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Handling The Perceptual Politics of Identity in *Great Expectations*

PETER J. CAPUANO

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I

Pip arrives in London a blacksmith by training but a gentleman by anonymous financial assistance, and this social contradiction creates a crisis in naming. A proper gentleman can not be called a vulgar name like “Pip” and, as Herbert Pocket points out, Pip’s Christian name “Philip,” does not fit him at all. Responding to this dilemma with a sense of tact bordering on genius,¹ Herbert resolves to call Pip “Handel” – for the composer’s *Harpsichord Suite No. 5 in E Major*, more commonly known as the “Harmonious Blacksmith.” The brilliance of the name, of course, comes from the way it forges unlikely continuities between physical, imaginative, and even emotional labor in *Great Expectations*. But beyond this, the name “Handel” also participates in a surging popular discourse about hands at mid century – both inside and outside the text; a surge that makes this particular body part crucial to understanding the interconnectedness between “nature” and “culture” that this novel so adeptly probes.

On 9 September 1848, *Punch Magazine* responded to this new wave of interest in the hand with a comical entry entitled “Handy Phrenology” [see figure overleaf).

The piece satirizes the Victorian penchant for reading the legibility of character in the materiality of the body with a characteristically playful flair²:

We dare say that the hand of WERTHER will be distinguished by its Werts; and we can imagine that the wrist will be found fully developed in A-WRISTOTLE, A-WRISTIDES, and the rest of the a-wristocracy of genius that the world has contained.

1 The phrasing is Elaine Scarry’s.

2 It is well known that the perceptual codes of physiognomy and phrenology permeated psychological, aesthetic, and fictional conventions by the middle of the nineteenth century. See Fahnstock; Taylor; Cowling.

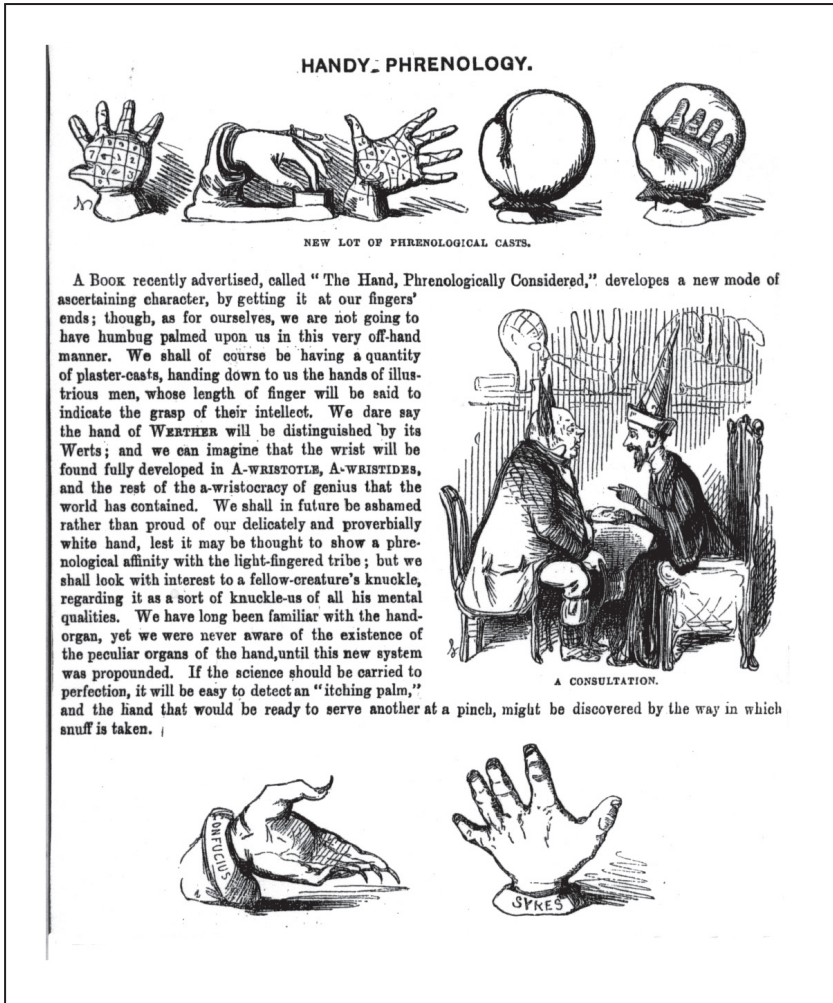


Fig. 1. "Handy Phrenology." *Punch* (9 September 1848) 104.

As is the case so often with *Punch*, however, its blunt humor exposes significant cultural preoccupations. The wide commercial success of more "serious" texts such as *The Psychonomy of the Hand* (Beamish 1843) and *The Hand Phrenologically Considered* (Anon. 1848) reflected the enthusiasm with which mid-century readers came to associate the material features of the body with the social components of identity. Since very few novelists rely more heavily on the material aspects of characterization than Charles Dickens,

it should come as no surprise that it is the hands of many Dickensian characters that extend their general dispositions: Fagin's dirty fingernails, Miss Pecksniff's lily hand, Stephen Blackpool's steady grasp, and Uriah Heep's sweaty palms represent just a few notable instances. By the 1850s these attributes came to reflect the specificity found in popular pseudo-scientific texts. Dickens's conception of Thomas Gradgrind's "squarely pointing square forefinger" in *Hard Times* (1854), for example, draws on contemporary anatomical discourse which maintained that "the square form on the ends of the fingers [was] the index of precedent, custom, and routine" (*The Psychonomy of the Hand* 8). But over and above this general attention to the appendages of his characters, I am suggesting that Dickens's 1860–61 novel *Great Expectations* is in a category all its own.

The sheer number of hand-related references in *Great Expectations* (1860–61) makes the topic difficult to miss. There are more than 450 allusions to the word "hand" alone, with many of them appearing regularly in the text's tragi-comedic undercurrent. Mrs. Joe rears her brother "by hand" (12); Pumblechook wants his nephew "bound out of hand" (84); Jaggers bites "his great forefinger" and throws his exceedingly "large hand" at his opponents (106); Miss Havisham follows her imperious commands with "an impatient movement of her right hand" (51); Estella wields a "taunting hand" and Joe a "great good hand" (55, 349). I grant that by culling these examples in this way, I am abstracting them from the flow of the narrative. That, however, is just the point. I maintain that in *Great Expectations* Dickens's "hands" are not merely extensions of personality; they function as starkly visible but barely noticeable features at the core of the novel's identity politics. They operate like a trope so worn away by use and repetition that we hardly notice the attention they call again and again to the series of urgently interrelated debates about evolution, class, and political economy in which they participate. To phrase this in the musical terms that Pip's London name "Handel" requires us to consider, the hands in *Great Expectations* become like a continuous rhythm that hear but don't necessarily listen to beneath the more recognizable melody.

