

How the Dickens Scandal Went Viral

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Attentive readers of Dickens's *Dombey & Son* in the summer of 1858 might well have been struck by the following passage:

The barrier between Mr. Dombey and his wife was not weakened by time. Ill-assorted couple, unhappy in themselves and in each other, bound together by no tie but the manacle that joined their fettered hands, and straining that so harshly, in their shrinking asunder, that it wore and chafened to the bone. Time, consoler of affliction and softener of anger, could do nothing to help them. Their pride, however different in kind and object was equal in degree; and, in their flinty opposition, struck out fire between them which might smolder or might blaze, as circumstances were, but burned up everything within their mutual reach, and made their marriage a road of ashes.

Those readers could have encountered this passage in any of a number of editions of the novel that had appeared since its debut ten years before. But some of them would have come upon it in newspapers like the *Congregationalist* of Boston, which prefaced it with a pointing finger and the comment, 'The following passage from *Dombey & Son* (the author, Charles Dickens, having just separated from his wife) is singularly striking at this moment'. Others might have run across it in the *Charleston Courier* of South Carolina, which found the description of Mr. and Mrs. Dombey similarly striking, 'apropos of the Dickens Scandal'. The *Daily State Journal* of Madison, Wisconsin, making the reasonable assumption that its readers were already well-informed about the state of the Dickens marriage, simply printed the passage beneath the ominous boldfaced title: 'Coming Events Cast their Shadow Before'.¹

For in the course of that summer, Charles Dickens's separation from his wife, along with all of the purported and imagined reasons for that separation, became matter for comment in the newspaper press all over the English-speaking world. In our own Internet-inflected terms, the 'Dickens scandal', as it was often called, went viral.

¹ *Congregationalist* (July 9, 1858); *Charleston Courier* (July 17, 1858); *Daily State Journal* (July 8, 1858). While some of the newspapers and periodicals mentioned in this article were consulted on microfilm, most were found in such collections of digital facsimiles as Gale Cengage's 19th-century UK Newspapers, 19th-century U.S. Newspapers, 19th-century UK Periodicals, *Illustrated London News* Historical Archive; *Times* Digital Archive; ProQuest's Historical Newspapers, Early British Periodicals, and C19: The 19th-Century Index; the *Scotsman* archive; Readex's Early American Newspapers; and NewspaperArchive.com.

Spreading all over Britain within a few days of Dickens's extraordinary public announcement in June (the 'Personal Statement'), the scandal had crossed the Atlantic a mere ten days later and begun to spread to the farthest reaches of the American hinterland. Thereafter, it would become a transatlantic phenomenon, shaped and filtered by the distinctly different cultures of the American and British newspaper press. The circulation and reception of the scandal was also importantly shaped by Dickens's own continued intervention, particularly the startling first appearance in America – and thereafter, of course, in Britain and elsewhere – of what would come to be known to his biographers as the 'Violated Letter,' composed by him in May but not published until August.

Dickens biography has not paid much attention to these developments.² While only slight notice has been taken of the interestingly varied reactions to the 'Personal Statement' in the British press, the circulation of reports about the Dickens marriage in the American press has been almost entirely ignored. One result of this neglect has been a curiously blinkered view of the scandal that over many years has perpetuated various misconceptions about how much contemporaries knew about the matter. For example, the standard view has always been that the story of the 'misdirected jewels' that precipitated the separation was privately known only to a few, who preserved it in records that were not published until decades later. More significant is the traditional understanding that Dickens's mistress, Ellen Ternan, was an 'invisible woman' (the title of Claire Tomalin's fine biography), whose role in Dickens's life had been so thoroughly suppressed that it remained completely unknown to the reading public before beginning to emerge, controversially, in the 1920s and thereafter. Neither of these assertions can survive a closer look at the news and commentary that actually appeared in American newspapers, much of it derived from London sources. That many of these details failed to re-cross the Atlantic to appear in Britain suggests how decisively the differing cultures of the two countries affected what kinds of information and opinion were made available to their respective readers. Quite apart from its import for students of Dickens's life, tracing the course of the Dickens scandal's journey through the 19th-century press helpfully illuminates important aspects of that press as a circulatory system.

The 'Personal Statement'

By the spring of 1858, the impact on Dickens's increasingly unhappy marriage of his infatuation with 18-year-old Ellen Ternan, whom he had met in Manchester in 1857, had proven decisive, and he determined to live apart from his wife. Matters came to a head in May, amid a flurry of legal moves and Dickens's growing concern that his domestic arrangements, and indeed his own personal conduct, had become a widespread subject of gossip. He was right: they had. William Makepeace Thackeray, for instance, wrote to his mother of walking into the Garrick Club one day and hearing men talking

² An important early treatment can be found in K. J. Fielding, 'Dickens and the Hogarth Scandal', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (June, 1955), pp. 64-74. Michael Slater's *The Great Dickens Scandal* (London: Yale University Press, 2012) gives the fullest account yet of the course of the scandal from its inception to the present day.

about Dickens as having separated from his wife because of an intrigue with his sister-in-law, Georgina. O no, chimed in Thackeray helpfully, 'it's with an actress'. Thackeray had heard all about it at the races at Epsom Downs.³ Dickens's first response to news of such rumours was an energetic campaign to quash them at their source, beginning with his wife's mother and her youngest sister, Helen, who had made no secret of being furious at the way Catherine had been treated and of their suspicions about his behavior; holding up the settlement of her income and house, he demanded and got their signatures on a statement repudiating any suggestion of misconduct on his part. On May 25, he wrote a long, self-servingly disingenuous account of his marriage that began with the statement that he and his wife, Catherine, had lived unhappily together for many years, and that they were 'in all respects of character and temperament, wonderfully unsuited to each other'. The remainder of this extraordinary letter threw the entire blame for the failure of the marriage upon his wife, whom he described as suffering at times from a 'mental disorder' that had rendered her unfit both as wife and mother, and ended with a defense of the spotless character of a 'young lady' who had been slandered by 'two wicked persons'. This letter he put into the keeping of Arthur Smith, the man in charge of the series of public readings that he would begin in June, with a cover letter urging Smith to show the letter 'to anyone who wishes to do me right, or to anyone who may have been misled into doing me wrong.'

