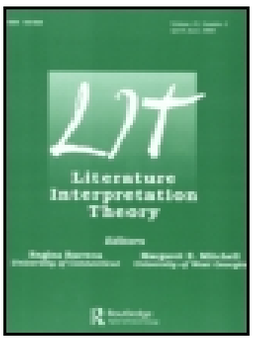

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Dickens's Queer Children

SUSAN ZIEGER

In Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, a bold polemic against a political order that systematically sacrifices its constituents to an idealized figure of "the Child," Charles Dickens serves as a predictable villain. According to Edelman's theory of reproductive futurism, Western nations valorize biological reproduction and its machinery, heterosexuality, as the basis of the political future, at the expense of both the political present and the queer people who inhabit it.[1] Dickens is implicated here most obviously because his very name is a byword for the sentimentalization of children's suffering and dying; but his characteristic use of such fictional spectacles to motivate an agenda of social reform and liberal inclusivity also directs the future-oriented gaze of the social, which Edelman critiques. *No Future* thus conjures "A Christmas Carol," in which frail, hobbling Tiny Tim represents the precarious future of "the Child" and hence the nation, and the miserly bachelor Ebeneezer Scrooge becomes the malevolent crypto-queer icon whose antisociality threatens it. Edelman reads Scrooge's queerness in his willful refusal of social belonging, an intensive inhumanness that would, if not for ghostly intervention, result directly in Tiny Tim's death, which means nothing less than the foreclosure of the future. As Edelman writes, "Tiny Tim survives at our expense in a culture that always sustains itself on the threat that he might die" (Edelman 48). Edelman's provocative thesis has been dubbed "the negativity thesis" by queer theorists who have debated it, because it elaborates queerness as the place of negativity, advocating the strategic embrace of this homophobic stereotype as a gesture against conventional politics. To reject sociality and community is to reject the future; it means nothing less than to inhabit and exploit the menace of the death drive. As Edelman

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writes, queer politics must not only assert equal rights within the social order, but must also say explicitly

> what [Cardinal Bernard] Law and the Pope and the whole of the Symbolic order for which they stand hear anyway in each and every expression or manifestation of queer sexuality: Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop. (Edelman 29)

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, the negativity thesis, which is also associated with the work of Leo Bersani, has come under pressure from various points of view. For example, its anticommunity, antirelational stance has been unveiled as a reaction against the contingency of sexuality with race, gender, class, and other qualities; its reliance on a gay male archive has been criticized for limiting the affective and intellectual expression of queer politics; and its Lacanian psychoanalytic influence has been lamented for missing the myriad social connections unleashed by self-shattering queer sex.[2] My engagement with Edelman's theory largely sidesteps these debates: I am interested instead in both contesting the figure of "the Child," and using it to test the status of queerness in and between Dickens's novels and their adaptations. Tiny Tim may be the iconic damaged, fragile, and threatened Child of reproductive futurism, but his place could be served equally by Oliver in *Oliver Twist* (1839), Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), the boys of Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), Paul Dombey in *Dombey and Son* (1848), or even young Pip in *Great Expectations* (1860). Oliver, with his cap and breeches, has been traditionally represented as "the purest boy in English literature," victimized by the official and unofficial management of poverty, the workhouse and Fagin's and Sykes' street crime syndicate (Dellamora 31). Classic adaptations of *Oliver Twist* such as David Lean's *Oliver Twist* (1948) and Carol Reed's *Oliver!* (1968) accentuate his cute, waiflike qualities—somewhat perversely, I shall argue—most intensively when he is laboring or hungry. Similarly, the boys who are maltreated, starved, and essentially enslaved at Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* are usually portrayed as adorable miniature figures in order to heighten the menace leveled against them. The outrage *Nicholas Nickleby* whipped up on their behalf helped close the Yorkshire schools on which Dotheboys Hall was based, and helped build Dickens' status as a social reformer. Edelman's work thus identifies a very powerful social formation. Insofar as Dickens's novels repetitively stage the imperilment and rescue of children, they help invent the ethos of reproductive futurism at the heart of the social itself.

But the very vehemence of such heartstring tugs also opens these foundational versions of the Child to reappropriations that pose critical questions

about the coercions of reproductive futurism. By risking more nuanced and uglier representations of exploited children, these recent adaptations refuse to erase their labor, need, and desire. For example, Jacob Tierney's *Twist* (2002) and Seth Michael Donsky's *Twisted* (1997) both set *Oliver Twist* in contemporary urban underworlds, exposing Oliver, the Artful Dodger, and Fagin's boys to sex work. Stephen Whittaker's gritty period *Nicholas Nickleby* (2000) also visually suggests the sexual reconfiguration of relationships between the subaltern Dotheboys. The most commercially and critically successful of these adaptations, Douglas McGrath's *Nicholas Nickleby* (2002), even manages to stage a queer romance between Nicholas and Smike, the disabled boy he rescues from Dotheboys Hall. The films' multiple strategies for queering sentimental representations of exploited children suggests both that the powerful figure of "the Child" is not invulnerable to subversion, and that there may have been something queer about Dickens' children all along. Bringing such cinematic texts into dialogue with Edelman and other theorists, we can illuminate the queer multiplicities of Dickens's and his adaptors' representations of children.

