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Class Discourse and Popular Agency in *Bleak House*

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A People there are, no doubt—a certain large number of supernumeraries, who are to be occasionally addressed, and relied upon for shouts and choruses, as on the theatrical stage; but Boodle and Buffy, their followers and families, their heirs, executors, administrators, and assigns, are the born first-actors, managers, and leaders, and no others can appear upon the scene for ever and ever. (191)

The recurrent satire on Boodle, Buffy, and parliamentary politics in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853) suggests that the novel’s title alludes not only to the Crystal Palace, but also to the House of Commons. Chapter 40, “National and Domestic,” likewise refers to the commonplace figure of the house as nation and nation as house, evoked, for example, in the January 1852 *Punch* cartoon “Mrs. England Setting Her House in Order,” which depicts Queen Victoria as a housekeeper instructing the prime minister, Lord John Russell, to pay a “bill” (fig. 1). Boodle and Buffy are actors on the national stage because they are leaders of their respective political parties; as members of Parliament they can propose, and vote for, legislative acts that shape social relationships. However, the Boodleites and Buffyites act only to serve their own interests, not the nation as a whole, a situation that makes Parliament, like Chancery, a deadlocked institution.

The “People” are relegated to “supernumerary” roles in the national drama, because they can neither elect representatives nor serve as members of Parliament. In theatrical parlance, supernumeraries are minor figures who do not speak or move the action forward. Like the Chancery suitor Gridley, who attempts to make himself heard in the opening chapter of the novel and “can by no means be made to understand that the Chancellor is legally ignorant of his existence,” the people have been deprived of agency, the ability to act in Parliament (16). Chancery is, in this respect, a stand-in for Parliament, a place of “speaking” that gives no voice to the people. As the theatrical metaphor
suggests, moreover, Parliament is a place of acting as well as speaking; members of Parliament had the capacity not only to express their beliefs but also to put them into effect by voting for or against parliamentary acts. For popular radicalism, therefore, the solution to England’s social problems was not economic transformation but extension of the franchise to the people: hence the founding, in 1838, of the
Chartist movement, which promoted universal male suffrage and related parliamentary reforms.

In the years following the passage of the Reform Bill of 1832, class discourse became highly politicized. Political appeals that opposed the ethos and rights of one class to those of another represented society in terms of class conflict. The debate over the Reform Bill itself was framed as a class question: did the emergence of a new “middle” class require an extension of the franchise—a role in governing the nation—or was the nation better governed by the landed aristocracy? Chartist discourse, by contrast, depicted parliamentary reform in terms of the inclusion of a privileged few and the exclusion of the people. While models of class do not intrinsically imply conflict, the contest between classes became a prominent feature of class discourse during these years (Cannadine 102–03).

This essay will place Bleak House within the liberal political tradition that, beginning at mid-century, envisioned an English nation that was not divided by class but was unified as a single people. In radical discourse, the people had always been a double figure. On the one hand, such discourse represented a nation divided between the included elite and the excluded people, the nation as it is now; on the other hand, it referred to a unified nation without class division, the nation as it should be. Dickens’s novel draws on this radical tradition to critique class discourse that seeks to define social inclusion and agency through the exclusion of others, and to assert the right of the people to political inclusion.

Bleak House addresses these problems of class discourse and social agency by critiquing and revising two kinds of national narrative: constitutional narratives and the national marriage plot. Like the constitutional narratives from which it arose, the narrative of the rise of the middle class established in the Reform Bill debates explained and legitimated the political agency of the “middle class” even as it assumed the continuing agency of the aristocracy and the exclusion of the people. The national marriage plot sought to solve the problem of class conflict in terms of this contest between aristocracy and middle class through a marriage that united the best qualities of the two classes. However, by confining the solution of class conflict to the aristocracy and middle class, this version of the national marriage plot perpetuated the exclusion of the people. Bleak House, therefore, seeks to imagine popular agency by revising the national marriage plot, but it stops short
of envisioning that agency in terms of the electoral franchise sought by the Chartists. Rather, it depicts the problem of class and political exclusion as a problem of discourse and seeks to reform the discursive terms in which public discourse is framed, making resistant discourse the preliminary to the achievement of popular agency.