The frequency of references to the literal and figurative hand in *Great Expectations* has propelled a variety of critical analyses, beginning with Charles R. Forker's 1961 observation that hands serve as "a kind of unifying symbol or natural metaphor for the book's complex of human interrelationships and the values and attitudes that motivate them" (281).³ Where the majority of critics treating this subject focus on the symbolic or mimetic functions of

3 For a critical history of criticism related to this topic, see Forker; Moore; Buckley; Stone; Reed; Macleod. For a notable and influential reading of the "manual semiotics" of masturbation, see Cohen.

the hands, I seek instead to historicize Dickens's treatment of them within specific cultural – and often scientific – debates about the expression and management of mid-Victorian anxieties vis-à-vis bourgeois subjectivity.⁴ To use Forker's expression, hands are "almost an obsession" in *Great Expectations* precisely because Victorians were indeed obsessed by them – but for a very specific set of reasons (280). This essay probes how the genealogy of this obsession figures into the practical consciousness of the period immediately after *The Origin of Species* (1859).

II

Part of my contention is that the affiliation between the lower-class and the animal converges in the fictional hand because this body part had begun to lose its privileged status as the primary site of physical differentiation between humans and other animals by 1860. Almost without exception, Western philosophical tradition dating back to Aristotle's *De Partibus Animalium* celebrated the hand as an essential feature of human beings. In fact, the line of hand-privileging among anatomists and philosophers runs fairly straight from Galen and Bulwer to Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger. Jacques Derrida's coinage of the word *humainisme* ("humanualism") for this tradition brilliantly identifies the importance of the manual to philosophical and biological conceptions of the human in the Western imagination. William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802) is only one of a series of texts published during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that imagined this "essential"

4 Not surprisingly, "hand" criticism took a deconstructive turn. It was J. Hillis Miller's brief discussion of the topic in *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (1958) that inspired Forker's more detailed article. In 1981 Harry Stone noted that the handshake ritual "is part of an elaborate network of hand imagery that links half the characters in *Great Expectations* in a secret freemasonry of hands. One is constantly astonished by magical ceremony of hands, for though plain to view, it is virtually invisible; it merges with – one might almost say loses itself in – the book's compelling realism" (334). Walter L. Reed concluded that "a whole prototextual sign language is generated simply by attention to the physical detail of hands. These manual markers are not simply metaphors, a pattern of imagery in the traditional sense where literal phenomenon and figurative expression are relatively distinct. They are rather an example of the physically literal world shaping itself into rudimentary patterns of meaning, creating a primitive version of language which characters may speak and – occasionally comprehend" (269–70). More recently, William A. Cohen has influentially extended Stone's notion of a "secret freemasonry of hands" to the encryption of sexuality in the novel's manual activity. According to Cohen, the "manual semiotics" of masturbation is covertly signaled yet "so starkly obvious as to be invisible" (221). I am interested in the same issue of invisibility as Stone and Cohen, but for very different reasons.

body part as an instrument of God's design. Even influential British anatomists such as Sir Charles Bell regarded physiological adaptation as a matter of "design and benevolence in the Author of our being" – a fact which led Bell to assert repeatedly, and somewhat awkwardly, that chimpanzees had "paws" rather than hands (151, 107). The full title of Bell's popular 1833 work, *The Hand: Its Mechanism and Vital Endowments as Evincing Design*, reflects the religiously-charged ideology of the Bridgewater Treatises (1833–36) to which it belonged. For Bell, this meant defining the hand as an organ "belonging exclusively to man" in the position of "the ruler over animate and inanimate nature" (16). As late as 1848, the anonymously-published but well-known work *The Hand Phrenologically Considered* made similar claims: "The hand of man is the emblem of his vast superiority over all the lower animals" (52).

It is commonly known that man's "superiority" over animals was contested throughout the 1850s by what the Victorians referred to as the "Development Hypothesis." But it was not until the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* that a mechanism for evolution seriously challenged the notion of a uniform law created by an almighty lawgiver. One of the very few passages containing explicit reference to a human being in the *Origin* discusses how the hand resembles the extremities of presumably "lower" animals: "the framework of bones [is] the same in the hand of a man, wing of a bat, fin of the porpoise, and leg of the horse" (387). While Darwin famously excluded humans from his original formulation of Natural Selection, their conspicuous absence from his 1859 text only made the subject more prominent to Victorian readers who considered the *Origin* to be "centrally concerned with man's descent" (Beer 59–60). Theories of racial degeneration multiplied as reports of the newly-discovered gorilla began to circulate among Victorian scientists in the 1850s. The British Zoological Society's acquisition of its first preserved gorilla specimen in 1858, along with the popular African travel books of Paul du Chaillu, helped make the existence of gorillas known to the general public in England during the late 1850s. By 1859, the preoccupation with the "Missing-Link" had developed into a full-fledged cultural phenomenon: virtually every British newspaper and magazine carried stories referencing "man's nearest relation."

Quite obviously, what propelled the Victorian interest in gorillas was how like humans the animals looked and behaved. Du Chaillu's account of his first gorilla sighting confirms the extent to which their general stature invoked comparison to humans: "they looked fearfully like hairy men" (60). Du Chaillu was even more shocked to discover how closely gorillas resembled humans from a skeletal perspective. His detailed comparisons revealed differences in the cranium, the spine, and the pelvis but they repeatedly called attention to the same number of bones in the human and

