

# Ruth Pinch in *Martin Chuzzlewit*: A Special Case

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**Introduction:** It has become a common practice to divide Dickens's women into two groups: the flawed women, who are acceptable because they aren't oppressively Victorian, and the "angels,"<sup>(1)</sup> who may be patronized, deplored, or simply ignored. Allowances must be made for critics who don't fit neatly into this rather broad characterization, but I think it applies to the majority of comments on Dickens's novels, especially those of generalists commenting on Dickens more from memory than detailed study. Thus, in *Bleak House* Mrs. Jellyby is acceptable because she is an obsessive cause-monger and a bad mother, but Esther Summerson, being a Victorian angel, can be patronized or despised, since she is too central to be ignored. It is even more common to treat *David Copperfield*'s wives in this way: Dora is a success because she is an inadequate wife, with cute little signs of arrested development, and Agnes, the good wife and companion, is, in George Orwell's words, the "perfect legless Victorian angel" (138).

When we come to the somewhat earlier novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*, we can expect the same criteria to be applied. Mrs. Gamp, the gluttonous, sadistic, hilarious nurse, is justly celebrated. But both Mary Graham and Ruth Pinch will be dismissed as Victorian angels. And indeed, if Dickens's angels can be dismissed out of hand, Mary and Ruth, though far from "legless," deserve to be, because they are

certainly "angels" in the normal sense, and Dickens doesn't mind calling them that.

These dismissals are questionable on the face of things for two reasons: First, they are knee-jerk reactions, and critical reading requires individual response. Secondly, if we grant that Dickens is a great novelist, we should hesitate before dismissing out of hand a habit in his novels that is important to him. Though we shouldn't accept any Dickens creation uncritically, we should be careful not to patronize him; and readers who reject Dickens's habits, as opposed to individual blemishes, leave themselves open to the question of why their taste should be preferred to the instincts of a great writer.

This paper will discuss the case of Ruth Pinch. I will try to show that Ruth serves a thematic purpose in *Martin Chuzzlewit*: that she plays a part in the larger structure of the novel, and her portrayal is justified. In Part I, I will explain how Ruth's situation is more drastic than Mary's. In Part II, I will explain how she is associated with her brother Tom, who embodies the theme of selflessness. In Part III, I will try to justify the caressing tone in which both Ruth and Tom are sometimes described and apostrophized.

**Part I, Mary and Ruth:** Mary is in the main tradition of good Dickens women. She recalls the eponymous Nicholas Nickleby's sister Kate in being hounded by a corrupt and undesirable man, Mr. Pecksniff. Kate Nickleby actually has two hounds, Sir Mulberry Hawk and her uncle, Ralph Nickleby, who sets Sir Mulberry on to her. Similarly, Mary prefigures Agnes Wickfield in *David Copperfield* and Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*. Agnes is wooed and menaced by the repulsive Uriah Heap, and Esther by Mr. Guppy (who is very

presumptuous, but otherwise harmless). Furthermore, all of these women have protectors: Agnes has David Copperfield, who will personally wring Heap's neck before he allows Agnes to marry him. Kate has her brother Nicholas, who comes quite close to wringing Sir Mulberry's neck. In a fine comic scene, Esther proves to have the mildest protector in Mr. Jarndice, who sends Guppy on his way with an urbane show of superiority. And Mary has old Martin Chuzzlewit to look after her, right from the beginning of the novel; and Pecksniff will feel his wrath before the novel ends.