I. Class Discourse and the National Marriage Plot

David Cannadine has argued that class became a key category for nineteenth-century discourses of social understanding “not so much because the working and middle classes were ‘making’ themselves where no such classes had existed before, but rather because the proponents of different visions of the social order increasingly sought to assert their own, mutually exclusive notions of how society was—and how it should be” (61). This view is in keeping with much recent work on the history of class, which argues that class identities were not shaped by economic relationships alone, but rather were produced through a discursive field constituted by social mappings—models of class and class relationships—and by national narratives through which these mappings were explained and authorized. Political discourse thus defined classes as a means of asserting political rights and social agency.2

In the early nineteenth century, historical narratives of the development of the English constitution served to legitimate a variety of positions in debates about the French Revolution, parliamentary reform, Peterloo, and other political questions.3 Because these constitutional histories were used to legitimate the right to the electoral franchise, a given narrative could serve either to ascribe or to deny agency to a particular social group. As James Vernon has demonstrated, “Competing political groups [sought] to construct their constituencies of support by appropriating and using the ‘shared’ language of constitutionalism in different ways” (Politics 296). Those who favored reform developed a constitutional narrative tracing the rise of the middle class to the restoration of rights following the Glorious Revolution, and claimed that broadening the franchise would not amount to a change in the constitution but would simply extend the franchise to a new class of property owners requiring parliamentary representation.4 Opponents of reform traced the constitution to the Norman Conquest and treated the Glorious Revolution and the reform movement as temporary disruptions of the tradi-
tional hierarchical order. Although each of these narratives sought to authorize itself by subverting the other, they shared the assumption that social agency was confined to the aristocracy and middle classes, which alone possessed the authority to act on behalf of the nation and to rule the people excluded from the franchise.

Because constitutional narratives were a “powerful national myth structure” that defined a shared language of political legitimacy, early-nineteenth-century radicals, and the Chartists after them, felt compelled to employ them when making their case for the constitutional rights of “the people” (Epstein, Radical Expression 85). Accepting the premise from John Locke and Adam Smith that property ownership was the basis of the franchise, they argued that, because labor produces property, the laborer is a property-owner who has a right to the franchise (Stedman Jones 108–09). Instead of protesting the economic system, the Chartists argued that the upper classes had obtained an unfair economic advantage within the system because they made the laws under which it operated; they acquired wealth through legal maneuver rather than labor (99–100, 134–37). This emphasis on parliamentary rather than economic reform explains why the majority of Victorians conceived agency not as the power to transform the economic system, but instead as the power to effect political change that could only be achieved through parliamentary representation (see 104, 173).

Each of these constitutional narratives mapped the nation as a distinctive set of class relationships. Cannadine points out that three different conceptions of rank persisted from the late seventeenth century into the twentieth: a finely graded hierarchy, which in the nineteenth century was favored by those opposed to parliamentary reform because it placed the aristocracy at the pinnacle of the class structure, rightfully ruling the nation; a tripartite social organization, favored by reformers because it implied the emergence of an alternative ruling class, a middle class; and a dichotomous society, favored by radicals, who saw the nation divided between the electorate and the wrongfully disenfranchised (20). Although the adherents of each mapping, like the adherents of each constitutional narrative, argued that theirs was the correct one, the already enfranchised tended to see the choice as limited to the hierarchical and tripartite models, which thereby enabled each segment of the enfranchised—aristocracy or middle class—to assert its claim to legitimacy as the class best equipped to rule the people.
Patrick Joyce argues that the concept of “the people” provided radicals and their successors with a powerful means of making a claim for political agency, which this restriction of the field to the hierarchical and tripartite mappings of class tended to occlude (Visions 4–6). Radicals preferred the dichotomous model of class, which implied that, while society was at present divided between the included and excluded, the excluded legitimately belonged to the nation. In their version of the constitutional narrative, British liberties had been lost with the Norman Conquest and had yet to be restored: hence the long-standing tradition that an Edenic Anglo-Saxon England had disappeared after the imposition of the “Norman yoke” (Hill). The doubled image of the people thus enabled radical discourse to envision a political transformation in which the enfranchisement of the wrongfully excluded people would produce a nation without class divisions (Cannadine 67).

During the heyday of Chartism (1838–50), novelists were revising the early-nineteenth-century national tale and historical novel in terms of class discourse. The national tale represents a confrontation between English culture and a culture of the other, frequently initiated by the journey of an Englishman to the cultural periphery, often Ireland or Scotland. Katie Trumpener has demonstrated that the national tale begins by differentiating the two cultures in terms of economic structures and a related ethos, and concludes by imagining a mediation between them, often through a “wedding that allegorically unite[d] Britain’s ‘national characters’” (141; see 133–48). As she argues, Walter Scott transformed the national tale into the historical novel by making the differences in national cultures stages of economic and political modernization, treating the difference in ethos as a difference between past and present. While the marriage plot of Waverley (1814), for example, provides an allegory of the union of cultures similar to that found in the national tale, its historical narrative presents this union as the absorption of the archaic by modern culture.