gorilla wrist and hand (418).⁵

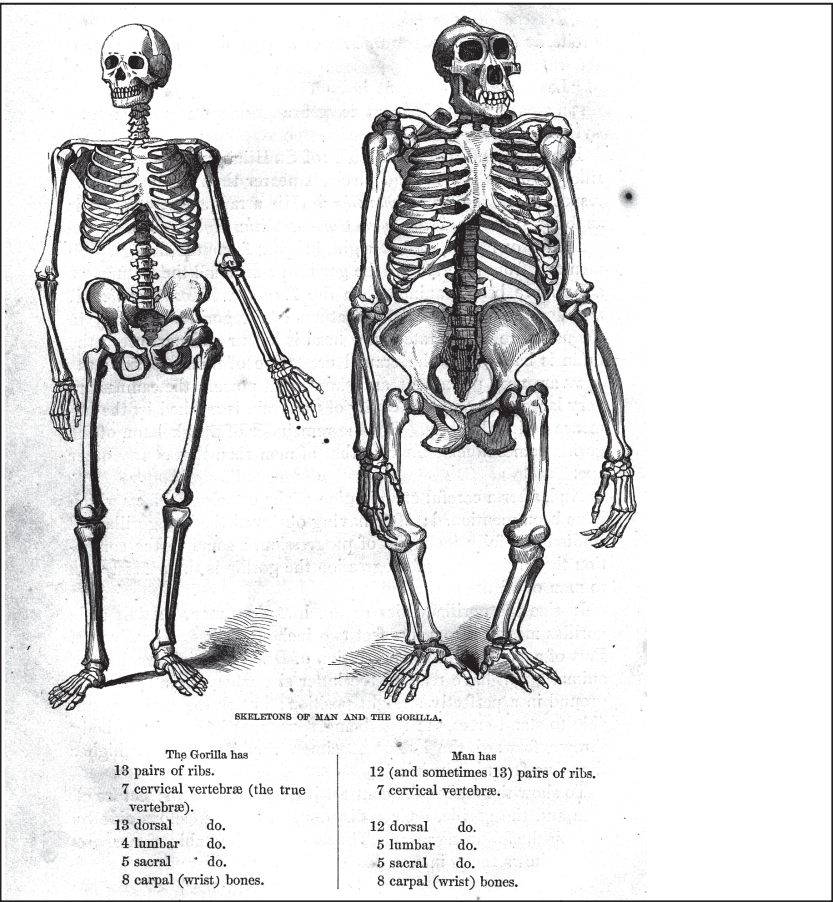


Fig. 2. “Skeletons of Man and the Gorilla.” *Explorations and Adventures* (418)
As I have suggested, the Victorian fascination with the gorilla was

5 The Victorian public feared descent even as evolutionary biologists altered their definitions of anatomical species development to reassert human supremacy with different rhetoric. Herbert Spencer, for example, began to emphasize the “*perfection of the tactile apparatus*” in human as compared to ape hands while Richard Owen argued for the cerebral primacy of man – a position that would later form the basis of the vituperative public arguments between Wilberforce and Huxley (*The Principles of Psychology* 361, *italics mine*). It was this general anxiety, and the publicity of these debates in particular, that allowed the hand to emerge as a site where scientists, politicians and novelists alike looked for a paradoxical kinship with and divergence from the variously imagined “lower orders” which dominate the cast of *Great Expectations*.

heightened by the fact that the animal's wildness was not solely a matter of redness in tooth or claw. The reports coming to England in the late 1850s dramatized how the gorilla attacked not with its formidable teeth, but rather with its "bare" hands. Du Chaillu had described this method of attack in considerable detail in *Explorations and Adventures*:

this animal lies in wait in the lower branches of trees, watching for people who go to and fro; and, when one passes sufficiently near, grasps the luckless fellow with his ["lower hands"], and draws him up into the tree, where he quietly chokes him. (62)

In May 1859, Dickens's own magazine, *All the Year Round*, set this aspect of the gorilla's "manual" savagery against the backdrop of middle-class industriousness:

The honey-making, architectural bee, low down in the scale of life, with its insignificant head, its little boneless body, and gauzy wing, is our type of industry and skill: while this apex in the pyramid of brute creation, the near approach to the human form, what can it do? The great hands have no skill but to clutch and strangle. ("Our Nearest Relation" 114)

A feature in *Punch* entitled "The Missing Link"⁶ reveals how quickly Britons co-opted contemporary evolutionary theory for colonial purposes to differentiate themselves from their Irish subjects:

A gulf, certainly, does appear to yawn between the Gorilla and the Negro. The woods and wilds of Africa do not exhibit an example of any intermediate animal. But in this, as in many other cases, philosophers go vainly searching abroad for that which they would readily find if they sought it at home. A creature manifestly between the Gorilla and the Negro is to be met with some of the lowest districts of London and Liverpool by adventurous explorers. It comes from Ireland, whence it has contrived to migrate; it belongs in fact to a tribe of Irish savages. (18 October 1862)

As L. Perry Curtis has demonstrated, the Victorians readily adopted this rhetoric of biological hierarchy to draw connections between the simian and the Irish – a "race" long regarded as sub-human in the English imagination. The idea of an "intermediary animal" seemed to fit particularly well given

6 Steven Jay Gould calls attention to the fact that the scientific search for the "missing link" was for a long time subverted by the search for the wrong body part (skull rather than hand) – a mistake itself arising from a faulty (and according to Gould, ideologically stipulated) emphasis on man-as-intellect rather than on man-as-creator, man-as-maker, or man-as-worker. See *Ever Since Darwin* (207).

the supposedly Irish predilection for violence and physical labor. Their status as Europe's only white "savages" was deeply entrenched by the time Thomas Carlyle wrote in *Chartism* that the Irishman "is there to undertake all work that can be done by mere strength of hand and back – for wages that will purchase him potatoes" (171).⁷ What many Victorians thought was a uniquely Irish combination of animality, violence, and capacity for manual labor may be seen in the life-size "tracings of living hands," which accompany Richard Beamish's popular work *The Psychonomy of the Hand* (1843):

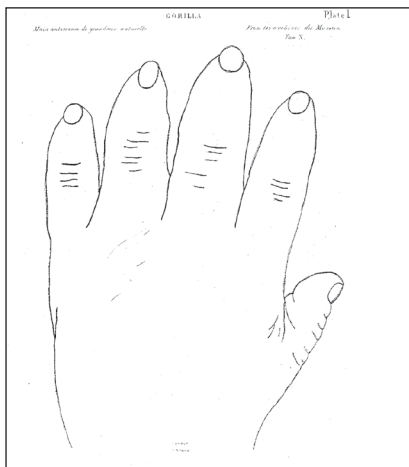


Fig. 3. "Gorilla."

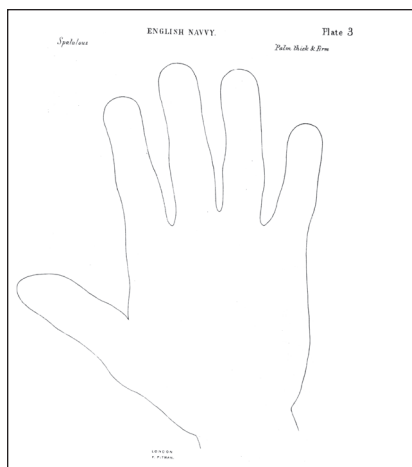


Fig. 4. "English Navy."

