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CHANCE AND ROMANCE IN DICKENS'S *DOMBEY AND SON*

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Abstract

The rational man construed by Enlightenment thought sneered at the idea that the world was a haphazard place and instead highlighted the predictability of natural and even social phenomena. As Ian Hacking explains, after the Enlightenment, the tendency was to formulate laws that uncovered the operation of physical forces and even the economy. Yet sometimes the sciences, too, acknowledged and even theorized risk and probability. In this milieu, Charles Dickens welcomed the ability to acknowledge unpredictability. In *Dombey and Son*, in contrast to the protagonist, a formidable entrepreneur, women and the lower classes accept that the wheel of fortune is at work all around them. Even as Dickens critiques the denial of randomness, he portrays speculators who take advantage of unpredictability in a negative light. Further, the novel recognizes and satirizes the categorization of haphazardness as an Oriental trait. In embracing unpredictability, the novel valorizes the art of storytelling, which must provide uncertainty and suspense.

Keywords: *Dombey and Son, Charles Dickens, Chance, Economics in literature, Storytelling .*

DICKENS'IN *DOMBEY AND SON* ESERİNDE ŞANS ve ROMANS

Özet

Aydınlanma düşüncesi tarafından canlandırılan rasyonel adam figürü, dünyanın rastgelelikle dolu bir yer olduğu düşüncesine gülüp geçer ve doğal ve sosyal olayların tahmin edilebilir olduğunun altını çizer. Ian Hacking'in açıkladığı gibi, Aydınlanma'dan sonraki eğilim fiziksel güçlerin ve hatta ekonominin işleyişini çözen kanunlar kuramlamak doğrultusundaydı. Ne var ki, bazen bilim dalları da riskin ve olasılığın varlığını kabul etti ve kuramlaştırdı. Özellikle *Dombey ve Oğlu*'nda belli olduğu üzere, Charles Dickens belirsizliği kabul etme yeteneğini yüceltti. Bu romanda, heybetli bir işadamı olan Dombey'in aksine, kadınlar ve alt sınıflar feleğin çarkınının gücünü kabul ederler. Dickens talihin hayattaki rolünü reddedenleri eleştirse de, belirsizliği kendi çıkarı için kullanan yatırımcılara da olumsuz yaklaşır. Ayrıca, bu roman rastgeleliğin toplumda genelde bir doğulu özelliği gibi görüldüğünün farkındadır ve romans türünde serüvenleri Londra'nın göbeğine getirerek bunu hicveder. Öngörülmezliği kucaklamak suretiyle, belirsizlik ve heyecanlı bir bekleyiş sunmak zorunda olan öykü anlatma sanatına değer katar bu roman.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Dombey ve Oğlu, Charles Dickens, Şans, Edebiyatta iktisat, Öykü anlatımı*

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1.INTRODUCTION

Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*, published serially from 1846 through 1848, traces the evolving relationship of the eponymous Mr. Dombey and his daughter Florence. Mr. Dombey, concerned only with money and his company at first, appears happy upon the birth of his son, as the boy is destined to take over the establishment as Dombey's heir. When the son dies in childhood and Mr. Dombey's financial empire later collapses, the once-stubborn man must learn to love his daughter Florence, whose adventures through childhood connect her to a likeable young man named Walter. When Florence becomes an adult, she is united with Walter and, by the end of the novel, reconciled to the father who once hated her.

Dombey and Son is well-known for its economic themes and has been the subject of much criticism concerning literature and economics. Robert Clark finds that the downfall of Dombey's firm and the rise of Carker—Dombey's manager—chronicles "*a violent capitalist transformation*," one associated with the energies of the emergent free-trade system, which Carker represents (1984: 75). For Lynda Zwinger, the novel reveals that "*the power dynamic between capitalist and employee . . . is exactly the same as between male and female*" (1985: 440). Thus, the novel's juxtaposition of a story about a firm (Dombey's) with that about a girl (Florence) interconnects patriarchy with capitalism. Like Clark, David W. Toise traces a transformation in the novel, in which abstract value comes to replace intrinsic value. That transformation is implicit in the economic victory of Sol Gills, Walter's uncle, who turns massive profits through a distant investment (1999). Garrett Stewart finds that the novel keeps two registers in mind simultaneously—the economic and the metaphysical (2000). The sea, for instance, signals both, as it is the setting for oceanic commerce and the entity that whispers of death to Dombey's son Paul.

