

Valerie Sanders

**“IS THERE NO WORK IN HAND?”:
THE IDLE SON THEME AT MIDCENTURY**

The famous graveyard scene opening of Dickens's *Great Expectations* refers to Pip's five infant brothers, all dead and buried, "who gave up trying to get a living, exceedingly early in that universal struggle." Pip is indebted to the five stone lozenges marking their graves for a belief, "religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trousers-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence" (35).¹ For a novel at least partly about the dignity of labor, this is an iconic image, overlooked in the wealth of other iconic images, of birth, death, and guilt, with which this scene abounds. Its depiction of five sons lying down with their hands immobilized in a stereotypical gesture of idleness is all the more meaningful in light of Dickens's frustration with his own seven sons, who by this time were active mainly in running up debts for their father to settle, or trying one career opening after another without success. What to do with sons addicted to the leisured life of a gentleman with private means was a pervasive concern throughout the mid-to-late Victorian period, especially among fathers who had worked strenuously to provide a living for themselves and their families. As a cultural phenomenon, it can be traced back to Prince Albert, the nearest we come to an early Victorian father-figure or role-model for the nation, and his disaffected eldest son, the Prince of Wales, over whom both he and Victoria despaired throughout his life. Bored with enforced education, and easily distracted by various kinds of dissipation, especially horses and women, "Bertie" apparently had no aspirations to be like his earnest hard-working father. Although his is an extreme case, it seemed to set the tone for middle-class young men who were sufficiently confident of paternal handouts and convinced of their own "gentlemanly" status to be unmotivated to work at a career. This was especially true of second-generation middle-class youths whose fathers had established secure economic foundations for the family. As Dickens himself put it in a letter of 1860, a small independence was "that worst of cushions": enough to make a man feel he was safe from destitution and free to "look about him" for an indefinite period (9: 246).² Henry Gowan of *Little Dorrit* is one such cushioned son,

having inherited “that very questionable help in life, a very small independence,” which has made him “difficult to settle” (250). Both in fiction and autobiography, as well as letters, Victorian men are heard lamenting the apathy and inertia of educated young men who, like Dickens’s own Richard Carstone in *Bleak House*, mysteriously fail at one profession after another, remaining indifferent to the satisfactions of a job well done.

In fact among the most magnetic personalities of the age were two young men who failed to achieve anything of significance in their short lives. Arthur Hallam, whose personality Alfred Tennyson glorified in his 1851 *In Memoriam*, was only twenty-two when he died; while John Sterling (1806–44), faithfully commemorated in an 1851 biography by Thomas Carlyle, signally failed to establish himself in any one career. As Carlyle himself admits, there was nothing significant in Sterling’s life to warrant a biography, and none of the three great middle-class professions—law, medicine, or the church—would have suited him. Uncharacteristically, for one so eloquent about the importance of work, Carlyle was inclined to blame the professions, which he calls “regimented human pursuits,” rather than the man: “In a better time,” he hopes, “there will be other ‘professions’ than those three extremely cramped, confused, and indeed almost obsolete ones” (*Life* 40–41). No less a workaholic than John Stuart Mill admired Sterling’s “frank, cordial, affectionate and expansive character,” as did Harriet Martineau, another byword for ceaseless activity, even when ill, and no great friend of Sterling during his lifetime: “I still do not see why S’s life shd ever have been written,” she admitted, but Carlyle’s rendition had made it “beautiful” (93; 222). That many commonsensical Victorians were capable of succumbing to the charisma of personality over the solid evidence of visible achievement is proof of their somewhat inconsistent attitude to manly work. To some extent, it also explains why so many novelists felt compelled to investigate the gap between the seductive promise of youthful masculinity and the professional success which eluded it.

As Martin Danahay has argued in the introductory chapter to his *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture*, “work was the foundation of male identity in the Victorian period, but as an unstable marker it proved to be an insecure basis on which to build subjectivity” (13). What made it unstable was the shifting nature of attitudes to different types of work and their suitability, both in class and gender terms, for middle-class men, as the professions expanded and consolidated, and the widening empire created more opportunities for physical and military as well as administrative work in the colonies. What might be appropriate for a working-class man, and earn universal respect, such as hard physical labor in the fields or factories,

or as a foot-soldier in a distant conflict, could be an indicator of disgrace or a catastrophic loss of social position in a man from the middle-classes. If a gentleman's son threw in his university place in favor of hard toil on the land, parents were usually disappointed at the waste of opportunity, as George Eliot's *Middlemarch* registers. When the manufacturer's son Fred Vincy abandons his intention of becoming a clergyman to work for the land agent, Mr. Garth, his father's response is: "You've thrown away your education, and gone down a step in life, when I had given you the means of rising, that's all." Fred insists: "I think I can be quite as much of a gentleman at the work I have undertaken, as if I had been a curate," but no one quite believes him, least of all his parents who sent him to Oxford with high hopes of professional distinction (613). Much the same is true of Angel Clare in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the only one of Mr. Clare's three sons who refuses to take holy orders, and is therefore forbidden a place at Cambridge. Instead he joins Talbothays Dairy as "a six months' pupil ... his object being to acquire a practical skill in the various processes of farming, with a view either to the Colonies, or the tenure of a home-farm, as circumstances might decide" (152). Angel's determination to study agriculture is completely incomprehensible to his family, who clearly think of themselves as too refined for manual labor, even as a route to eventual land management and farm ownership.