This queerness is more complex than simple sexual non-normativity. As Jacqueline Rose, James Kincaid, and others have demonstrated, fantasies of children's innocence and purity are consistent projections of adult desire; moreover, such reveries thrive by conjuring the threat that this innocence is being menaced by the premature intrusion of sex. I contend that these dialectical projections are as much economic fantasies as they are sexual ones, because the Child's nominal purity is guaranteed by its exemption from the market. Children's circulation in the market, whether as laborers, paupers, thieves, or commodified images, opens them to sexual signification and activity; as Catherine Robson has shown, this was a matter of anxious debate in the campaign against child labor in the 1840s. Conversely, when children are violated by untimely sexualization, their status as incipient workers is also broached, and it is this far less recognized dimension of the topic that I would like to elucidate. The figurative child who is touched, whether by sex or the market, accelerates the normative pace at which implicitly heterosexual workers mature and reproduce themselves. Because this is an implicitly heteronormative temporality, in which work and sex guarantee the next generation, the figure of the premature child will always signify queerly. Perhaps the best example is Little Father Time in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1896), the anonymous, curiously aged boy who hangs himself and his siblings; according to the doctor who pronounces death, such children represent "the beginning of the universal wish not to live" (Hardy 337). Hardy hints that this foreclosure of the future is the specter of species auto-extinction, but also indicates its more banal root, poverty: Little Father Time's suicide note reads, "Done because we are too menny" (Hardy 336). Compressing the normative lifespan arc from childhood to adulthood to death, Little Father Time quite obviously embodies queer time, but it is

economic pressure that renders this embodiment visible. Indeed, Judith Halberstam describes queer time as the optic through which we can see how "respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality" (Halberstam 4). Laura Berry goes so far as to claim that children victimized by want "represent the construction of the social; they elicit pity and outrage; yet they have no single social significance" (Berry 14). I contend that the figure of the wizened child damaged by market forces represents the greatest spur to Edelman's reproductive futurism, but also its most subversive challenge.

This aged child who has been brought too soon to market is everywhere in Dickens. In *Dombey and Son*, Paul Dombey, wilting under his father's impatient desire that he mature and fulfill his partnership in the family firm, "looked (and talked) like one of those terrible little Beings in the Fairy tales, who, at a hundred and fifty or two hundred years of age, fantastically represent the children for whom they have been substituted" (Dickens, *Dombey* 109). Paul's is the angelic prematurity of fatigued wisdom, but the queerly aged child also carries connotations of vice and evil: in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the Dotheboys reflect back the evil they have suffered: "children with the countenances of old men"; "childhood with the light of its eye quenched, its beauty gone"; "vicious-faced boys brooding [. . .] like malefactors in a jail"; a description culminating with the exclamation, "[W]hat an incipient Hell was breeding there!" (Dickens, *Nickleby* 97). In *Oliver Twist*, the strangeness of this sort of untimely aging through premature and criminal labor is made plain in the person of the Artful Dodger: introduced as "one of the queerest-looking boys that Oliver had ever seen," he is "as dirty a juvenile as one would wish to see; but he had got all about him the airs and manners of a man" (Dickens, *Twist* 60). Robson concurs, tracing the ideal child's femininity and the juvenile delinquent, the "toddling anomaly," as a masculine "freak of nature," "the not-child" (Robson, 30).[3] By consistently emplotting economic threats to children's innocence, Dickens' texts render them "queer" in his signature sense of eccentric, strange, quirky, and wonderful; as well as in the theoretical sense I have been describing, as presumptively sexual-economic beings.

Observing the economic dimension of Edelman's theory of reproductive futurism, we can see how Dickens's boys, particularly Oliver, Smike, and the boys of "Dotheboys Hall" are ripe for queer neo-Victorian appropriation. These take several strategies: McGrath's *Nickleby*, for example, sets his queer romance within the bourgeois family, where the ill effects of Smike's exploited institutional labor can be transformed, albeit temporarily, into the virtues of wifely devotion to Nicholas. Rescuing same-sex eroticism from the homophobic aspersion of negativity, coercion, and heterosexual substitution it typically accrues in institutional settings, McGrath dignifies it by installing it within the family, but the tradeoff is that it can never be formalized there. Whittaker and Tierney, by contrast, reject the family for the more open and lateral relations between individuals; here, queer desire offers a glimpse

of radically mutual social reconfigurations, but ultimately succumbs to the brutalities of the market. Whittaker comes closest to depicting the Dotheboys' reflected "vice" onscreen, whereas McGrath follows Lean and Reed in keeping them cute, reserving the queer romance for his teenage characters. By making Oliver and the Artful Dodger sex workers, Tierney most intensively exposes the imbrications of premature sexuality, sex work, and queer desire. Whereas *Twist* demonstrates and refines Edelman's main point, that reproductive futurism makes queer lives expendable, McGrath's *Nickleby* suggests possibilities for queer assimilation into the bourgeois family, a move that aligns it with a different critical trend in queer theory and literary studies. Insofar as both films make putatively heterosexual characters gay, or place them in homoerotic scenes, these adaptations can be said to queer Dickens; yet they also straightforwardly extend the Dickensian project of social reform through the exposure of specific forms of poverty and abuse.