In the 1830s and 1840s, English authors internalized the national narrative, reframing it as a confrontation and mediation between regional cultures and rewriting it in terms of narratives of class formation, in particular the opposed narratives of the rise of the middle class and the preservation of hierarchy. These novels thus transformed the confrontation between ethnic cultures into regional class conflict, between, for example, the southern aristocracy and the northern...
middle class. Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil* (1845), in which the journey to the cultural margins becomes a journey into industrial Lancashire, imagines the restoration of paternalist hierarchy through the marriage of the aristocrat Charles Egremont to Sybil Gerard, the daughter of a working-class radical. In Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855), a genteel heroine travels from the rural south to the industrial north, where she comes into conflict with the new urban entrepreneur. While the marriage of Margaret Hale and John Thornton unites southern and northern ethos so as to mitigate the effects of social change, Gaskell follows Scott in employing a narrative of modernization in which the rising middle class displaces a fading genteel culture. *Bleak House*, in which a captain of industry, Rouncewell the Ironmaster, similarly displaces the outmoded aristocrat, Sir Leicester Dedlock, also depicts the rise of the middle class, but rather than resolving class conflict through marriage across class lines—as evidenced, for example, in the unions of Watt Rouncewell and the servant Rosa, as well as of Esther Summerson and Allan Woodcourt—the novel puts class identities into question.

As I have already suggested, Dickens wrote *Bleak House* at the moment when spokesmen for the emergent Liberal party began to appeal to a broadened concept of “the people” conceived, by way of radical discourse, in terms of the “desire to transcend class identities in the wider interest of the nation” (Vernon, *Politics* 325; see Joyce, *Visions* 30). Like them, Dickens draws on the radical tradition to oppose exclusionary discourses of class and to gesture toward a single people who constitute the nation. However, I do not mean to argue that *Bleak House* exhibits a single coherently radical or liberal perspective. Rather, the novel employs radical discourse strategically, even as it elsewhere employs middle-class discourse. Insofar as it favors the abolition of aristocratic privilege, *Bleak House* affirms the narrative of the rise of the middle class, but at the same time it strategically draws on radical discourse to reject the related triadic mapping of class that excludes the people from agency.

**II. Philanthropists, Dandies, and the Resistant Narrator**

*Bleak House* opposes a pair of male dandies who perform an aristocratic identity, Harold Skimpole and Mr. Turveydrop, to female philanthropists who perform middle-class identity, Mrs. Jellyby and
Mrs. Pardiggle. Each of these characters first appears in Esther Summerson’s narrative, and each attempts to assert his or her authority by calling on Esther to assume a position defined by the languages of class. These figures, three of whom live precariously at the margins of society—the Jellybys go into bankruptcy, Skimpole is repeatedly arrested for debt, and Turveydrop’s school operates at the limits of respectability—use the language of class to establish their social authority and their right to inclusion in English society. Yet the disenfranchised orphan resists her interlocutors by producing satiric representations of their use of the language of class, which enable her to assume a place within discourse and so to assert the right to be included among the people of the nation.

Competing languages of class constituted the aristocracy and middle class by claiming for these classes a superior ethos derived from birth, ancestry, and source of income. Middle-class discourse claimed for entrepreneurs and industrialists the virtues of diligence and industry, derived from the fact that entrepreneurs did not inherit wealth but earned it through their own labor. In addition they promoted social order by creating jobs and economic opportunities as well as engaging in philanthropic endeavors aimed at promoting prudence and industry, thus giving the poor the opportunity to rise into the middle class. Aristocratic discourse countered that because landowners did not have to earn a living—they lived off rents of their land, not on profits from wage labor—they were disinterested, better able to act according to moral conviction. This argument was reinforced by the paternalist strain of aristocratic discourse, which depicted a stable hierarchy in which the landowner acted as a benign parent who promoted the welfare of his children.

Because class discourse asserted the authority of one class over another, the ethos of one class was defined in relation to, and as a critique of, the other. Middle-class critiques depicted an idle, unproductive land-owning class that lived off the wealth created by others; rather than benign paternalists, they saw country squires who cared only about drinking, hunting, and protecting their economic interests through the Corn Laws. Aristocratic discourse in turn portrayed entrepreneurs as too involved in their work to gain a broad perspective on society; rather than creating opportunities for the poor, their ruthless pursuit of profits caused them to exploit their workers. By asserting the
superiority of their ethos, each class claimed that it was better fitted to
govern the nation, to provide for the working class and the poor.

Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle make a great show of energetic
industry in the pursuit of their philanthropic projects. Mrs. Pardiggle,
with her pamphlets and lessons, practices philanthropy in accord with
the dictates of middle-class discourse, which promoted direct moral
instruction as opposed to what it deemed the merely sentimental prac-
tices, characteristic of genteel philanthropy, of providing succor to the
poor through gifts of food and coal (see Tobin 132–35). That Mrs. Jellyby
and Mrs. Pardiggle are deploying a language of class, rather than acting
from motives of class, is evident from the fact that they repeatedly insist
on saying that they are energetic: Mrs. Jellyby, for example, declares that
her work “involves the devotion of all [her] energies,” and Mrs. Pardiggle
insists that she “love[s] hard work” (53, 127). Finally, their claim that
their philanthropic activities are motivated by a desire to promote the
Christian faith is a means of asserting their moral authority, establishing
them as superior to those they would instruct as well as to those who fail
to join them in their cause (see Pope 127–28, 132–39).

Neither Skimpole nor Turveydrop is an aristocrat or a member
of the gentry, but this is just the point: they employ the language of class
so as to legitimate a manner of living that exploits others. Indeed, they
live according to the code of the dandy, who was not ordinarily an aris-
tocrat but who sought to establish his social superiority by presenting
himself as possessing an inborn capacity for aesthetic cultivation
(Moers 41). The aristocratic identification is straightforward in the case
of Turveydrop, who “fully believes he is one of the aristocracy” and
regularly parades in “the aristocratic part of the town” (227, 250). His
condemnation, in nearly the same terms used by Sir Leicester, of the
“levelling” tendencies of the era is of a piece with his belief that he has
a right to live off the labor of his son and daughter-in-law (228). Skim-
pole similarly invokes the code of the gentleman who does not work to
earn a living when he claims that, as a “perfectly idle” man, he draws
and plays the piano strictly as an “amateur” (682). Moreover, he
frequently manifests a dandyish disdain for entrepreneurial industry
and a disregard for money (see 116, 676).

Esther’s depiction of these characters sets each class critique
against the other, revealing that the claims of each class to social and
moral superiority mask self-interested motives. In the philanthropists’
displays of energy and industry she sees the vices of the marketplace,
complaining that Mrs. Pardiggle’s voice “was much too business-like and systematic” and that she does “charity by wholesale” (130, 133). She emphasizes as well that for all her displays of energy, Mrs. Pardiggle ultimately does nothing to assist the objects of her philanthropy. Esther suggests, moreover, that these women are motivated not by disinterested altruism but by the middle-class vices of self-interest and greed. Their canvassing for donations becomes a parody of middle-class acquisitiveness: “They wanted everything. They wanted wearing apparel, they wanted linen rags, they wanted money, they wanted coals, they wanted soup, they wanted interest, they wanted autographs, they wanted flannel, they wanted whatever Mr. Jarndyce had—or had not” (123). She further suggests that their underlying aim is achieving public acclaim: “Mr. Quale’s mission to be in ecstasies with everybody else’s mission” is “the most popular mission of all” precisely because it inserts his fellow philanthropists into the social center (239). This self-absorption in turn leads to the “telescopic philanthropy” that prevents Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby from recognizing the needs both of their own families and of the people they claim to serve.

Esther’s narrative similarly satirizes the dandyish pretensions of Skimpole and Turveydrop. Drawing on a tradition of satires of the prince regent, whom Turveydrop so admires, she portrays the latter-day dandy as bloated and artificial: “He was pinched in, and swelled out, and got up, and strapped down, as much as he could possibly bear. . . . He had everything but any touch of nature; he was not like youth, he was not like age, he was not like anything in the world but a model of deportment” (225). She similarly highlights the compromises in Skimpole’s argument against moral earnestness, especially insofar as it derives from his dandyish aestheticism, as revealed in his remarks on the picturesqueness of slave labor (295). In this respect, Esther’s narrative criticizes both philanthropists and dandies for using class discourse to conceal the fact that their behavior harms their families. Like Mrs. Jellyby, who makes a “slave” of her daughter in the service of eliminating the slave trade, Skimpole projects the suffering of slaves into the distance, displacing it from his immediate surroundings in a manner that involves a willful blindness to its moral implications.

The languages of class employed by the philanthropists and dandies construct Esther as an outsider, neither middle-class nor aristocratic, one of that undifferentiated mass of others—the poor, the lower classes, “the people”—who do not belong to the nation. Indeed, like
many autobiographical narrators, she tells a story of social exclusion, commencing her narrative with an episode in which her aunt declares that she is “set apart” from others by her illegitimate birth (31). Even John Jarndyce and his cousins, who reject this evangelical moralizing, join in the assumption that a propertyless and illegitimate woman must have limited marriage prospects. By addressing her as the spinster Dame Durden, Jarndyce defines her, like others without property, as devoid of agency; having done so, he proceeds to meddle on her behalf with both of her suitors, Woodcourt and Guppy, and even to make his own ill-advised marriage proposal.

