



Title	Anxieties about Victorian Gender Ideology : A Study of Dickens's Oliver Twist and The Old Curiosity Shop
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Citation	大阪大学世界言語研究センター論集. 2010, 3, p. 37-52
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://hdl.handle.net/11094/7752
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Anxieties about Victorian Gender Ideology: A Study of Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*

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要 旨

ヴィクトリア朝ジェンダーイデオロギーの不安 —ディケンズの『オリヴァー・トゥイスト』と『骨董屋』の研究—

「男女の領域」「性差による役割」を重視しながら、本来は男性に従属すべきとされていた女性が国を統治しているという根本的な矛盾を抱えていた Victoria 朝のイギリス社会では、社会構造の変化に伴い「男性らしさ」が身体能力によって規定されるようになっていた。本稿では、Victoria 朝初期に出版された Dickens の『オリヴァー・トゥイスト』と『骨董屋』における老人と子供の多さに着目し、老人の女性化と「男性らしさ」の関係、子供と「性差による役割」の逆転の可能性という問題を、具体的な登場人物を取り上げて論じる。そうすることにより、作家という職業の「男性らしさ」さえも疑問視される時代背景の中で、当時まだ若かった男性作家の作品が、当時の社会に潜む gender の問題に対する懸念をいかに反映しているか、を明らかにする。

Keywords: Victorian, Gender, Masculinity, Children, The Aged

キーワード: ヴィクトリア朝, ジェンダー, 男性らしさ, 子供, 老人

1. Introduction

The Victorian period, when the “ideology of separate spheres” was prevalent especially among the ascending middle class, was fraught with deep and unsolvable paradox from the start, as a female monarch acceded to the throne in 1837. The “separate spheres” ideology, “T[t]he feminine home was the place for nurture and love, the masculine world for restless energy and rationality,” strictly regulated different gender roles, causing “a heavily polarized understanding of gender,” which was even “seen to divide humankind into two quite different elements”: “the association of masculinity with reason, authority and resolve was consolidated, together with their dissociation from the feminine” [Tosh 1999: 46–47]. On the other hand, the Queen of the Commonwealth, endowed with utmost authority, had to rule and govern with “restless energy and rationality” out of her home. Although the Queen is known to have made much

of her home as well, trying to be a model wife and mother, "domestic ideology came to find it difficult to give sufficient explanations of the reality" and various feminism movements began to bear fruits towards the end of the century, as the feminists regarded the Queen as *their* model [Kawamoto 2005: 46; my translation]. It is not difficult to suppose, therefore, that Victorian people were all the more conscious of gender issue under these circumstances.

In the context of the time, on the other hand, it has been pointed out that "D[d]ue to the feminization of the novel, the domestic location of the novelist's work . . . the Victorian male novelist was often seen, by both himself and others, as being not sufficiently manly," and that "the Victorian male novelist was, in fact, deeply concerned about questions of manliness" and "these concerns are reflected in his literature" [Dowling 2001: 1, 35]¹. The male novelist, as well as other Victorians, could not but be sensitive about gender problem. This critic acutely traces "the fear of femininity that lies at the heart of Victorian literary masculinity" [Dowling 2001: 9].

Curiously enough, what is called "the fear of femininity" that the novelist suffered was shared by Victorian aged people; for, while in the 18th century, "masculinity was understood in terms of gentlemanliness . . . determined by rank and property," the rapid change in the social framework made the "autonomy and physical strength" "the requisites of the new masculinity" in the Victorian period [Heath 2009: 13]. In other words, when "masculinity" came to be "measured by physical ability at its youthful height," "the older man increasingly was pushed to the margins, and aging became more and more debilitating and effeminating" [Heath 2009: 30]. It is natural that novelists, whose work is more concerned with mental ability than with "physical strength," should have similar uneasiness.

If aged men can represent deviation from the codes of masculinity because of their physicality, children before puberty also have the inherent possibility of transcending the gender distinction and codes because of their insufficient physical differentiation. It is known that even male children before school age in the Victorian period were brought up, in many families, together with their sisters in the nursery at home, which was regarded as the female sphere [Tosh 1999: 103–104]. Then, it would not be too much to say that the combination of children and the aged characters in a novel by a Victorian male writer should, in some way, expose the deep-rooted anxiety about the gender problem in the contemporary society.