Ruth is not part of this pattern at all, which is the most obvious difference between her and Mary. Ruth is courted by no one at the beginning. After more than 100 pages, she is revealed to be attractive when she first meets the Pecksniff sisters, both of whom were looking forward to ridiculing a female version of her awkward, balding brother Tom. They feel "indignation" at meeting a young woman who is "by no means what they came to see" (138, with proximate quotes).<sup>(2)</sup> Thus far, it would be stretching things to call Ruth beautiful. She is "not at all ugly," and has "a good face, a very mild and prepossessing face; and a pretty little figure—slight and short, but remarkable for its neatness." She is not described as beautiful until we see her through the eyes of John Westlock, who apparently falls in love with her the first time he sees her with Tom, and is probably not objective.<sup>(3)</sup>

On the other hand, we might take John at his word, since his appraisal of Ruth's appearance, even before speaking to her, so far surpasses the pretty pictures that Tom's affectionate charges (Pecksniff's boarders) always painted of her from pure imagination. They decorated their work-room walls with ugly caricatures of the

rest of Tom's imagined family but drew nothing but beautiful pictures of the imagined Ruth. Thus:

Tom made himself as spruce as he could before leaving home, and when John Westlock, through the half-opened parlour door, had glimpses of that brave little sister brushing the collar of his coat in the passage...he called to mind the fancy-portraits of her on the wall of the Pecksniffian work-room, and decided with uncommon indignation that they were gross libels, and not half pretty enough: though, as hath been mentioned in its place, the artists always made those sketches beautiful, and he had drawn at least a score of them with his own hands, (573)

Above all, though, Ruth has no prospects and no attachment to anyone of influence, so she attracts no attention even from undesirable men.<sup>(4)</sup> So, while Mary is protected by old Martin from the beginning, Ruth lives on the outskirts of society. Working as a governess, she is abused not only by her *nouveau riche* employer, the brass-and-copper founder, but by everyone in his household, from his nasty little daughter, Ruth's student, to the footman, as Tom quickly discovers when he visits her:

"Oh!" said Tom, hurrying towards him. "I didn't observe that there was anybody else. Pray is Miss Pinch at home?"

"She's in," replied the footman. As much to say to Tom: "But if you think she has anything to do with the proprietorship of this place, you had better abandon that idea." (537, with proximate quotes)

This reception gets decidedly more insulting, with the footman first

pretending to be distracted by a pigeon and then, in taking the message that Miss Pinch's *brother* has come to see her, pretending to confuse the word "brother" with "mother." The happy result is that Tom has an argument with the proprietor, Ruth is fired, and Tom takes her away to live with him. This is the point where good things begin to happen for Ruth, with John Westlock bringing a message to Tom that a job has been offered him by an anonymous employer, who turns out, much later, to be old Martin. The second (and intended) benefit here is that John meets Ruth and they fall in love, which solves Ruth's problems in the time-honored manner.

But before Ruth and Tom leave the brass-and-copper founder's house, Tom feels compelled to insist, in reply to the man's sneering remark that Ruth is "an unprotected young person" (540), that his sister does indeed have a protector: himself. In a more naturalistic vein — in an Emile Zola novel, for instance — this would be a rather pathetic claim. Tom has no prospects at all, and only his friendship with John Westlock, who is now a wealthy heir, seems to stand between the Pinch family and the abyss. And without old Martin, who is at least a semi-magical presence,<sup>(5)</sup> this would be the simple fact. Ruth would be without actual protectors (with John Westlock's protection left to chance, since she hasn't even met him at this point). This makes Ruth entirely more vulnerable than Mary, for whom old Martin is a longtime employer, and whose support from old Martin involves no "magic" at all.

**Part II, Ruth's Relation to Tom:** Leslie Fiedler, reminiscing about a time when he used to discuss Dickens with his coterie of precocious high school friends, makes a rather sweeping dismissal of not just the

good women in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, but the good characters in general:

In any case, we neither admired nor long remembered the novel's 'good' characters: young Martin himself, or Mary Graham..., nor their doubles, John Westlock and Ruth Pinch, who similarly wind up in marital bliss. They remained for us as pallid and disembodied as Old Martin, the protagonist's grandfather, who ensures their Happy Endings by manipulating events from behind the scene, like the "Duke of Dark Corners" of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. (530)