What complicates this picture in the instances I am about to discuss is not just the changing attitudes to what constitutes "masculine" work in the middle classes, but specifically the conflict between generations. This seems to have been especially fraught in the relationships between mid-century fathers who earned their living by writing and sons born between 1840 and 1860. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall suggest that attitudes to professional training in the middle classes became more focused around mid-century; moreover the 1851 Census, by requiring more detail than its 1841 predecessor about the Head of household's work, "contributed to the equation of masculine identity with an occupation" (230). Though preparation of sons for a professional career became more systematic from this period, a son whose father was an author lacked a realistic role model for gainful employment. As Julie Codell has argued, "Domesticated patriarchs who worked at home, whether men of letters or artists, created conflicts in the constructions of heterosexual masculinity" (20). Though Carlyle attempted to restore the masculinity of "the Hero as a Man of Letters," and the much-vaunted muscularity of Christian novelists such as Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes reminded readers that male authors and their heroes could be in the vanguard of vigorous living and

working, there remained a stubborn cultural belief that “real men” went out to work.³ Whatever skepticism, both then and now, there might be about “separate spheres” in the practical operations of many households, popular moralists continued asserting the traditional divisions of labor between the female domestic world and the male marketplace. Samuel Smiles’s *Character*, for example, which has chapters on “Home Power” and “Work,” largely excludes men from the former and women from the latter. Though Smiles claims that “Home makes the man,” he is referring to a man’s training and upbringing, rather than his role as a father to the next generation, and insists, with unacknowledged echoes of Ruskin’s “Of Queens’ Gardens,” that “The home is the woman’s domain—her kingdom, where she exercises entire control” (31).⁴

Smiles also suggests that some of the greatest writers of the past, such as Chaucer and Milton, “were men of affairs, trained to business” (p.107). Many held down what we would now call a “day job”—in the civil service, a bank, or some other steady business—which gave them the discipline of daily external employment, while time for their creative work had to be salvaged from their evenings and weekends. Smiles’s more recent examples include John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold, Anthony Trollope, and T. B. Macaulay, who “wrote his ‘Lays of Ancient Rome’ in the War Office, while holding the post of Secretary of War” (112). According to Smiles, “many of the best books extant have been written by men of business, with whom literature was a pastime rather than a profession” (109). Of course many apparently stay-at-home literary fathers such as Dickens were heavily involved in editorships and writing for journals which took them regularly into a London office. Nevertheless, the sons of novelists and other “desk-workers” saw them ensconced at home in the daytime, like their mother and sisters, instead of going to work; and such work as they did was sedentary and invisible, taking place behind the closed doors of the study. Writing books did nothing to strengthen the body, involved no heroics, and might indeed produce in authors signs of emotional stress and despair at the failure of imagination in the face of pressing deadlines. Samuel Hollyer’s portrait of Dickens in his study at Gad’s Hill Place (fig. 1) indeed shows him deep in thought, apparently distracted by a paper in his hand, his manuscript untouched, his writing equipment idle, his tall waste paper bin empty. With its wide view of the garden the desk seems to invite exactly the state of dreamy contemplation in which Dickens is apparently letting the day pass. Both Danahay and Rosemarie Bodenheimer further associate Dickens with the indoors of houses: through assumption of Esther Summerson’s meek housekeeping voice and identity in *Bleak*



Fig. 1. Charles Dickens in his study at Gad's Hill Place, c. 1875. Printed by permission.

House, and as a dedicated manager of houses, both his own and social projects such as *Urania Cottage*, which was designed to redeem prostitutes and prepare them for emigration (Danahay 76). His daughter Mary (“Mamie”) Dickens in her published recollections remembers him as “the good genius of the house,” whom she recalls “with a child nearly always on his knee ... his bright and beautiful eyes full of life and fun” (33–34). Apart from the male pronoun, this could easily be a description of an idealized Victorian mother. Dickens’s wife Catherine is however significantly absent from most family accounts of the Dickens household, and increasingly from Dickens’s own letters to his coterie of male friends.

In light of this, it is hardly surprising that some of the most notorious cases of idle sons occurred in the families of successful novelists, journalists, and poets such as Dickens, George Henry Lewes, Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Arnold. Margaret Oliphant belongs here too, though she was a widowed mother for whom domestic life was supposedly the norm, but she disturbs gender expectations by (self-consciously) performing as a “man of letters” or “gentleman of the press,” pot-boiling both novels and articles in an effort to feed and clothe her two Etonian sons and nephew. The result was much the same as with her male contemporaries: her sons reacted against her tireless dynamism as if she were a hyper-energetic father like Dickens, and fell into habits of lethargy and failure like his sons. After a bright childhood for her elder son Cyril, came “Oxford with

its clouds”—often the first sign of something going wrong in the lives of Victorian young men succumbing to drink, debt, and inability to manage the discipline of work. “The self denial that would have made all right was what he could not do,” Oliphant admitted [[Please make sure each Oliphant page reference is matched w/the correct quote. Is this 79 or 45-46?]]. The popular remedy of sending him abroad to work—in this case as a private secretary to the Governor of Ceylon—proved a failure, as did his cousin Frank’s attempt to become an engineer in India. Both men were too weak to stand the climate, and Frank died after four years in the colony. While she accepts that she spent too freely what she earned (“One cruel man the other day told me I had ruined my family by my indulgence and extravagance”), Oliphant soldiered on as “the general utility woman” at Blackwood’s. In front of her boys, however, she took her work “lightly,” not letting them know how hard-pressed she was (45–46; Jay 248) [[are these citations correct?]].

