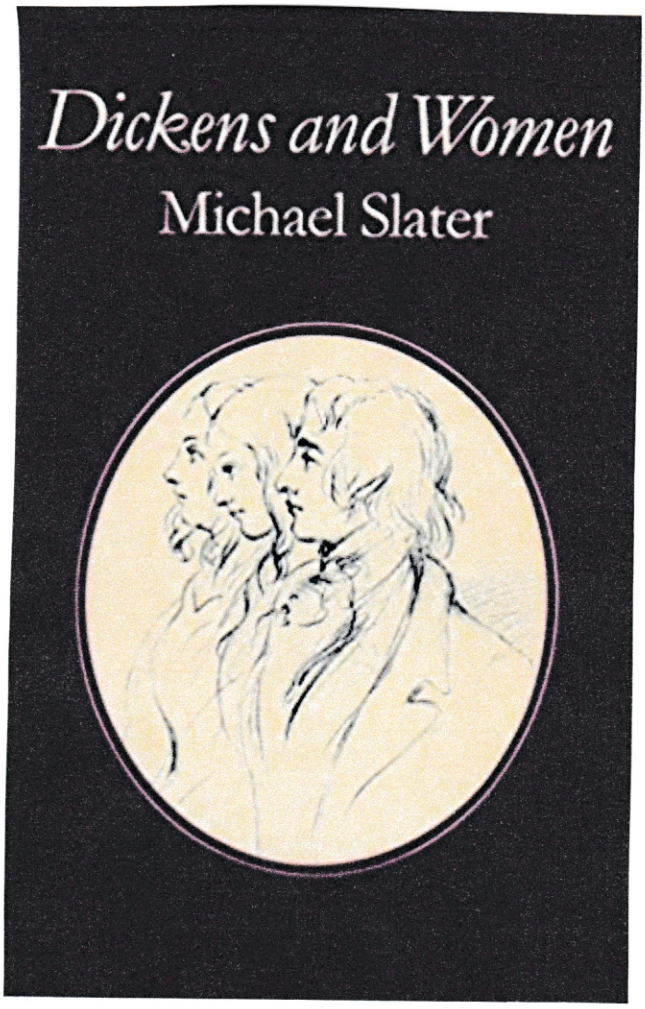

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One day when the Rev. Patrick Brontë was questioning his children about their beliefs and attitudes to life he asked one of his daughters 'what was the best mode of education for a woman?'. The child's answer, 'That which would make her rule her house well', would certainly have met with Dickens's fullest approval. Woman being clearly destined by

God and Nature for a domestic role, the primary aim of her education should not be academic (she need not be learned, wrote Tennyson, 'save in gracious household ways'), still less the cultivation of elegant 'accomplishments' such as music or sketching, but should focus on training her to become a wise and efficient housekeeper and manager of servants. *Household Words* was barely a month old when it featured an article by Dickens's sub-editor, W.H. Wills, complaining that, whilst 'young ladies of the leisure classes are educated to become uncommonly acute critics of all that pertains to personal blandishment. . . able to tell to a thread when a flounce is too narrow or a tuck too deep', they are totally ignorant of the principles of cookery and so at the mercy of incompetent servants:

> Badly seasoned and ill assimilated soup; fish without any fault of the fishmonger, soft and flabby; meat rapidly roasted before fierce fires – burnt outside and raw within; poultry rendered by the same process tempting to the eye, till dissection reveals red and uncooked joints! These crimes, from their frequency and the ignorance of 'the lady of the house', remain unpunished.

Wills's article appeared only a couple of months before Dickens's hilarious dramatization of the problem in chapter 44 of *Copperfield*, concerning the chaotic housekeeping of the newly wed David and Dora which, as David plaintively remarks 'is not comfortable'. Both the article and the chapter in *Copperfield* were part of Dickens's recurrent satirizing of the inadequacies of middle-class girls' education. From Miss Lillerton in *Sketches by Boz*, who is considered well educated because she 'talks French; plays the piano; knows a good deal about flowers, and shells, and all that sort of thing' to Belinda Pocket in *Great Expectations*, who had 'grown up highly ornamental, but perfectly helpless and useless', and beyond, Dickens repeatedly mocks 'the pursuit of giddy frivolities, and empty nothings' that he sees as characterizing middle-class female education. His criticism of it is not that it fails to develop the girls' mental faculties or train their intellects but that it unfits them 'for that quiet domestic life, in which they show far more beautifully than in the most crowded assembly'.[55]