Insofar as the precocious, sexualized, working, and evil child scrambles the normative temporal sequence of childhood, maturity, and parenthood, it can be said to queer the child-to-parent telos, and this phenomenon also invites us to rethink the assumptions underlying the tacit conceptualization of cinematic adaptations as the offspring of a literary parent. In *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, Kamilla Elliott critiques the models and metaphors by which cinema is said to have been "born" from the Victorian novel, particularly—via theorist Sergei Eisenstein—from those of Dickens. Her aim is to expose the intellectual poverty of conceiving adaptation as only the conversion of words into images: "Were film to acknowledge its debt to literal and visible arts (to paintings, sculpture, architecture, photographs, theater, book illustrations, and more) or its tangible debts to the words of novels, its birth would appear far more mundanely derivative, *if it appeared as a birth at all*" (Elliott 125; my emphasis). In other words, we can complicate the too-easy formulation that a film adaptation has a "natural" or "genetic" relationship to the "original" literary work it adapts by considering, among other things, the visual aspects of the foregoing text, and the literary qualities of the film. Rather than assuming that meanings are mysteriously genetically encoded in the narrative itself, we can see how they engage audiences across time. This retheorization of adaptation is a more collaborative one that neither privileges nor disparages Dickens' novels as original sources. This essay thus refers both to the queer children that we glimpse in Dickens' novels and in films inspired by them, and to the films themselves, which put their "inheritance" to new and traditional uses.

BRIMSTONE, TREACLE, AND CHILD SLAVERY

In *Nicholas Nickleby*, one can see Dickens helping reproductive futurism to invent "the Child," while simultaneously destabilizing it. This feat involves a

profound and yet insidious capaciousness of tone, to accommodate both outrage at the boys' exploitation, and a crass mirth that perpetuates it. As Amanda Claybaugh has recently reminded us, when Dickens began writing *Nicholas Nickleby*, he had not yet decided to go on a crusade to reform the Yorkshire schools of their abuses; he merely wanted to entertain his readers (Claybaugh 53). The novel reflects this dual agenda: the long passage from which I quoted above presented the boys of Dotheboys Hall as old, starved, and vicious, culminating with the narrator's exclamation of an "incipient Hell [. . .] breeding there!" (Dickens, *Nickleby* 97). Right after this peak of misery, however, the narration abruptly shifts strategies, drawing comedy from the same material: "And yet this scene, painful as it was, had its grotesque features, which, in a less interested observer than Nicholas, might have provoked a smile" (Dickens, *Nickleby* 97). This reversal in readerly affect presides over the boys' feeding with "brimstone and treacle" (Dickens, *Nickleby* 95) or sulfur and molasses. Readers know this to be a symptom of the Squeers' reprehensible practice of taking "as much from every boy as could by possibility be screwed out of him," both by extracting their labor as if on a "plantation," and by putting as little of value into them as possible; hence Mrs. Squeers explains that the brimstone and treacle "spoils their appetites and comes cheaper than breakfast and dinner." (Dickens, *Nickleby* 95–96). Indeed, the figurative economic circuit is one in which the boys magically sustain themselves by eating something that resembles their own excrement; this substance makes their inconvenient appetites for legitimate nourishment vanish.[4]

And yet this is precisely the comic spectacle of force-feeding from which Dickens and his adaptors generate the crass comedy of indigestion:

> Mrs. Squeers stood at one of the desks, presiding over an immense basin of brimstone and treacle, of which delicious compound she administered a large instalment to each boy in succession, using for the purpose a common wooden spoon [. . .] which widened every young gentleman's mouth considerably, they being all obliged, under heavy corporal penalties, to take in the whole of the bowl at a gasp. (Dickens, *Nickleby* 97)

Hablot K. Browne's illustration (Figure 1), dutifully portraying the boys as miniature middle-aged men, shows those who have just been "treacled" in postures of imminent vomiting; the victim in progress is in a pose of extreme discomfort. The very same moment that exemplifies the boys' neglect also permits readers and viewers to laugh.