Oliphant attempts several other explanations alongside this for Cyril’s failure, but finally admits defeat. She had tried to find him editorial jobs at home, but even these were too much for him. “Why should I try to explain? He went out of the world, leaving a love-song or two behind him and the little volume of “De Musset,” of which much was so well done, and yet some so badly done, and nothing more to show for his life” (152–53). Receiving mixed signals from their mother about the necessity of hard work, neither Cyril nor his brother Cecco developed disciplined habits or any compulsion to earn money, and both died in their thirties following a gradual consumptive decline.

The young men who particularly concerned Dickens were incapable of showing any steady interest in anything for longer than a few months. They are like James Harthouse of *Hard Times* who “had tried life as a Cornet of Dragoons, and found it a bore; and had afterwards tried it in the train of an English minister abroad, and found it a bore; and had then strolled to Jerusalem, and got bored there” (158). His letters show him repeatedly deploring the absence of any real drive in his sons, especially when compared with the motivating energy he experienced himself at their age as a Parliamentary reporter and novice writer. The disaffection of these sons (not just Dickens’s, but many of the other writers’) seems to have been in direct proportion to the dynamic energy of their parents, which was itself a form of over-compensation for their own apparent failure to match up to masculine ideals (or in Oliphant’s case, more traditional feminine behavior). In other words, fathers and sons caught in this battle to reconcile masculine work with a domestic and sedentary

lifestyle adopted opposite and contradictory ways of managing it. While the fathers talked up the exhausting physical commitment of their writing, the sons, after failing at school or university, agreed to be sent to the colonies to make a fresh start in farming, banking, or soldiering. Dickens even insisted that any constitutional tendency to inertia must have come from his wife, the boys' mother, and not from himself. To Angela Burdett Coutts in 1854 he complained that his eldest son Charley "inherits an indescribable lassitude of character—a very serious thing in a man," which he had acquired, along with "tenderer and better qualities" from his mother (*Letters* 7:245). Inability to work, and demonstrate a real relish for it was clearly, for Dickens, a gendered matter. Both in fiction and in the "real lives" of men like Dickens, the final outcome for unemployable sons (and sometimes the contrastingly "driven" fathers) is often severe illness and death, signaling a moral panic which threw not just gender norms but ultimately the future of the professional middle class into turmoil.

One prominent father who successfully achieved the reconciliation of the professional and domestic without unduly compromising his masculinity was Charles Darwin. Once his chronic malaise, weakness, and vomiting became an established habit, he based his scientific research at Down House in Kent, and made as few trips to London as possible. His garden became his laboratory, his sons his co-workers, his eldest surviving daughter his amanuensis, and his wife the guarantor of a comfortable routine protected from unwelcome intrusion. "Work" is one of the most-often used words in his correspondence, but even these seemingly perfect arrangements were flawed by continuing strains of unease. One letter of 1854 written to Philip Gidley King, formerly a midshipman on the *Beagle*, and now an Australian farmer and mining company manager, neatly encapsulates the kinds of conflict about work, energy, masculinity and overseas travel that beset Darwin, even when he had apparently resolved all his difficulties about work routines. "I live in the country about 16 miles from London," he told King, comparing notes after many years, "in a good large house, in a very solitary part of the country: we do not see much company, excepting relations; & I work very steadily at Natural History." King's life in Australia sounded very different, "almost that of a Gaucho," as Darwin put it:

In very many respects, I envy you; though having, owing to my Father's long life of professional exertion, a very fair income, yet when I think of the extreme difficulty of finding professions for my five sons, I often think it would be wise to emigrate. But I have

“Is there no work in hand?”: *The Idle Son Theme at Midcentury*

neither energy or strength for such an awful undertaking; & really for a quiet settler, the Australian Colonies seem ruined [[(489–92) Please provide specific page #s for each quote]].

Darwin's letter provides us with a miniature three-generation model of family history, with Darwin himself caught in the middle. A beneficiary of his father's hard work, he now quails at the prospect of providing equally well for his sons, especially, as he tells King later in the letter, now that his health is so poor that a walk of four miles would “quite annihilate” him. Running away to the colonies was here, as so often in Dickens's correspondence, an attractive fantasy. What particularly appealed was the prospect of good honest physical toil, instead of competition for a secure place in London's mercantile or professional world. As Dickens suggests in *Our Mutual Friend*, the man who owns “Shares” need have no established character or ideas: “Perhaps he never of himself achieved success in anything, never originated anything, never produced anything? Sufficient answer to all; Shares” (160).