These full-page plates appeared at the end of Beamish's text, and readers were encouraged to trace their own hands on top of them as a means of direct comparison. The above affiliation between the gorilla and the navy is implied by proximity (plate numbers one and three of thirty), and also by shape and nationality. Beamish states that "the more the palm dominates over the fingers in the hand of man, the more the character approaches to that of the brute, with instincts low and degrading" (6). Since the discovery of gorillas (Fig. 3) and the influx of Irish navvies (Fig. 4) into the British workforce occurred more or less simultaneously, large palms and short fingers were interpreted not only as indicators of a propensity to handle shovels, pickaxes, and barrows, but as signs of animality itself. Barbarism

⁷ It is worth noting that Dickens was personally alarmed by the physical roughness of Irish crowds attending his public speaking tour of 1858. For an analysis of the politico-religious turbulence Dickens witnessed in Ireland in the late 1850s, see Wynne.

and manual labor – concepts linked long before Darwin – thus became biologically constituent in the Victorian imagination immediately before Dickens began to compose *Great Expectations* at the end of 1859.

Indeed, less than one year after his magazine published the piece describing “the portentous power of grasp” in the gorilla hand, Dickens created a working-class Irish character in Molly who murders a woman twice her size by strangling her with her bare hands. Such parallels would be less worthy of remark were it not for Dickens’s conspicuous emphasis on Molly’s Irishness throughout the text. Most obviously, her name is a lower-class Irish nick-name for Mary, and Wemmick’s assertion that she has “some gypsy blood in her” (293) only confirms Terry Eagleton’s observation that Gypsy blood in the nineteenth-century novel was “simply an English way of saying that [the character] is quite possibly Irish” (3). The convergence of Molly’s nationality, class status, and violent “nature” reaches its most ideological and subjective distillation in the dramatic scene in chapter 26 where Jaggers pins her hands to the table for Pip and his other clients to view:

“There’s power here,” said Mr. Jaggers, coolly tracing out the sinews [of Molly’s hand] with his forefinger. “Very few men have the power of wrist that this woman has. It’s remarkable what force of grip there is in these hands. I have had occasion to notice many hands; but I never saw anything stronger in that respect, man’s or woman’s, than these.” (166)

Jaggers’s compulsive admiration of Molly’s hands further anatomizes the novel’s general association of criminal behavior with animality. In particular, the scene’s figuration of Molly’s social deviancy in evolutionary terms serves to collapse the disavowed discourses of gender, labor, and criminality into a single bodily organ. The “remarkable force of grip” in Molly’s hands alludes to her previous crime but, as we have seen, the method she uses in the performance of this criminal act reflects contemporary anxiety regarding the fragility of the barrier between the human and the animal.

This barrier is further destabilized by Molly’s direct affiliation with manual labor. Since the narrative mentions her presence solely at Jaggers’s dinner parties, it is easy to overlook how Molly’s status as the household’s *only* servant would classify her as a “maid-of-all-work” in the 1850s – that “unfeminine and rough” housekeeping class whose daily chores included hauling coals, bundling wood, and scouring grates (Beeton 1485). Far from rendering her “a wild beast tamed” as Wemmick surmises, then, Molly’s domestic servitude actually forms a necessary part of what Jaggers calls her “wild violent nature.”

III

Yet it is crucial to analyze the ways in which Jaggers's domination of Molly's "untamed," working hands underwrites his attraction to them. Dickens figures the attraction as a class and racial affiliation that would have been immediately apparent to a readership familiar with manual typologies like Beamish's *Psychonomy*, which drew explicit correlations between race, occupation, and hand size:

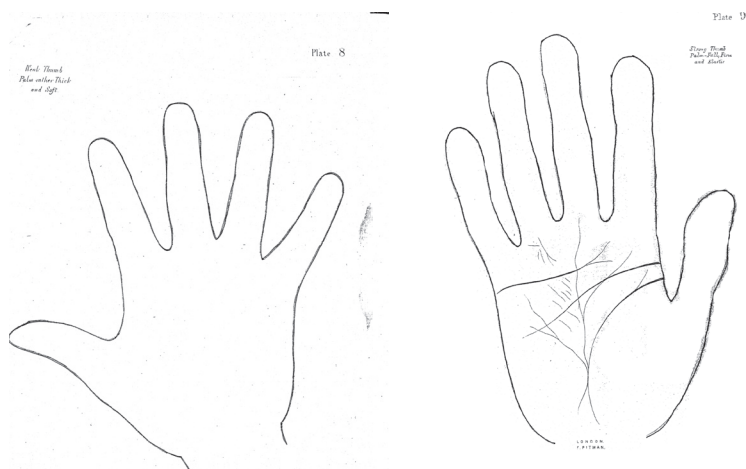


Fig. 5.

Fig. 6.

According to Beamish, "the one [Fig. 5], by force of character raised himself to respectability and wealth; the other [Fig. 6] remains in his original depression, a labourer at two shillings and sixpence a day" (11). What is implied, of course, is the Lamarckian notion that the hand's biological structure wills itself to suit its owner's social stature – a point more subtly implied by the blankness of the "respectable" hand (on the left) in comparison to the marked palm of the laborer (on the right). Thus the emphasis on Jaggers's "exceedingly dark complexion" and "correspondingly large hand[s]," combined with his compulsive desire to keep them *unmarked* by his labor, paradoxically forms a kind of perceptual politics that align him with the very qualities he attempts to tame out of Molly (68).⁸

8 The class anxiety manifested in Jaggers's hands may have been generated by events in Dickens's own life. It is well known that Dickens successfully suppressed any public knowledge of his own working-class experience in Warren's blacking factory. His father's incarceration in the Marshalsea Prison and his own sudden descent into manual labor formed in Dickens a life-long desire to remove the taint of poverty and social disgrace.

The novel's uncanny insistence on the material presence of Jagger's hands illuminates the ideological contradictions at the heart of middle-class subjectivity at mid-century. Edgar Rosenberg and Daniel Tritter have demonstrated how Jagger's training in a lawyer's office (as opposed to at a university) make his work more like a trade than a genteel profession. The way he uses his ponderous hands even in his middle-class job as a solicitor, though, suggests a more immediate connection to manual labor. Jagger's occupation clearly situates him in a class above common laborers, yet nearly all of the professional "work" he accomplishes in the novel depends directly on his abnormally large hands. For instance, his habit of biting his hands and throwing his "great forefinger" frightens clients and magistrates alike in nearly every professional scene the reader witnesses (107).