This happens whether the boys' aged viciousness is accentuated, or whether they are made cute and cuddly, as in McGrath's film, which emphasizes the treacling as industrial processing. This treatment takes advantage of the semantic reversibility of the term "Dotheboys": in the novel, the boys do the labor at the hall, but are also objects to be processed or done. McGrath's

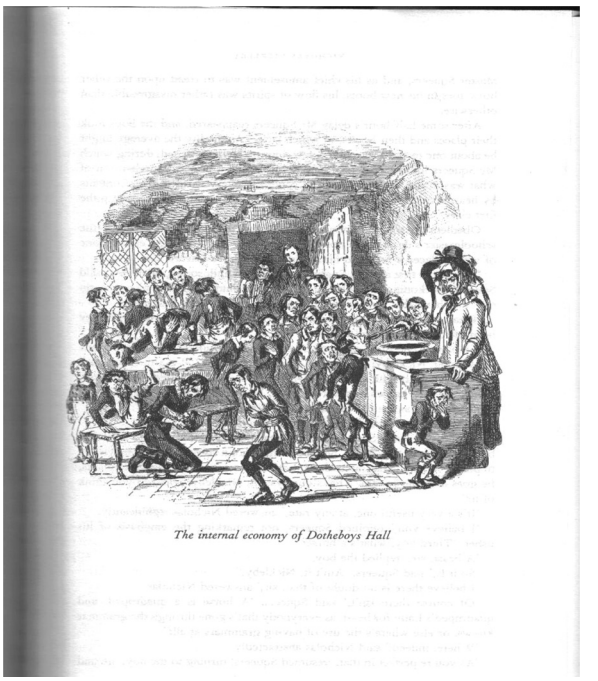

FIGURE 1 Hablot K. Browne, "The internal economy of Dotheboys Hall" in Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838).

choices exacerbate the meretricious basis of the comedy: his boys are even more magical than Dickens's, because they can be fed upon their own waste and still look adorable. At the same time that "the Child" is imperiled, this peril is remotivated for comedy, a destabilization with queer overtones of sodomy and coprophagia as the brown spoon pries open little mouths.

The subversive mirth to be made out of violating and neglecting children comes from another famous Dickensian moment involving a wooden spoon, when Oliver Twist famously states, "I want some more" (Dickens, *Oliver Twist* 15). On the one hand, Oliver, the workhouse boys, and the boys of Dotheboys Hall have the appetites of adults that demand satisfaction, and correspond with their representation as proleptically old and vicious; on the other, the urgency of their needs can be blunted by representing them as young, cute, and non-threatening. James Kincaid has sketched the incoherence of these opposite tendencies with respect to Oliver: "it is as if we always wanted him somewhere other than where he is, wanted him in motion, always glimpsed and never set" (Kincaid 389). Dellamora has interpreted the spoon Oliver holds as the working class's phallic demand for citizenship, an adult request linked to his sexual knowingness, a subtle but overlooked exception to his seeming purity. According to Dellamora, Oliver's queerness helps him fit in with Fagin's boys, who Dickens after all describes as

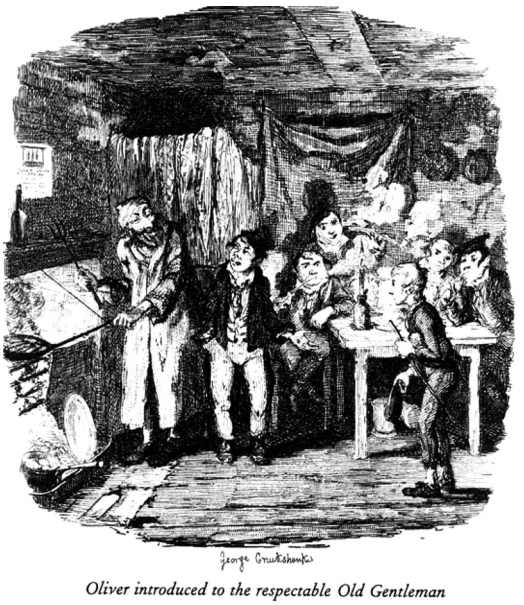

FIGURE 2 George Cruikshank, "Oliver introduced to the respectable Old Gentleman" in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837).

"smoking long clay pipes and drinking spirits with all the air of middle-aged men." (Dickens, *Twist* 64). In striking similarity to the prematurely aged Dotheboys, illustrator George Cruikshank follows this description closely (Figure 2). But this adult dimension is lost in adaptations that eliminate the cause-and-effect sequence whereby deprivation or criminality in turn makes the boys insatiable and depraved; these films preserve their childish cuteness, and even aestheticize their hungry desire.