Dickens's situation was very different, his father having been such a poor provider that at various points in his life he was jailed, declared insolvent, forcibly relocated, and offered work by his own son. As the number, in turn, of his own sons rapidly increased, Dickens alternated between trying to persuade himself they were talented enough to do anything and panicking that he would eventually have to bale them out at considerable expense. He educated most of them in France or Germany as well as in local schools around London, believing that being able to speak European languages would improve their job prospects, and arranged for them to have work experience in appropriate fields. Ultimately, his plan was to send them to India, Australia, or into the armed services, rather than university, away from the temptations of young male life at home, of which the most insidious was to depend on the Dickens name for special favors. When his third son Francis Jeffrey, decided not to become a doctor, on the dubious grounds of an incurable stammer, he told his father: “The only thing I should like to be, is a gentleman-farmer, either at the Cape, in Canada, or Australia. With my passage paid, £15, a horse, and a rifle, I could go two or three hundred miles up country, sow grain, buy cattle, and in time be very comfortable” (*Letters* 9: 71). Dickens merely scoffed at his son's ultra-masculine frontier fantasy, assuming that he would be robbed of his fifteen pounds, thrown by his horse, and his head blown off with the rifle; but two other sons, Alfred and Edward, did in time settle in Australia, and Frank fulfilled his yearning for adventure, first by



Fig. 2. Edward Dickens with gun.
Printed by permission.

joining the Bengal Mounted Police, and ultimately Canada's Northwest Mounted Police.

A photograph in the Dickens House Museum in London shows Edward Dickens (known as "Plorn"), puny and drawn, unconvincingly pointing a rifle in nervous readiness for action, and looking anything but the virile settler seeing off intruders (fig. 2). For one thing he is dressed as if for an afternoon at his club, his eyes wide with self-doubt: a mirror image perhaps of his brother Frank armed to the teeth in the letter Dickens ridiculed above. Dickens was all too well aware that much of his own knowledge came from an indoors life, rather than the rigors of the outback, as he explains in relation to

Alfred's final effort to make a go of things in Australia. "I know its leading incidents, from books and verbal description very well," he assured an Australian civil servant and historian friend in 1865, insisting that "the sons of a father whose capital can never be the inheritance of his children must ... hew out their own paths through the world, by sheer hard work" (*Letters* 11: 127).

Despite his recourse to the imagery of path-breaking and misgivings over the Dickens name as a passport to a career, Dickens meanwhile unashamedly badgered men in high office, including the Foreign Secretary, Earl Russell, for openings and favors for each of his sons as they left school without any real sense of what they wanted to do. Though he never went to Australia himself, and uses it in his novels as a place to send convicts, prostitutes, and bankrupts, he often dreamed of going there, seeing it essentially as a great opportunity for fresh beginnings away from home habits. Manly physical work was always, for Dickens, heartening and refreshing in its sheer naked energy. "Let's do something. Is there no work in hand? No game to shoot, nothing to cut, nothing to carry?" asks Richard Wardour, the tragic hero of Wilkie Collins's play *The Frozen Deep*, which was inspired by Sir John Franklin's ill-fated navigation of the North-West Passage in 1845. Dickens himself acted the part of Wardour, and therefore spoke the lines: "Hard work, Crayford, that's the true Elixer

[sic] of *our* life! Hard work that stretches the muscles and sets the blood a-glowing, that tires the body and rests the mind.” As a man enters with an axe, Wardour offers to “do his work for him, whatever it is” (*Under New* 135). In a play where the men and women are mostly kept apart, and the women can do little but wait for news of their missing men folk, the work-related implications of the gender divide are exaggerated with stark simplicity. Dickens himself performed an unusual version of gendered work in more than one sense of the word, literally as an amateur actor, and as a domesticated father who welcomed this opportunity to assert himself in a challenging physical environment very different from his study. The only irony was that in the early productions of the play, before it was moved into a public theater, Dickens/Wardour called for an axe in the crowded space of his own home, Tavistock House, where the schoolroom had been commandeered for family theatricals. Once again, his attempt at brazen masculinity had been compromised by the inescapable nature of his domestic setting, and the sense that he could play the role of a great polar explorer only in make-believe, on an elaborately artificial painted stage-set. Possibly the whole profession of acting may have seemed unmanly to him, given the pressure to produce gales of histrionic emotion on the prompting of a script, or to wear effeminate costumes and the “False hair, false colour, false calves, false muscles” donned by Mr. Crummles’s male troupe in *Nicholas Nickleby* (377). When Nicholas escapes gratefully from school-mastering slavery at Dotheboys Hall, and for a time relishes the delight of acting in Vincent Crummles’s company, there nevertheless remains a sense that apart from the long-term risks of depending on a make-believe world, he is the only authentic gentleman among itinerant performers, and would lose caste if he stayed with them. He leaves, indeed, to perform the real manly work of protecting his sister Kate from the snares of Ralph Nickleby and his associates.