Following the lead of such criticism, this paper turns to the descriptions of commerce and investment in this novel to suggest that Dickens singles out one line of economic action as lucrative: one that takes into account the primacy of unpredictability. *Dombey and Son* insists that investments must acknowledge randomness, and as such, the novel opposes the Enlightenment confidence that the universe is an orderly place. As we will see, Dickens's embrace of the unpredictable is an aesthetic choice as well as an economic statement. His fiction offers suspense, as does the economy, highlighting our lives' dependence on chance occurrences.

2. CHANCE OCCURRENCES AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

As Ian Hacking explains, the Enlightenment witnessed an attack on chance:

> *Throughout the Age of Reason, chance has been called the superstition of the vulgar. Chance, superstition, vulgarity, and unreason were of one piece. The rational man, averting his eyes from such things, could cover chaos with a veil of inexorable laws. The world, it was said, might often look haphazard, but only because we do not know the inevitable workings of its inner springs* (Hacking 1990: 1).

In the post-Enlightenment period, the desire for order prevented the rational man from seeing the world as a haphazard place, and the burden of superstition was placed on the shoulders of the other, be it women or the lower classes. This pattern was manifested especially in sciences that sought to formulate immutable laws governing the universe, the world, and everything taking place in them.

Yet chance was not completely marginalized in nineteenth-century science. For one thing, social scientists such as political economists seemed unsure of the exactness of the laws they formulated. Thomas Malthus, for example, observed that "*some of the principal writers on political economy*" possess a tendency to "*premature generalization*" (Malthus 1951: 8); John Stuart Mill, noting the overdetermined nature of economic phenomena, wrote that "*no treatise on political economy can enumerate all th[e] causes" that give rise to the patterns that are observed*" (Mill 1909, 1). Secondly, in the mid-Victorian period, science was to become increasingly open to the notion of probability through Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. As George Levine notes, "*chance and the random become great creative forces in Darwin's theory*" (Levine 1988: 93). Hacking himself notes that in nineteenth-century science "*a space was cleared for chance*" (1), although, of course, the desire to master chance accompanied this development.

Charles Dickens emphasizes the omnipotence of fortune in his fiction, and as such, takes sides in the ongoing negotiation of the value of chance in Victorian culture. His treatment of chance is especially prominent in *Dombey and Son*, in which unpredictability haunts and shapes characters' feelings and adventures, regardless of their class status, gender identity, and geographical location. Indeed, the boundaries between genders, social classes, and geographical locations are demarcated by characters' attitudes toward fortune. While the lower-classes are self-consciously at peace with the reign of fortune, Dombey, the upper-class businessman, denies the operation of the wheel of fortune. While the ubiquity of chance can be articulated in the geographical margins of England and among the servants in the Dombey estate, in Dombey's vicinity silence prevails with regard to this matter.

Dickens valorizes what he constructs as lower-class, feminine, and geographically marginal response to unpredictability: fortune must be recognized, not denied. It must be encountered with the desire to surrender to it, not with the impulse to master it. Such an attitude toward chance contrasts to the desire for orderliness and predictability, which manifests itself in the characterization of Mr. Dombey. Even economic affairs, *Dombey and Son* communicates, bear the mark of the wheel of fortune; in Dickens's vision, the acceptance of unpredictability is the appropriate way of dealing with life.

3. DOMBEY'S HABITS

Refusing to admit the presence of chance happenings, Mr. Dombey denies fortune. He ascribes predictability to a world governed by randomness, but is always disappointed. He cannot accept that the outcome of a birth may be a girl as well as a boy; he cannot accept that the wheel of fortune gives him a child weak in health. When his son dies and any hope of predictability disappears along with him, Dombey's denial amounts to a crisis. Denying, yet having to confront, the wheel of fortune is Dombey's lot in life.

As his friends know, Dombey's "*dinner hour is a sharp seven*" (Dickens 2001: 385). What such strict discipline precludes is the possibility of chance occurrences. The moment his son Paul is born, Dombey has no doubt that the future will fulfill his predictions. "*This young man has to accomplish a destiny—a destiny*," he says. If Paul has to accomplish a destiny, Dombey is certain that he will. The "*old fashioned*" little Paul's openness to uncertainty contrasts to his father's reliance on predictability. While Dombey takes for granted that Paul will undertake the firm when he grows up, little Paul hopes that he can have "*a beautiful garden, fields, and woods*" with his darling sister Florence *if* he grows up:

> "*Yes," said Paul. "That's what I mean to do, when I--"he stopped and pondered a moment.*
>
> *Mrs. Pipchin's eyes scanned his thoughtful face.*
>
> *"If I grow up," said Paul*. (Dickens 2001: 202)

The plot in its entirety reveals Paul to have the more rational approach here, as he recognizes the contingency of life for what it is.