Furthermore, Jagger's "ceremonious" use of his handkerchief allows him to induce fear by forcing his opponent to focus on his most recognizable physical attribute (185). Even this reliance on the silk handkerchief, though, is shot through with internal and professional confliction. Evacuated as it is of the functional value it would have for laboring hands, the handkerchief communicates social divisions by simultaneously invoking and invalidating the most common anatomical site of work in the nineteenth century. By contrast, "real" laborers wore handkerchiefs around their necks and in their pockets where they were used for protection against the sun and for wiping away sweat from the face and hands when performing manual work. Given these cultural associations, Jagger's ownership of the silk handkerchief marks him as genteel, but his actual *use* of it intimates his

This process would have become quite literal for the young Dickens, whose ten hour days ended by scrubbing black paste from his hands and nails. An overlooked fact, however, is that each of Dickens's adult professions – law clerk, stenographer, editor, and novelist – required hand washing as well. Though solidly above so-called "manual labour," his occupations were nonetheless implicated in such labor if only because of the tendency of ink to mark the hands of lowly "copy clerks" – a job Dickens held for eighteen months in the firm of Ellis and Blackmore. Dickens clearly associated the work of writing with the more physical occupations of manual labor. Consider, for example, the language of metaphorical labor that Dickens uses to describe his attitude toward copying documents for Spenlow and Jorkins in *David Copperfield* (1849–50): "What I had to do, was, to turn the painful discipline of my younger days to account, by going to work with a resolute and steady heart. What I had to do, was, to take my woodman's axe in my hand, and clear my way through the forest of difficulty, by cutting down the trees until I came to Dora" (505). Even as the most famous novelist in the world, Dickens's class status was insecure enough to make him grandiloquent about the dignity and eloquence of the novelist's calling. This is not to say that there was anything in the Victorian novelist's calling that prevented one from also being a "gentleman." Thackeray and Trollope had proven this beyond a doubt. But Charterhouse and Harrow provided a very different sort of training than Chatham dockyard and Warren's Blacking Factory.

working-class origins – especially since Dickens repeatedly emphasizes how the handkerchief’s “imposing proportions” correspond directly to the size of his hands (185).⁹

Elizabeth Grosz’s view of the body as a live theater of sociocultural life is germane to *Great Expectations* in the sense that the scenes involving the aestheticization of Molly’s hands stage Jaggers’s complicated personal relationship to society’s lowest classes. Since Jaggers orchestrates Molly’s “hand trap” to interrupt a discussion of the arm size and rowing prowess of genteel clients, the scene offers a dramatic commentary on class from an unlikely, and otherwise robotically-neutral, source. It is precisely when Pip’s group is “wound up ... to a pitch little short of ferocity,” “baring and spanning [their] arms in a ridiculous manner” that Jaggers traps and displays Molly’s hands for his genteel clients (166). Not only does the timing of the action make it a pronouncement to Pip and his friends about the authenticity of the labor she performs but, more importantly, it draws attention to a form of labor that Jaggers’s middle-class profession prohibits him from claiming as his own.

What we witness in Jaggers’s eccentric behavior is the complex and often vexing presence of work in Victorian England. James Eli Adams, Kaja Silverman, and Herbert Sussman have demonstrated the multiform ways in which masculinity operated as a locus of anxiety rather than as a monolithic and stable source of power for Victorian men. In particular, the Victorian ideology that defined masculine “work” as physical and muscular induced an anxiety in middle-class males who no longer worked with their hands amidst a society transformed by bourgeois industrialization. A new valorization of manliness – unsteady though it was – emerged around a model of discipline and self-regulation in the face of what was seen as the libertinism and idleness of the gentry and the irregularity and sexual license of the working class. As we see with Jaggers, though, even a rigid application of “control” offers not a unitary consolidation of masculinity, but rather one beset by contradictions and fluid anxieties.¹⁰

9 The ambiguity of handkerchief deployment also directly affects Magwitch. Recounting his experience before the judge with Compeyson, Magwitch notes the skill with which Compeyson deployed his “white pocket-handkercher” during the trial, an obvious sign of his (fake) gentility in contrast to Magwitch, “a common wretch,” against whom appearances remain heavily stacked (chapter 42).

10 *Great Expectations* diffuses some of this anxiety in its comical treatment of hand ornamentation in other parts of the novel. For instance, the precariousness of Pip’s rapid ascent from the forge may be seen in the way “the stiff long fingers” of his gloves constrain him from ringing the door bell at Satis House upon his first visit as a “gentleman” (122). Similarly, the Aged P. struggles to get his warehousing hands into kid gloves while his son, Wemmick, dons “at least four mourning rings” in Little Britain to decorate his

The fact that Wemmick can reliably predict that Pip will experience the hand-trapping spectacle during his visit to Gerrard Street means that the exhibition of Molly's hands is a ritualized part of Jaggers's identity. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have shown the contradictory psychological effects that rapid economic transition had on the middle-class subject: "The bourgeois subject continuously defined and re-defined itself through the exclusion of what is marked as "low" – as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating ... Yet the very act of exclusion was constitutive of its identity" (191). More recently, Janice Carlisle has linked this line of inquiry to a particular melancholic condition in Victorian manhood; what she calls a "nearly pathological insubstantiality" affecting recently mobile men who "unconsciously long for the sensuous, material reality characteristic of traditional forms of trade" (20, 62). It is for this reason that the language of Molly's "taming" so accurately describes the fractured nature of Jaggers's subjectivity. In both cases the ever-present possibility of eruption of the "low" must be "kept down," as Jaggers himself says, by a repetitive process designed to stop even "an inkling of its breaking out" (307).

I refer here to a mechanism of psychic repression that is not solely Freudian. Like many Foucauldian-influenced critics, I seek to recast behavior that has been ahistorically aligned with fear, guilt, or avoidance as, instead, a Victorian response to the unstable and contradictory boundaries of normative bourgeois masculinity. By this logic, the episodic taming of Molly's hands provides a necessary environment for facilitating the *controlled return* of all that Jaggers represses in his own hands. It is a paradoxical process of acknowledgment and negation that ultimately links Molly's wildness with other textual indicators of Jaggers's anxiety: his insistence on casual rather than "ceremonious" dinner attire and his preference for "Britannia metal" rather than silver (163, 160).¹¹ And since anxiety protects by obscuring what

"wine-coopering hands" (337, 135). Unlike Wemmick, however, who manages the anxiety attendant on his modest rise in station by maintaining a schizoid separation between the place of his "head" work in Little Britain and his "hand" work at Walworth, Jaggers returns home with all the accoutrements of his professional life – handkerchief, penknife, and soap – at the ready to defend his superiority over the lower classes he lives amongst on Gerrard Street. Within the Dickens oeuvre, these contradictions link Jaggers backwards to Bucket (*Bleak House*) and Bounderby (*Hard Times*), but also forwards to Bradley Headstone (*Our Mutual Friend*), whose obsession with social respectability exists in opposition to his desire to evoke a working-class past.