Now known to Dickensians as the 'Violated Letter', this document would appear in print in August under mysterious circumstances, with results to which we will return, but when it was composed in May it appears to have been one among several private or, at most, semi-public measures that Dickens had employed to beat back what he saw as a rising tide of private gossip about the separation. But he soon determined on an extraordinary course that Forster opposed but that John Delane of the *Times* supported: a fully public statement. Headed merely 'Personal,' this open letter to his reading public was printed up as a 'card' and sent to the major London dailies for publication on June 7, anticipating Dickens publication of it on the first page of the number for *Household Words* that was dated June 12 but appeared on June 9. It begins, 'Three-and-twenty years have passed since I entered on my present relations with the Public,' and indeed the only relationship discussed in the statement is that between Dickens and his public. Of the actual occasion for this extraordinary declaration, he writes only that it concerns 'some domestic trouble of mine, of long-standing' that 'has lately been brought to an arrangement'. The main thrust of the statement is the urgency of contradicting the 'grossly false' gossip circulating concerning his 'domestic trouble', gossip that he imagines 'not one reader in a thousand' has been able to escape.⁴ Dickens's main concern, as I have argued elsewhere, is to use the power of the press to stop people from talking about the separation; his target is not what appeared in the newspaper press itself, which had been entirely silent about the matter, but with the oral transmission of gossip.⁵ From the moment of the statement's appearance, however, the newspaper press, willingly or not, had become a party to the discussion of Dickens's private life.

³ Thackeray to Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth [May 1858], in Gordon Ray, editor, *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1945-1946, 4: 85-87

⁴ 'Personal,' *Household Words* 17 (June 12, 1858): 601.

⁵ Patrick Leary, *The Punch Brotherhood* (London: The British Library, 2010), pp. 86-88.

It is no exaggeration to say that the publication of the Personal Statement stunned the British literary world. The range of press responses, from instinctive support to disapproval, is reflected even in the papers that first willingly printed it at his request. The *Morning Chronicle* prefaced the letter with the remark, ‘We publish with regret, and at a special request, the following...’⁶ In the days to come, what struck most observers who commented editorially, in remarks that usually either prefaced or were appended to the statement itself, was Dickens’s crucial vagueness about the precise nature of the ‘domestic trouble’ to which he had alluded. Most people, even among his most admiring readers, simply had no inkling of his private life, let alone the nature of the ‘monstrous’ rumours concerning it. The opening article in the *Critic*, reprinting the statement, doubtless spoke for many readers in asking, ‘Now really we should be very much obliged to anybody who will inform us—what is all this about? What are the “misrepresentations”? What the “slanders”? What the precise nature of the “unwholesome air”?’⁷ The *British Banner* coyly remarked, ‘We are happy in being able to say that we are entirely in the dark as to what the nature of the scandal is.’⁸ The *Era* noted, ‘Mr. Dickens has written a letter to all the daily papers...in reference to some scandal...but to what member of Mr. Dickens’s family the reported scandal attaches does not clearly appear’.⁹ A number of papers combined disapproval of the impropriety of Dickens discussing such personal matters in print with utter perplexity about their nature. The *Aberdeen Journal* spoke for many in expressing regret that Dickens had ‘felt compelled to come before the public, and defend himself from what he calls “abominably false rumours”,’ before going on to confess: ‘What these are we have not yet heard.’¹⁰

Into this informational vacuum rushed the London correspondent of the *Scotsman*, which followed its printing of the statement with an editorial gloss that would be reprinted throughout the English-speaking world and would crucially shape responses to the scandal. The paper began by remarking on how limited a circle might have been expected to have possession of information that Dickens had mistakenly assumed was well-nigh universal before moving on to an insider’s account of the matter at hand.

As Mr Dickens’ statement is apt to be somewhat unintelligible to those beyond the reach of the gossip of London and “the literary world,” we may explain that the fact, as we are informed, is, that Mr Dickens has, by mutual agreement, separated from his wife, on the ground of “incompatibility.” The name of a young lady on the stage has been mixed up with the matter—most cruelly and untruly, is the opinion, we hear, of those having the best means of judging... We mention these facts to explain the allusions to which Mr Dickens has thought proper to give publicity...¹¹

⁶ *Morning Chronicle* (June 7, 1858): 5.

⁷ *Critic* (June 12, 1858): 287.

⁸ *British Banner* (June 10, 1858): 13.

⁹ *Era* (June 13, 1858): 9.

¹⁰ *Aberdeen Journal* (June 9, 1858): 5.

¹¹ *Scotsman* (June 9, 1858): 4.

