of waste, decay, and death, as Shelley did in *Frankenstein*, Dickens was engaging in his own conversation with Milton's philosophical thinking in relation to marriage and needful divorce. Given his access to Milton's work, and the allusions to Milton which can be seen within his writing, it is reasonable to assume not only that Dickens was aware of Milton's arguments but that he was in general agreement with Milton's position on divorce as it was expressed in the divorce tracts.

Indeed, Stephen Blackpool's marriage is not the only one in *Hard Times* which is subjected to criticism through a Miltonic lens. As a distraught Louisa Bounderby stands before her father to plead with him to save her from her own wretched marriage, she describes herself as being "crushed […] into a demon," and as having a "deadened state of mind," saying, "When I was irrevocably married, there rose up into rebellion against the tie, the old strife, made fiercer by all those causes of disparity which arise out of

our two individual natures, and which no general laws shall ever rule or state for me, father, until they shall be able to direct the anatomist where to strike his knife into the secrets of my soul" (175; bk. 2, ch. 12). As with *David Copperfield*, the reference to disparity between the parties is one that reflects the Miltonic position on divorce. Importantly, particularly when it comes to our understanding of the relationship between *Great Expectations* and *Paradise Lost*, the notion of disparity, as set out in his divorce treatises, is one Milton himself would return to in *Paradise Lost* through Adam, as this newly created man recognizes the "disparity" that exists between him and the animals of creation, asking "Among unequals what society | Can sort, what harmony or true delight?" (bk. 8, lines 383–84). As this passage immediately precedes the creation of Eve, who is described as being formed for Adam to share with her an "unfeign'd | Union of Mind, or in us both one Soul; | Harmony to behold in wedded pair" (bk. 8, lines 603–05), the implication is that paradise for the couple is predicated on the basis of meet conversation between them, and that there can be no paradise where any disparity exists between husband and wife, echoing Milton's idealization of "unfeigned love and peace" within the marital union which he advocated for in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (256). This inference comes to fruition in Milton's depiction of Eve's sin, when Adam grieves Eve's perversion by the Serpent and her partaking of the fatal fruit, as he goes on not only to ponder the nature of the tie that binds him to Eve, but the irrevocable nature of marriage itself, lamenting the "infinite calamity" caused to life and household peace by this immutable tie to a woman who has proven to be no "fit Mate" (bk. 10, lines 898–908).

Adam's diatribe bewailing the irrevocable tie of marriage leaves Eve in tears, her "tresses," her hair, a symbolic covering, "disord'd" (*Paradise Lost*, bk. 10, lines 910–11). It is as though her disobedient actions have disturbed the symbolic harmonious veil of her marriage to Adam, leaving her portrayed as somewhat distasteful and slovenly, the very image of a profligate woman which so many writers of the nineteenth century would appropriate as they created their own characters trapped in miserable marriages with no possibility of divorce, including Dickens's wretched Mrs. Blackpool in *Hard Times* "trying to push away her tangled hair from her face" (60; bk. 1, ch. 10), which, while referencing *Paradise Lost*, was also another subtle allusion to *Frankenstein*, where the creature is described by Walton as having a face "concealed by long locks of ragged hair" (Shelley 218).

Hard Times was written at a time when the law of divorce was being debated, and in the depiction of the marriages of both Stephen Blackpool and Louisa Bounderby, layered as they are with allusion to both Milton's divorce treatises and *Paradise Lost*, the novel should be seen as containing an endorsement of the Miltonic needful divorce. By the time he was writing