Several complex and interwoven patterns are emerging here. While the mid-Victorian educated middle classes professed, from the vantage-point of their studies and clubs, to look down on rural labor and physical soldiering (as opposed to membership of the officer class), at least as careers for their own sons, they increasingly came to see employment in colonial agriculture and business as reassuringly honest and virile for youths likely to be tempted by London’s dissipations. Many parents like Dickens, Lewes, Kingsley, and Arnold, thought that careers in the colonies would not only offer their sons more opportunities, but also to some extent remove the stigma of lost status attendant on largely physical labor which would have accrued to a similar position in England. Ultimately they must have hoped

such work would make men out of boys, and as a by-product reflect some enhanced masculinity on the father-figures back at home. In turn, some of the greatest Victorian novels reflect what seems to have been a deep-seated cultural anxiety, judging by the frequency with which they portray young middle-class men who struggle to make a career choice and opt instead either for a life of self-indulgent lounging and dissipation, or for a series of half-hearted false starts in the professions. Apart from Fred Vincy, mentioned above, other cases include: Dickens's Richard Carstone in *Bleak House*; James Harthouse and Tom Gradgrind in *Hard Times*; Henry Gowan in *Little Dorrit*; Pip in *Great Expectations*; Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend*; Elizabeth Gaskell's Osborne Hamley in *Wives and Daughters*; Trollope's Sir Felix Carbury in *The Way We Live Now*; and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Robert Audley in *Lady Audley's Secret*; culminating in Wilde's cluster of aesthetic dandies in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Where dogged hard workers are portrayed in fiction, they tend to be from a lower social class: George Eliot's Adam Bede, for example, and Tom Tulliver, or Dinah Mulock Craik's John Halifax, the dogged homeless orphan, whose years of servitude in a tanner's yard are eventually rewarded with gentlemanly status for his sons. Mrs. Humphry Ward's Robert Elsmere, a well-born, Oxford-educated, dedicated rector, dies in effect of overwork: the apparent opposite of middle-class idleness, but also its extreme distillation, collapse under the strains of sustained physical and emotional effort.

Fictional responses to what was clearly perceived as a predicament for the Victorian middle-class intelligentsia capture the confused and contradictory attitudes of both fathers and sons, with mixed outcomes. Dickens's most alarmed parody of the parasitic father-son relationship is embodied in Magwitch, whose sole desire is to make money so that he can keep his son in gentlemanly indolence: "I worked hard, that you should be above work," he tells Pip on his return from New South Wales (*Great Expectations* 337). This is exactly the opposite of what Dickens wanted for his own sons, here exaggerated by the notion of Pip's fortune being "convict money," albeit honestly enough earned by sheep farming. As is well recognized, Dickens was profoundly uneasy about the sources of middle-class wealth, and, both in his advice to his sons and in the career-paths of his heroes, emphasized the attractions of acquiring an independent and uninherited income. No son, he suggests, should depend on his father for more than an initial start in life, and even this may be more than he is entitled to. In the depths of moral despair when the truth is out, Pip meanwhile resorts to the wildest fantasies of desperate youth: "What am I fit for?" he asks Herbert Pocket. "I know only one thing that I am fit for, and that is to go for a soldier"

(357). Level-headed Herbert reminds him that if he wishes to renounce Magwitch's patronage and repay his favors, he would be "infinitely better in Clarikker's house, small as it is." Ultimately, as Pip explains, "We were not in a grand way of business, but we had a good name, and worked for our profits" (489). Despite the moral vindication of this ending, however, the narrative reveals that Joe has paid Pip's accumulated debts, and Pip himself has paid for Herbert's partnership at Clarriker's with money, first from Magwitch and then from Miss Havisham. No money for business advancement or debt clearance in this novel is "clean," except for Joe's, earned by honest labor in the forge; yet Joe, as we know, is a simpleton who can hardly read and write. Dickens never underestimated the difficulties of earning a living free of the entanglements of indebtedness and guilty favors, hence his continuing faith in the romance of manly labor in the colonies. Though this, too, was hardly ideologically innocent, Dickens glosses over it, as with Mr. Peggotty's triumphant return from Australia at the end of *David Copperfield*, boasting "We've allus thrived. We've worked as we ought to't, and maybe we lived a leetle hard at first or so, but we have allus thrived" (941). The fact that Mr. Peggotty is elderly, like Magwitch, may partly explain his dedication to work and avoidance of typical young men's temptations such as drink, gambling, and idleness.

Dickens's classic example of a youth who fails to find work is of course Richard Carstone from *Bleak House*: a fatherless son destroyed by his conviction that the Chancery case will eventually be resolved, and rescue him from the need for a long-term career. His guardian, John Jarndyce, blames his indecision of character [[on someone?]], his miseducation on Esther Summerson, and his lack of interest in his work on Mrs. Bayham Badger, wife of his first employer. Though she is largely a comic character as she recounts the sayings of her three husbands, Captain Swosser's view "that if you only have to swab a plank, you should swab it as if Davy Jones were after you," is of a piece with Dickens's overall attitude to the moral and material benefits of solid work (282). As Richard drifts half-heartedly from medicine to the law and the Horse Guards, the text sets up many other examples of work patterns and role models experienced by a vast social array of characters. Danahay has shown how Dickens uses female characters such as Esther as "representatives of excluded or repressed desires that cannot find expression directly within the world of masculine work" (84); one might also comment on the awkward positioning, within the same novel, of men like Skimpole and even John Jarndyce himself, who are never seen actually working at anything physically Jarndyce's retreats into the "Growlery" for a bout of emotional incontinence, though treated