The analogy that political scientists employed over and over to emphasize the predictability of economic patterns is the motion of planets and stars. Just as a planet's motion around the sun is predictable, so is the economy, according to this logic. Dombey, too, is fond of the reference to heavenly bodies: "*The Earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and the moon were made to give them light*" (Dickens 2001: 2). Like the political economists, Dombey relies on the eternal presence of heavenly bodies to convey his sense of the persistence of economic profit. The firm Dombey and Son, whose origin seems to predate the sun and the stars, seems at least as stable and permanent as these entities in this reified vision.

The presence of characters who are at once immersed in economic transactions and acknowledge the presence of randomness reveals that Dickens does not equate economic activity with an aversion to chance. In contrast to Dombey, who "*plays nothing*," Carker "*plays at all games*" and "*plays them well*" (Dickens 2001: 401). While Carker does not object to rolling dice—he plays backgammon—Dombey keeps his distance from games. Carker knows that dice are at work not only in backgammon, but also in business. His fascination with insurance reveals his awareness of the potential to gain profit out of chance happenings. Speaking of the ship the *Son*

and Heir, he says, "*she was insured, from her keel to her master head*" (Dickens 2001: 387). It is not only Carker the scheming and dishonest businessman who relates economic transactions to randomness. The Midshipman sells "*chronometers, telescopes, compasses, charts, maps, sextants, quadrants*"—tools that help a ship's crew deal with the surprises nature offers them. To use Hacking's term, these tools tame chance and in doing so acknowledge its existence. Dombey, on the other hand, cannot tame chance because he does not acknowledge its existence. The cautiousness that the tools represent is necessary, because life in general and the economy in particular present unpredictable challenges.

We can contrast Dombey's rejection of randomness with Walter Gay's acceptance of it. Eager to seek adventures at sea, Walter talks to his uncle's friend Captain Cuttle:

> *As to mere going away, Captain Cuttle, I don't care for that; why should I care for that! If I were free to seek my own fortune—if I were free to go as a common sailor—if I were free to venture on my own account to the farthest end of the world—I would gladly go! I would have gladly gone, years ago, and taken my chance of what may come of it.* (Dickens 2001: 224)

Walter longs to seek his fortune in two senses of the word. First, he seeks to make money; secondly, he longs to find out what chance has in store for him. The two significances overlap, of course, in that chance will either enable him to make money or not. It is not a coincidence that Walter is both poor and he seeks his fortune: his survival hangs in the balance. Cautiousness is a luxury he cannot afford. The plot proves Walter right in that seeking his fortune is the way to go—it brings him money and happiness.

Walter is not the only one who seeks his fortune. Speculation, that is, the desire to turn profits without investing in any material goods is a theme in this novel, though it is not as conspicuous as in the case of *Little Dorrit*. Dickens's sensitivity to, and fictionalization, of economic speculation—both within and beyond *Dombey and Son*—hints at his awareness that the economy was not as predictable as some economists hoped. From Mrs. Pipchin's husband, who falls victim to a fatal speculation in the Peruvian mines, to Mr. Merdle in *Little Dorrit*, his characters engage in economic speculation. The characters who speculate take advantage of uncertainties in the economic market. In this context, Dombey's refusal to play games gains further significance. Nineteenth-century discourses often described speculation as a game. Jane Austen employed a card game as an analogy to speculation in *Mansfield Park*; an economic journalist named Morier Evans wrote repeatedly of the "*round game of speculation*" and "*the very hazardous game that was being played*"; Dickens wrote in *Nicholas Nickelby*, "*Speculation is a round game; the players see little or nothing of their cards at first*" (Holway 1992: 110). Given this association, Dombey's refusal to play games positions him as the opposite of a speculator.