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Great Expectations, however, the political and legal landscape had been somewhat altered by the passing, on 28 August 1857 of the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act (20 & 21 Vict, c 85; hereafter "the Divorce Act"). There was nothing of the Miltonic ideal of marital liberalism in the new legislation. Pursuant to section 7 of the Divorce Act, decrees of divorce *a mensa et thoro*, the church-sanctioned marital separation, were replaced by judicial separations, and pursuant to section 31, the divorce *a vincula matrimonii*, or a dissolution of the marriage pursuant to a private act of parliament, was replaced by a court ordered dissolution of the marriage, provided that the threshold requirements set down in the Act were met. As Margaret K Woodhouse observes, what this amounted to was "not a new law, but the shifting of duties from one court to another; from the House of Lords to a court of first instance," with one court "established in London to take the place of the three courts previously hearing a divorce case" (260, 272). According to the nineteenth-century barrister Frederick Clifford, strenuous attempts were "made in both Houses to enlarge the rights […] given to wives and make it correspond more nearly with the husband's rights to a dissolution of marriage," with some, including Lord Lyndhurst, protesting that the relief afforded to a wife was "partial and unjust" as contrasted against that afforded to the husband, but these attempts were ineffectual (423–25). The Divorce Act reinforced the sexual double standard, enshrining it within the legislative framework whereby a husband could be granted a divorce on the ground of his wife's adultery, whereas a wife would still require something more than the mere adultery of her husband to be entitled to the same remedy.[4] Further, in the way that it incorporated provisions in relation to married women's property rights on separation or dissolution of marriage, the Act did nothing to disturb or dismantle the disabilities of wifehood stemming from the doctrine of coverture, which effectively rendered the husband and wife one person in the eyes of the common law, reaffirming the patriarchal appropriation of a married woman's rights, property, and her very existence.

For Dickens, on a personal level, even with the new Divorce Act there was still no escape to be had from his marriage and his resulting frustration found expression in *Great Expectations*, particularly through one of his most memorable characters, Miss Havisham, the corpse-like bride, Dickens casting her as a vengeful jilted bride rather than an abandoned wife, as the latter

4 Section 27 of the Divorce Act provided that a wife could present a petition to the Divorce Court for a dissolution of her marriage, on the ground that "her Husband has been guilty of incestuous Adultery, or of Bigamy with Adultery, or of Rape, or of Sodomy or Bestiality, or of Adultery coupled with such Cruelty as without Adultery would have entitled her to a divorce *à Mensa et Thoro*, or of adultery coupled with Desertion, without reasonable Excuse, for Two Years or upwards" (United Kingdom, Government).

would have been far too uncomfortable for his public persona given his separation from his wife. On his first sight of Miss Havisham, Pip observes, "I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young woman, and that the figure upon which it now hung loose, had shrunk to skin and bone" (58; ch. 8). Miss Havisham, as first observed, becomes a living allegory of the covered wife, as she sinks into invisibility at the hymenal altar, embracing this allegorical burden by describing herself as "yellow skin and bone" when told she looks well (86; ch. 11), yellow also being the color of the creature's skin in *Frankenstein* (Shelley 57)—Dickens alluding to Shelley's monster from the outset. Miss Havisham names herself for what she believes herself to be: a walking corpse. In her duality of presentation, portrayed simultaneously as both the perpetual bride and a ghostly, faded, diminished apparition, she becomes the embodiment of the doctrine of coverture and the horrors it continued to impose upon the married woman, even after the Divorce Act had come into force.

Through Miss Havisham, it is as though a manifest horror is brought to life, just as Frankenstein brought his creature to life, as Pip's thoughts turn to the macabre, death not only linked with the very thought of matrimony, but presented in the image of the bride herself, with marriage depicted as the metaphorical living death of the bride: "Once, I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress, that had been dug out of a vault under the church pavement. Now, waxwork and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me" (58; ch. 8). Dickens makes a spectacle of the body of Miss Havisham, using her skeletal frame as a means to show the devastating consequences of marriage for women, as she embodies the brutal and harsh reality that the doctrine of coverture forced upon all married women, who cease to exist as individual entities upon marriage, and thereby suffer a kind of death in the eyes of the law, an injustice which survived the passing of the Divorce Act. Yet, while Dickens's portrayal of Miss Havisham is laden with symbolism that evokes the notion of death, the primary concern is not with her liberty or agency as an unmarried woman. Latent in the depiction of Miss Havisham as the shriveled bride is an unstated desire: that no man wishes to be shackled for life to a living corpse; no man wishes to suffer the torture of Mezentius.