The year 1837, when Victoria succeeded to the throne, coincides with the time

1 Dowling, in relation to Dickens, argues mainly about *David Copperfield*, but his point can be extended to the novelist's earlier novels.

Charles Dickens started serializing his second novel *Oliver Twist*, which is unequivocally permeated with children and aged characters. Within only three years from the beginning of this novel, which is appreciated as “surely one of the great popular works of art of all time” [Wilson 1970: 104], Dickens commences to write *The Old Curiosity Shop*, another novel that shows the “positive relationship between young and old” [Covvey 1991: 61]. These two novels at the early stage of the author’s (and also the Queen’s) career are the most distinctive instances, many of whose characters’ ages are set at both extremes. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to focus on *Oliver Twist* and *Old Curiosity Shop*, and trace the concerns about gender from the viewpoint of the aged and children. The former half will discuss the aged characters in the two novels, while the latter will treat the children, so that we can consider the aspects of digression from the codes that might throw some light on the obsession and tension about gender in the Victorian society.

2. The Aged and Masculinity

As was mentioned above, the Victorian period was beginning to set up new criteria for defining manliness due to the change in the social structure. This section will analyze how the issue of masculinity in the elderly or aged characters is presented in the two novels, focusing on their manifold physical, mental and behavioural features.

One of the most memorable Dickensian villains, Daniel Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is described as “an elderly man” when first appears in front of us, though we are never informed of his exact age [22]². We can safely suppose that he is younger than Nell’s grandfather, “a little old man” [4], but Quilp comes to seem less and less fit even for the category “elderly” as the story goes on. Contrary to the physicality of Nell’s grandfather, that is, his “long grey hair,” “spare and slender form” and “so deeply furrowed” face, which, together with “something feeble and wandering in his manner,” are all suitable for his old age [4–5], Quilp’s outward characteristics present curious and striking duality. His teeth “yet scattered in his mouth” are called “few discoloured fangs,” which indicates their scantiness/oldness and sharpness/toughness at the same time; “his wiry throat” stands for thinness and strength; his hair “of a grizzled black” shows his age by its colour, but its standing “straight upon his temples” suggests his yet unwaning vitality, just as his “coarse hard beard” does [22].

The disparity between his “elderliness” and his physical appearance is intensified by his words and behaviour, which “incessantly give off the remorseless, boundless vi-

2 Citation from Dickens’s novels will be made only with page numbers.

tality of desire," to the extent that "he personifies the energy of life" [Marcus 1965: 152 – 153]. Quilp, still at his age, is endowed with youthful vitality rather than the signs of "physical deterioration" or "behavioral infirmity" typical to the old age [Mangum 1999: 98]. The description of Quilp at breakfast table, for example, shows his remarkable, even demonic vigour:

He ate hard eggs, shell and all, devoured gigantic prawns with the heads and tails on, chewed tobacco and water-cresses at the same time and with extraordinary greediness, drank boiling tea without winking, bit his fork and spoon till they bent again . . . [40]

His appetite here does not stand separate from his desire toward women.

While he is described as an "ugly creature" and "dwarf," he seems to have a strange attraction towards women, which has made Mrs. Quilp "a pretty little, mild-spoken, blue-eyed woman," ally "herself in wedlock to the dwarf in one of those strange infatuations" [30]. His attitude towards his wife and his mother-in-law is like that of a tyrant, but Mrs. Quilp admits "Quilp has such a way with him when he likes, that the best-looking woman here couldn't refuse him if I was dead, and she was free, and he chose to make love to her" [32]. Quilp himself even invites Little Nell "T[t]o be Mrs. Quilp the second, when Mrs. Quilp the first is dead" after five or four years[45], though his words just make the girl shrink from him and tremble. The point here, however, is that the "elderly" Quilp, "Dickens's most brilliant grotesque villain, whose hideous vitality forms an ongoing counterpart to Nell's frail purity" [Lerner 1997: 95], still has the prospect of a new life with a young wife after a few years when he will be much older than he now is.