11 There are also several aspects of Jaggers's lifestyle which, taken together, reveal a deliberate attempt to remain true to his lower-class beginnings. We can infer from the constant demand on his services, and because he demands payment up front, that Jaggers enjoys a significant income. Yet he chooses to live in only three rooms of an unimpressive house in Soho (amongst the people he defends). As Pip ponders his invitation to have dinner at Jaggers's house, Wemmick assures him that there is "no silver ... Britannia

would otherwise be intolerable to contemplate, the “training” sessions at the dinner table with Molly allow Jaggers to touch yet control the qualities that middle-class Victorian men were most anxious about: their proximity to manual labor, female labor, and racial degeneration.

The aestheticization of Molly’s hands in terms of their animality and labor becomes a way for Jaggers to retain physical and psychological contingency with the most the socially-interdicted realms of middle-class Victorian manhood. “These low domains,” according to Stallbybrass and White, often “return as the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination” (191). However, *Great Expectations* represents only one instance of a cultural trend after the publication of the *Origin* where the physical site of such longing and fascination was figured in the human hand.

What Dickens called the “attraction to repulsion” from working hands also formed the basis of the bizarre relationship between the real-life Arthur Munby and his servant-turned-wife Hannah Culliwick. The Cambridge-educated Munby never worked with anything heavier than a pen, yet his diaries are replete with an attraction to the “animalistic” features of working female hands. Recent historians and literary critics have acknowledged the value of Munby’s diaries to constructions of mid nineteenth-century gender and class anxieties, but surprisingly not in relation to *Great Expectations* where these concerns surface as a particular form of evolutionary uneasiness in the wake of the publication of *The Origin*.¹²

Consider the eerie similarity between the dramatic hand-trapping scene in *Great Expectations* and Munby’s diary recollection of an encounter with a servant in 1861:

I asked her to show me her hand. Staring at me in blank astonishment, she obeyed, and held out her right hand for me to look at. And certainly, I never saw such a hand as hers, either in man or woman. They were large

metal, every spoon” (160). Once there, Pip takes notice that, though “the table was comfortably laid,” there was “no silver in the service” (164). Just as Jaggers draws attention to his common dinnerware, he insists on common dinner attire even among his gentlemanly wards. “‘No ceremony,’ [Jaggers] stipulates firmly, ‘and no dinner dress’” (163). Such comments suggest that Jaggers’s harbors a deep ambivalence toward his role as a guardian for young men on the path to gentility – a path clearly not open to him when he experienced his own “poor dreams.”

12 Although *Great Expectations* was composed in the immediate wake of *The Origin of Species* (1859), it has received relatively little Darwinian analysis. Levine’s chapter “Dickens and Darwin” in *Darwin and the Novelists* (1988) contains only two references to *Great Expectations*. Most recently, Ivan Krielkamp’s chapter “Dying Like a Dog in *Great Expectations*” engages Darwin only in a footnote (88). For a recent exception, see Morgentaler. The key texts in regard to Munby/ Culliwick are Hudson and Davidoff. More recent studies include Stanley; Pollock; McClintock; Reay.

and thick & broad, with big rude fingers and bony thumbs – but that was not very remarkable ... It was in her *palms* that she was unrivalled: and such palms! The whole interior of each hand, from the wrist to the finger-tips, was *hoofed* with a thick sheet of horn ... What must be the result to a woman of carrying about her always, instead of a true human hand, such a brutal excrescence as this? (Reay 99–100, 128)

Since there are no documented links between Dickens and Munby (not to mention the near simultaneousness of *Great Expectations* and this particular account), it would be a mistake to dismiss their focus on rough female hands as isolated instances of social deviance. Instead, if we view this kind of “manual” perversion as a culturally *central* phenomenon, it is possible to see the ways in which the “deviant” hand emerged as an important site of tension between new scientific theories of interconnectedness and a social heterodoxy that assigned innate, unalterable characteristics to gender, class, and animality. The staging of what Judith Halberstam calls “female masculinity” is riveting precisely because it offers a privileged glimpse into how masculinity is constructed as masculinity. This anxious pluralizing of gender categories productively complicates the pervasive academic model that often situates nineteenth-century gender conflicts solely within the binary of masculine/ feminine. In a novel deeply concerned about the precariousness of many identities, attention to hands exposes the disturbingly relational – not immutable – nature of such categories. The hand becomes, in Bakhtinian terms, a socially peripheral but symbolically central Victorian issue.

IV

The fact that the novel’s most “wild” hand is biologically connected to its most refined makes the hand a prime agent in the novel’s plot as well as a site of collapsed social signification. Here I wish to extend Peter Brooks’s influential claim that plotting is “the central vehicle and armature of meaning” in *Great Expectations* by exploring how the novel’s aesthetics of embodiment make meaning not only carnal but, even more specifically, manual (*Reading* 24). The semioticization of the body eventually converges with what Brooks calls “the somatization of the story” in Pip’s sudden realization that Molly’s “hands [are] Estella’s hands” (*Body Work* 21). The improbability of their biological association, of course, rests on the putative difference between what their respective hands mean in the text’s symbolic economy: if Molly’s hands connote animality, violence, and labor, then Estella’s signify refinement, beauty, and leisure.

Yet for much of the novel, the text actively abets and even endorses the misinterpretation of these categories as separate, self-contained entities through its depiction of female gesture at Satis House. Dickens often figures Miss Havisham's class leverage, for example, as a barely perceptible but consistent combination of verbal and manual directive. Over and over again, Miss Havisham's orders for Pip to "play," to sing Old Clem, and to walk her around the bridal table are accompanied by the same "impatient movement of the fingers of her right hand" (51, 77, 70). What complicates Pip's mistake is the fact that Estella appears to "inherit" a capacity for similar behavior as she uses her "white," "taunting hand" to reinforce her inaccessibility during Pip's tortuous visits to Satis House (55, 181). The narrative red herring which apparently affiliates Satis House hands serves to invoke a Ruskinian notion of gentility as an organic sensibility where the "fineness of nature" is figured as a category of "breeding." Unable even to consider the notion of a less-than-aristocratic Estella, Pip is blinded by this Victorian ideology which tended to convert differences in the acquisition of culture into differences of nature.¹³

Dickens highlights this inability to comprehend relationships between high and low in Pip's repeated failure to identify the connection between Estella's and Molly's hands. After the "taming" scene at Jaggers's house, the text subtly but regularly aligns Molly's animality with Estella's recalcitrance almost exclusively by way of gestural similarity. Estella's insistence that she possesses "no softness, no – sympathy – [no] sentiment" becomes acutely unsettling to Pip because it is accompanied by "a slight wave of her hand" (183, 182). The proclamation of insensitivity, combined with the movement of her gesturing hand, sends Pip into the novel's most puzzling meditation:

As my eyes followed her white hand, again the same dim suggestion that I could not possibly grasp, crossed me. My involuntary start occasioned her to lay her hand upon my arm. Instantly the ghost passed once more and was gone.