Dickens critiques Dombey's denial of chance occurrences even as he also condemns speculation. Mr. Pipchin suffers as a result of his choice to speculate, for instance. The proper attitude toward fortune, for Dickens, is to accept its existence but not to take advantage of it. A docile acceptance is the ethically acceptable position in dealing with the wheel of fortune: such is the position that *Dombey and Son* assumes. Neither the speculator nor the rigid Dombey satisfies this condition.

The novel treats the economy itself as an unpredictable domain, as evident in the bankruptcy of the Dombey firm. Precisely because Dombey takes the firm's strength for granted, he is inept to deal with financial crises. Announcing Carker's fraud, Mr. Morfin notes that there will be "*no danger*" to the "*House's credit*" unless "*the head of the House, unable to bring his mind to the reduction of its enterprises, and positively refusing to believe that it is, or can be, in any position but the position in which he has always represented it to himself, should urge it beyond its strength*" (Dickens 2001: 791). As the ensuing bankruptcy reveals, Dombey fails to display the necessary flexibility. Just as Paul never grows up to fulfill his destiny, the firm is not what it used to be, yet Dombey cannot adopt to the new cards he has been dealt.

Dombey's inability to deal with chance occurrences also manifests himself in his early attitude toward Florence. He is unable to make his peace with having a girl. The firm Dombey and Son is destined indeed to be Dombey and Daughter, but until the novel's closure, Dombey does not have the maturity to accept the card he has been dealt and make the best of it. His rejection of the girl is similar in nature to the business failures that

make him go bankrupt. The inability to deal with randomness is not just a pragmatic financial problem but an ethical failure, as his attitude toward Florence reveals. He makes the girl suffer. When he ultimately learns that she is indispensable for his happiness, that development charts his growth in dealing with chance occurrences.

Maritime metaphors offer a linguistic tool for acknowledging the wheel of fortune. The unpredictability that the scientist fears and Dombey denies materializes in the metaphor of the shipwreck—a chance occurrence that requires an ability to adopt to new circumstances. *Dombey and Son* as a whole is preoccupied with what the waves whisper, and if, in the case of Paul Dombey, they whisper news of this impending death, in the case of economic matters they intimate the impossibility of foreseeing the future.

Carker and Sol Gills, with their willingness to acknowledge chance, embody the astuteness required to deal with the economy. In this sense, the novel chronicles a transition from an older attitude toward risk taking, represented by Dombey, to a new attitude toward it, represented by both Carker and Sol Gills, but especially the latter, whose economic activity the novel rewards. Sol Gills's investments pay off whereas Carker is punished as the plot unfolds. What is different about Sol Gills? He is not manipulative the way Carker is, he doesn't seek to keep life under control, but deals peacefully with the cards that life deals him. Among the investors of the novel, he is the character most at peace with the operation of the wheel of fortune.

The plot of the novel similarly trains Florence to recognize the ubiquity of chance occurrences and accept the effect that they have on her life. When Walter's ship first goes missing, Florence has to accept a state of uncertainty. Free indirect discourse reveals her thoughts: "*uncertainty and danger seemed written upon everything*" (Dickens 2001: 344). Even the state of uncertainty remains an uncertain matter. Florence's imagination dwells on the uncertain, always preoccupied with the possibility of bad news: "*The weathercocks on spires and housetops . . . pointed, like so many ghostly fingers, out to the dangerous seas, where fragments of great wrecks were drifting, perhaps*" (Dickens 2001: 344). Acknowledging the possibility of a shipwreck is not pleasant, but it is a necessity, and the plot rewards Florence for that acknowledgment. Florence does her part by not despairing, by keeping the advice of a friend who declares, "*a bright look-out for'ard, and good luck to you!*" (Dickens 2001: 359). Sure enough, Walter is returned to her.

