As the first biography to focus on Charles Dickens's complex relationships with women and therefore with his female characters, Michael Slater's *Dickens and Women* (1982) inspired three decades worth of critical contributions that have yielded many exciting insights. But they are now old. New insights on this topic call for new ways of looking at it, which is just what this new book provides. Preston closely reads the "rhetoric of implicit disgust" (1) underlying Dickens's portrayal of his mother in his 1847 autobiographical fragment and three of his novels--*David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, and *Great Expectations*. By this means, Preston not only develops new ways of examining the relationships between the heroes of these novels and their biological and adoptive mothers; she also shows how the heroes grapple with their anti-maternal disgust in order to move beyond it.

In her first chapter, which considers what the language of Dickens's 1847 autobiographical fragment reveals about his attitude toward his mother, Preston also considers how the fragment has been critically interpreted, most notably in Edmund Wilson's cornerstone work *The Wound and the Bow* (1941). Dickens's art, Wilson argues, stems from the primal wound he suffered in being sent to the workhouse. Following this line, Preston notes that just as Dickens's mother made him sell his books and furniture, Clara Copperfield sells David's caul and Mrs. Joe sells Pip to Miss Havisham. In so doing, these women negatively alter the domestic sphere, thus antagonizing each protagonist (15). By rejecting their son or foster son, the mother figure overturns her identity and sense of place in the world.

Consequently, Preston argues, each novel she examines has both a biographical and an adoptive mother whom the hero and heroine (representative of Dickens himself) must transcend to purify themselves of their perceived maternal taint. David Copperfield does so with the help of Agnes, whom--Preston argues--Dickens creates from the notion of the romantic sublime. In other words, she is so impossibly ideal that only she can allow David to cleanse himself of his mother. Though Agnes may be sickeningly sweet (as critics such as George Orwell, Harold Bloom, and feminist critic Barbara Hardy point out) and a "paragon of virtue," as Coventry Patmore called her, Preston finds that Dickens thought her essential to David's complete separation from his biological mother, Clara, and his adoptive mother, Betsey Trotwood. Summing up her argument, Preston writes: "Dickens draws upon the discourse of the sublime in order to construct [Agnes] as the natural object through which David can achieve authentic identity" (53).

One of the most provocative features of Preston's work is her fine-tuned metacritical analysis, which she also displays in her chapter on *Bleak House*. As the plain Jane of this novel, Esther Summerson is more akin to Dickens's David Copperfield and Pip: she is an outcast heroine creating ideals in order to purify herself of her mother's sex so as to be socially accepted. But as a female, her approach to this task slightly differs from that of David and Pip. To purge herself of her mother, Preston argues, Esther not only creates the idealistic Ada; she also attempts to destroy herself by deliberately courting smallpox. "[T]he disfiguring disease that Esther accidentally contracts," writes Preston, "is actually something that she seeks out at a subconscious level in order to punish her mother and herself" (98).

By analyzing Esther's narratives, Preston shows how her self-hatred and disgust stem from her biological mother, Lady Deadlock, and from her adopted mother, Miss Barbary, who construes Esther as the tainted byproduct of Lady Deadlock's sexuality. Esther, Preston contends, is grateful for the smallpox scars that mar the beauty she inherited from her mother because they break the link between the two. Finally, Preston argues, Esther cares less about looking attractive to her husband than she does about having erased visible signs of her connection to her mother and being reassured that the angelic Ada thinks her beautiful (122). While Preston does not say this outright, one can recognize that Esther constructs Ada as her romantic sublime just as David constructs Agnes.

Like David and Esther, Pip in *Great Expectations* employs anti-maternal rhetoric, but unlike them, he "is, at least at some level," we are told, "aware that 'bad' mothers are not, of themselves, always totally to blame" (132). That is how Preston begins this chapter, and this is how she ends it: "the implicit disgust towards women that [Joe Gargery] modeled may have actually forger 'the poor labyrinth' that Pip got caught up in," (166). In order to get from point A to contradictory point B, Preston draws some questionable inferences. If bad mothers are not always to blame, why does Preston blame Georgiana, Pip's biological mother, for ruining the lives of her husband and her sons? Preston argues, "it is as if Pip fancifully holds her responsible for the deaths of his father and five brothers" (137). To buttress this point, Preston quotes Mary
Douglas: "Ideas about contagion can certainly be traced to reaction to anomaly" (qtd. 137). Georgiana, Preston claims, is an anomaly, and "by [Pip's] infant reckoning she is an awful agent of contagion who has laid waste to six male members of his family" (137). In Preston's version, then, "Pip imagines his father [as] swarthy and vigorous-looking but his mother was marked ill and his five brothers quickly gave up on life and were all born in a supine state" (137).

But if Pip's father's name is "above" his mother's (as it is in the novel), and if Pip's father is "vigorous" and his mother "feeble," couldn't it also be argued that Pip's father destroyed his mother? And wouldn't this interpretation better support Preston's final claim about Joe, which is that he forged Pip's passive-aggressive anger towards women because his mother failed to protect him from his father's abuse? Though "[w]omen are not always to blame," Georgiana is said to be the foundational monster who destroys all males in the novel. It seems to this reader that Preston models maternal disgust more than Pip or Joe does.

Moreover, since women are said to destroy men in this novel, it's hard to figure out whether Joe is good or bad for teaching Pip misogyny. Joe is "passive-aggressive" towards Mrs. Joe, writes Preston, "because he subconsciously blames his mother for failing to protect him from his father's abuse" (158). But is this reading of Joe's behavior supported by the evidence of his goodness? Jarringly, Preston chides Joe for disrespecting his wife, for treating her as if "she doesn't exist" (157).