Yet Esther’s satiric portraits of the philanthropists and dandies refuse a class discourse that constructs her as an outsider without agency. As Pam Morris suggests, when Esther feels “guilty and yet innocent” (Bleak House 31) of having been born in sin she simultaneously internalizes a sense of exclusionary guilt and asserts her right to be considered legitimate, to be included in English society (Morris 92). In this context, Esther’s determination to be “industrious, contented, and kind-hearted” (Bleak House 31) should not be regarded as an attempt to assimilate herself to middle-class domesticity but to assert, as did the radicals and Chartists, that her labor makes her one of the people who constitute the nation. Not least of these labors, of course, is the resistant narration through which she produces herself as an agent who decodes the performance of class identities. Her resistance also makes itself felt in the tone of suppressed resentment in her representation of courtship, a representation that raises questions about why she should be treated as a sexless duenna while Ada Clare is an object of desire. In representing herself as an object of desire for Woodcourt—who can be understood as a substitute for Richard Carstone—she resists the identity of the excluded, unmarrigeable woman.

III. The Ironmaster, the Baronet, and the Rise of the Middle Class

If Esther’s narrative represents at the individual, or domestic, level a discourse of social exclusion practiced by those who seek to legitimate their own social inclusion, the omniscient narrator’s portion of the novel uses the narrative of the rise of the middle class and decline of the aristocracy to reveal how these processes operate at the national level. Just as the philanthropists and dandies employ class discourse to legitimize themselves and contest the position of others, the narratives of the
rise of the middle class and of the restoration of aristocrat-dominated hierarchy stage a contest for political power and personal privilege. Similarly, Esther’s interlocutors neglect their families even as they assert personal prerogatives, while political parties serve kin at the expense of the nation. Both, moreover, constitute their status and privilege through the exclusion of the disenfranchised—Esther on the one hand, and the Irish laborers and the homeless who reside in Tom-all-Alone’s on the other.

Given that the rise of the middle class was a narrative produced to explain and legitimate parliamentary reform, it is appropriate that Bleak House signals the displacement of the aristocracy by the middle class through a parliamentary election in which Sir Leicester’s candidate is defeated by Rouncewell’s. In this respect, the novel seems to endorse middle-class discourse, which represents the displacement of an enervated aristocracy by a vigorous bourgeoisie. Sir Leicester’s ubiquitous cousins, “loung[ing] in purposeless and listless paths, . . . quite . . . at a loss how to dispose of themselves,” display all the marks of the idle aristocracy (448). Sir Leicester seeks pensions for his cousins so that they need not work for a living and can instead engage in the nonproductive social practices—such as hunting, gambling, and keeping up with fashion—demanded by the genteel ethos. Like Skimpole and Turveydrop, Sir Leicester and his cousins practice a “dandyism” that would “make the Vulgar very picturesque and faithful, by putting back the hands upon the Clock of Time,” thus transforming the poor into aesthetic objects (189). Finally, the seven-hundred-year-old Dedlock family is, as the name suggests, not only unproductive but moribund, its future clearly indicated by Sir Leicester’s failure to produce an heir and symbolized in the novel’s final illustration of the Dedlock mausoleum.

Whereas the aristocrat is unproductive and inflexible, Rouncewell the Ironmaster is industrious and mobile. In Sir Leicester’s hierarchical society, Rouncewell would, as the son of servants, become a servant himself in time, but he has instead followed the middle-class model of the self-made man who elevates himself through individual industry to the status of successful entrepreneur. In contrast to Sir Leicester, whose efforts to secure pensions for his cousins enable their idleness, Rouncewell educates his son with the expectation that he will have to earn his own living. Similarly, while Sir Leicester hires agents to campaign for his candidates, Rouncewell takes an active role in the electoral campaign, making speeches on behalf of his candidate (Blount
Sir Leicester’s belief in fixed social “stations” is opposed by Rouncewell’s conviction that education can make the children of a laborer “worthy of any station” (453). Such social mobility corresponds to the geographic mobility of the entrepreneur who has “so many workmen in so many places” that he is “always on the flight,” a stark contrast with the languid cousins (451). Finally, whereas the Dedlocks are dying out, the Ironmaster’s vigor and mobility are rewarded by a new generation of Rouncewells and the promise of future success.