4. THE PLACE OF UNCERTAINTY

Patrick Brantlinger argues that the periphery of England is the "*place where the fantastic becomes possible*" (Brantlinger 1998: 43). Brantlinger thus suggests that peripheral spaces are likely spots for randomness to flourish. Yet Dickens's shipwreck metaphor—the treatment of the Dombey firm as a shipwreck—brings unpredictability home. If, habitually, many literary works locate chance happenings in the East or in British colonies elsewhere, *Dombey and Son* emphasizes that chance reigns supreme everywhere. Dickens indeed mocks the literary convention of exiling unpredictability to distant corners of the world as he incorporates it into a comic element. Romance, the genre in which unlikely adventures transpire, usually takes place in exotic lands, but Dickens brings it home. Captain Cuttle and Mrs. MacStinger's interaction transports Robinson Crusoe's marvelous adventures right into the heart of London. In the Midshipman, the captain is depicted as "*cast away upon his island, look[ing] around on the waste of waters with a rueful countenance*" (Dickens 2001: 349). Fitting with this extended metaphor, the potential visit form MacStinger is figured as an enemy attack. The marvelousness of the adventure may seem out of place in London, but Captain Cuttle sincerely feels as if he were Crusoe: "*Captain Cuttle daily rose . . . with the solitary air of Crusoe finishing his toilet; and . . his fears of a visitation from the savage tribe . . . were somewhat cooled*" (Dickens 2001: 580). The deliberate use of the Crusoe allusion as part of the novel's sense of humor reveals Dickens's insight that the romance plot, dependent on chance occurrences and fantastic adventures, conventionally belongs to far-away islands.

It is indeed traditional for romances to export adventures to peripheral spaces far away from the protagonists' base, but such is not the case for *Dombey and Son*. The metropole becomes like a peripheral space in its accommodation of the adventure plot, which means that it becomes the home of randomness. In this, Dickens reverses the commonplace designation of the Orient as the home of the marvelous. It is in everyday affairs, in details as prosaic as investment profiles, that romance makes itself felt.

Consider, for instance, the description of Florence's house as a fairy-tale setting. The London dwelling is compared to a magic house set far away from any human settlement. This comparison imports the supernatural aura surrounding the latter into the former: "*Florence lived alone in the great dreary house. . . No magic dwelling-place in magic story, shut up in the heart of a thick wood was ever more solitary or deserted to the fancy*" (Dickens 2001: 337). The house achieves liminal status. It is in the metropole, but displays all the characteristics attributed to peripheral or decentered spaces in romances: "*So Florence lived in her wilderness of a home*" (Dickens 2001: 339). Dickens describes the dwelling both as an ordinary urban space and as the locale of an unfolding romance that promises exciting adventures.

The conventional association of unpredictability with the Oriental also becomes evident in Mrs. Skewton's comment about Mr. Carker's encounter with Edith. Most interesting for my purposes is Mrs. Skewton's identification of an "*enchanting coincidence*" as something a Turk—here simply metonymically representing any Muslim—would respond to by referring to God. She designates religion as the means of making sense of coincidence. Through Mrs. Skewton's appropriation of Oriental rhetoric upon encountering a coincidence, Dickens caricaturizes the post-Enlightenment Western self's inability to deal with unpredictability.

In addition to portraying one of his main characters as blind to chance (Dombey), Dickens preserves spaces within the setting of the novel where characters can cultivate an awareness of unpredictability. In Dombey's vicinity, chance occurrences go unacknowledged; however, below the stairs, or in proximity to the nation's border, or in spaces inhabited by women, it becomes possible to acknowledge the randomness of life.

In this novel, social class is one of the significant factors in determining one's attitude toward randomness. The fortuneteller comes from the lower class. In search of some money, Mrs. Brown offers to tell fortunes in exchange for money: "*Give me a piece of silver, pretty lady, and I'll your fortune true*" (Dickens 2001: 404). Of course, the reader is not to think that Mrs. Brown can really predict the future. What Dickens offers instead is a woman who, in dereliction, has no problem acknowledging the role of fortune. Dombey is perhaps the character least likely to be her client: why would a man, who knows from the moment his son is born that he'll inherit the firm, ever go to a fortuneteller? The *raison d'etre* of fortune telling after all, is that no one except the fortuneteller can predict the future.

Uncertainty, although unwelcome in Mr. Dombey's presence, causes no discomfort in the servants' quarters. When Dombey's daughter Florence goes missing, the servants "*wonder where she is*" (Dickens 2001: 763). In contrast, Dombey is never in a state of wonder. In wondering is the insight that out of numerous possibilities only one will ultimately crystallize. The boss, on the other hand, is always certain. That is precisely the posture toward life that will not work in the Dickensian universe—Dombey must become bankrupt, because he does not have the ability to deal with chance occurrences, to display wonder for the uncertainties of life.