more tolerantly than Skimpole's good-humored sponging visits, nevertheless impugn his masculinity when compared with Allan Woodcourt's silent heroism in the shipwreck. Miss Flite's narrative of Woodcourt's exploits, told in her clipped abbreviated style, is almost a parody of the kind of male heroics impossible for a study-bound novelist (though it unknowingly prefigures Dickens's attempts to rescue injured passengers in the railway accident of 1865 in which he and Ellen Ternan were involved). "Hundreds of dead and dying. Fire, storm, and darkness," says Miss Flite, setting the scene for Woodcourt's actions: "Saved many lives, never complained in hunger and thirst, wrapped naked people in his spare clothes, took the lead, showed them what to do, governed them, tended the sick, buried the dead, and brought the poor survivors safely off at last!" (556). When Woodcourt finally settles down to his real job, as medical attendant to the poor in Yorkshire, however, Jarndyce describes it as "an appointment to a great amount of work and a small amount of pay" (873). The implication is perhaps that this kind of work demands a more sustained kind of heroism than the intense, but short-lived drama of a shipwreck.

Elizabeth Gaskell's treatment of the "idle son theme," mooted with Harry Carson in *Mary Barton*, comes to a head in *Wives and Daughters*, where the motif is split between Squire Hamley's two sons, Osborne the poet and Roger the scientist. There is a direct correlation between the Squire's management of his estate and the boys' progression to university: "He sold a great deal of timber to send the two boys to college," Mrs. Hamley tells Molly, adding that Osborne "did not get a scholarship, and then all went wrong. I don't know how" (228). The Squire's plans for his elder son are indeed those of the traditional rural landowner; casual expenditure of hundreds of pounds on pictures, tailoring, and wine is incomprehensible to both his parents: "Osborne was to do great things; take high honours, get a fellowship, marry a long-descended heiress, live in some of the many uninhabited rooms at the Hall, and help the Squire in the management of the estate that would some time be his" (297). From Osborne's jaundiced perspective, however, all jobs look suspect, and he sounds like Richard Carstone as he quickly dismisses the law, the church, and the army: "In fact, there are evils attending all professions—I couldn't bring myself to become a member of any I've ever heard of" (298).

In fiction, most of these father-son conflicts occur at a point when the son has left university, runs up countless bills for various kinds of self-indulgence unknown to the father, and then declines to choose a profession. The assumption is that his father will continue paying the bills, and that the family estate can be used as surety against debt. The clash here

is again between two kinds of masculinity—the father’s version, which is equated with the energy of the self-made man, whether a capitalist, or an author, or even a country squire who manages his estates, and eschews debt—and the son’s, which is based on the expectations of a “gentleman,” to whom all kinds of visible exertion are seen as uncouth or unnecessary. Unlike the earlier Romantic version of masculine failure through a brilliant life cut short (Shelley or Byron), there is no brilliance, but only indifference and self-indulgence. Although Osborne writes poems, Gaskell leaves us in no doubt as to their commonplace quality (“To Aimée” 299) [[Please add to the works cited!]]. In desperation, he tells his brother Roger that “if the worst came to the worst, a hundred pounds would take us to Australia” (302). In fact Roger himself is also unsure of his plans at this point, but has an entirely different way of managing his indecision: “He rather liked awaiting an object, secure in his own energy to force his way to it, when once he saw it clearly” (391). Although the language used here is partly passive, it quickly swings round into a more assertively masculine register of forceful energy, which is confirmed when he is appointed to a scientific expedition like Darwin’s voyage of the *Beagle*. Compared with Dickens, Gaskell is vague about what happens when young men go abroad to the colonies: when Roger leaves home, “his idea was to cast round Africa on the eastern side until he reached the Cape; and thence to make what further journey or voyage might seem to him best in pursuit of his scientific objects” (643). It does however, mature him from an awkward boyish lover with a crush on Cynthia, into a “broader, stronger—more muscular” (644) man with the judgment to see that Molly would make the better wife. When they are reunited after his absence, she is startled when a “bronzed, bearded, grave man came into the room” (647). Of course Roger was never presented as “unmanly” at any stage of his career, but this exposure to a challenging foreign climate and an all-male environment, albeit for the purposes of scientific study rather than sheep-farming or agriculture, provides him with that transition into manhood that Osborne’s effete life of poetry-writing and dallying with a French “bonne” met in Hyde Park singularly fails to do. The fact that we never see Osborne as a father reinforces the point that such manhood as he has acquired through his relationship with Aimée remains slight and superficial.