But isn't it Mrs. Joe who treats Joe himself this way? And when Joe tells Pip about his father's abuse of his mother, what words imply that he blames her? And what about Biddy, whom Preston never mentions? If Joe dislikes compliant women, wouldn't he be disgusted with her as well? If so, where do we see this in the text? Lastly, does feminism have to redeem all women, whether they deserve it or not? After all, there are some women, like Mrs. Joe, whose abusive actions fail to merit redemption (not that she necessarily deserves to be knocked on the head with a leg-iron and rendered mute). While Preston supports the first part of her book with close readings, her interpretation of Joe leaves close reading behind, and the reader in doubt--to say the least.

Perhaps her argument unravels here because her theoretical premise is also somewhat carelessly established. After her opening analysis of Dickens's 1847 autobiographical fragment, Preston introduces her hermeneutics: "this study will show that Mary Douglas's anthropological understanding of pollution and Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic concept of abjection provide the most profitable exegetic tools to explore the anti-maternal rhetoric within Dickens' novels" (2). Douglas's Purity and Danger (1966) shows how cultures maintain boundaries of pure and impure, clean and unclean, by managing dirt: "[A]n out of place person," she writes, "is an active form of dirt most likely occurring when a human doesn't fit" (qtd. 31 and 147).

Expanding this concept of dirt as pollution that crosses the boundaries between pure and impure, Julia Kristeva's Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (1980) argues that all symbolic reminders of the mother's body disrespect the boundaries on which language, identity, and civilization depend and are therefore abject. For example, she writes, drinking milk as an adult might cause gagging because it reminds us of our pre-linguistic oneness with the mother, from whom we must separate to enter the Symbolic Order (Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 2). Since this separation is so difficult, we are said to ensure its continuance by creating the psychic image of a terrifying mother. Often misplaced onto all women in the Symbolic Order, this image begots violence towards both women and men.

Preston reads Kristeva with the aid of critics such as Kelly Oliver and Judith Butler, who have helpfully explicated and interpreted her European theory. But Preston neglects critics who have grappled with charges that Kristeva is essentialist: critics such as Allison Weir, Diana Fuss, and Martha Reineke. In relying too much on feminist versions of Kristevan theory rather than on other accounts of it and on her own analysis of it, Preston seems to infer that any discussion of the female body automatically reduces women to their biological function. Some passages from Kristeva's works, she claims, "reinforce stereotypical ideas concerning the feminine [and are] quite offensive in [their] depiction of stifling maternal power" (49). But don't Preston's own analyses of despised mothers reinforce misogynistic views of women? Though she faults Kristeva for placing the maternal at the center of her theory, Preston herself puts it at the center of her book. Preston also slightly previous Kristevan analyses of Victorian novels. To name a few, they include David Rosenwasser, "A Kristevan Reading of the Marriage Plot in Jane Eyre" (Approaches to Teaching Bronte's Jane Eyre, ed. Diane Long Hoeveler and Beth Lau [NY: MLA 1993] 154-161); Keryn Carter, "The Consuming Fruit: Oranges, Demons, and Daughters" (Critique. 40:1 [Fall 1998] 156-23); and C.S. Weisenthal, "The Body Melancholy: Trollope's Purity and Danger" (Explaining the Depiction of Violence Against Women in Victorian Literature: Applying Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection to Dickens, Bronte, and Braddon [NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005]). In the chapter titled "Something Covered with an Old Blanket": Nancy and Other Dead Mothers in Oliver Twist" (rpt. The American Journal of Psychoanalysis, 65:3 [September 2005]: 239-260), I use Kristeva's theory of abjection to interpret the brutal murder of Nancy by Sikes, who is Dickens's way of characterizing his own psyche. In this chapter as well as in my Introduction, I argue that because Dickens found his own mother more repulsive than fascinating, he turns his sexual, maternal characters into "powers of horror" that, as such, must be abjected with ferocity. While Dickens attempts to destroy these powers in his works, especially in Sikes's killing of Nancy, he continuously displaces abjection by "killing" various maternal figures throughout his novels. For Kristeva, such failure of abjection can lead only to "the abjection of self" (Kristeva, Powers of Horror 5), or in other words, death. I conclude that because abjection has failed throughout Oliver Twist, Dickens has no choice but to end this novel: in other words, to abject himself. But in obsessively insisting on public readings of the Sikes and Nancy story against his doctors' advice, he hastened his own death, which Kristeva calls "the culmination of abjection" (Powers of Horror 5).

Just as I argue that Dickens' repeated abjections fail and thus lead to his own death, "the abjection of self," Preston does likewise in her Postscript. Even though Dickens, she argues, has repeatedly sought to purge his maternal disgust through David, Esther, and Pip, he deliberately abjects himself because he has not been able to transcend it. Of David Copperfield, in a letter, David Copperfield, Bleak House, and Great Expectations, Preston writes: "all of these works, owing to their skillful deployment of anti-maternal rhetoric, effectively enabled Dickens to hold at bay the sense that he was abject, but in the end they weren't enough and it would appear that the only way for him to overcome his self-disgust was to abject himself" (183). How can I help but fault Preston for an argument so close to my own? She not only loses her credibility but also fails to fulfill the promise she sets forth in her Preface: "I went away and read everything I could on and by Dickens" (3).
Yet perhaps we should not—pardon the cliché—throw the baby out with the bathwater. Despite Preston's grave oversight, her analysis of Dickens's "anti-maternal rhetoric of disgust" in *David Copperfield, Bleak House,* and *Great Expectations* is intriguing and will likely fuel a few more years of critical debate on Dickens' treatment of women.

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