What *was* it? (183)

Similar to the way in which Lady Dedlock's recognition of her lost lover's handwriting in *Bleak House* touches her "like the faintness of death," the question – "what *was* the nameless shadow?" – repeatedly chills Pip each time he observes anything associated with Estella's hands (202).

Pip's failure to identify the connection between Estella's and Molly's hands provides narrative suspense but it also exposes his crucial misunderstanding

13 The formulation is Bourdieu's. See *Distinction* 68.

of the relationship between nature and culture. Estella's beauty and inaccessibility lead Pip to assume that there is something "natural" about her class position, an assumption which exemplifies Bourdieu's notion that social values become invisible as acts of culture. Pip suffers from a form of *habitus* which legitimates (and delimits) categories in a society that encourages people to recognize as valid the kinds of everyday ritual, dress, and actions which make particular individuals appear to be the flesh-and-blood incarnation of social roles. Pip exhibits this blindness most notably as he objects to Estella's professed incapacity for feeling by alleging that such emotional deficiency "is not in Nature" (271). Estella's double-sided response more accurately summarizes the interconnectedness between origin and culture that characterizes the novel: "It is in *my* nature ... It is in the nature formed within me" (271, Dickens's italics).

The formation of the latter nature, or what we might call personality, is antedated by Estella's biological kinship with Molly and Magwitch. Beneath her genteel aloofness and apparent refinement there are important parts of Estella's identity that link her disposition, as well as her hand movements, to Molly's "wild" nature. Not only does she exhibit the violent capacity of her mother's hands as she slaps Pip's face "with such force she had," but she also appears *attracted* to the atmosphere of physical aggression itself.¹⁴ Watching Herbert and Pip fistfight delights Estella so much that she offers Pip her only unsolicited amatory advance in the moments after the altercation:

There was a bright flush upon her face, as though something had happened to delight her. Instead of going straight to the gate, too, she stepped back into the passage, and beckoned me.

"Come here! You may kiss me if you like." (75)

Interestingly, Estella shows her attraction to Pip not when he learns to act like a "gentleman," but after he cuts his hands on Herbert's teeth and confesses to feeling like a "species of young wolf, or other wild beast" (75). The attraction of Estella to physical violence, apparent also in her marriage to Drummle, suggests the emergence of a long-buried barbarism that opens

14 Pip records much the same excited response in his sister, when she observes Joe fight with Orlick. Although she drops "insensible" at the window, Pip also notes, parenthetically – "(but who had seen the fight first, I think)" – and then records how she was carried back into the house and "laid down." After struggling and clenching her hands in Joe's hair, a strange hiatus follows. In Pip's words: "Then came that singular calm and silence which I have always connected with such a lull – namely, that it was Sunday, and somebody was dead – and I went upstairs to dress myself" (chapter 15). David Paroissien has convinced me that there is something decidedly post-coital about this intriguing scene. If nothing else, it decidedly echoes the reaction of Estella to Pip's encounter with Herbert.

deeper connections to Molly. Yet only in the “action of their fingers,” does Pip register a Darwinian truth which he, along with middle-class culture at large, deeply abhors: that criminality and civilization, violence and refinement, wealth and poverty are inextricably linked.

V

The Darwinian model of interconnectedness frames the entire novel in the sense that Pip’s *bildung* turns out to be the process by which he learns to appreciate the social, economic, and emotional value of his own (and others’) hands. This development poses a figurative corollary to the literal transformation of Pip’s hands from “coarse” instruments of labor in the forge to bejeweled appendages of leisure in London. Nowhere does the contrast between laboring and genteel hands appear more starkly than when Magwitch returns to London at the end of the novel’s second volume. Here, Magwitch’s proclamation that he “lived rough, that [Pip] should live smooth” is not simply highlighted, but brilliantly *embodied* by the physical interplay of Magwitch’s “heavy brown veinous” hands and Pip’s ringed and recoiling hands (241). On seven different occasions in this brief reunion chapter, Magwitch attempts to embrace Pip’s hands while Pip responds by “recoil[ing] from his touch as if he had been a snake” (241).

Like Molly, Magwitch’s class and criminality evoke a fear of “wildness” that is located principally in the action of his hands. The reader shares with Pip, for instance, the frightening image of Magwitch’s “manacled hands” shaking Compeyson’s “torn hair from his fingers” from one of the novel’s earliest scenes (33). In the convict’s return to Pip’s apartment, Dickens extends this conflation of animality, labor, and criminality. Magwitch’s membership in the penal colony of Australia classifies him as necessarily both a criminal *and* a manual laborer in the eyes of the state. Watching Magwitch move about his apartment, Pip registers his “repugnance” and “abhorrence” for Magwitch in his remark that “there was Convict in the very grain of the man” (253–4, 252). But Pip seems to object, both consciously and unconsciously, more to the “wild” unrefinement of Magwitch’s class than to the barbarity of his unknown crimes. Pip’s observations in the paragraph immediately following his contention that there was “Convict” in the very grain of Magwitch are telling in this regard: “In all his ways of sitting and standing, and eating and drinking ... there was Prisoner, Felon, Bondsman, as plain as could be” (252–3).

The tone of indictment Pip uses to describe lower-class manners also resonates with his disgust for Joe’s clumsiness upon first visiting London. Joe is antithetical to all things criminal, but the working-class life he represents

is criminalized nonetheless once Pip becomes a gentleman. The genteel requirement to stay away from work, home, and forge is represented most poignantly by Pip's sobbing farewell to the "finger-post" at the end of his village. Pip either touches or mentions the village finger-post every time he comes back to the marshes as a gentleman. If the finger-post is "the pastoral equivalent of Jaggers's forefinger," as Douglas Brooks-Davies has suggested, then the manual labor it points to becomes criminalized like everything else to which Jaggers directs his great index finger (57).