The narrative of the individual self-made man was reduplicated in the national, historical narrative of the rise of the middle class, which in turn was set against an opposing historical narrative representing the rise of the middle class not as a long-term historical shift but as a temporary social disruption of an aristocrat-dominated social hierarchy. In terms of the Whig constitutional narrative, the rise of the middle class was the culmination of the historical processes set in motion by the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which restored rights lost with the Norman Conquest. The Tory constitutional narrative, by contrast, traced the constitution to the Conquest itself and treated 1688 as merely reaffirming it; from this perspective, the rise of the middle class was not an extension of the Glorious Revolution but a repetition of the disruption of social order that had preceded it, the Civil Wars (Vernon, Politics 298, 304).

The history of the Dedlock family corresponds to the latter constitutional narrative. The Dedlocks trace their ancestry to the time of the Norman Conquest (if not to 1066, then at least to the century following), and Chesney Wold bears the name of a Norman family that dates to the time of the Conquest. In accord with the narrative of the preservation of hierarchy, Sir Leicester insists that everyone remain in his or her “station” and constantly frets about “the obliteration of landmarks, the opening of floodgates” (450). Consequently, he resists reform of Chancery precisely because preserving it will maintain a “British, constitutional kind of thing,” and insofar as Chancery is a stand-in for Parliament, he considers parliamentary campaigns a “great Constitutional work” (25, 639).

From this perspective, the rise of the middle class is just one in a series of rebellions, including, most notably, the Peasants’ Revolt (1381) and the Great Rebellion (1642–51), that sought to overturn the constitution established at the time of the Conquest. In a reverie about Chancery reform early in the novel, Sir Leicester invokes for the first
time the figure of Wat Tyler, leader of the Peasants’ Rebellion: “He is upon the whole of a fixed opinion, that to give the sanction of his countenance to any complaints respecting [Chancery], would be to encourage some person in the lower classes to rise up somewhere—like Wat Tyler” (26). Not surprisingly, Rouncewell the Ironmaster is for Sir Leicester a modern Wat Tyler. Like the industrial “revolutionary” James Watt, after whom he names his son, Rouncewell early on shows a tendency to “move in the Wat Tyler direction,” and Sir Leicester resists the Ironmaster’s attempt to meet with him on an equal footing by associating him both with Tyler and with “the people in the iron districts who do nothing but turn out by torchlight” (107, 452). This association between Tyler and the Chartists is hardly accidental. In 1817 radical booksellers had published Robert Southey’s early work, *Wat Tyler*, making it well-known in radical circles; in fact, such was its popularity that in 1848 Isaac Jefferson, one of the leaders of the Chartist demonstrations at Bradford, used Wat Tyler as his pseudonym. By casting Rouncewell as a Chartist rather than a political rival whom he might meet on equal terms, Sir Leicester seeks to preserve the hierarchical social order and to deny the Ironmaster the political agency he has gained by becoming a man of property.

To these competing narratives of the rise of the middle class and of the preservation of aristocrat-dominated hierarchy, the omniscient narrator adds two strands of radical discourse: satires on the failures of Parliament, specifically the House of Commons, and assertions of the right of the people to parliamentary representation. Parliamentary satire drew on long-standing complaints that Parliament remained under the control of a small number of powerful families, and that government pensioners were not only unproductive but also lived off the labor of tax-paying citizens (Fulcher 75). The demand for parliamentary representation correspondingly implied that Parliament could be an effective governing institution only if it became truly representative of the people and so granted them the right to act on the national stage.

*Bleak House* satirizes political parties as coteries whose self-serving activities lead to social deadlock. As Sambudha Sen suggests, the title of *Bleak House* may allude to William Hone’s 1819 post-Peterloo satire on the House of Commons, *The Political House That Jack Built* (Sen 946). Hone’s revision of the nursery rhyme implies that Parliament—the “house” that “the people” built—has been invaded by vermin—the
Whig-Tory establishment—that have appropriated it from them. By transforming the Tories and Whigs into Boodleites and Buffyites, Dickens represents the parliamentary parties not as standing for distinctive political philosophies or social classes but as rival kinship networks. Sir Thomas Doodle, for example, regards the failure to find an office for his cousin Noodle a national disaster, and when he becomes prime minister, he brings “in with him all his nephews, all his male cousins, and all his brothers-in-law” (638). The aim of these parties is not to govern the nation well but to provide sinecures for their kin.

The result of this self-serving conception of government is deadlock within a Parliament that is so focused on providing benefits to its members and their kin that it ignores the needs of the people that it is supposed to govern. As John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson have shown, Dickens’s depiction of the national election, and of the parliamentary crisis that brings it about, was inspired by the ministerial crises of 1851–52, which The Times blamed on the fact that the choice of ministers was limited to a “very small clique” of “two or three families” (qtd. in Butt and Tillotson 188): “Lord Coodle would go out, Sir Thomas Doodle wouldn’t come in, and there being nobody in Great Britain (to speak of) except Coodle and Doodle, there has been no government” (638). In the concluding clause, Dickens gives a double meaning to the phrase “no government,” which serves here to indicate not only the conventional meaning, that the party leaders have failed to form a governing ministry, but also that Britain has “no government” at all.