It is clear from the rest of his article that Fiedler hasn't updated this opinion. We might be impressed that the young Fiedler and his friends noticed old Martin Chuzzlewit's resemblance to the Duke in *Measure for Measure*,<sup>(6)</sup> but otherwise the opinion is mainly useful as an exaggerated case in point: not only does Fiedler gloss over the differences between Ruth and Mary Graham; he blurs the fundamental differences between young Martin and John Westlock. It should be obvious to anyone that Westlock is a much simpler character than Martin. John is a finished product from the beginning of the novel: sensitive, modest, and loyal. He sees through Mr. Pecksniff so completely that he is willing to set the old hypocrite's vices aside and shake hands with him before leaving his house forever (balked only by Pecksniff himself). John is as unaffected when he comes into money as he was in his condition of gentile poverty. Thus, when he is treating Tom Pinch and young Martin to an expensive dinner, he keeps laughing at his own ability to pay for the treats he orders.

John also turns out to be the good Samaritan who is paying for the housing and care of the unconscious (and still anonymous) Lewsome. And above all, John completely appreciates Tom's superiority.

By contrast, Martin is a work in progress. When he first meets John, the two young men make an easy connection because of their similarities. Martin also has the background, look, and manner of a gentleman. It might be added that Martin has the *instincts* of a gentleman. He is a much better person *in potentia* than he has yet become, which may be why his grandfather, old Martin, loves him so much and tries to secretly watch over him. But there the resemblance ends. Martin is selfish, conceited, and almost delusional about his prospects in life. And his sense of superiority to Tom is the best evidence of this. In their first meeting, Martin grossly abuses Tom's hospitality, calling him "Pinch" (104),<sup>(7)</sup> dominating the warm space in front of the fireplace, and even having Tom read him to sleep — all of which reflects a casual and patronizing contempt.

Gradually, after being expelled from Pecksniff's house, and then more quickly, as he suffers through his experience in Eden,<sup>(8)</sup> Martin improves; and one recurring sign of Martin's improvement is his progress in appreciating Tom: from not even admitting to Mary that Tom has "loaned" him money, to simple nostalgia, to a complete recognition of Tom's superiority.<sup>(9)</sup>

In any case, whether we are discussing character or depth of portrayal, the difference between John Westlock and the young Martin Chuzzlewit is obvious, and by discounting it Fiedler and his school-day friends (in their role of discriminating critics) were expressing an unconscious indifference to this novel, if not to Dickens's novels in general. It shouldn't surprise us, then, that Mary and Ruth

were also confused.

The best evidence of Ruth's special status in the novel is her relationship with her brother. Viewed in a crude, materialistic light, Tom is a simpleton. This is young Martin's first impression of him and partly explains the way Martin treats him at the beginning. When John Westlock, trying to politely warn Martin off taking advantage of Tom, mentions that Tom has pride and would never accept a gift of money, Martin takes this as evidence of inferiority:

"As to receiving money as a gift," resumed John Westlock; "I think he'd die first."

"He's made of simplicity," said Martin. (197)

The distinction between John and Martin in the early phase of the novel, is precisely registered in their different attitudes towards Tom. John recognizes Tom as a kind of perfect man, and Martin thinks of him as someone far gone in simplicity who can be exploited without any harm being done.

Similarly, Mark Tapley, who has no moral failings at all, has a perfect appreciation of Tom and privately deplores young Martin's obtuse references to him. We see the same in all the characters, major and minor. Mary knows Tom's value from a time preceding the action of the novel, and is always as kind to him as an unromantic relationship allows. She even confides to him what she keeps from old Martin: that Mr. Pecksniff has been making undesired advances to her. When, as a result of this confidence,<sup>(10)</sup> Tom leaves Pecksniff's house forever, he is sent off by "several people, young and old" (475), including the exemplary Mrs. Lupin (Mark's future wife), because

everyone has come to love him.