Rightfully so, a host of critics have explored the complex array of forces that converge to make labor particularly resistant to representation in the Victorian novel.¹⁵ In *Great Expectations*, though, we encounter work in the most likely of places: in the hands of its working characters like Biddy, Joe, the Aged P., and Molly. It is true that *Great Expectations*, like the majority of other Victorian novels, conceals much of the actual "work" performed within its pages. With Magwitch, however, Dickens makes up for the deficit of narrative space devoted to the sheep-farming operations in Australia by repeatedly inscribing it on Magwitch's hands. Marx's physiological model of labor power as a commodity which exists only in the worker's living body becomes dramatized in Magwitch's account of his life as he sits before Pip and Herbert. Here, even the act of recounting the story of work is labor: Pip remarks how Magwitch often "spread his hands broader on his knees, and lifted them off and put them on again . . . took out his [cotton] handkerchief and wiped his face and head and hands, before he could go on" (262–63). Here, even the act of recounting the *story* of work is labor. Furthermore, Dickens describes his hands as "large," "heavy," "brown," "knotted," and "veinous" only when he returns from New South Wales and knocks on Pip's door in London – a circumstance which seemingly fulfils Engels's postulation that "the hand is not only the organ of labour, *it is also the product of labour*" (240, 253). As we saw with Jaggers and Molly, the size of Magwitch's hands indicates wildness and criminality. But the narrative's insistence on the color, shape, and texture of his hands reflects manual labor's unwillingness, as it were, to go away even in the Victorian novel where it is rendered textually and often geographically invisible. This emphasis on the materiality of Magwitch's hands highlights the physiological fact of human labor behind a money commodity that could not have been more abstract to Pip. As Pip tells Herbert, "It has almost made me mad to

15 George Orwell famously searches in vain for a "realistic" portrait of the working class in *The Decline of the English Murder*. Bruce Robbins suggests the most realistically portrayed worker is the servant in *The Servant's Hand*. Elaine Scarry has chronicled the ways in which work resists representation in *Resisting Representation*. Most recently, Carolyn Lesjak interprets the "invisibility" of labor as an essential function of *Great Expectation's* imperial capitalism in *Working Fictions*.

sit here of a night and see him before me, so bound up with my fortunes and misfortunes, and yet so unknown to me" (358).

Rather than recognize labor in Magwitch's hands, or perhaps *because* he recognizes it, Pip confuses a hand that is "stained with blood" with a hand that is marked by work (242). His unwillingness to acknowledge a hand marked by labor engages the more central problem of work's (in)visibility in the rapidly industrializing capitalist economy. Thomas Richards has argued that the Great Exhibition of 1851 inaugurated an "era of the spectacle" where the display of Victorian commodities became physically and semiotically separated from their actual manufacture (3). Pip confirms his culture's investment in the imaginative separation of work and commodity when he laments that the only thing worse than being a manual laborer is being seen in the act of performing such labor:

What I dreaded was, that in some unlucky hour I, being at my grimest and commonest, should lift up my eyes and see Estella looking in at one of the wooden windows of the forge. (87)

In an ironic twist on Marx, Pip's ignorance of where his money comes from is perhaps never so fraught with alienation than on the night he sees the hands that actually produced it. The agitation with which Pip receives Magwitch's avowal that "I worked hard, that you should be above work" comes not so much because Magwitch is or was a criminal, but rather because the producing hand has become literally visible. Up until this point, Pip has maintained a state of agitated unawareness regarding the connection between the money that sustains him and the labor that supports him. The "social hieroglyphic" that Marx sees connecting labor with money, though, becomes immediately decipherable when Magwitch enters Pip's apartment with his hands outstretched. In this sense, Magwitch's "large brown veinous hands" materialize the "mystical character" of the commodity that Marx attributes to its ability to embody human labor (132). The size and color of his hands, along with their veins and knots, serve as the text's most important reminder that the idleness and prosperity of the privileged classes are dependent on the labor of others. But because he does not extort the surplus value of his labor – he relinquishes it to Pip – Magwitch temporarily interrupts the antagonistic social relations of capitalism.

Dickens marks the end of Pip's time as an idle gentleman aptly: by rendering physically useless the very hands upon whose disengagement Victorian gentility was defined. The fact that Pip's hands are burned in a fire further emphasizes how far his quest for gentlemanly status has taken him from his original apprenticeship as a blacksmith – a vocation requiring him to handle fire, coals, and molten iron on a daily basis. Regaining "the

use of [his] hands” so that he can row Magwitch to safety thus becomes the most important object in Pip’s life and one necessary for him to recognize the immediate power and value of the burned hands he had earlier disowned as “coarse and common” appendages (301).

If Pip’s emotional search for Estella’s true identity is a displaced search for his own identity, as Carolyn Brown has usefully suggested, then the specific location of the disclosure of Estella’s history within the scene where Pip receives treatment for his burned hands merits closer scrutiny (71). This displacement is highlighted most clearly by the text’s juxtaposition of Herbert’s family knowledge with the physical convalescence of Pip’s hands:

“It seems,” said Herbert, “– there’s a bandage off most charmingly, and now comes the cool one – makes you shrink at first, my poor dear fellow, don’t it? but it will be comfortable presently – it seems that the woman was a young woman, and a jealous woman, and a revengeful woman; revengeful, Handel, to the last degree.” (302)

Herbert’s dialogue may appear routine given his task, but something remarkable happens in this passage’s treatment of Pip’s “shrinking.” The reaction is at once a physical response to having bandages removed from his blistered hands and an emotional flinch from learning of Estella’s low, criminal heritage. The causes of physical and emotional pain are the same for Pip at this moment, and their convergence in the novel’s most crucial body part draws attention to the ways in which Victorian anxieties about the fragility of the barrier between human and animal were transferred – often via the hand – to the period’s eroding social boundaries.

The text mitigates some of this anxiety by figuring the hand as the principal instrument of sympathetic feeling between Pip and Magwitch. In a sequence at the end of the novel that Harry Stone has influentially referred to as a “secret freemasonry of hands,” Pip yearns for contact with the criminal hands he so vigorously sought to keep separate from his own (330). After Stone, critics have attempted to “decode” Dickens’s emphasis on hands in *Great Expectations* as part of a “fugitive,” “covert,” or “textually-established scheme” (McLeod 127, 129). As I have endeavored to show, however, the meaning behind the pantomime of hand imagery which ends *Great Expectations* is far from secret or “magical” (333). Instead, it offers a quite fitting resolution for a novel composed at the unique cultural moment when the hand was diagnostic of biological, social, and moral identity.

Historicizing hands in the context of contemporary discourse allows us to evaluate how this particular part of the body became a site where scientists and novelists alike could re-imagine “progress” and transformation. In the

world of *Great Expectations*, those who fail to adapt and change never truly make any progress, and Dickens has some fun with this idea as he concludes the novel. While people like Pumblechook conspicuously offer “the same fat five fingers” in the text’s beginning and its end, Joe, over the same course of time, develops not only his laboring hand but his writing one as well (351). Likewise, Pip’s moral development actually becomes manual development; the sensitivity of Pip’s character eventually merges with the sensitivity of his hands as he learns to understand, among other things, the feel of “pretty eloquence” in Biddy’s ringed hand and the exquisite meaning of the “slight pressures” of Magwitch’s hand while his benefactor lay on his deathbed (341). Even his ability to thwart Jaggers’s “powerful pocket handkerchief” develops concomitantly with his ability to distinguish between criminality and manual labor, between hands that fabricate bank notes and hands that forge iron, between hands that “work” and hands that work (305).

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