The inability of Chancery to act—to reach a decision on its cases—parallels the failure of Parliament to act on behalf of the people, and in this respect the unreformed Court of Chancery serves as a stand-in for the unreformed House of Commons. That Dickens thought of them in similar terms is evident from the fact that in his Household Words satire “A Haunted House” (1853) he transferred the image, from Bleak House, of the “mud in the streets” (13) surrounding Chancery to a country constituency, where, during the 1852 electoral campaign, “the dirtiest mud” is “found to be flying about and bespattering people at a great distance” (“Haunted” 153). Significantly, both Chancery and Parliament are responsible for the state of Tom-all-Alone’s, which has fallen into decay not only because it is tied up in Jarndyce and Jarndyce but also because Parliament, in spite of “much mighty speech-making,” has failed to produce sanitary or Chancery reform (Bleak House 708).

Insofar as middle-class discourse envisions the sweeping away
of aristocratic privilege, *Bleak House* affirms it, yet insofar as the middle class seeks only to gain such privileges for itself and excludes the people, the novel critiques it alongside the aristocracy. Nor does the victory of Rouncewell’s candidate over Sir Leicester’s indicate that Parliament is about to be reformed, for at the end of the novel Parliament is still dominated by the Boodleites and Buffyites (see 983). Moreover, just as the narrator portrays Sir Leicester in generally positive terms while still undercutting him, so too the narrator treats Rouncewell the Ironmaster favorably but does not make him an idealized captain of industry along the lines of Friend Prudence in *Past and Present* (1843) or John Thornton at the conclusion of *North and South*. Indeed, we never learn what kind of relationship Rouncewell has with his employees; he is heroic only in his opposition to the aristocracy, not in his relation to the people.

The satire on an ineffectual Parliament thus goes hand in hand with the radical assertion that those who have been excluded from the franchise have the right to act on the national stage. *Bleak House* thus critiques the assumption of those gathered at Chesney Wold that “Boodle and his retinue, and Buffy and his retinue . . . are the great actors for whom the stage is reserved” while the people are mere “supernumeraries” (191). Whatever his feelings about democracy, Dickens consistently protested the exclusion of the people from political agency. Indeed, in his *A Child’s History of England* (1851–53), conflict arises when the monarch or nobility deny the people the right to pursue their own course of action. Wat Tyler’s rebellion is an uprising of the “common people” against “lords of the land” who have treated them as “mere slaves” (294), and the Great Rebellion is the result of a “fatal division between the king and the people” (453). We find the same language in Dickens’s commentaries on contemporary events; in “To Working Men” (1854), for example, he suggests that if working people will “take the initiative” the “middle class” will “unite with them” and “force” the government to “acquit itself of its responsibility” (228).

However, Dickens’s protests against the exclusion of the people are complicated by his ambiguous representation of popular agency. He calls on working men to act, but he does not address the issue of universal suffrage. In a letter explaining the position he had taken in “To Working Men,” he does allude to the relationship between popular agency and the franchise: “A worthless Government . . . will never do these things . . . until they are made election questions and
the working-people unite to express their determination to have them, or to keep out of Parliament by every means in their power, every man who turns his back upon these first necessities” (Letters 444). Yet even here Dickens imagines a popular agency circumscribed by current law that excludes the people from the franchise. As working people could not influence the outcome of the election with their votes, he must mean that they should do so through the kind of public demonstrations with which the Chartists had sought to pressure the government to award them the franchise. He has made the means of gaining the franchise an end in itself, treating public protest as the practical form of popular agency.

In this respect, popular protest resembles Esther Summerson’s resistant narration. In “Judicial Special Pleading” (1848), which criticizes the abandonment of judicial impartiality in the trials of Chartists, Dickens contends that the French Revolution was more than a “struggle for ‘political rights’”; it was, rather, “a struggle on the part of the people for social recognition and existence” (140). From this perspective, the attainment of agency begins not with inclusion in political institutions but with the ability to resist and reform the discourse of class.

IV. The National Marriage Plot and Popular Agency

Trevor Blount has suggested that the marriage of Watt Rouncewell to the servant Rosa provides a resolution in terms of the national marriage plot, insofar as Watt represents the new urban industrial society and Rosa, the aristocratic world of Chesney Wold where she had been a servant (425). Yet, apart from a few vague expressions of loyalty to their elders, neither Watt nor Rosa manifests allegiance to the ethos of city or country, entrepreneur or aristocrat. This alliance between the iron country and Chesney Wold does not represent the formation of a new class that will take the place of the aristocracy so much as the transformation of the aristocracy into the middle class, the birth of the middle class—Watt’s father had been born at Chesney Wold—out of the ashes of the aristocracy.