Conversely, the evil characters, from Pecksniff to Jonas Chuzzlewit hold Tom in the lowest estimation. As prescient old Martin decides, Pecksniff is "the incarnation of selfishness and treachery" (744); and Jonas is a wife-abuser, would-be patricide, and murderer. Pecksniff constantly slights Tom, even as he relies on him for the running of his boarding school. When Jonas visits Pecksniff's house, Pecksniff tells him, "Here I am alone in [the house], for Thomas Pinch I do not count as any one" (453). After this same visit, Jonas attacks Tom, who quickly subdues him. This is a point of embarrassment for both of them, since Tom is ashamed of his resort to violence, even in self-defense, and Jonas is embarrassed and secretive about losing — all of which turns Tom into an object of Jonas's hatred.

In sum, Tom is a challenging character, not just for readers, many of whom, like Leslie Fiedler, dislike him, but for the characters in the novel; and their reaction to him reflects their own moral level, from good to evil. The novel has many implicit themes, but the most overt is the theme of what Dickens calls "self."<sup>(11)</sup> All the evil characters are selfish; the good characters are more or less selfless, according to their place in the moral hierarchy, and Tom is at the top of this hierarchy. Near the top are the characters that understand Tom best, like John Westlock, and the semi-omniscient old Martin. But there is only one character who shares the pinnacle with him, and that is Ruth, who has the same gentleness and naive good will. She even trusts the Pecksniff sisters when she meets them, despite their malicious tone, because, like Tom, she projects her own good will on to them.

And then Ruth reveals to Tom that she knows his secret: he loves Mary. Tom's love is the ultimate proof of his selflessness. It is the kind of attachment that rules out a future transfer of affections, so he will surely die a bachelor, as the last scene implies he will. Yet Tom does everything in his power to bring Martin back to Mary, and no one but Ruth divines the meaning of this. Lest we miss the significance of Ruth's special knowledge, Dickens provides us with a final scene, with Tom playing the organ by himself and contemplating his life,<sup>(12)</sup> when Ruth steps in to join him:

And coming from a garden, Tom: bestrewn with flowers by children's hands: thy sister Ruth, as light of foot and heart as in old days, sits down beside thee. From the Present, and the Past, with which she is so tenderly entwined in all they thoughts, thy strain soars onward to the Future. As it resounds within thee and without, thy kindling face looks on her with a Love and Trust, that knows it cannot die. The noble music, rolling round her in a cloud of melody, shuts out the grosser prospect of an earthly parting, and uplifts her, Tom, to Heaven! (782)

The image of Ruth, who makes her appearance and then is referred to by the feminine pronoun, has supplanted the image of Mary, and becomes part of Tom's compensation for his frustrated love. Thus, Ruth is treated as a sort of special being, equal to Tom in selflessness, and in a sense superior because she is a woman. She represents not just selflessness, but selfless beauty.

**Part III, The Caressing Tone:** It is possible that a reader might

agree with me about the intended significance of Ruth in the novel and still object to the caressing tone that Dickens uses to describe her. Here is the scene in which Ruth and John Westlock meet at Fountain Court:

So light was the touch of the coy little hand, that he glanced down to assure himself he had it on his arm. But his glance, stopping for an instant at the bright eyes, forgot its first design, and went no farther. (645)

This is the prevailing tone when describing Ruth. Dickens even uses the word "coy," and, as usual, he describes Ruth as "little." It is as though Dickens loves his little creation too much. Here is the scene in which Ruth returns to old Martin (who, in his matchmaking role, insists on a double wedding of the four lovers) and allows John to put on her gift bracelet:

It was the prettiest thing to see her holding out her round, white arm; and John (oh deep, deep John!) pretending that the bracelet was very hard to fasten; it was the prettiest thing to see her girding on the precious little zone, and yet obliged to have assistance because her fingers were in such terrible perplexity; it was the prettiest thing to see her so confused and bashful, with smiles and blushes playing brightly on her face, like the sparkling light upon the jewels; it was the prettiest thing that you would see, in the common experiences of a twelvemonth, rely upon it. (767)

This tone is best characterized by Dickens himself on the same page. Old Martin's way of talking to Ruth (below) is exactly like Dickens's way of treating her:

The old man's way of seating her beside him, and humouring his voice as if she were a child, was whimsical enough, but full of tenderness, and not ill adapted, somehow to charming little Ruth.  
(767)

In the end, if we object to this tone as patronizing, or to Ruth as too pure and innocent, no one can prove us wrong. But we might remember William Blake's "The Lamb," from *Songs of Innocence*, the second stanza of which has a very similar tone:

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,  
Little Lamb I'll tell thee:  
He is called by thy name,  
For he calls himself a Lamb:  
He is meek & he is mild,  
He became a little child:  
I a child and thou a lamb,  
We are called by his name.  
Little Lamb God bless thee.  
Little Lamb God bless thee. (106)

In Blake, however, this is not the whole picture: there is also "The Tyger" from *Songs of Experience*, which inspires Blake's final question: "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" It is the play between

this presentation of innocence and the realities threatening it that gives Blake such a range of relevant observation. But if Dickens's way of apostrophizing Ruth (and Tom too) is patronizing, so, surely, is Blake's way of addressing the lamb.<sup>(13)</sup> And just as Blake's lamb is balanced by the tiger, Dickens's portrait of Ruth and Tom, his innocents, is balanced by a menagerie of menacing characters, from Pecksniff, to Jonas, to Sarie Gamp, Hell's hilarious answer to the sick nurse.<sup>(14)</sup>

**Conclusion:** Ruth is a combination of things that make her a special case for Dickens. She represents all the virtues that her brother Tom represents, including selflessness, kindness, and modesty. She adds what for Dickens is the virtue of femininity. Nor is the caressing tone in which she is portrayed and (with Tom) apostrophized any more objectionable than Blake's childlike tone in his *Songs of Innocence*. Dickens balances the innocence represented by Ruth with a plentiful display of less innocent characters and situations, and Ruth fits in the larger pattern.

### Notes

- (1) Mary Graham, the young Martin Chuzzlewit's eventual wife, is seen most clearly through Tom Pinch's eyes as he plays the organ in church, where she is the resident, and appropriate, angel; and Ruth Pinch is even called an angel by John when he proposes to her: "I hope I know the value of your heart, I hope I know the worth of your angel nature" (764).
- (2) All references are to the Penguin edition of *Martin Chuzzlewit* listed in the Works Cited section below.

- (3) Describing the fountain scene, where Ruth and John first meet without Tom being in tow, F.S. Schwarzbach exhibits a very unusual appreciation of Ruth, and of her attraction for John: "The excitement of the fountain is quite openly sexual, and like the treasure buried beneath the Todgers', related to and perhaps even engendered by the process of slow ageing and decay around it. The presence of Ruth is so electric that even the dead love letters locked away in the law offices of the Temple are momentarily stirred to life. The very next moment, Ruth meets John Westlock; and here, by silent agreement they return after the reunion scene orchestrated by Old Martin, and again under the influence of the fountain realise their mutual love" (96). This strikes me as very well observed and much closer to the feeling that Dickens wrote with than the usual dismissal of Ruth.
- (4) Actually, Ruth has a secret patron in old Martin, but we don't learn about this until the last chapters of the novel, since Martin has never met her. But, like the omniscient Count in *Measure for Measure*, old Martin has spies of preternatural efficiency, and he secretly takes care of both Tom (the man at the Pecksniff house he came to trust completely) and his sister. It could be argued that Mary and Ruth share the same patron, but their sense of security is quite different. Mary has been old Martin's companion from the beginning, and at the very point where Martin pretends to believe all Pecksniff's lies, he is "especially tender to Mary" (451). We only discover that old Martin has heard of Ruth on p. 761 of my 782-page edition (not counting the notes).
- (5) Both Harry Stone (92) and Steven Marcus (226) make this point, though from opposite critical vantages. Stone sees old Martin as a *deus ex machina*, and therefore an artistic weakness, while Marcus argues that magic is a recurring component in Dickens's novels, and something more than an awkward plot device.
- (6) This isn't much of an insight. I am impressed that there was a time when American high school students would be erudite enough to make the connection between old Martin and the Duke, but only because *Measure for Measure* wasn't on any high school reading list I ever saw. (With regards to secondary education, England is another thing entirely.) The similarity is obvious, and it tends to justify old Martin's place in the

novel more than to call it into question, unless we (like some critics) consider Shakespeare's Duke at least a partial failure.