There are many other scenes where Quilp presents the incongruity with "the long held associations between old age and illness, disability, disengagement and decline" [Featherstone & Hepworth 1995: 31]. When asked by Nell to stop two boys fighting, he cools their courage by "dancing round the combatants and treading upon them and skipping over them, in a kind of frenzy . . . always aiming at their heads and dealing such blows as none but the veriest little savage would have inflicted" [46]. Quilp goes to work "with surprising vigour; hustling and driving the people about, like an evil spirit; setting Mrs. Quilp upon all kinds of arduous and impracticable tasks; carrying great weights up and down, with no apparent effort . . ." [103]. Moreover, his omnipresence, that is, his trick of stealing up on others without being noticed and of eavesdropping the conversations the speakers want to hide from him, is another proof of his physical prowess and keen attention. By showing himself in the most unexpected way at the

tea party for the ladies of the neighbourhood, he succeeds in shattering the discourse “upon the propensity of mankind to tyrannize over the weaker sex, and the duty” of “the weaker sex to resist that tyranny and assert their rights and dignity” [30]. Even Mrs. Jiniwin, Quilp’s mother-in-law who is “laudably shrewish in her disposition and inclined to resist male authority” is discouraged in her attempt to excite her daughter (Mrs. Quilp) “under the dominion of her husband” “to rebel” [30]. Here, Quilp is not only the personification of “the energy of life,” but acts as a proponent of masculinity.

Another villain in Dickens’s early work — Fagin, “a very old shrivelled Jew” in *Oliver Twist* — proposes similar incompatibility between his age and abilities, though he must be much older than Daniel Quilp. Despite his oldness, Fagin sometimes shows amazingly swift movement: when training his group of boys for picking pockets, he “trotted[s] up and down the room” [110]; at the poking with a toasting fork by one of the defiant boys, he steps back “with more agility than could have been anticipated in a man of his apparent decrepitude” [135]; he “darted[s] out in pursuit” on the occasion of Oliver’s flight [164]. Though the old man usually walks at a “shuffling pace,” he can walk with “unusual speed” and “even faster,” if necessary [235].

Physical ability of nimbleness, however, is not the only feature that Fagin shares with Quilp. The domineering attitude Quilp assumes at home towards his wife and mother-in-law, at his office towards his employee, and at any other places is common to the authoritative and relentless treatment of his gang. His oppressive and scaring manners and his cunningness serve him effectively in controlling the group of boys who are much younger and perhaps stronger than he is. He rebukes his apprentices “with great vehemence” and “enforce[s] upon them the necessity of active life, by sending them supperless to bed,” if the boys come back to him empty-handed; he goes “so far as to knock them . . . down a flight of stairs” to teach them a lesson and subdue them [112]. Fagin’s violence and dominance analogous to those of Quilp’s are manifestations of “male authority” he consciously or unconsciously wants to maintain regardless of his old age. In the cases of these two brisk and active elderly/old men, we can find the “unnerving” instances of “older people who held on too tightly to property or to power” in the Victorian period [Magnum 1999: 101].

We can witness another outstanding example of the “unnerving” aged in Nell’s grandfather in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, who holds on “too tightly to property.” It would not be, however, appropriate to call him a “villain” as we do Quilp or Fagin. Among the aged characters in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, or even in all Dickensian works, Nell’s grandfather might be one of the most complex mixture of negative and positive features. The narrator, who is an aged man himself, comments on this little old man at their first meeting: “coupled with something feeble and wandering in his manner, there

were, in his face, marks of deep and anxious thought which convinced me that he could not be, as I had been at first inclined to suppose, in a state of dotage or imbecility" [5]. He is confused at the grandfather's strange behaviour of getting out of his house late at night: he cannot but feel the incongruity between his leaving the granddaughter alone and his affectionate tone in calling "Little Nelly, little Nelly!" [6]. The narrator, while disposed "to think badly of him [the grandfather]," is far from doubting "his love for her [Nell] was [is] real" [12].

Another noteworthy feature about the grandfather appears in his repeated references to Nell's future: "she shall be rich one of these days, and a fine lady . . . I say again, the time is coming when she shall be rich. It has been a long time coming, but it must come at last. . . ." [6, 9]. His prospect of his granddaughter's becoming rich sounds totally groundless, especially at this early stage of the story. He later confesses that he has borne poverty, but would "spare her the miseries," and "leave her—not with resources which could be easily spent or squandered away, but with what would place her beyond the reach of want for ever" [27]. The old man's strong purposeful words lead the narrator, and the reader, to surmise that he is "a wealthy man" "constantly tortured by the dread of poverty" [27].