By the end of Pip's first meeting with Miss Havisham, after he is left alone, the creeping horror that he experienced throughout his encounter with her culminates as he imagines a figure hanging by the neck, with the hue of yellow, Frankenstein's skin color, once more prominent:

> A figure all in yellow white, with but one shoe to the feet; and it

> hung so, that I could see the faded trimmings of the dress were like earthy paper, and that the face was Miss Havisham's […]. In the terror of seeing the figure, and in the terror of being certain that it had not been there a moment before, I at first ran from it, and then ran towards it. And my terror was greatest of all, when I found no figure there. (64; ch. 8)

Pip's living nightmare is not just of a bride who is dead and withered, but one who has been brutally executed, or worse, one who has chosen her own fate, to die by suicide. The latent power of the scene is a silent scream against marriage; that the bride dies, whether by force or by choice, as soon as she chooses to dress herself in her bridal attire, the veil and the shroud amalgamating into a cloak that renders her invisible. Pip's terror is magnified when he realizes that he sees nothing at all, as if the bride he envisioned had disappeared as though she never existed, just as a bride disappears under the burden of coverture once she becomes a wife. For Dickens, that transformation from youthful bride to withered, decaying, and vanished woman becomes a metaphorical warning to all that marriage is for a young woman and the husband that takes her. Marriage is a prison from which there is no escape. Worse, marriage condemns the bride to a living death, while the husband is condemned to remain tethered to her living corpse. As Sharon Marcus observes, it is the living death of Miss Havisham that "makes her all the more vivid a presence" (173), Dickens using her symbolic power to potent dramatic effect, just as Shelley did with her monster in *Frankenstein*.

The correlation between these two characters can also be seen in their understanding that release from their tormented lives can only be delivered by fire. In *Frankenstein*, the monster proclaims that his liberation from his "burning miseries" would only come from the "agony of the torturing flames" (Shelley 223), and it is the fiery destruction of Satis House that will lead to Miss Havisham's physical death, one foreshadowed throughout the novel. In one of Pip's visits back to Satis House, for example, as he begins "the old slow circuit round about the ashes of the bridal feast," the ashes point to the remnants of something burnt. Pip's observations here, once more, are permeated with images of death, in "the funereal room, with that figure of the grave fallen back in the chair" (Dickens, *Great Expectations* 239; ch. 29), as he sees Miss Havisham, in "her shroud of a dress," strike "at the air as if she would as soon have struck herself against the wall and fallen dead" (240; ch. 29). It is a prophetic observation, with Pip later witness to Miss Havisham set alight, and having to "forcibly" hold her down "like a prisoner who might escape" (402; ch. 49). This notion of freedom through fire occurs throughout *Great Expectations*. Notably, when Pip comes into his expectations, Joe brings out his indentures of apprenticeship, and they put

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them in the fire. This is significant because an apprentice had obligations similar to those of a bride, with Dickens having developed an interesting correlation between Pip's indentures and Miss Havisham's own bonded state. As Pip contemplates his impending apprenticeship with Joe, the language adopted in Pip's thoughts reflects that of his previous observations of the bridal Miss Havisham, with Pip feeling "dusty with the dust of small-coal" (107; ch. 14), just as he had envisaged Miss Havisham being reduced to "dust" (60; ch. 8). He also speaks of being weighted down, as though "a thick curtain had fallen," and that curtain, "heavy and blank," offered only "dull endurance" (107; ch. 14). The curtain here acts as a symbolic veil, positioning an indentured Pip, the apprentice, with the plight of the perpetual bride, Miss Havisham; as, like a bride, the apprentice is unable to live his life freely and suffers an effective slavery pursuant to a contractual obligation.