As a clue to how the correspondent came by this information, the most striking elements of this summary are the phrase, ‘as we are informed’, followed by the grounds for the Dickens’s separation: ‘incompatibility’. The latter word, expanded by many newspapers into the phrase ‘incompatibility of temper’, would soon become a key part of the discussion of the Dickens marriage. Other newspaper accounts make clearer that Dickens himself, or someone close to him, had offered this explanation of his ‘domestic trouble’ privately as a kind of supplement to the Personal Statement. The most likely way for this explanation to have gained circulation would have been through private showings of the letter that he had drafted on May 25 and given to Arthur Smith with the admonition to show it to anyone who might benefit from seeing it; ‘incompatibility of temper’ is a fair paraphrase of the opening remarks of that letter. As *John Bull and Britannia* archly summed up the situation, ‘[W]e are led to suppose that the “trouble” which Mr. Dickens has succeeded in bringing to an arrangement was entirely an affair of incompatibility of temper. Plainly speaking...there have been Household “Words,” at divers times between certain persons; but no Household Deeds of a discreditable kind.’¹²

But of course the *Scotsman* had also mentioned, although it had quickly dismissed, vaguely discreditable deeds that provided an alternative explanation to mere ‘incompatibility’ for the dissolution of the Dickens marriage: an unnamed ‘young lady on the stage’. What the paper did not mention were even more damaging rumours linking Dickens with Georgina Hogarth, his sister-in-law. *Reynolds’s Newspaper* was not so delicate, remarking that ‘The names of a female relative, and of a professional young lady, have both been, of late, so freely and intimately associated with that of Mr. Dickens as to excite suspicion and surprise.’¹³ Most other papers kept their allusions to these other explanations for the separation less specific, and gave credence to Dickens’s strenuous denials of their truth.¹⁴ In touching on the nature of those rumours, some of Dickens’s defenders may, in their zeal, have made matters rather worse. *Freeman’s Journal* for example, boldly declared:

It is due to the character of the great writer and public teacher to say that his friends (and they are legion) entirely acquit him of the charge of gross immorality so recklessly made and so industriously circulated.¹⁵

Hull Packet and East Riding Times likewise prefaced its reprint of Dickens’s statement (followed by the *Scotsman’s* editorial) in this way, ‘Some slanders, imputing gross

¹² *John Bull and Britannia* (June 12, 1858): 377. Another possible explanation for the recurrence of the phrase ‘incompatibility of temper’, which was frequently set off by inverted commas, is that it appeared in some other document connected with the separation that has not yet come to light.

¹³ *Reynolds’s Newspaper* (June 13, 1858): 3.

¹⁴ Typical of this supportive tone was the *Illustrated London News* (June 12, 1858): 583: ‘A great author has this week thought it necessary to appeal in print to his fellow-authors against certain scandals—stupid, foul, and lying enough—which nobody of name believed for a single moment.’

¹⁵ *Freeman’s Journal* (July 2, 1858): 3. The *Freeman’s* piece was reprinted in such papers as the *Birmingham Post* and *Trewman’s Exeter Flying Post*.

profligacy to Mr Charles Dickens, having been in circulation, he has published the following personal explanation in *Household Words* this week'.¹⁶ Conjecturing that the rumours themselves might be responsible for the separation, the *Morning Chronicle* went so far as to openly urge a reconciliation between Mr. and Mrs. Dickens:

Where all parties concerned are so really good and amiable, it will be indeed most lamentable if the exaggeration of scandalizing rumour amongst ignorant persons be allowed to widen a breach, which every experience of life shows not to be really so irreparable...¹⁷

Although most writers for the British press, with a few exceptions like Reynolds, were at least distantly sympathetic to Dickens's desire to quell malicious gossip, almost all could agree that he had been ill-advised to issue a public statement on such a personal matter. The correspondent for the *Inverness Courier* remarked that 'though Dickens is a universal favourite, this egotistical manifesto of his is universally condemned'. (Unusually among commentators at this time, the *Courier* also spared a few words of praise for Mrs Dickens as 'a kind, good-humoured Scotch lady'.)¹⁸ Others remarked upon Dickens's curious delusion that 'not one reader in a thousand' would be ignorant of the rumours about his marriage, the *Era* estimating that 'out of the thirty millions of people in these islands, till he himself gave rumour her wings, there were not thirty individuals who knew anything of the matter'.¹⁹ *John Bull and Britannia* fretted at the disillusioning effect upon Dickens's readers, who until now had imagined that he embodied in his own life the domestic virtues that he had extolled in his novels; by telling his readers 'how little, after all, he thinks of the marriage tie...he has quite spoilt our taste for the greatest of all fictions – Dickens himself.'²⁰ As press reactions to the statement trailed off toward the end of June, to be replaced by glowing reviews of Dickens's series of readings, the *Critic* took a last retrospective look at the subject that reflected the common opinion that Dickens had been misled by authorial vanity into stoking the fires of gossip:

[Y]our literary man gets his head above the soil and imagines that the business of mankind mainly consists in looking at him. This is the error into which Mr. Dickens fell when he put forward that extraordinary document which, as we predicted...has set all the old women in the land inquiring what dreadful things the amiable author of "Pickwick" has been doing.²¹

Glad to put the matter to rest, the *Era* had doubtless spoken for many when it declared, 'In charity, we hope that Mr Dickens will write no more letters on family subjects'.²²

¹⁶ *Hull Packet and East Riding Times* (June 11, 1858): 8.

¹⁷ *Morning Chronicle* (June 11, 1858): 5.

¹⁸ Reprinted by the *Caledonian Mercury* (June 21, 1858): 3.

¹⁹ 'Charles Dickens and His Letter', *Era* (June 13, 1858): 9.

²⁰ *John Bull and Britannia* (June 12, 1858): 377.