As the story proceeds, however, it turns out that the grandfather's expectant view on futurities is merely based on his habit of gambling. Whether his obsession with gambling is caused by addiction anybody can fall into or by "miserly behavior or avarice" with which "O[o]lder people have long been associated" [Covey 1991: 51] is not clear. It is certainly beyond all reason, still, that he should steal the spare savings from his granddaughter and even plan to rob his benefactor so that he can make money for Nell. However strongly he might assert that he is doing everything out of his love towards his granddaughter, we cannot help tracing in it something of the "behaviour betraying . . . mental failure," typical of the aged people [Mangum 1999: 98].

The old grandfather's obstinate adherence to gambling and money, on the other hand, might be understood as his resistance to the old age. He says he first began his habit when he recognized, "how short a time I [he] might have at my [his] age to live. . ." [74]. His oldness is beginning to disqualify him as Nell's protector, just as his poverty has made it impossible for him to protect his wife and his daughter, both of whom passed away early. By securing Nell's happiness, he might be trying to compensate for his helplessness with Nell's mother and grandmother, and regain his position as a protector and master. Then, his gambling is doubly "unnerving," because it is nothing but the representation of an old man holding "on too tightly to property" and "to power" at the same time [Mangum 1999: 101]. Ironically enough, "his weakness for gambling," which he started as a means of recovering his authority as a guardian, "makes him ut-

terly unreliable as a protector and she [the granddaughter] has to take on the role of looking after him" [Lerner 1997: 94, 95].

Contrary to the villains such as Quilp and Fagin, who are horrifying all the more because they retain too much energy even at their age, there are other aged characters in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Oliver Twist* who stand for "maternal masculinity," as Mangum names it [Mangum 1999: 99]. This critic refers to the "connection between gender and old age" in literature, which represents male characters undergoing "the feminizing effect of old age," and goes on to argue: "this feminization, while representing a fall from one kind of idealized man—the youthful, virile, assertive man of action—sometimes signals moral, spiritual, and domestic fulfillment." Another critic mentions the "association of old age with wisdom," introducing that "ages-of-life formulas linked wisdom and scholarship with old age" [Covey 1991: 61]. The schoolmaster in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is one of the illustrative aged characters.

When the heroine of the novel and her grandfather, after escaping from the Punch-show men, meets this schoolmaster with "a kind face" for the first time, they find him sitting alone "thoughtful and silent," extremely worried about one of his pupils [182]. He tells the travellers much about that pupil, his "favorite scholar," and asks them to pray for the child [185]. The schoolmaster in the classroom next day is depicted as "the very image of meekness and simplicity, vainly attempting to fix his mind upon the duties of the day, and to forget his little friend" [188]. His anxiety about the boy's illness is so agonizing that he gives his class a half-holiday. The pupils are, of course, glad and joyous, but some of their parents visit the school in the afternoon to express their displeasure and criticize him. The "peaceable school-master," however, does not utter a word against their attack but remains "quite silent and uncomplaining" [190–191]. When the sick child finally passes away, the schoolmaster cannot lay down "the small cold hand in his" and keeps "chafing it," knowing that it is "but the hand of a dead child" [193]. The deep sorrow of the old schoolmaster over the death of his favorite pupil reminds the reader of the old woman in the churchyard, who frequents the place for her husband even after fifty-five years from his death. At the end of the story, after the death of Nell and her grandfather, the schoolmaster, "timid of venturing into the noisy world" is seen pursuing "his quiet course in peace" in his "lone retreat" [553].

Another example of "maternal masculinity," which is concerned with the issue of the association of wisdom with old age, is found in Mr. Brownlow in *Oliver Twist*, who is the benefactor of the eponymous hero. This old gentleman is marked with his plentiful experiences and memories. His present single state derives from the unexpected death of his wife-to-be on the very day of their wedding, which circumstance again bears close similarity to the case of above-mentioned old woman, who has cherished the

memory of her deceased husband for fifty-five years. By going through various moments of "great pain and sorrow," Mr. Brownlow has become a kind-hearted gentleman as his words show:

The person on whom I have bestowed my dearest love, lie deep in their graves; but, although the happiness and delight of my life lie buried there, too, I have not made a coffin of my heart, and sealed it up, for ever, on my best affections. Deep affliction has but strengthened and refined them.

[146]

We can witness the expression of his benignity on the occasion of his seeing the weak orphan boy "very worn and shadowy from sickness"—"Mr. Brownlow's heart, being large enough for any six ordinary old gentleman of humane disposition, forced [forces] a supply of tears into his eyes" [129 – 130].

