In light of his accomplishments as a novelist, Dickens's sketches are generally viewed as a warm-up to the main event. The immense Sketches by Boz launched Dickens's career, and critics have long recognized that those graphic, impressionistic studies formed the foundation characters and scenes that filled his full-length novels. Consequently, Dickens's use of the "sketch" form itself has been studied less often than expected considering his mastery of this characteristic Victorian genre. The present book is the first modern edition of two short volumes of a sketch not acknowledged by Dickens in his lifetime, Sketches of Young Gentlemen and Sketches of Young Couples, along with Edward Caswall's Sketches of Young Ladies. By presenting these little-known Dickens sketches in the company of the work that preceded and partially inspired them, Schlicke recovers their contemporary literary milieu and allows us to see them as more than mere harbingers of future greatness.

It would be difficult to find a better qualified editor for this work. Paul Schlicke, a past president of both the Dickens Fellowship and the Society of America, has written extensively, almost exclusively, on Dickens throughout his long career. He has focused in particular on the popularizing aspects of Dickens's work, most notably in Dickens and Popular Entertainment (1985), and as general editor of the Oxford REA Companion to Dickens. Having edited a number of Dickens's novels, he is now producing--along with this volume--the Clarendon edition of Boz. He has also been active in British preparations for this year's Dickens Centenary celebrations, and it seems appropriate that this attractable edition, which includes all of Phiz's illustrations and even a sewn-in ribbon marker, should appear in 2012.

Schlicke's concise and informative introduction situates the sketches in several relevant contexts. He not only notes their place within and between career but also compares the journalistic format of the sketch to the layout of visual sketches, particularly the work of William Hogarth to the work of Edward Caswall. Though unfamiliar to literary scholars, the young Caswall would go on to become a minister and eventually a Catholic priest noted as the author and translator of many hymns. Interestingly, Schlicke links Caswall's facetious "classification of young ladies" (xii) to contemporary debates about the conflict between scientific investigations into geology, botany, and fossil records and Christian accounts of creation. Caswall's extended satire in this vein, Schlicke notes, suggests "his confidence that the human race can be satisfactorily within the beneficence of God's creation" (xiv).

In comparing Caswall to Dickens, Schlicke observes, we can recognize Dickens's greater insight and lighter touch even while enjoying rediscovered work of his precursor. Dickens's pieces were written in response to the Sketches of Young Ladies, but Dickens's Sketches of Young Couples also responds to the news of Queen Victoria's impending marriage to Albert of Saxe-Coburg. The Queen's engagement prompted Dickens to write both humorously and seriously on the nature of marriage and marital relationships.

Well received in their day, Caswall's Sketches briefly and sometimes humorously characterize such types as the Romantic Young Lady, the Evangelical Young Lady, the Natural Young Lady, and, worst of all, the Young Lady Who Sings. These short sketches focus almost entirely on presentation of the young ladies in question, without as much of the broader social context as Dickens will bring to bear. Caswall's stress on affectation he finds in each of these types makes his sketches work well with the illustrations that Phiz (Hablot K. Browne) produced for them. The volume is that Phiz's illustrations for Caswall's work seem stronger than those he produced for Dickens: livelier, more original, and more fully elaborated. It may be that the obviousness of Caswall's critiques provided easier purchase for Browne's satire. The illustration for the Young Lady, for example, nicely contrasts the author's description of the young lady's ostentatious refusal of food in public with a scene shyly privately gorging on a hearty meal.

Dickens's two sets of sketches, however, exploit the sketch form more successfully, presenting longer and more integrated vignettes of young gentlemen and couples (not all of them young, in spite of the title). Though Caswall's narrator complains that some of these types are unfortunate interlocutors, Dickens conveys a more vivid sense of his subjects and their effect on their audiences. Many of his types can still stand on their own. Who among us does not recognize "The Couple who Dote Upon their Children," for example, especially as presented in the foreshadowing account of their conversation?

In this dialogue Mrs. Whiffier, as being deeply responsible for the twins, their charms and singularities, has taken no share; but she now relates, in English, a witticism of little Dick's bearing upon the subject just discussed, which delights Mr. Whiffier beyond measure, and causes him to declare would have sworn that was Dick's if he had heard it anywhere. Then he requests Mrs. Whiffier will tell Saunders what Tom said about mad bulls; a Whiffier relating the anecdote, a discussion ensues upon the different character of Tom's wit and Dick's wit, from which it appears that Dick's humour is lively turn, while Tom's style is dry and caustic. (183)

The prolixity of Dickens's account replicates the tedium of the conversation.

A more laconic and pungent style, however, is applied to "The Egotistical Couple." They are said to "have undergone every calamity, experienced every pleasurable and painful sensation of which our nature is susceptible. You cannot by possibility tell the egotistical couple all you don't know, or describe to them anything they have not felt. They have been everything but dead. Sometimes we are tempted to wish they even that, but only in our uncharitable moments, which are few and far between" (201). Dickens does not let the humor of this depiction slip by, however. He goes on to comment on the nature of egotism and how it can distort social interactions. In fact, as several of his double portrait
show, couples can learn to play off each other, each supporting the other's peculiarities, and by disguising their mutual egotism as concern the egotists make their dysfunctional alliance that much harder to penetrate. A similar sketch, "The Couple who Coddle Themselves," ends moral: "that all men and women, in couples or otherwise, who fall into exclusive habits of self-indulgence...not only neglect the first duty of happy retributive justice, deprive themselves of its truest and best enjoyment" (212).

In an image that seems to anticipate the language of Vanity Fair, Dickens ends by saying that the "samples" he has chosen from his hand" have been "separately ticketed and labeled" to facilitate our inspection (220). But he also brings the sketches to a serious close by al couple whose impending marriage has inspired his reflections: "the one young couple on whose bright destiny the thoughts of nations are f youth of England, he suggests, may take them as a model, and from them learn that even the "pomp and glory of a throne, yield in their p conferring happiness to domestic worth and virtue." In stating that the Queen's marital state "links her woman's nature to that of tens of tv humble subjects," Dickens suggests that while the characters of his book are types, Queen Victoria is an archetype: an image of womanhoc stands alone, and stands in for all of her subjects. Thus Dickens uses these sketches to reflect not simply on specific foibles and follies, but of example. The sketches gathered in this collection demonstrate the descriptive talent for which Dickens would become famous. More impexemplify his own conviction that learning to read the people around you from the brief glimpses that life affords--and to separate good ex the bad--is an important part of one's moral education.

Alison Byerly is College Professor at Middlebury College in Vermont, and in 2012-13, Visiting Scholar in Literature at MIT.