²¹ *Critic* (July 3, 1858)

²² *Era* (June 13, 1858): 9.

Yet it is a measure of how quickly and widely news and opinion could now circulate in the new mass press of the mid-19th century that matters would not end there.

American Reaction

The news about Dickens's 'domestic trouble' reached the New York papers less than two weeks after its first appearance in Britain. The poles of the press reaction were represented by the two most successful papers in the city, and indeed in the country: the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Herald*. Both had been founded in the 1830s, and both reflected the aims and personality of their founders, each of whom continued to be deeply involved in the daily operation of their respective papers.²³ Horace Greeley's *Tribune* was above all a paper of views rather than news, and those views were staunchly Republican, anti-slavery, patriotic, and respectable. The paper's purpose was to improve the moral tone of American society. Newspaperman James Gordon Bennett had made the *New York Herald* essential daily reading for the New York business community by being the first to carry detailed commercial news of doings on Wall Street, but he made his paper essential to a growing host of other readers with his reporting on sensational crime and scandal and his insistence on being the first with breaking stories. The *Herald*, like its owner, was cynical about politics, skeptical of authority, pro-Southern and Democratic in its sympathies. The two men despised one another. Greeley considered Bennett a scoundrel whose wallowing in unseemly scandal degraded the tone and purpose of the newspaper press as a whole. Bennett, in turn, thought his rival a moralizing blockhead, memorably suggesting that if one could somehow galvanize a large New England squash, it would make just as capable a newspaper editor as Horace Greeley.²⁴

Reprinting Dickens's statement elsewhere in the paper but offering no London reporting of its own, the *Tribune* added a brief and dignified editorial paragraph that echoed the *Morning Chronicle* in blaming the gossips and hoping that some sort of reconciliation might still be effected:

Charles Dickens has met, by a full, emphatic denial, the scandals which certain London journalists and letter-writers have recently set afloat with reference to his family relations. Until further advised, we shall believe that he states the truth... It seemed from the first improbable that he, the father of a family of grown-up children...could have deliberately exposed himself in the autumn of life, to such gossip. Most likely he had some momentary difference with his wife, which tale-bearers aggravated into a

²³ On differences between the British and American newspaper press at this period, see Joel H. Wiener, *The Americanization of the British Press, 1830-1914: Speed in the Age of Transatlantic Journalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), especially his discussion of Bennett as one of the creators of the modern press (pp. 36-42).

²⁴ Harvey Saalberg, 'Bennett and Greeley, Professional Rivals, Had Much in Common', *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (September 1972), p. 541.

serious alienation, and then invented infidelity on his part to account for that alienation.²⁵

The *New York Herald*, by contrast, was all over the story, and its account was widely reprinted by other papers. The report of the *Herald*'s anonymous 'London correspondent' was dated June 4—before the appearance of the Personal Statement—but appeared in the paper on June 18. The tenor of the lengthy article can be guessed from the italicized highlights at the top of the column: '*The Separation of Charles Dickens from His Wife – What the Gossips say about it – Miss Ternan implicated – Public Sympathy with Mrs. Dickens ... What some People Say about Mr. Dickens' Troubles*'. This was the sort of gossipy scandal that the *Herald* lived for, and it seized upon the opportunity with evident relish, brushing aside Dickens's privately offered explanations:

The great novelist, and delineator of the character of the inimitable Mr. Pecksniff, has separated from his wife. ...[I]t is given out that the cause of their separation is incompatibility of temper. That is all fudge. A married life of twenty-two years, nearly a dozen children, a spotless life on the part of the wife and mother, and now to have uncongenial temper cause a separation, is simply preposterous.²⁶

The correspondent went on to explain (with startling accuracy) that in the course of recruiting professional actors to assist in putting on private theatricals for charity in Manchester, Dickens had met 'a Miss Ternan, well known in Manchester, and latterly on the London boards... A very pure and very platonic affection sprang up between this young lady and the author of *Pickwick*. ...She is now charged with being the cause of the separation.' The *Herald* correspondent was probably confusing two 'Miss Ternans' in his report; Ellen was scarcely 'well known' as an actress, and her older sister Fanny would subsequently be mistaken by other gossips as the object of Dickens's affection. Nevertheless, the printing of these specifics—the actress's name, as well as the circumstances under which they had met—instantly distinguishes the American paper's treatment of the scandal from that of even the boldest of its British counterparts.

The 'London correspondent' is a frequent and notable feature of American coverage, as it had been for some parts of the provincial press in Britain. While the major metropolitan dailies often paid London writers to contribute regular reports, many much smaller newspapers could boast an occasional 'London letter' of some sort. Little is known about these correspondents, who almost always wrote anonymously. Some were London-based experts on politics or foreign affairs; Karl Marx, for example, was the *New York Tribune*'s London correspondent at this period, writing reports for the paper about European politics. Some portion of the trade, however, appears to have consisted of less formal arrangements between American papers and London journalists who picked up some extra income by retailing stories about London literary and

²⁵ *New York Tribune* (June 21, 1858): p. 4.

²⁶ *New York Herald* (June 19, 1858). Despite the date of June 4 at the head of the column, in a later paragraph the author may be referring to the Personal Statement in alluding to 'Mr. Dickens's statements', although it is possible that the reference is to the letter of May 25 given to Arthur Smith.

theatrical celebrities for American readers, as Edmund Yates is known to have done for the *New York Times* in the 1860s. The course of the Dickens scandal in the American press makes clear that, while some papers were merely reprinting material and adding their own editorial commentary, others were featuring actual reporting from writers in London, as the *Herald* had done. Out of reach of the British law of libel and writing for a newspaper culture that was often considerably less restrained than the British press in reporting this kind of news, the London correspondent frequently contributed material to American papers that would have been virtually unprintable at home. One startling result of this critical element of the scandal's circulation was that newspaper readers in tiny towns in rural America were often much more closely informed of the state of London gossip about Dickens's marital troubles than were readers in London itself.