This aged gentleman, however, possesses not only abundant gentleness and emotion but reason and self-control to restrain his feelings. The tears at seeing the poor boy are checked before they drop, and Mr. Brownlow just clears his throat and asserts that his hoarse voice is due to his having caught cold. Instead of crying, he chooses to ask very practical questions to the boy and the housekeeper. The gentle old man, in addition, is rather short-tempered and his "indignation" tends to be "greatly roused," but is soon "suppressed" with the help of his reflection, so that he is saved from acting hot-headed as his friend Mr. Grimwig often does [121]. His "perfect firmness and composure" finally drive the cunning Monks, Oliver's half-brother, to confess the malevolent schemes to destroy Oliver, and clarify the mystery of the boy's identity [453]. His rationality stands in decided contrast with the loving and almost intuitive trust in Oliver's innocence Mrs. Bedwin, his housekeeper, shows. While Mr. Brownlow wants to believe in the boy at the bottom of his heart, he tries to accept the beadle's report about Oliver's past, persuading himself that "Oliver, is an imposter" who "has been a thorough-paced villain, all his life" [176]. Though Mrs. Bedwin turns out to be correct in the end, the balance between emotion/passion and reason/self-control manifested in Mr. Brownlow effectively suggests the positive "maternal masculinity," represented by the "wisdom" of the aged.

As we have seen, masculinity in terms of physical strength is not always regarded as a positive feature in the elderly or aged. Villains such as the grotesque Quilp and miserly Fagin with enough physical ability are far from being pleasant in the depictions by the author, though they have strange attraction that prints them on our memory.

Nell's grandfather, who is quite helpless, cuts a pathetic or even abhorring figure by clinging too much to money, which might derive from his deep-set desire for authority. The country schoolmaster and Mr. Brownlow, who severally act as the benefactor of the protagonist in each novel, are accepted as favourable for their "maternal masculinity" based on their mentality rather than physicality.

3. Children and Reversed Gender Roles

While it is true that younger children were treated equally regardless of their gender, it is also true that the idea of the child at the period was strongly connected to gender issue:

t[T]here have been two principal ways of perceiving it—in an anticipatory or a retrospective mode. . . . These two modes tend to be gendered male and female, respectively. In the anticipatory, masculinized mode, the child is seen in relation to his own adulthood In the retrospective feminized mode, the child is . . . associated with the past . . . and frequently with death. [Robson 2000: 118]

The mere fact, however, that both *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity* have boys who die of illness without reaching their "own adulthood" already contravenes this idea, demonstrating the fuzzy gender demarcation in these novels, which even the death of Little Nell does not seem to compensate. In this section, we are going to take up the relationship between gender and children in the Victorian world by focusing on the passive/feminine hero Oliver and active/masculine heroine Nell.

Oliver Twist, who represents, as Dickens himself mentions in the Preface to the novel, "the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance and triumphing at last" [33], is characterized by his passivity as well as his total innocence. Steven Marcus defines the boy "the first youthful example of the passive central figure" [1965: 81], while Angus Wilson goes as far as to call him "a vacuum," "an image of humanity worked upon by external forces" [1970: 105, 106]. Even at the very start of his life, whether to survive or not is left to Nature, as there is nobody else near him except a drunken pauper woman and a careless parish surgeon. The orphan's station in society is fixed by "the old calico robes" enveloping him: "a parish child—the orphan of workhouse—the humble half-starved drudge—to be cuffed and buffeted through the world—despised by all, and pitied by none" [47]. From this time on, Oliver's life is filled with the scenes where he is forced, subdued, led or patronized by the people and

circumstances surrounding him, which all foreground his passivity and submission.

On his ninth birthday, Oliver is to be moved from the branch workhouse for juvenile paupers to the regular workhouse after the decision by the parish authorities. The matron of the branch workhouse, Mrs. Mann, gives the boy a "hint" by "shaking her fist at him", so that he is forced to pretend, in front of the parish beadle Mr. Bumble, to feel sad about leaving the place [52]. The child is taken away from the horrible place to another still more horrible place, "firmly grasping his [Mr. Bumble's] gold-laced cuff" [53]. At the new place, Oliver is urged by other starving boys to go to the master after the meal and ask for more. Nobody, of course, wants to take such a daring action, but it falls onto the unlucky boy by lottery: he is forced by the power of Fortune, as it were. This impudent behaviour is punished by exile from the workhouse to be apprenticed to an undertaker. Oliver, "once more attaching himself to Mr. Bumble's coat cuff" is "led away by that dignitary to a new scene of suffering"; the beadle acts as the orphan's "conductor" with "a fit and becoming air of patronage" [72].