In *The History of Pendennis*, Thackeray’s Arthur Pendennis seems to be heading in much the same direction—of poetic idling and academic failure, along with the accumulation of debts—until he is saved by a combination of sisterly guidance and rough exposure to the world of writing for the lit-

erary marketplace. His new friend Warrington, in calling himself a “prose labourer,” is clearly trying to play up the masculine effort of his work as a journalist. By contrast, the effete Pendennis, who has squandered his time and money at an Oxbridge college where he has been “plucked,” is completely at a loss as to how to enter a profession and make money. “Before I have almost begun the race in life, I am a tired man,” he tells his adopted sister Laura Bell, whose energetic devotion to his mother Helen stands out in stark contrast: “I would dig in the fields, I would go out and be a servant—I would die for her,” Laura declares in the same chapter [(363, 300–01) which page numbers go with which quotes?]]. Laura shames Pen into energizing himself, while Thackeray is goaded by an indignant response to his portrayal of the literary marketplace, into a defense of the “dignity of literature.” His essay on the subject, written for the *Morning Chronicle* in 1850, reminds his readership that while there is nothing disreputable about the profession of writing, it is a means of earning bread, like any other, and its practitioners are rarely geniuses. In the shifting uncertainties about the manliness of literature as a profession, Thackeray’s intervention both reasserts its gender specifics (his essay defends the reputation of the “literary man”), and relocates its social activity away from the home and into public houses like the ironically named undomestic “Back Kitchen,” where Pen and Warrington meet “men of all sorts and conditions” ([specific page # in chap. 31?]). Unlike Gaskell, Thackeray finds a way of redeeming the masculinity of writing and setting Pen on a more promising track towards economic independence, but this is achieved only at the cost of apparently dragging the profession into disrepute, and having to explain himself in the popular press.

The contrasting experiences of young women—all the sisters, mothers, and hopeful girlfriends of the young men discussed so far—provide an eloquent backdrop to the inert drama of the Oxbridge failure and languid lawyer. Although it was a marker of middle-class gentility, and the father/husband’s professional success for the women of the house to be elegantly idle, Victorian literature abounds with women who long to work, but can only vicariously activate tired men. George Talboys’ sister Clara in *Lady Audley’s Secret* inspires the lethargic hero Robert Audley to investigate her brother George’s disappearance, her sheer energy frightening him into redoubling his efforts; while humble Bidley in *Great Expectations*, Esther Summerson, Nelly Dean, Lucy Snowe, Jane Eyre, Maggie Tulliver, Tess Durbeyfield, Lady Carbury, and Mary Garth and her mother in *Middlemarch* are all presented as actively engaged in some form of regular work which gives them a steady purpose and value within their com-

munity. At the very least, this was the needlework (often known just as “work”) to which most Victorian women of all classes submitted themselves. It was not until the “New Woman” novels of the 1880s and ’90s that a more focused cultural anxiety was expressed over women’s eagerness to take on external paid work.

Danahay argues that “Work and sexuality were linked in the Victorian imagination” (64), especially for women where economic independence might be derived from some form of self-prostitution in the market-place: if not literally, in the “sex trade,” then metaphorically in the sense of selling their skills to the purchasing public. In the case of young men, I would argue that sexuality was more likely to be associated with *not* working, as in the cases of Richard Carstone, who dies leaving Ada pregnant; James Harthouse who nearly seduces Louisa Gradgrind; or Osborne Hamley, who has fathered a child with a French maid without having the means to support them. Trollope’s Hetta Carbury observes to her strait-laced cousin Roger: “They say that young men have to be bad, and that they do get to be better as they grow older” (141). Her own brother Felix is in effect emasculated by being sent to Germany with a clergyman for a year, though Trollope’s notes on the novel suggest he originally intended him to die as punishment for his incurable indolence (475). While the other cases I have discussed are not as explicitly sexualized as these, there is nevertheless a sense that young men without a steady income, but with the habits of a “gentleman,” will sooner or later become “encumbered” with unsought responsibilities, for which their fathers will then be liable.

The “idle son” theme thus focalizes several intergenerational issues for Victorian men, including the failure of responsible masculinity, rejection of Christian manliness, the miseducation of the male middle-to-upper classes, and evolutionary and social decline from the standards of the previous hard-working generation. In narrative terms their lives represent an anti-*Bildungsroman* or effete Rake’s Progress: a narrative cul-de-sac, a story that goes nowhere except backwards to Regency cliché and self-cancellation, ending in death, exile, or humiliation. All the more surprising, then, that the Victorians chose to tell and retell this same story of masculine non-achievement, and evolutionary failure, while the story of these men’s sisters, seething with frustrated energy, is often relegated to the background. This argues that in the middle of the nineteenth century there was a greater cultural fear of the father-son conflict and male inertia than there was of daughterly ambition. At the root of the problem was an irresolvable paradox. The strongest measure of a father’s success in securing his family’s middle-class status was his sons’ conspicuous leisure, their supe-