In *Oliver!*, the musical and lyrical momentum of Lionel Bart's "Food, Glorious Food" is not toward the massive redistribution of resources that would secure a consistent food supply, but for small increments of excess: "Just thinking of growing fat/Our senses go reeling/One moment of knowing/That full-up feeling/Food, glorious food!/What wouldn't we give for/ That extra bit more/That's all that we live for" (Bart, "Food"). A thought, a moment, a bit: these boys are not menacing because they're not demanding much, after all; their desires resemble the bourgeois audience's, for a morsel of entertainment. This representational strategy fetishizes Oliver's purity and innocence by making him, in Berry's clever reading, a superficial face that signifies emptiness, "less individual subject than 'liberal object'–not a 'self,' but a surface [. . .]" (Berry 55). Accordingly, his and the other boys' blankness helps them to appear as pure, cuddly, and consumable children rather than vicious, dwarfish adults. Here, the figure of the Child doesn't even motivate urgent action on behalf of children—just a musical comedy celebration of their capacity to hide adults' deprivation and abuse under a charming veneer.

The same strategy of sanitizing these queerly aged children for consumption governs McGrath's version of Nicholas' discovery of the sleeping arrangements at Dotheboys Hall. In Dickens's novel, the boys are heaped together in "a huddled mass" for warmth; "here and there a gaunt arm thrust forth: its thinness hidden by no covering, but fully exposed to view in all its shrunken ugliness" (Dickens, *Nickleby* 149). Melted together, these bodies represent an anxious materiality, recognizable as the detritus of an animal, heterosexual breeding that knows no propriety or limit. Because their parents pay for their upkeep at Dotheboys Hall, they are clearly middle class, yet they also clearly resemble the pauper children of the workhouse, the embodiment of a Malthusian nightmare of working-class over-breeding. In keeping with this political context, Dickens conjures impoverished childhood as a mass grave: "There were some who, lying on their backs with upturned faces and clenched hands, just visible in the leaden light, bore more the aspect of dead bodies than of living creatures [. . .]" (*Nickleby* 149–50). McGrath retains the aura of deathliness, but erases the ugliness and agedness, and significantly substitutes individual boxes with straw for Dickens' collective, withered flesh. These operate as the middle-class, individualizing signifier of coffins, and recall Oliver's sleeping in Soweberry's coffin workshop.

With their eyes closed, we cannot see the "quenched light of childhood" (*Nickleby* 97), only the sleep of innocence and the peace of a respite from abuse. But these boxes can also be read as packing boxes: the slow pan across each boy references the visual idiom of shopping: boys who are clean, quiet, new, and, in repose, very like objects, become available for our visual consumption. Here, the child represents the ultimate commodity, the desire to end all desires.

Yet between this model and Dickens's rebarbative description of undifferentiated child-flesh lies a third and plainly queer strategy, that of Stephen Whittaker's 2000 production of *Nicholas Nickleby* for Channel 4. Whittaker's boys appear not clumped indistinguishably together, as a mass or crowd with the potential to rebel, but rather in small groups of twos and threes, some with their arms around each other, all staring with either malevolence or vacancy at the camera, which represents the viewpoint of the three new captives Squeers and Nicholas have delivered from London (Figures 3 and 4).

Viewers consuming these images confront an interpretive choice: when we read these pairings as manifestations of homosocial intimacy, we fail to see them as expressions of lower class unity; conversely, if we read the boys' postures as effects of class deprivation—they're merely huddled together to keep warm—we erase their queer potential. This dilemma stems from the assumption that sexual activity is a luxury: if the boys are really so starving and half-dead that they can barely move, how could they have the energy for sexual frolics? In other words, as Michel Foucault has demonstrated, sexuality is a bourgeois concept. An obscure early Victorian structure of feeling resurfaces here: the possibility that eroticism may unfold in different relations

FIGURE 3 From *Nicholas Nickleby*. Dir. Stephen Whittaker, 2000.

to other bodily needs, and to the state, than are conventionally assumed; indeed, that erotic expression and class unity could even be one and the same. After all, the menace of this scene combines class uprising with radical sexual reconfiguration. Whittaker puts us directly into the midst of the boys, with all their filth, wounds, and malevolence. He thus activates mid-Victorian discourses, analyzed by Seth Koven, in which homosocial masculine spaces such as the casual ward, workhouse, convict colony, and barracks were perceived as sites of "moral and sexual danger," particularly the specter of sodomy (Koven 43). What is eminently queer about these images is the possibility of sex de-linked from heteronormative desire and economies of reproduction, and subject to a childish logic of inclusion and exclusion. Perhaps these are images of children's affective relations among each other—relations that do not reflect parents' originating affection, relations that are revolutionary, cohesive, and frightening. In this way, the queer potential of the Dotheboys is manifested as violence against middle-class paternalism, whether it is the malevolent version of the Squeers, or the beneficence of those who closed the Yorkshire schools. Whittaker's allusion to queerness

FIGURE 4 From *Nicholas Nickleby*. Dir. Stephen Whittaker, 2000.

as class unity also touches Edelman's vision of a politics that appears to be reconfigured against the future that the social normatively conjures. Resisting the individualizing logic of the commodity fetishization of children present in McGrath, Whittaker refuses to make child poverty adorable.