Dickens's early work features a number of fatuous middle-class schoolmistresses (the Misses Crumpton, the 'Lady Abbess' of Westgate House in *Pickwick*, etc.) including one quite vicious caricature, Miss Monflathers in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, who berates Little Nell for being a 'wax-work child' with Mrs Jarley instead of working in a factory as befits a working-class child. Obsessive gentility, prudery and stupidity characterize all these women, and the only products that could be

expected from the schools they run are girls who, like Dora Spenlow or Belinda Pocket, may be brimming with fashionable 'accomplishments'[56] but who are totally ignorant of domestic matters. Mrs General, the genteel widow employed by Mr Dorrit to 'polish' his daughters, is a majestic variation on the earlier schoolmistresses, representing another facet of the so-called 'education' given to middle-class girls (in this case, of particularly affluent families). Dickens returns to the actual genteel schoolmistress again in his last novel. It is true that here he makes the mockery more benign and humanizes the caricature by showing us that Miss Twinkleton off duty is quite a different person from the prim school-ma'am, almost skittish indeed; but there is no mitigation of the underlying criticism of the sort of fatuous education provided by establishments like the Nuns' House where Rosa reluctantly learns some jumbled ancient history, about 'Isises, and Ibises, and Cheopses, and Pharaohses', but nothing at all that might help her to cope with running a home and family.[57]

A *locus classicus* for Dickens's views on women's education may be found in an article entitled 'My Girls' which appeared in the second volume of his journal *All The Year Round* (11 February 1860). It is by Wilkie Collins, not Dickens himself, but obviously must have had his editorial approval. Collins starts out from the position that women are 'naturally unselfish':

> Women have, or should have, *no identity wholly their own*, no separate existence in themselves – this is treating of women in their natural state of alliance with men. If a woman (speaking generally) so allied, has any thought at all, except for her husband and children, she is nothing.
>
> . . .
>
> Now, the whole tendency of a girl's education, as at present conducted, is to eradicate this natural self-abandonment, and to cultivate that quality of selfishness which, barely, and only in the slightest degree, excusable in men [who, the writer has said earlier, 'have to hew their way to every achievement by mowing down so many obstacles, that they are obliged to think of themselves, or they would never get on'], is, in women, not only a hideous, but an inconceivably dangerous disfigurement.

'The excellent Mrs Primways' is ironically praised for teaching the girls at her school so many accomplishments ('we all know that there is no gentleman . . . who would not prefer a brilliantly executed piece of Chopin's to a well-served little dinner') and Collins then goes on

humorously to propose a 'Girls' Holiday Occupation Institute' which might make up for the deficiencies in the girls' education:

> I propose that there shall be the following classes: A Physical-Education Class; a Cookery Class; a Household-Bill-auditing Class; a Shirt-button-Supervision Class; and a Mangy-Gossip-Suppression Class.[58]

Only the last of these proposed classes relates to moral, as opposed to domestic-practical, education, but Dickens was as concerned as Mrs Ellis herself that the sort of education provided by a Miss Monflathers or a Miss Twinkleton not only failed to prepare young women for future domestic responsibilities but also failed to prepare them for the more exalted aspect of their destined role as wife and mother, the role of spiritual and moral exemplar and 'humble monitress' (to use Mrs Ellis's phrase). In her book, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic* (1838) Mrs Ellis saw a looming national danger. English-women, she declared, were 'deteriorating in their moral character', corrupted by 'false notions of refinement', and also too much 'mental development':

> When the cultivation of the mental faculties had so far advanced as to take precedence of the moral, by leaving no time for domestic usefulness, and the practice of personal exertion in the way of promoting general happiness, the character of the women of England assumed a different aspect, which is now beginning to tell upon society in the sickly sensibilities, the feeble frames, and the useless habits of the rising generation.

Dickens echoes her two years later, at the end of his *Sketches of Young Couples:*

> How much may depend on the education of daughters and the conduct of mothers; how much of the brightest part of our old national character may be perpetuated by their wisdom or frittered away by their folly – how much of it may have been lost already, and how much more in danger of vanishing every day – are questions too weighty for discussion here, but well deserving a little serious consideration from all young couples nevertheless.[59]

But he nowhere attempts to describe an ideal girls' school, such as might help to remedy the situation, as he attempts to describe an ideal boys' one in Dr Strong's establishment in *Copperfield* (and perhaps it is just as well since his account of Dr Strong's is decidedly woolly).