At his new master Mr. Sowerberry's, Oliver is subdued by "his superiors," especially by Noah Claypole, who declares the new boy is "under me[him]" [76, 77]. After continuing "meekly to submit to the domination and ill-treatment of Noah Claypole," the passive boy just once defies the elder boy with an "energy he had [has] never known before" when his mother is insulted [88]. This outbreak of vigor, however, is soon subjugated by the superiors and Oliver is "dragged. . . into the dust-cell," and locked up there [90]. After this momentary rebellion, the orphan boy decides to run away from his master's "to seek" his "fortune" [96], though his "fortune" seems to be destined for his successive experiences of compulsion and subservience.

The escapee Oliver comes across a queerest-looking young gentleman, who has "about him all the airs and manners of a man," in a town near London [100]. This strange young gentleman, Jack Dawkins, or the artful Dodger, becomes now the orphan's "conductor" and takes him through the narrow and muddy street, "directing Oliver to follow close at his heels," "catching him by the arm," and "drawing him into the passage" [103]. The den the boy is led to has an old Jewish, Fagin, as its master, who is the Dodger's "patron" and has taken the young gentleman "under his protection" [102]. Here we find Oliver once more deprived of his freedom and restored to the position of the subordinate, just as Dawkins is a "pet and *protégé*" of the elderly man. The Dodger introduces the new boy to the master of the place, "pulling him forward," and leads him upstairs, while Oliver cannot but follow his conductor "groping his way with one hand, and having the other firmly grasped by his companion" [103]. He is not only navigated into the building, but is forcibly dragged into the dark world of the evil.

In this shady place, the innocent boy is instructed and trained to be a pickpocket,

without recognizing the fact, and believing the practice just a playful game. One day, Oliver goes out of Fagin's den “under the joint guardianship” of two other boys, who steal a handkerchief from a gentleman's pocket and run away, leaving Oliver on the spot [113]. The poor boy is chased by the crowd, caught, “lugged along the streets by the jacket-collar,” and locked up in a stone cell [117]. At the magistrate's inquiry, the boy is proved to be innocent by the robbed gentleman's testimony. The kind gentleman Mr. Brownlow takes the orphan to his house while the boy is unconscious because of illness: now the boy has become the “charge” of his new friend [125].

Contrary to the dark and dirty den of the thieves, the gentleman's place is a neat house with a kind housekeeper. At this peaceful place, under a new protector, the sick boy is “tended with a kindness and solicitude that knew[knows] no bounds,” and recovers little by little [125]. Oliver's life here, “like Heaven itself” [143], is completely different from what he has experienced so far: Mr. Brownlow's house is far from being a place of oppressive custody. The quiet protection by the old gentleman, however, cannot last long. When the thankful boy goes out on an errand, he is found out by one of the young women who frequent Fagin's. The woman, Nancy, embraces the boy, claiming him to be her own runaway brother, and leads him along the street, “grasping Oliver's hand” [157]. The poor child, who has enjoyed momentary dreamlike peace, is again “dragged into a labyrinth of dark narrow courts,” and is “forced along them,” while Sikes, a brutal lover of the woman, is “seizing Oliver's unoccupied hand” [158, 159]. The boy now returns to the shadowy world of Fagin's group and is kept among them once more.

Back in Fagin's place, Oliver is “led . . . into an adjacent kitchen” by one boy and made to change from the new clothes Mr. Brownlow has provided to the old ones he used to wear [168]; the old suit of clothes show his present status as the old calico robes did at his birth. The clever Jewish man tries to secure the boy as one of his gang by closing him in the den and prohibiting the companionship of other boys. Thus, controlled by the cunning trick of the old Fagin, the innocent boy is made to take part in the burglary by Sikes and his friends. The fierce man has “led him[Oliver] away” from Nancy's presence, and takes him to the destination, “dragging Oliver after him,” urging “with a jerk at his little companion's wrist,” so that Oliver cannot but quicken his pace and follow the man [202–204].