CONSIDER YOURSELF AT HOME: QUEER ROMANCES OF THE FAMILY AND STREET

McGrath's participation in reproductive futurism via the cute liberal objects of the Dotheboys helps rebuild a framework in which queerness can become visible: the family. Following Dickens, McGrath develops his audience's sympathy for the exploited Dotheboys by identifying it with Nicholas's pity for Smike; out of this relation grows a queer romance. Smike occupies the pathetic middle between cuteness and damaged vice. Like the other Dotheboys, he is a strange mixture of age, even death, and youth: "Although he could not have been less than eighteen or nineteen years old, and was tall for that age, he wore a skeleton suit, such as is usually put upon very little boys;" furthermore, "round his neck was a tattered child's frill, only half concealed by a coarse man's neckerchief" (Dickens, *Nickleby* 90). Smike has been at Dotheboys the longest, performs the most unpaid labor, receives the brunt of the Squeers' abuse, and is the most damaged. He emerges from the heaped-up, unintelligible mass, but retains the vestiges of its social death in his repeated fantasizing of his own death, and his eventual succumbing to consumption. Although Nicholas swears oaths of loyalty and equality to him, their relationship resembles one of master and servant, since Smike performs all the labor. This inequality may be a residue of a picaresque hero-and-pal duo; but even during this phase, Smike's affection gravitates toward the erotic, flavored by the domestic: "I only want to be near you," he tells Nicholas. "You are my home," he says, claiming furthermore that he will follow him "to the churchyard grave" (*Nickleby* 162). Of course, Smike will die first, but not before he has translated his gratitude, loyalty, and affection for Nicholas into further domestic services for him. Smike may be a model mid-Victorian wife.

Holly Furneaux develops this observation of Smike's linked adoration and desire for Nicholas, noting how Nicholas's body forms the object of Smike's consistently eroticized gaze. For Furneaux, "Smike's valiant and repeated efforts to speak his love for Nicholas reach their culmination when the possibility of a physically similar sister is presented" (Furneaux 180). The Smike-Nicholas romance functions as evidence for Furneaux's larger claim that the Victorian bourgeois family—far from fostering Edelman's militant reproductive futurism—was indeed quite hospitable to queer desire. This trend in queer theory and the history of sexuality, also enacted in Sharon Marcus' recent *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in*

Victorian England (2007), operates by dismantling the entrenched oppositions between heterosexual and homosexual desire that traditionally structure critical discussions of sexuality, but which had not, after all, emerged until the end of the nineteenth century. From this perspective, Dickens and McGrath conjure a vision of an inclusive, non-biologically defined family into which the crypto-queer Smike is welcomed. The Smike plot is a synecdoche for the Dickens oeuvre's systematic argument for the liberal and familial inclusion of the quirky, the eccentric and, indeed, the queer. McGrath's film understands Dickens's liberal appeal precisely: the desire it cultivates for cute little Dotheboys is informed by reproductive futurism; but this discourse is capacious enough to include Smike's incorporation into the Nickleby family, developing a cultural vision in which the heteronormative family can host queer desire. This reconceptualization of the family also notably meshes with a contemporary middle-class queer political agenda of marriage, family, and other civil rights—an agenda that pointedly rejects Edelman's apparent nihilism.

Rather than attempting to translate the wizened Dotheboys to the screen, McGrath simply amplifies the homoerotics of a different set of elder youth—the teenagers Nicholas and Smike. He stages the scenes of their intimacy and devotion under starlit skies, with two gay icons in the roles. Nicholas is played by Charlie Hunnam, of "Queer as Folk" fame, and Jamie Bell, best known for his titular role as the ballet dancer in *Billy Elliott* (2000), is Smike. A supporting cast including Alan Cumming, Nathan Lane, and Barry Humpheries, otherwise known as Dame Edna Everedge, added queer flavor. The review in *planetout.com*, titled "Putting the 'Dick' Back in Dickens," observed "Everyone here either is queer, has played queer, portrayed a queer's mother or father, or once met Madonna. Is that a coincidence?" (Judell).

Smike is thus easily brought into the Nickleby family, but as numerous critics have pointed out, he doesn't last there long, conveniently dying of consumption instead. The novel's unconvincing redirection of his desire from Nicholas to his identical sister Kate doesn't yield a marriage because Smike is too damaged to become handsome, productive, and eligible. This damage, however, registers queerly. As Furneaux suggests, "Though Dickens allows Smike a brief, exclusively male Arcadia (being nursed and cared for by Nicholas in an idyllic and remote rural setting), there is no recovery from his terminal desire" (Furneaux 186). Helena Michie notes "an exclusionary process by which some are ruthlessly selected for a long life within loving families—and some die in the bosom of a family that cannot completely integrate them" (Michie 133). Smike's ultimate exclusion from the family suggests that queerness can only be temporarily accommodated; in this way it supports Edelman's thesis, that reproductive futurism expends queer people to maintain its heterosexual scaffolding. In fact, Dickens undercuts his plot's own charitable impulse, since Smike turns out precisely to have been a