The coverage of the role of the 'other woman' in the scandal offers a particularly striking instance of this contrast, as we have seen. Nor was the *Herald* the only American paper to mention the possibility of another woman's involvement in the case. The London correspondent of the *North American and United States Gazette* of Philadelphia, for example, informed American readers that the 'wicked rumours...refer to a pretty young actress, Miss T—, and as people are usually uncharitable, the worst actions and motives have been attributed to an acquaintance which, if it existed at all, may have been perfectly innocent'.²⁷ Under the heading, 'CHARLES DICKENS IN TROUBLE', the *Baltimore Sun* noted archly that 'Charles Dickens, the author, who did not like the moral habits of some of our countrymen, has just given the English world the opportunity to scan his own.' The *Sun* went on to report that 'Charles has had a taste for private theatricals, which threw him into frequent intercourse with a Miss Ternan, an actress of celebrity. His attentions becoming something more than was required by a fictitious passion, Mrs. Dickens rebelled.'²⁸

It was left to the London correspondent of the *Detroit Free Press*, however, to provide the most extensive reporting on this aspect of the scandal. Passing along rumours that Dickens had been sleeping in the office of *Household Words*, the paper's 'letter from London' went on to give the proximate cause of the separation:

... I hear that Dickens has for some time been paying attention to an actress at the Haymarket. (Amy Sedgwick, it is thought.) So charmed was he with her that he went to Hunt & Roskell's and bought her a beautiful bracelet...and had the lady's name engraved upon it. The trinket was unfortunately lost one night when he was taking her to a place of amusement and was found by some honest person, who took it to Hunt & Roskel's [sic], who at once sent it to Mr. Dickens, and as Mr. Dickens was out, Mrs. Dickens received the naughty tell-tale. She presented it to her lord when he came home, and simply said, 'Charles, I wish you would not be so open in these matters,' whereupon (as the lawyers say) the editor of

²⁷ *North American and United States Gazette* (June 21, 1858).

²⁸ *Baltimore Sun* (June 21, 1858): 2.

Household Words went into a towering passion, and said he would not stay another minute in the same house with his wife...²⁹

Devotees of Dickensian biography will instantly recognize this as a version of the ‘misdirected jewels story’ that most chroniclers agree was the immediate occasion for the separation between Charles and Catherine. Astonishingly, this published report in a Detroit newspaper is by far the earliest and the most detailed version that we have, one that appeared within weeks of the incident and was quickly reprinted in the *Charleston Courier* and other American papers.³⁰ True, it gets the name of the actress wrong—Amy Sedgwick, with whom Ellen Ternan had once worked as an understudy, was mentioned by more than one report about the scandal—but it admits that that information is uncertain, and unlike any of the other accounts that were published decades later, it gives the name of the jewelers.³¹ No hint of this story in a British newspaper of the period has ever come to light.

Despite such reports as these, however, the American press’s reaction to the scandal, taken as a whole, did not reflect a widespread conviction that Dickens had been unfaithful to his wife. To the contrary, his denials of such ‘monstrous rumours’ in the Personal Statement were generally believed, although the alternative reason advanced for the separation remained puzzling to many commentators. Dickens’s popularity undoubtedly played a role in this reluctance to believe the worst. ‘That the author of the immortal *Pickwick*, the hypocritical *Pecksniff* and the noble-hearted *Cuttle*; the creator of *Little Nell*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Agnes...*’, wrote the *Galveston Weekly News*, ‘should so far depart from his high duty as to violate the precepts he has been so many years teaching, is what we have no disposition to believe.’³²

Some editorialists found the rumours simply hard to credit about a husband and father of Dickens’s age. ‘It seems scarcely probable’, remarked the *Sandusky Register* of Sandusky, Ohio, ‘that Mr. Dickens, who has lived with his wife some twenty-two years and...who is father of nearly a dozen children, should at this advanced stage of life become enamored of a pert young actress.’³³ Nevertheless, while not joining the *New York Herald’s* correspondent in dismissing the ‘incompatibility of temper’ explanation as mere ‘fudge’, many other newspaper writers found that explanation hard to credit for the same reason.

²⁹ *Detroit Free Press* (June 22, 1858)

³⁰ There are several sources for the story, the most often cited being a book of reminiscences published in 1909 by John Bigelow, who recalled having heard the story at Thackeray’s dinner-table in 1860. A few years ago, I came across another version in the unpublished diary of publisher Richard Bentley (Special Collections, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), who noted having heard it from Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Chandler Halliburton, who had in turn heard it from Mrs. Gilbert Abbott a Becket. That diary entry is from March 23, 1859.

³¹ This is indirectly confirmed by Richard Bentley, who in the recounting of the story in his diary refers to Hunt and Roskell by its former name, Storr and Mortimer. In investigating possible candidates for the jewelers in the story, Katharine Longley, in her unpublished defense of Ellen Ternan, confirmed that the firm’s records perished in the Blitz (Senate House Library, ‘Pardoner’s Tale’, Chapter 6, note 12).

³² *Galveston Weekly News* (July 21, 1858).

³³ *Daily Commercial Register* (June 23, 1858): 3.