The language Dickens uses as he plays with the notion of marriage and aligns it to the legal consequences of the signing of Pip's indentures hints at restraint and a loss of freedom, both the bride and the apprentice being bound. Pip is taken "into custody" and "bound, out of hand" (104; ch. 13), just as a wife was joined to her husband in the bond of holy matrimony, her hand being taken in marriage. An apprentice was effectively bound to his master for a specified period, usually around seven years, to learn a trade. Onerous conditions were placed on the apprentice, including being forbidden from drinking "strong liquors," keeping "late hours or bad company," or indulging in "vagaries" including playing cards and dice (Dickens, *Great Expectations* 106, ch. 13; Meckier, "Apprentices" 103), in many ways mirroring the obligations that would be demanded of a respectable wife. It is only with the burning of his indentures, the destruction of the contract binding him, that Pip is able to feel free, and, as he goes forward into this new stage of his life with "all the novelty" of his "emancipation" on him (146; ch. 19), Dickens steeps the narrative in imagery suggesting freedom and opportunity, with the mists of the marshes having "all solemnly risen," with "the world lay spread before" Pip (160; ch. 19), mirroring the Miltonic language of the departure of Adam and Eve from Paradise in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (bk. 12, line 646), which Dickens would return to as he ended *Great Expectations*. Just as a curtain had come down to cast a shadow over Pip as he was indentured to Joe, the mists, another symbolic veil, are lifted from him as he obtains his freedom from the contractual obligations of a bound apprentice.

Yet, although Pip may have obtained his freedom from his apprenticeship with his expectations, those same expectations burdened him with a different kind of captivity, one of obligations to a benefactor, and those obligations also take on the character of a marriage as Pip contemplates them. Initially he believes his benefactor to be Miss Havisham, but when he discovers the truth,

and confronts Miss Havisham to query why she let him continue to falsely believe she was his benefactor, she accuses him of having made his "own snares" (360; ch. 44). Yet, while Pip was incorrect in his assumption that it was Miss Havisham who bestowed his expectations on him, Miss Havisham correctly identifies those expectations for what they are: yet another kind of trap, the reality of which is explored when an adult Pip is confronted by "his convict," reflecting that "the wretched man, after loading wretched me with his gold and silver chains for years, had risked his life to come to me, and I held it there in my keeping!" (322; ch. 39). Pip acquires the property of Magwitch, much as a husband acquires the property of a wife, and that property becomes "chains," leaving Pip morally tethered to Magwitch, his "dreadful burden" (324; ch. 39). His relationship with Magwitch, a man Pip sees as "a wild beast" (324; ch. 39), and whose touch Pip recoils from, as if "he had been a snake" (320; ch. 39), is described in tones drawing explicitly on the gothic horror of *Frankenstein*: "The imaginary student pursued by the misshapen creature he had impiously made, was not more wretched than I, pursued by the creature who had made me, and recoiling from him with a stronger repulsion, the more he admired me and the fonder he was of me" (339; ch. 40). Just as Pip is repelled by the "snake" that he sees Magwitch as, Frankenstein is warned by his creation that he is watched with "the wiliness of a snake, that [he] may sting with its venom" (Shelley 168), with both cases being evocative of the serpent in the garden of Eden, the cause of the first marital disharmony between a husband and wife.

Iain Crawford suggests that *Great Expectations* is "largely free from the bitter rage that is so prevalent in *Frankenstein*," and consequently, "when *Paradise Lost* appears in *Great Expectations* it does so in tones that are appropriately softened, and which carry a value quite different from the allusions in *Frankenstein*" (640). Meckier too points to where Dickens's novel is "drastically different" from Shelley's, with his specific focus on the endings of each of *Great Expectations* and *Paradise Lost*, as "they appear to end similarly" ("Dickens" 35). However, as with the conclusion to *Great Expectations* itself, the ending of *Paradise Lost* can also be seen to end not with union, but with a discordant couple joined together by an indissoluble bond between them, particularly when viewed with Milton's divorce treatises in mind and within the context of a shared marital paradise lost.