Nickleby—Ralph's son and Nicholas and Kate's cousin—all along; hence, he was truly owed the care the Nicklebys thought they were giving away to a non-relative. Smike dies, of course, to expiate Ralph's original violation of the family through extramarital sex; but his expiration as the result of a disease suggests the bio-political calculation that deviance leads to decay and decline. Smike thus joins the long list of tragically queer men whose sexuality signifies sterility and death (Nunokawa 312). Smike's ultimate exclusion from the family suggests that queerness can only be temporarily accommodated. Far from the more radical and unsettling sexual implications of Dickens' and Whittaker's aged, vicious boys, McGrath's *Nicholas Nickleby* contains the queer romance within the family idiom of adoption, where it can pass for straight and then vanish.

Tierney's *Twist*, by contrast, offers the cinematic equivalent of the negativity thesis; indeed, it even bolsters the argument by including issues of class and labor that Edelman's and Bersani's analyses tend to marginalize. Tierney consistently re-imagines the bourgeois biological family as the site of a heinous hypocrisy and cruelty, born of self-interest, which cannot brook any recognition of its own same-sex desire. He reworks the adoption plot between Oliver and Mr. Brownlow as a sexual encounter between Oliver and "the Senator," a rich Somebody who pays Oliver only to talk to him, and gives him his phone number. At Nancy's urgent suggestion—for which Bill kills her off screen—Oliver thinks the Senator might want him as his exclusive boyfriend, thus removing him from the hard life working the Toronto streets for sex. He obtains the Senator's address by telling his secretary he's his grandson, but this queer trespass onto bio-family ground is implicitly rebuked when the Senator's actual granddaughter answers the door. Oliver's ploy infuriates the Senator, who threatens both to punish his accessory, the secretary, and seal the breach by firing her. He wants Oliver only for clandestine, temporary sexual services, and accordingly dismisses him from the porch by telling him, "I know where to find you" (*Twist*). This statement neatly reverses the anxious narrative momentum of *Oliver Twist*, in which Oliver disappears from Brownlow's care, kidnapped back into Fagin's gang. The paternalism of Dickens' adoption plots in *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* is utterly erased: adult desire is never on behalf of damaged and deprived youth; adults never care for children, even when motivated by their own narcissistic investment and consumer desire; they merely want the self-gratification that comes with the sexual consumption of commodified youth. This re-plotting partly fulfills Edelman's thesis by displaying a bio-family hysterically and hypocritically cleansing itself of queerness. But Oliver's status as sex worker both complicates Edelman's insistence on queer exclusion, and actually brings the film closer to Dickens' argument for sympathy for poor children. In *Twist*, it is not merely Oliver's queerness that affronts the biological family; more so, it is the transgression of publicly transacted sex that infects domestic privacy and affection.

The film develops this thematic most intensively and horrifically in a subplot that imagines a back story for the Artful Dodger: in a series of scenes with his brother David, Dodge demands money to save himself from Bill's homicidal violence. David still lives at home with the male head of family who had sexually abused Dodge as a child, presumably causing him to take to the streets. David attempts to get Dodge to come home, more out of self-justification than actual compassion; Dodge retorts that his life as a sex worker at least has the virtue of being honest because it is paid labor, not the intimate violence of familial sexual exploitation. But Dodge does not win the argument: the scene culminates with David requiring Dodge to "show me what you do," as he demands Dodge fellate him in exchange for the money that will preserve him from Fagin's and Bill's threatened violence. The most telling piece of dialogue here is David's claim that Dodge "can't just leave" the family. This underscores Dodge's own inability to leave Fagin's ring; but it also is a home truth, so to speak, about the violent pressures of biological familial belonging. The penalty for rejecting the biological family and its pathologies is more sexual violence: Fagin's ring of boys merely exposes, through grim parody, the biological family's tainted hierarchies of power maintained by violence. Dodge's analysis of himself as a worker is revealed to be only half-correct: because his labor is extorted under the threat of violence, it amounts to slavery, echoing the conditions in which the Dotheboys labor for Squeers.[5] Whereas McGrath's film adapts Dickens by finding those familial niches in which queerness as romance can shimmer into visibility and then evanesce, Tierney's *Twist* emphasizes the family as a barbaric micro-economy in which sex counts as labor and currency.