‘What strikes the public as remarkable in this case’, wrote Cleveland’s *Daily Herald*, ‘is the fact that Dickens and his wife have lived for a quarter of a century together, and Mr. Dickens has just found out that there exists an “unconquerable incompatibility” of temper between them. No body will believe this story’.³⁴ In its ‘Monthly Summary of Events’ for July, 1858, the *United States Democratic Review* listed the news item in this way: ‘Charles Dickens has separated from his wife — cause, domestic difficulties and *incompatibility of temper*, discovered after living together 22 years, and bringing up a large family of children.’³⁵

Remarkably, many papers took it upon themselves to bolster the otherwise implausible explanation of ‘incompatibility’ after so many years of marriage by holding up Dickens’s domestic difficulties as typical of the man of genius. Young Walt Whitman, writing in the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, condoled with Dickens’s many disillusioned readers who ‘had imagined that their favorite author enjoyed some such domestic bliss as he has himself pictured in his "Copperfield”.’ Citing the recently reported scandal attaching to Bulwer Lytton, whose own unhappy marriage had been much in the news, Whitman averred that, ‘Of all the calamities of authors—of all the infelicities of genius—it strikes us that their domestic difficulties are the worst’.³⁶ The same comparison occurred to the editorialist of the *Louisville Journal* of Louisville, Kentucky:

It is rather melancholy that the two greatest living novelists, Dickens and Bulwer, are separated from their wives. Each of the two seem to be idolized by almost every lady in the world except the one he interchanged vows with at the altar.³⁷

The *Philadelphia Enquirer* offered up a column on the larger theme entitled, ‘Ill-Assorted Marriages; Or, Genius Not Domestic’, while the *Plain Dealer* of Cleveland, in a widely reprinted piece, expounded, ‘From the days of the poet Job, whose wife was the original Mrs. Caudle, down to Socrates and Xantippe, and so on down to Byron, and finally to Dickens, matrimonial unhappiness has ever attached itself to literary men’.³⁸ *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, in a long, gossipy report of the scandal, advised its female readers ‘not to marry men of genius!’, a species of advice echoed by the *Richmond Whig*, which excoriated men of letters like Dickens as ‘the most irritable of all human beings’ and cautioned any woman against marrying one ‘unless she is prepared to burn incense to his vanity for the rest of her life’.³⁹

³⁴ *Daily Herald* (June 22, 1858).

³⁵ *United States Democratic Review*, (July, 1858): 93.

³⁶ ‘The Private Lives of Great Men’, quoted in Emory Holloway, ed., *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman* (New York: Doubleday Page, 1921), vol. 2, p. 18.

³⁷ As reprinted in the *Baraboo Republic* (Baraboo, Wisconsin) of July 15, 1858, giving the *Journal* as its source; also reprinted without attribution in the *American Citizen* of Jackson, Michigan, (August 5, 1858): 4.

³⁸ *Philadelphia Inquirer* (June 1, 1858): 3; *Plain Dealer* (June 26, 1858): 2.

³⁹ *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (July 3, 1858); *Richmond Whig* (July 13, 1858).

Authorial vanity became a popular theme in a number of other American press reports of the separation, one that in some instances was coupled with highly colored imaginings of what had gone on inside the Dickens household. The *Springfield Republican* in Massachusetts was not the only paper to offer a capsule history of the Dickens marriage, but the account of its ‘London correspondent’ was the one most widely reprinted in other American papers:

For some years they lived very happily together; but Mr. Dickens, having become a great man, flattered and courted, finds that his domestic felicity is not as great as could be desired. ---She is not intellectual. – He reads his works to her, and she, absorbed in needlework, inquires abstractedly what he means by some of his most brilliant passages. In short, she is not a companion to him, so the brilliant novelist and actor separates on the ground of “incompatibility” from her whom he vowed before God to love and cherish.⁴⁰

The circulation of this account also illustrates the speed with which articles and paragraphs about the Dickens scandal were picked up and reprinted, often moving quickly from papers on the Eastern seaboard to towns large and small throughout America, following along major transportation routes. Within little more than a week, the Springfield paper’s article had moved west to the Great Lakes and south to Richmond, soon to reach the Gulf coast (Alabama’s *Mobile Register*) and such small Midwest towns as Kenosha, Wisconsin (*Kenosha Times*) and Fort Wayne, Indiana (*Weekly Republican*).⁴¹ Striking, too, is how many smaller papers were capable of originating material that would be widely reprinted in major metropolitan dailies, such as a report from the London correspondent of Boston’s *Atlas and Bee* that claimed that the separation could be explained by disagreement between the Dickenses over the religious education of their daughters.⁴²

As it had in Britain, American newspaper coverage of the Dickens scandal dwindled within a matter of weeks. By the end of July, few papers had anything more to say about it. Coverage of Dickens’s readings rarely mentioned anything about his marital difficulties, and anticipation ran high over reports that he might soon embark on a reading tour of America. The following month, however, a letter appeared that brought the whole matter up again.

The Violated Letter

The circumstances surrounding the appearance in August, in a New York City newspaper, of the letter that Dickens had written in May explicitly blaming

⁴⁰ *Springfield Republican* of Springfield, Massachusetts, reprinted first in the *Detroit Free Press* (July 18, 1858) and thereafter in many other papers.

⁴¹ Similarly, a long article on the scandal, entitled ‘Incompatibility’ and meditating on the lessons to be learned from the Dickens matter, appeared in the *Cleveland Daily Herald* on July 23 and shortly thereafter was published on the front page of the *Superior Chronicle*, the paper of the tiny hamlet of Superior, Wisconsin, at the far western edge of the Great Lakes.