Had Dickens portrayed his ideal girls' school we may be sure that we would have heard even less, if possible, about actual academic education than we do in his description of Dr Strong's (where it consists of a single

allusion to David's 'growing great in Latin verses'). He would never have made the connection that George Eliot, reflecting on her Maggie Tulliver's defective education, makes between book-learning and moral or spiritual development.[60] Indeed, he sometimes wrote as though the pursuit of knowledge in girls' education, especially in humbler schools, were as big a threat to their all-important domestic training as the emphasis on accomplishments in middle-class schools. Thus he writes to Miss Coutts during her preoccupation with the movement for promoting the teaching of 'Common Things' in elementary schools:

> I thoroughly agree in that interesting part of your note which refers to the immense uses, direct and indirect, of needlework. Also as to the great difficulty of getting many men to understand them. And I think Shuttleworth [i.e., Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, first secretary of the Council on Education 1839-49 and pioneer of education for the masses] and the like, would have gone on to the crack of doom, melting down all the thimbles in Great Britain and Ireland, and making medals of them to be given for a knowledge of Watersheds and Pre Adamite vegetation (both immensely comfortable to a labouring man with a large family and a small income), if it hadn't been for you.[61]

In portraying Miss Peecher, the 'small, shining, neat, methodical, and buxom' elementary schoolteacher in *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens delights in emphasizing that true womanliness has been far from crushed out of her by the learning of facts and figures. She is deeply in love with her colleague, Bradley Headstone ('The decent hair-guard that went round his neck and took care of his decent silver watch was an object of envy to her. So would Miss Peecher have gone round his neck and taken care of him') and what she occupies herself with in private, after taking 'a refresher of the principal rivers and mountains of the world, their breadths, depths, and heights', is the making of a dress for her own personal adornment.[62]

Miss Peecher's dealings with books are made to sound endearingly comic ('taking a refresher' of the principal rivers, etc.) and this fits in with an overall tendency in Dickens to present any association of women with books (other than the Bible, of course) as funny. Mrs Varden and her addiction when ill-tempered to the study of the Protestant Manual, Cornelia Blimber 'dry and sandy with working in the graves of deceased languages', her mother enthusing over Cicero, Julia Mills and her breathless annotations of circulating-library novels ('Entranced here by the Magician's potent spell. J.M.') and Mrs Tickit with her volume of Dr Buchan's *Domestic Medicine* are all cases in point.[63] If Annie Strong were to begin looking into any of those tomes of her learned husband's that she

so assiduously dusts she would at once become a comic character (a consummation, we might feel, devoutly to be wished). The only exceptions to this rule are sisters such as Florence Dombey or Lizzie Hexam who plunge into the world of learning not for their own sakes but for the benefit of their brothers. Only love, it would seem, can provide the right stimulus for a woman to develop her mental powers: Esther Summerson confesses that she has 'not by any means a quick understanding' but adds, 'When I love a person very tenderly indeed, it seems to brighten'.[64] Otherwise, female pursuit of learning is seen by Dickens either as a comic aberration, like Miss Blimber's passion for exhuming dead languages, or as a form of vanity, as in the case of the 'blue' ladies of Boston who 'rather desire to be thought superior than to be so' and the young lady Martin Chuzzlewit meets in New York who was 'distinguished by a talent for metaphysics, the laws of hydraulic pressure, and the rights of human kind . . . and bringing them to bear on any subject from Millinery to the Millennium, both inclusive'. As to the lecture-going ladies in Major Pawkins's New York boarding house ('Philosophy of the Soul' on Wednesdays, 'Philosophy of Vegetables' on Fridays, etc.), they are simply idle, using their cultural activities as an excuse for dispensing with 'family duties at home':

> . . . the chances were a hundred to one that not one of [them] could perform the easiest woman's work for herself, or make the simplest article of dress for any of her children.

When he is faced, even through the medium of print, with a truly intellectual woman Dickens finds himself rather disconcerted. Reading about Madame Roland, he admires 'her brave soul and engaging conversation' but confesses that 'if she had only some more faults, only a few more passionate failings of any kind' he might love her better. He adds, however, with commendable candour, 'I am content to believe that the deficiency is in me, and not in her.'[65]