- (7) In the nineteenth century, at least, for a younger man to call an older man he hardly knew by his surname was a preemption of class superiority.
- (8) For those who haven't read the novel, Eden is the ridiculous name given to a poisonous backwater in the American hinterland where Martin has been gulled into buying land. With the help of his resourceful "partner" (and servant) Mark Tapley and the further help of a kind American from Boston, Martin survives this experience and returns to England, a sadder, wiser, and better man.
- (9) The other gauge of Martin's progress as a human being is supplied by Mark Tapley. Mark has no vices at all, a fact that gives meaning to his hilariously inverse comments on Martin. It is Mark's improbable goal in life to keep his good humor through a really trying obstacle in life. He frequently suggests, in a way that Martin never notices, that being Martin's companion might supply this trial (because, for instance, Martin is oblivious of the sacrifices Mary and Tom have made for him). As Martin wakes up to the sufferings of others and tries subordinating his own wishes to theirs, Mark begins to lament that Martin is becoming a disappointment: the hero is no longer a challenge to anyone's good humor. Thus Mark, with his inverse logic, is chorus to the formation of Martin's sensibility.
- (10) This scene might be Pecksniff's *coup de grace*. It is a sterling example of hypocrisy. Pecksniff overhears Mary's confession to Tom. They are in the church, where Tom has been practicing the organ. Mary tells Tom how Pecksniff has been harassing her, and Tom immediately sees the light and denounces Pecksniff. Just as Mary is distinguished by her belief in Tom, he distinguishes himself by his immediate acceptance of her story. But Pecksniff has been hiding in the pews of the church, listening to this conversation. When Tom returns to the house, Pecksniff actually accuses Tom, to old Martin, of courting Mary, trusting Tom not to contradict him as long as there might be harsh consequences for Mary. When Tom has left, Pecksniff stands at the door, gesturing

outward, like God the Father at the Last Judgment.

- (11) I am indebted to John O. Jordan for pointing how that John Forster, Dickens's original biographer, "recounts how Dickens set out in the novel...to display 'the number and variety of human vices that have their root in selfishness' (Forster 4.I)" (Jordan, 36).
- (12) Tom's reminiscence includes the memory of a deathbed scene with old Martin, "the spirit of that old man dead, who delighted to anticipate thy [Tom's] wants" (782).
- (13) As Malcolm Andrews, in a brilliant essay, observes, "In Tom the early-Victorian transformation of the idea of manliness involves the idea of childhood qualities persisting in the grown-up man as an index of greater virtue....Tom's lack of surface manliness...and of worldly panache disguises the new inner manliness, which is revealed in his sensitivity... and in his ability wholly to subdue his own desires, as in his unspoken love for Mary Graham." Andrews calls Tom's simultaneous childishness and manliness his "purity" (93-94).
- (14) The presentation of evil in the novel will not be seriously questioned. Philip Hobsbaum complains that Pecksniff is so interesting that he creates an imbalance in the structure of the novel. "Structurally he ought to be an adjunct to the main plot: a scheming villain to set the two Martins at loggerheads. But his feel and presence are so great that he attracts all the interest to himself, thus rendering the plot lop-sided" (80). Lyn Pykett points out that Mrs. Gamp also stands out (though Pykett doesn't complain that this creates an imbalance): "Certainly Mrs. Gamp is sinister and terrifying, but she is also a gloriously energetic reversal of that model of self-sacrificial femininity which Dickens idealizes in the figure of Ruth Pinch in this novel, and in countless other female characters throughout his fiction" (85).

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