Like class, gender is a factor in determining one's approach toward uncertainty. Mrs. Chick does not belong to the lower class, but unlike Dombey she can still recognize the wheel of fortune at work, specifically by getting "*a presentiment—a dark presentiment . . . that something [is] going to happen*" (Dickens 2001: 443). The moment of presentiment supposes its own extraordinariness: except it such fleeting moments, it implies, one cannot tell the future. Dickens bestows Mrs. Chick with the ability to validate unpredictability: "*Why, my gracious me, what is there that does not change! Even the silkworm, who I am sure might be supposed not to trouble itself about such subjects, changes into all sorts of unexpected things continually!*" (Dickens 2001: 434). Dickens writes with sarcasm—who after all does not know that the silkworm shall be transformed? In Mrs. Chick we find a fault that is the opposite of Dombey's: she feels surprise where none is to be expected.

Those Englishmen who are associated with the geographical periphery similarly possess a facility in noticing and articulating the ubiquity of chance. Solomon Gills and Walter are situated at the border of the nation, not only because the business of the Midshipman puts them in touch with people who have been around the world, but also because they themselves travel to distant lands. Walter, even before he begins to travel, has a "*taste*" for the "*lure and charm of the ocean*" and "*the life of adventure*" that it offers (Dickens 2001: 45). The taste for adventure is as much an aspect of characterization as a signal that, when we deal with these characters, we enter the realm of a genre based on marvelous happenings: the romance. *Dombey and Son* indeed needs the romance

that these characters' lives lend themselves to, as that genre cultivates uncertainty and confusion, which in turn provides suspense. Captain Cuttle and Solomon Gills wonder what Walter's fate is, and they are aware they cannot know it; Walter and Captain Cuttle wonder where Solomon Gills is, and they are aware they cannot know it. They have to take into account multiple possibilities, only one of which will be the actual outcome. Acknowledging unpredictability, Gills writes to Cuttle that he is going to "*wander away on . . . a wild voyage*" in "*uncertainty*" (Dickens 2001: 584); he later describes the journey as one characterized by the lack of "*certain information*" (Dickens 2001: 843). Similarly, Cuttle, when he moves into the Midshipman, is aware that he is clueless about what the future will bring. He "*go[es] into the instrument business*" simply "*to see what comes out of it*" (Dickens 2001: 380). As Dickens suggests, the nation itself is no less susceptible to chance occurrences than distant corners of the world, but those situated liminally on its borders are more self-conscious about the ubiquity if chance.

The geography of unpredictability in *Dombey and Son* suggests an outlook that contrasts to the binaries mounted by imperialist ideology: the Orient governed by chance, the Occident by Enlightenment rationality. In fact, Dickens's resistance to that binary complements the anti-imperialist potential that Edward Said locates in Dickens's fiction. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said underlines Dickens's willingness to articulate what others would rather repress, namely England's dependence on the geographical other in shaping itself. More recently, Van Wyk Smith and Rajeswari Rajan have underlined the anti-imperialism of *Dombey and Son*. Whereas the former argues that the "*derring-do*" of the sea "*disrupt[s] triumphant mercantile imperialism*" (Van Wyk Smith 2000: 138), the latter notes that the novel reveals "*fissures in . . . [the] ideology of progressive social and historical change*" (Rajan 2002: 87). The undoing of the correlation between Orient / unpredictability and Occident / predictability similarly constitutes a subtle way in which the novel challenges imperialist ideology.

Dombey and Son moves chance from the margins to the center. Consider first the commonplace treatment of chance by the beginning of the nineteenth century: "*In 1800 'chance,' it was said, was a mere word, signifying nothing—or else it was a notion of the vulgar, denoting . . . lawlessness, and thus to be excluded from the thought of Enlightened people*" (Hacking 1990: 7). Dickens, on the other hand, underlines the omnipresence of chance happenings and the inevitability of unpredictability. In this context, characters' awareness of uncertainty indicates wisdom rather than constituting a failure. Mr. Dombey's servants possess the wisdom that their masters lack, thus displaying the utopian potential that Bruce Robbins attributes to fictional servants (1986).