riority to relentless physical activity. Class mobility was tied to the less visible kinds of exertion; yet at its most consummate, gentlemanly idleness in sons threatened to destroy everything the father had built up. Dinah Mulock Craik unusually makes her hero John Halifax one of Carlyle's "Working Aristocracy": the orphaned son of a "scholar and a gentleman," who works his way up from tanner's apprentice to prosperous mill owner, telling his children: "now, twenty-five years of labor [sic] have won for me the position I desired" (Carlyle, *Past* 179; Craik 35–36, 366). Despite (or because of) his willingness to drop below his class origins, he too raises a son with a "pleasure-loving temperament," whose drunken assault on a man of higher social standing and sexual jealousy of his own brother generate a decade's exile in Spain and America (Craik 370). Though a legendary story of the rewards of determined hard work, this novel is also a perfect embodiment of the period's nervous distrust of the speed with which business success can raise a family to proximity with the corrupt local gentry, threatening their children's moral decency and well-being. Overall, the mid-Victorian novel's preoccupation with the idle middle-class son is a significant cultural marker, embodying all that hard-working fathers feared about their tenuous hold on social position and security of status. Caught in a double-bind, whereby their own personal success multiplied their sons' temptations to ape the behavior of the gentry and aristocracy, fictional Victorian middle-class fathers, like their real-life prototypes, dreaded the possibility that their sons would either adopt the expensive habits of the class above, or the degrading and dangerous labor of the class below, with work in the colonies a hopeful compromise. Above all, the "idle son theme" signified the frailty of the fathers' achievement, and the sons' potential to destroy a lifetime's effort and self-denial—essentially by doing nothing.

University of Hull

NOTES

¹ Dickens had already used this image in "The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices," which he co-wrote with Wilkie Collins for *Household Words* in 1857. The first of five episodes describes the young men of Carlisle "drawn up, with their hands in their pockets, across the pavements," with apparently nothing else to do (314).

² David Copperfield spends some time "looking about him" before deciding on a career, for example in Chapter 19 of the novel. [[page #?]]

“Is there no work in hand?”: *The Idle Son Theme at Midcentury*

³ Thomas Carlyle’s lecture on “The Hero as a Man of Letters” was given on 19 May 1840 and published in his *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*; “muscular Christianity” is widely discussed by, for example, Hall.

⁴ John Ruskin’s lecture “Of Queens’ Gardens,” which elevates a woman’s domestic life to a medieval fantasy of queenly rule, was reprinted in *Sesame and Lilies*.

WORKS CITED

- Bodenheimer, Rosemary. *Knowing Dickens*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *The Life of John Sterling*. Centenary ed. of *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*. Vol. 11. London: Chapman, 1897. 40–41.
- _____. “The Hero as a Man of Letters.” *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. 1841. Ed. John Chester Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1907. 215–71.
- _____. *Past and Present*. 1843. Ed. Richard D. Altick. New York: New York UP, 1977.
- Codell, Julie T. *The Victorian Artist: Artists’ Life-Writings in Britain, ca 1870–1910*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Craik, Dinah Mulock. *John Halifax, Gentleman*. 1856. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2005.
- Danahay, Martin. *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.
- Davidoff, Leonore, and Catherine Hall. *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1788–1850*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.
- Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House* 1853. Ed. Norman Page. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.
- _____. *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*. Vol. 7. 1858–59. Ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt et al. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992.
- _____. *David Copperfield*. 1850. Ed. Trevor Blount. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966.
- _____. *Great Expectations*. 1861. Ed. Angus Calder. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.
- _____. *Hard Times*. 1854. Ed. David Craig. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.
- _____. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*. Vols. 7, 9, 11. Pilgrim ed. Ed. Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, and Angus Easson. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993, 1998, 2000.
- _____. *Little Dorrit*. 1857. Ed. John Holloway. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.
- _____. *Nicholas Nickleby*. 1839. Ed. Michael Slater. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.
- _____. *Our Mutual Friend* 1864–65. Ed. Stephen Gill. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.
- _____. *Under the Management of Mr Charles Dickens: His Production of “The Frozen Deep.”* Ed. Robert Louis Brannan. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1966.
- _____, and Wilkie Collins. “The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices.” *Household Words* 15 (1857): 314.
- Dickens, Mamie. “Charles Dickens at Home. By his eldest daughter.” *Cornhill Magazine* 4 (1885): 33–34.
- Eliot, George. *Middlemarch*. 1871–72. Ed. W. J. Harvey. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.
- Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Mary Barton*. 1848. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997.
- _____. *Wives and Daughters*. 1866. Ed. Frank Glover Smith. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.
- Hall, Donald E., ed. *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. 1891. Ed. P. N. Furbank. London: Macmillan, 1974.
- Jay, Elisabeth. *Mrs Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself. A Literary Life*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1995.
- Martineau, Harriet. *The Collected Letters of Harriet Martineau*. Ed. Deborah Anna Logan. London: Pickering, 2007.
- Mill, John Stuart. *Autobiography*. 1874. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971.

Valerie Sanders

- Oliphant, Margaret. *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*. 1899. Ed. Elisabeth Jay. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Ruskin, John. "Of Queens' Gardens." *Sesame and Lilies*. 1865. New York: Dutton, 1965.
- Smiles, Samuel. *Character*. 1871. Popular ed. London: John Murray, 1897.
- Thackeray, William Makepeace. *The History of Pendennis*. In *The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*. Vol. 3. London: Smith, Elder, 1898–99.
- Trollope, Anthony. *The Way We Live Now*. 1875. Ed. John Sutherland. World's Classics: Oxford, 1982.