The bright exception to this exposure is Oliver himself, whose desire and affection for Dodge is pure precisely because it lacks economic motive. Tierney's true innovation is to remotivate and re-energize Oliver's iconic purity as that of disinterested and therefore positive queer desire. The scenes that express Oliver's desire for Dodge transform the character from Berry's "liberal object" or blank surface into queer liberal subjectivity. As Oliver tries to seduce Dodge, he cites the happiest and most fleeting relationship in adaptations of the novel, the beginning of the friendship between the Artful Dodger and Oliver. In the novel, the Dodger simultaneously compassionates and coerces Oliver, buying him a loaf from a chandler's shop and offering him shelter, while teaching him Cockney lingo and drawing him into Fagin's gang. Readers delight in Oliver's salvation and his sudden street education: it appears as a moment in which the Artful will lend blank Oliver some of the character of the imagined romance of the London streets, and of a fantasy community of boys without parents, schooled only in lawlessness. *Oliver!* both recognized the glee of this idyllic, potentially queer social reorganization and immediately collapsed it back into familial domesticity: "Consider yourself/At home/Consider yourself/One of the family/We've taken to

you/So strong/It's clear/We're/Going to get along." (Bart, "Consider"). The undertone of self-consciousness and coercion in these lyrics accentuates the reconstitution of the bourgeois family's rules of inclusion and intimate violence in the street family. Tierney's film manages to escape this deadly embrace, if fleetingly, in the plot of lateral desire and affection between two exploited workers, which offers far more than the false class mobility of Oliver's failed courtship of the Senator. The possibility of a romance between the Dodger and Oliver extends and narrativizes the radical moment in Whittaker's representation of the Dotheboys: here, same sex desire and class solidarity combine in potentially revolutionary ways. Rather than Oliver being coerced into a violent family, Tierney's reversal of the erotic interest picks up on Oliver's knowledge and power that Dellamora had identified, suggesting the possibility that Dodge could be seduced out of his abject slavery.

Oliver's desire for Dodge, like Smike's desire for Nicholas, generates queer possibilities because of its economic disinterest and freedom from economic exploitation. But *Twist's* narrative ultimately cannot imagine a future in which such a radical social reorganization could flower. Making Dodge the center of the story and combining queer exclusion with the slavery of streetwalking creates queer time as uninhabitable. Halberstam emphasizes addicted time as queer resistance to norms of bourgeois reproduction: "Within the life cycle of the Western human subject, long periods of stability are considered to be desirable, and people who live in rapid bursts (drug addicts, for example) are characterized as immature and even dangerous" (Halberstam 4–5). But whereas Halberstam celebrates postmodern writers whose queer heroes enlist drugs in "an alternative history" of rebellion, Tierney emphasizes the enormous cost such a mode of life exacts from its subjects (Halberstam 5). Dodge, having survived longer in this subaltern space than Oliver, is morticed to it body and soul: he is too strung out and victimized to respond to Oliver's overtures, and his heroin addiction further places him in a non-modern temporality of chronic self-sabotage. Instead of Oliver lifting Dodge out of this abject realm of queer sex as work, and into a future of queer desire freely given, Dodge drags Oliver back into the never-ending time of queer sex as slavery: the film's closing scene of Oliver recapitulates its opening scenes of Dodge, dead-eyed, arising from a customer's bed. Tierney's film thus refines Edelman's negativity thesis by reminding us that queer exclusion from the bourgeois family is effected not by an isolated and totalizing homophobia, but by its combination with a class system that recategorizes sex as labor. This reminder picks up on a representative strategy in Dickens' novels that earlier adaptations had cheerfully erased—damaged or imperiled children who were not a spur to reproductive futurism, but rather a queer source of radical class and social reorganization.

Edelman's description of "the Child" and its organization of the social to exclude queerness is limited by its static relationship to history. As Furneaux

and Marcus have shown, homoerotic desire can be found at the heart of heteronormativity, the family, and in its tiniest and most coercive figures. Tiny Tim's ilk can become, in both Dickens's novels and their adaptations, sites in which queer and class critiques combine in powerful, if temporary ways. One virtue of Edelman's argument is that it prompts us to piece together the history of the Child, beginning in the 1830s and 1840s, when Dickens's aged children challenge heteronormative and class orders. The neo-Victorian adaptations I have been discussing perform this work of historical insight and transformation. A second virtue is its prompting to think about reproductive futurism in the context of contemporary queer politics, particularly the difficult fight for long-overdue civil rights such as marriage and adoption. If gay-and lesbian-headed families will become increasingly accepted by formerly homophobic societies, the space of queerness itself, in relation to reproductive futurism, must necessarily shift. Will queerness come more specifically to identify the refusals of the biological and pedagogical reproduction of the social within family units, however capaciously defined? As the family becomes increasingly inclusive and even more powerful, what will become of class, sexuality, gender, and race as modes of affective and political identification?

NOTES

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2. For these positions, see Robert L. Caserio, et al.

3. Robson notwithstanding, the wizened child figure is not limited to males: in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the "Infant Phenomenon" is clearly an adult woman parading the theatrical stage as a child to drum up business, and in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) Jenny Wren swaps places as breadwinner and caregiver with her delinquent parent, Mr. Dolls.

4. In this period, sulfur was taken as a laxative.

5. The threat of violence classifies Dodge's extorted labor as slavery under twenty-first-century definitions; see Kevin Bales (10).

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