Just as the burglary is to take place, the good boy summons up his courage to betray the gang and tell the people of the target house. His brave deed is half completed, as he himself is shot by the man of the house and is forsaken by his evil companions again. Again unconscious, the wounded boy is taken into the house to be taken care of by the two ladies there. After regaining health, he keeps staying with the kind ladies,

Mrs. Maylie and Rose Maylie, this time without being drawn back to the dark underworld. His active behaviour, on the other hand, keeps falling short even after this. When he thinks he has pointed the robbers' house where they stayed together before the burglary, he learns that it is now inhabited by a total stranger. Oliver's attempt to reunite with gentle Mr. Brownlow and his housekeeper Mrs. Bedwin fails the moment he finds the gentleman's house empty.

Thus the passive protagonist does not lose his passivity throughout the story, though there are moments when he shows the fragments of activity. Even his identity, the greatest mystery in the novel, is traced and clarified by the positive efforts and operations of people around him, without his taking any active part in the pursuit. Oliver is adopted by Mr. Brownlow as his son and lives a retired life in a tranquil village: we are never told how he grows up into adulthood or what he becomes afterwards, as if the process of his growth itself becomes inactive as the novel draws to its end.

One of the female counterparts of innocent Oliver is Little Nell, the heroine of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The author, in the Preface to this novel also, refers to "her innocent face and pure intentions" surrounded by "associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first foreshadowed" [xii]. The reference to "her bed" here seems almost as noteworthy as her innocence, when we remember that the first chapter of the novel is closed with the depiction of "the beautiful child in her gentle slumber," and the appropriate illustration of the scene [14]. A critic rightly points out:

In *The Old Curiosity Shop* the idyll . . . celebrates peace, rest and tranquility. The strongest impulse with which the novel is charged is the desire to disengage itself from energy, the desire for inertia. The fatigue and steady decline of vitality which Nell suffers is merely one manifestation of this need. [Marcus 1965: 142]

While it is true that the novel is filled with "the accumulating, pervasive atmosphere that leads us to think about death almost all through the book" [Lerner 1997: 95], it cannot be denied that Nell is not as passive and submissive a character as Oliver who is dragged, controlled and protected, almost always regardless of his own will. Despite her "frail purity," she has to behave actively and energetically, just because "she has to take on the role of looking after" her grandfather who has become "utterly unreliable as a protector" [Lerner 1997: 94–95]. She shoulders the responsibility of the protector and parent, which is far beyond the range of generally expected feminine propensities. Moreover, she loses her house in the early pages of the novel, which deprives her of the

position of “the angel in the house” conforming to Victorian domestic ideology. The following paragraphs will illustrate the variety of unfeminine actions the innocent girl has to perform.

When Little Nell is first introduced to us by the aged narrator, she is lost in the city at night on her way back from her errand. She cannot but ask this stranger to show the way to her own home to return. This episode appears to exemplify the little girl’s dependence on the aged man, but the important part of the incident is that she has carefully and intentionally chosen the person she wants to be helped by. She decides to talk to him, among many strangers around her, believing that he would not tell her wrong, because he is “such a very old gentleman,” and walks “so slow” himself [3]. Her judgment turns out to be correct, as the narrator confesses later that he loves “these little people” and is “ashamed to take advantage of the ingenuousness or grateful feeling of the child” to gratify his curiosity [4]. The impression the narrator has on the scene symbolizes the girl’s position throughout the novel: “the little creature accommodating her pace to mine, and rather seeming to lead and take care of me than I to be protecting her” [3]. Nell, from the start, is to act as a protector and leader rather than a passive dependent and has “the energy” to move people’s mind.

The instance of her most critical decision is shown at the time when the vicious Quilp seizes the curiosity shop because of the debt the grandfather cannot pay back to him. She has, for sometime, suggested to her grandfather, to “be beggars, and be happy” rather than to undergo “all the agony of mind,” always worrying about their financial standing [71]. She makes this suggestion “boldly,” “with an energy. . . in her flushed faced, trembling voice, and impassioned gesture” [71]. Her sincerity and earnestness finally succeed in persuading the old man to “be gone from this place, and never turn back or think of it again,” and they leave their beloved home in an early morning, without being seen by the cunning Quilp who is still asleep in bed. Now the girl literally becomes “his [the grandfather’s] little guide,” as the old man laments that he “can do nothing” for himself [116–117].