As Milton brings his epic poem to its conclusion, he cannot let go of his didactic impulse in his portrayal of the marital relationship in the post-Fall world. The ending of *Paradise Lost* is revealing of Milton's experience of the inherent loneliness that one can suffer even within the marital relationship. As Adam and Eve leave paradise after their banishment, although they join hands, suggestive of physical intimacy, and embodying, as John Halkett observes, a conventional formula of matrimonial harmony (105), they depart

Eden by a "solitary way" (bk. 12, line 649). Tellingly, even when Adam is joined in a union where Eve has been lulled into a "meek submission" (bk. 12, line 597), the marriage is still depicted as one of isolation, for, by the use of the word "solitary," Milton is suggesting an existence secluded from all others. Milton, as he ends with humanity's loss of paradise, still cannot let go of his innate skepticism of the institution of marriage, the solitary path of Adam and Eve being the symbol of his view that there can never be a true union between them as man and wife.

Meckier suggests that the ending of *Great Expectations* is a modification of *Paradise Lost* with Pip and Estella being "liberated, not exiled" like Adam and Eve, thereby moving towards a representation of the "sort of partnership *Great Expectations* celebrates" ("Dickens" 33, 35). The manner in which Dickens infuses his work with Miltonic philosophy does indeed confirm this contention, as it demonstrates that Dickens was thematically concerned with the idea of partnership, but specifically it was Milton's notion of mutuality and companionship within a partnership which he edified and developed within *Great Expectations*, leading, as Meckier states, to a "new ideal of equality between true partners" (36).

The endings of *Frankenstein* and *Great Expectations* may appear to be very different from one another. However, they both end with a strikingly similar tone to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with the focus not on partnership but on isolation and solitariness, suggesting singularity, not union. *Frankenstein* ends in "darkness and distance," with the monster "content to suffer alone" (Shelley 221 and 223), while *Great Expectations* echoes the ending of *Paradise Lost* by having Estella and Pip, hand in hand, leaving the "ruined place" together, but with an ending shrouded in the ambiguity of a "shadow" of another parting. Significantly, it is Pip who exercises control, by taking Estella's hand, with the direct and active "I took her hand in mine" (484; ch. 59), suggestive of the taking of a wife by the husband in marriage, an act more redolent of possession than of union, betraying an utter absence of mutuality between them. In each of these endings, a Miltonic parable on marriage can be inferred, namely, that if love and companionship in a relationship has been tainted or corrupted, or where there is an absence of mutuality between the parties, that relationship should not be prolonged, and this attests to a vindication of individual liberty over enforced continuation of an ill-omened union. As Milton stated, "this is a deep and serious verity, showing us that love in marriage cannot live nor subsist unless it be mutual; and where love cannot be, there can be left of wedlock nothing but the empty husk of an outside matrimony, as undelightful and unpleasing to God as any other kind of hypocrisy" (*Doctrine* 256).

Both Shelley in her depiction of the relationship between Frankenstein and his Creature, and Dickens in his depiction of the multiplicity of

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claustrophobic and confining relationships that dominate authorial concern in *Great Expectations*, can be seen to share a common heritage in the "ill-mated marriages" bewailed by Milton in *Paradise Lost* (bk. 11, line 684), for the hypocrisy of a loveless marriage was something both Shelley and Dickens had every reason to critique within their work. Both authors had suffered on account of the irrevocability of marriage in nineteenth-century England. Mary Shelley, as she penned *Frankenstein*, was unable to marry her lover Percy Shelley, as he was already married to another woman, leaving her financially vulnerable and subject to societal censure, and Dickens's scandalous marital woes were compounded by his inability to divorce his wife. They both knew all too well the heavy weight of the chain of marriage, when all love and companionship within the marriage was dead. In deploying their own manifestations of the torture of Mezentius, being bound to a corpse until freed by death—Shelley through the monstrous creation of Frankenstein and Dickens through the walking cadaver that is Miss Havisham—both of these authors embedded a criticism of the laws of divorce in England within their work, their novels becoming loci advocating for divorce law reform, and specifically for the Miltonic needful divorce, to enable the prospect of an escape from the adamantine chains of a failed marriage.

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