⁴² See, for example, the reprinting of this article in the *New York Times* (June 29, 1858).

Catherine for the separation, remain impenetrably mysterious. The few details that scholars thought they knew about it, derived from John Forster's biography, turn out to be mistaken. In Forster's account, Dickens's readings manager, Arthur Smith, gave a copy of the letter to 'the London correspondent of the *New York Tribune*', where it appeared on August 16, 1858. However, we now know that the *Tribune* was not the first paper to publish it: the letter had already appeared the day before in the rival *New York Herald* under the heading, 'The Dickens Domestic Affair', prefaced only by the comment, 'The following letters are in circulation among the friends of Mr. and Mrs. Dickens. They speak for themselves'.⁴³ The *Tribune* reprinted the *Herald's* version under the same title and in the same four-part form in which it would subsequently appear throughout the American and British press: the statement that the letters were circulating among 'friends' and speak for themselves; Dickens's cover letter to 'My Dear Arthur,' urging him to show the letter to all and sundry; the long letter itself; and the appended statement exculpating Dickens and signed by the Hogarths. The whole ends with the initials 'D.J.A.,' a signature that has never been plausibly explained.⁴⁴ Dickens would subsequently claim that the letter had appeared in print without his knowledge or consent—hence the term 'violated letter'—but the expansive tone of his cover note to Smith suggested to many observers, then and since, that if he had not specifically connived at its publication he had certainly given Smith the kind of blanket permission that had made that publication likely, if not inevitable.

Although it had not been the first to print the letter, the *Tribune* did published a separate editorial on the matter that contrasted sharply with its sympathetic support of the Personal Statement:

Mr. Dickens has recently felt constrained to separate from his wife of some twenty-odd years. That wife has said nothing, and, so far as the public is aware, has instigated others to say nothing, about the matter... Mr. Dickens was stung by the circulation of anonymous scandals to publish...his solemn, emphatic denial... There he should have stopped. ... Yet he has been tempted to write again, ostensibly for private circulation only, but his letter has got into print, as such letters always will. ... In a case of matrimonial abrasion, the public sympathy instinctively takes the side of the weaker party—that is, the wife... One more uncalled-for letter from Mr. D. will finish him.⁴⁵

As before, the material was quickly reprinted, appearing in the *New York Times* on August 17 under the weary heading, 'The Dickens Scandal Again,' before

⁴³ *New York Herald* (August 15, 1858): 8.

⁴⁴ The late Katharine Longley's suggestion of 'Delaware Journalists Association' has no evidence to support it; no such organization has been traced, and initials printed at the ends of columns in American newspapers almost always appear to have referred to individuals. Longley was, however, the first scholar to notice that the *Tribune* editorial's reference to the letter having 'got into print' suggested that it had already appeared elsewhere. See her letter to the editor of the *Dickensian* (August 1989), pp. 128-129.

⁴⁵ *New York Tribune* (August 16, 1858): 4.

rapidly surfacing in Philadelphia (August 17), Charleston (August 20), Raleigh, (August 25), and many other towns, large and small, throughout the United States. Although commentary was restrained, perhaps as a result of readers' fatigue with a distasteful subject, much of what did appear echoed the *Tribune* editorial's exasperated disapproval. As the *Gazette* of Alexandria, Virginia remarked, 'We should think that it was about time that this subject should be excluded from the newspapers.'⁴⁶

Michael Slater, in *Dickens and Women*, gives a brilliant and persuasive analysis of the psychology of the Violated Letter, and how writing it met Dickens's need to cast himself, by proxy through his own children, as a child neglected by an uncaring mother.⁴⁷ Likewise, Catherine Waters points to the letter's ideological dimension, in the urgency with which it argues that Catherine Dickens had failed in her proper domestic sphere.⁴⁸ But looking at what might be called the media ecology surrounding the letter's appearance in print offers yet another vantage point. Dickens's Personal Statement had puzzled many readers, and the subsequent explanations failed to satisfy. Unless one were prepared to believe that a man of Dickens's age and eminence, a writer who had written so movingly of the joys of domestic life, had been unfaithful to his wife, the only other proffered explanation was 'incompatibility of temper'; but that reason, as discussed in so many newspaper accounts, struck many people as almost equally implausible. The appearance of the Violated Letter, however inadvisable it seems in retrospect, at least supplied what had been so conspicuously lacking in the Personal Statement – a plausible and specific set of reasons for the separation, beyond mere 'incompatibility', in the form of Catherine Dickens's purported failures as a wife and a mother. The timing of its publication therefore suggests that someone connected with its appearance was responding to the already extensive newspaper coverage of the scandal.

Unlike much of the material about the Dickens scandal that had appeared in the American press in June, the Violated Letter and its associated documents appeared in their entirety in the British press just as soon as steamships could bring the American papers to London, appearing first on August 30 in the *Evening Star* under the heading, "Mr. Charles Dickens and His Wife," before being reprinted all over Britain in the following week. The *Star* was quick to point out that 'the public will, of course, bear in mind that in this painful case MRS. DICKENS has all along remained silent. Her husband's story only has been told. It is possible that she might, if disposed, put a different complexion upon it.'⁴⁹ *Reynolds's Weekly* concurred, adding, 'We do not think

⁴⁶ *Alexandria Gazette* (August 18, 1858).

⁴⁷ Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), pp. 145-148.

⁴⁸ Catherine Waters, *Dickens and the Politics of the Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 10.