In order to survive, decision and guidance are always upon her: she has to determine “at which [labourer’s hut] to ask for permission to rest awhile, and buy a draught of milk” [118]; after meeting the Punch Show men, Mr. Codlin and Short, she proceeds to the place to stay overnight, “having hold of her grandfather’s hand,” which reminds us of Oliver who, on the contrary, is always led with his hand held by somebody. The companionship with the performers at first seems to offer some relief to the old man and the child, but Nell begins to feel certain uneasiness to be with them, as she notices they are always watched by their new companions. Although even the misanthropic Mr. Codlin speaks to her “with a number of benevolent and protecting looks” [146], she

cannot be free from this uneasiness, and dares to escape from them at the crowded racecourse.

Away from the racecourse, Nell and the old man come across a solitary-looking schoolmaster. In spite of his distressed atmosphere, which makes her hesitate to approach, Little Nell "took [takes] courage" and "ventured [ventures] to draw near, leading her grandfather by the hand" [182]. Her bold demeanour works here again, allowing the exhausted travellers to find shelter and food there. Their departure from the schoolmaster's brings about the encounter with a new companion, Mrs. Jarley, a wax-work exhibitor. When the lady offers the girl a position which will separate the child and the grandfather, Nell asserts "in an earnest whisper" that they cannot be separated, finally winning the positions both for herself and for her grandfather [205]. At around the same time, the girl happens to see the horrid Quilp from a distance while taking a walk in town. Despite the utmost fear she feels, however, the child concludes cool-headedly that they do not have to run away this time, because Quilp is leaving their town on a London coach.

The threat that disturbs the secure life under the benevolent Mrs. Jarley comes from an unexpected direction: Nell's grandfather resumes the habit of gambling at an inn they happen to stay on a stormy night. The old man frenziedly pesters her for money, which she cannot but hand to him, yet still she tries to "drew [draw] her grandfather aside, and implored [implores] him, even then, to come away," all in vain [223]. The old man even steals money from his granddaughter's room at midnight, and counts it with "his white face pinched and sharpened by the greediness" [229], at which sight the innocent girl feels quite horrified. What is worse, the greed of the old man drives him to plan to rob Mrs. Jarley of her money, which makes Little Nell decide to flee once more. Though this flight turns out to be the one into the final stage of her life, she ventures to take her grandfather away from the source of temptation, "holding him by the hand" and "led [leading] him on" [318].

By meeting again the old schoolmaster they have met before, and finding a tranquil shelter at his village church (now that he is a clerk and schoolmaster), Nell's need to lead and guide her grandfather comes to an end. At the same time, her life itself also attains consummation, as it were. It is as if she is not allowed to grow into womanhood but destined to remain in her childhood, when she can fully exert her positive activity and leadership, which are often connected to masculinity and tend to be denied in a Victorian female.

In the unfolding of these "C[c]hildren central to his earlier novels" who are not "allowed to grow up" [Andrews 1994: 135], we can witness the prominent instances of

the inverted gender roles. By picturing the personification of passivity/femininity and activity/masculinity opposite to the norm in two of the most favoured children in his novels, these novels seems to suggest the possibility of the positive view on the digression from gender codes.

4. Conclusion

So far, we have seen how the issue of masculinity and gender can be detected in the early novels of Dickens. As the aged men and children are both prone to obscure gender identity chiefly due to their physicality, their combined appearance in the novels can produce the utmost effect of revealing the anxiety about manliness and confusion of gender codes. In *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the reconciliation with rather feminized “maternal masculinity,” as opposed to the untimely persistence in the masculine qualities by the elderly/aged people as seen in Fagin and Quilp, and contradictory projection of gender ideology to innocent children incarnated in Oliver and Little Nell can be understood as the reflection, or rather the precursor, of the overall uneasiness about gender paradox in the country beginning to be ruled by a female monarch. It may also be regarded as justification for the young Victorian male novelist who was going through the still more pointed inquietude at the beginning stage of his writing career. While his early novels *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* are replete with a variety of children and aged characters, Dickens’s later novels, written in his forties, would come to portray middle-aged male characters in their relationship with younger girls, which is to disclose the writer’s added anxiety about gender and masculinity: his own “increasing preoccupations with aging” [Heath 2009: 42].

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(2009. 12. 3 受理)