5. THE NOVEL, SUSPENSE, AND CHANCE OCCURRENCES

In valorizing women's and the lower class' stance toward chance, the novel to an extent celebrates its own accomplishment. After all, the novel, suspenseful and full of unforeseen plot developments, embodies the unpredictability it thematizes. For example, Walter, who is supposed dead after disappearing at sea, comes back to seek his pursuit of Florence. Storytelling remains a medium open to unpredictability: plots, especially Dickensian ones, are full of unlikely coincidences, even though they may seem predictable to the experienced reader. To be sure, as George Levine reminds us, "*the feeling of coincidence is merely local*" in plots and "*what has seemed like chance at the level of story acquires a meaning in overall plot*" (Levine 1988: 138, 131). What constitutes a coincidence within the world created by the author has in fact been carefully designed in advance. Yet, to the reader absorbed in the storyline, turning the pages in suspense offers the experience of encountering chance happenings. It comes as no surprise that Dickens would have Captain Cuttle tell a story to prepare Florence for the big surprise—Walter's return. Storytelling constitutes an excellent exercise in training oneself to process randomness and seek meaning amidst it. In this way of thinking, the opposite of predictability is flexibility and adaptability rather than irrationality.

Dickens's celebration of chance happenings also constitutes a celebration of his own career. Robert L. Patten writes, "*it was a series of accidents, or perhaps more accurately contingent opportunities of which [Dickens] took advantage, that steadied his ambition, channeling it into writing novels*" (Patten 1976: 333). Not that Dickens's own business was as unpredictable as the fate of a ship in a storm. The point here is rather that Dickens was able to construct his fame because of historical developments that were not under his control, such as "*the growth of paperback publishing in the post-war era*" (Patten 1976: 333). As such, he was the opposite of Dombey: a man

who knows how to take advantage of contingencies. To be sure, Dickens resembles Dombey in that he seeks to turn profits, but there the resemblance ends. Surprisingly it is not the fictional owner of a business empire but the bourgeois novelist who better displays the attitude that translates into profits.

Dombey and Son after all does not lend itself to a reading in which the novel critiques all economic activity. There are characters in it whose investments are rewarded, such as Sol Gills and Walter Gay. The lucrative investors of the novel also turn out to be its successful story tellers. I have argued that this is no coincidence: both economic activity and storytelling require the ability to recognize and welcome chance occurrences. The realm of aesthetics and economics are not mutually oppositional, but share the modern penchant for risk-taking, which presents itself as a new stage of development after the Enlightenment discomfort for randomness.

6. CONCLUSION

In accepting the significance of disorder and unpredictability, this novel valorized a way of thinking that Enlightenment thought had sought to reverse. Dickens was not alone in undertaking this project. By the time he was writing, some branches of science were taking into account probability. At a time when scientists were debating the extent to which their theories should acknowledge probability, Dickens's *Dombey and Son* highlighted just how powerful the wheel of fortune is. In this manner, Dickens tackled the same project as various branches of science, with confidence and sophistication.

In this novel, women's and the lower classes' acceptance of random events contrasts to the rich entrepreneur's inability to deal with them. In fact, as the novel highlights, an entrepreneur who cannot deal with the operation of chance is not one who will survive the vicissitudes of business. The novel honors the acceptance of randomness by its female and lower-class characters. Also noteworthy is the novel's criticism of the urge to speculate. While the novel asserts the importance of recognizing chance occurrences, it does not condone taking advantage of unpredictability. Accepting the wheel of fortune is different from making money out of it. While the former act recognizes the impotence of human design, the latter seeks to assert mastery over chance happenings. Betting on unpredictability seems as dangerous as not recognizing it at all.

As Edward Said has argued, during the nineteenth century the West and the East were treated as oppositional, but in this novel Dickens does not treat them as such. Reversing facile binaries between the East and the West, this novel displays self-consciousness that unpredictability is located at the heart of London, not just in distant corners of the world. The novel's own presentation of surprising turns of plot, which are coincidences at the level of the storyline, reinforce the thematic embrace of chance. The novel thus aligns itself with what it portrays as women's and the lower classes' ability to accept chance occurrences for what they are. The novelist is on the same side as the underprivileged, sharing their insightful approach to chance. Romance elements, which consist of fantastic adventures, are thus treated as worthwhile. If, by the time Dickens was writing *Dombey and Son*, realist fiction was becoming increasingly dominant, romance adventures are justified in this novel through the embrace of chance occurrences.

The value Dickens places on the need to recognize unpredictability sheds light on his love of coincidence as a plot device. Dickens's plots famously depend on coincidences, especially in order to come full circle and find closure. At times, some modern readers look down upon the prevalence of such coincidences that offend their sense of likelihood. However, it is possible to approach the coincidence-driven plot from another angle and find in it the culmination of Dickens's ethic of honoring chance occurrences.

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