⁴⁹ *Evening Star* (August 30, 1858): 3. Interestingly, the *Star* and most of the other British papers give the letter's source as the *New York Tribune*, while others attribute its publication to 'New York papers', but none sources it from the *Herald*, where it had actually first appeared. This misunderstanding, perhaps originally derived from a reluctance to cite a paper with the *Herald's* reputation as a scandal-sheet, doubtless accounts for Forster's later mistake.

that in this instance [her] silence signifies acquiescence in all he says.⁵⁰ The definitive editorial coup de grace was administered by the *Liverpool Mercury* in a long piece entitled, 'Literary Men and the Public':

Mr. Dickens some weeks back thought proper to devote a page of his *Household Words* to a statement relative to certain domestic troubles of his, and to certain scandalous rumours to which (as he informed the world) they had given rise. ... The thing passed off, however, with much less comment than it deserved. Mr. Dickens is a sort of spoiled child of the public, and can take liberties which would be fatal to most men. People stared, wondered, and thought it a piece of abominably bad taste, but were hardly inclined to resent it.

Within the last few days, however, a document of a somewhat different description, attributed to Mr. Dickens, has come before the world—a document which, unless he can satisfactorily clear himself of all responsibility for its publication, must gravely damage him in the estimation of all men whose esteem is worth having. ... A man who stands at the very head of popular English literature tells all England and America... that a lady with whose conduct and temper the public have not the remotest concern is a bad mother and is not quite sane.⁵¹

A long letter to the editors of the *Evening Herald* and the *Evening Star*, signed 'A Hater of Scandal', archly questioned the authenticity of the letter, arguing sarcastically that Dickens could not possibly have stooped to 'such an unmanly attack' on his own wife and calling upon the novelist to repudiate it.⁵² Three weeks later, this letter had re-crossed the ocean and appeared in the *Cleveland Daily Herald*, the *Charleston Courier*, and other American papers, reviving another brief round of commentary.⁵³ By this time, also, the Personal Statement had begun to appear in Australian and New Zealand newspapers, sometimes accompanied by commentary—a reminder that the circulation of news and opinion in the English-language press had by this period reached truly global proportions.

Conclusion

To select items on the same topic from many papers over even a short period of time may leave the impression that newspaper readers during that period were concerned with little else. This was not true, of course, for the world of the newspaper press was an almost incalculably vast and many-sided one. Although it is remarkable how far and how fast the Dickens scandal spread in the summer of 1858, and how varied and extensive were the newspaper commentaries on the

⁵⁰ *Reynolds's Weekly* (September 5, 1858).

⁵¹ *Liverpool Mercury* (September 9, 1858).

⁵² *Evening Herald* (September 1, 1858): 3. The letter appeared in the *Star* on the same date.

⁵³ *Charleston Courier* (September 1, 1858): 1.

subject, from the perspective of 21st-century media it is equally remarkable how restrained the coverage was, even in most segments of the American press. Although in his initial statement he had mistakenly estimated the reach of rumour, Dickens had been entirely correct in asserting that his relationship to his reading public had been a long and intimate one, and that relationship, together with the conventional limits observed by most newspapers, seems clearly to have constrained responses to the scandal.

This protective restraint continued to operate for the rest of Dickens's life, persisting even after his death in 1870. Four years later, shortly after Forster's biography had appeared, at a time when both Ellen Ternan and Catherine Dickens were still very much alive, an article by yet another 'London correspondent' appeared in the American press that for the first time used Ternan's Christian name in identifying her as the woman whose relationship with Dickens had been the cause of the separation. Featured in a New York literary weekly called the *Arcadian*, this obscure article is the only actual eyewitness account we have of this key part of the novelist's life, offering a vivid glimpse of Dickens and Ternan together. 'It was evident to nearly all of us', the correspondent wrote of the Manchester performances, 'that the two were mutually infatuated. Dickens was constantly at her side.' Although quick to add that '[Dickens's] affection for her was said to be purely platonic', the writer matter-of-factly explains that 'it was this intimacy which was the final cause of the rupture between Dickens and his wife', adding to his account yet another version of the 'misdirected jewels' story.⁵⁴ And yet not only did the publication and reprinting of this remarkable report have no measurable impact whatever upon Dickens's reputation in America, it was afterward so entirely forgotten even in that country that no mention of it has ever appeared in any Dickens biography, or even in any scholarly accounts of Ellen Ternan or the scandal, from that time to this.

The Dickens scandal called forth strong feelings among newspaper writers and readers on both sides of the Atlantic, giving rise to reflections on the nature of marriage as well as the nature of genius and celebrity, and highlighting continuing controversy over the boundaries between public and private life, and between oral and print culture. Close attention to the way in which the scandal was reported upon and discussed in both Britain and America therefore illuminates key nineteenth-century attitudes as well as the winding course of Dickens's reputation and Dickensian biography. Such attention also allows us to begin to trace some portion of the complex and dynamic circulatory system of the mid-Victorian press.

⁵⁴ The article was reprinted in its entirety on August 6, 1874, in the *Daily Whig and Courier* of Bangor, Maine, as well as the *Evening Bulletin* of San Francisco, and discussed in both the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Daily Inter-Ocean*. Although I have not been able to inspect the pertinent issue of this short-lived (1872-78) and scarce periodical, the reprinting dates and the fact that the *Arcadian* was published on Thursdays suggest that it had first appeared on July 31, 1874. As the story appears to originate from someone who was involved in the Manchester productions, and as few among that small circle were still alive and living in London in 1874, a likely candidate for the authorship of this story is musician Francesco Berger.