Esther’s narrative provides an alternative to the marriage plot depicted in the omniscient narrative. The marriage of Esther Summerson and Allan Woodcourt might also be regarded as a union of middle-class domesticity and aristocratic heritage but for the fact that Esther and Allan explicitly reject class identities. Instead of repre-
senting a new class of idealized governors or employers of the people, their marriage gestures toward an ethos that offers the people a degree of political agency by granting them “recognition and existence” (“Judicial” 140).

Esther and Allan break with the past and, with it, a class identity determined by their origins. Although his mother insists that his “choice of wife” is limited because he can “claim kindred with ap-Kerrig,” Allan refuses to emulate the Dedlock relations by seeking a sinecure with the help of his aristocratic relations (470). Moreover, in addition to rejecting his mother’s class pretensions, he eschews the language of class, neither aligning himself with gentility nor mounting a middle-class critique of it. Esther might be regarded as middle-class insofar as she, like Rouncewell, has risen from among the people through her own efforts. As we have seen, however, she also refuses to perform a class identity. Her critiques do not, like the discourse of the philanthropists and dandies, seek to align her with one class by criticizing another, but rather serve to critique class discourse itself.

Because they eschew class discourse, Esther and Allan are able to envision the people as social agents. The philanthropists and dandies fail to grant recognition to the people because they treat them merely as an occasion for establishing, respectively, their moral or aesthetic superiority. Similarly, Sir Leicester and Rouncewell are more concerned with their battle for political supremacy than with the import it has for the people. By contrast, Esther and Allan establish relationships of reciprocal recognition in which the people may speak rather than merely listen: as Esther notes, “I never walk out with my husband, but I hear the people bless him. . . . The people even like Me as I go about, and make so much of me that I am quite abashed” (988–89; emphasis added).

Yet Dickens’s representation of the systemic nature of England’s social ills makes it abundantly clear that individual actions can in themselves do little to ameliorate the condition of the poor. Esther’s notion that she should “render what kind services [she] could, to those immediately about [her]; and . . . try to let that circle of duty gradually and naturally expand itself” does not claim that individual philanthropy will effect social reform but rather acknowledges that, as events confirm, the scope of individual action is limited. Her kindness to Caddy Jellyby and Miss Flite helps them improve their circumstances to some degree, but Miss Flite remains psychologically disturbed and
Caddy becomes the sole support of two adult men and a child born deaf and dumb. Allan Woodcourt’s profession suggests that he is, in terms of the novel’s symbolic structure, the surgeon who will cure a diseased England, yet he can do little more than ease the pain of sufferers. He does what he can to comfort Jo the crossing-sweeper, but he cannot restore him to health, and when he encounters Jenny in Tom-all-Alone’s he cleans the wound inflicted by her husband but is powerless to stop his abuse. It is not what they do for these people that makes the difference, but rather the fact that they behave in a way that grants them social recognition.

In this respect, Allan and Esther resemble those district visitors who altered their discourse in response to the poor, implicitly granting them agency. The brickmakers visited by Mrs. Pardiggle have received financial assistance from a philanthropic voluntary society such as the Domestic Mission. These visits were intended to ensure that “relief was given in a family context” and that the recipients of assistance were truly in need, but they were also an occasion to promote sobriety, cleanliness, and prudence by instructing the poor in domestic economy and Christian doctrine (R. J. Morris 218; Seed 12–15). In his analysis of Unitarian domestic missions in Manchester, however, John Seed found that such proselytizing had little effect on the poor; instead, the poor “had an important effect back on liberal ideology” when visitors recognized that even “frugal and industrious families” could “scarcely obtain sufficiency of food” (17). Although these people could not speak, or act, in Parliament, Seed suggests, their words became part of the discourse of poverty, serving to reshape public policy.

Similarly, just as Esther refuses the identities conferred on her by her interlocutors, the brickmakers refuse the identity that Mrs. Pardiggle would impose upon them. Mrs. Pardiggle’s sermons and pamphlets fail to instill her values in the brickmakers precisely because her discourse constructs them as fundamentally other than herself, as inebriated, prodigal, and irreligious in opposition to her sobriety, industry, and piety. Jenny’s husband resists these characterizations by relocating his behavior in relation to his family’s social circumstances: he does not drink gin because he is a “drunkard” but because their water is unhealthy, his house is not dirty because his family is untidy but because it is begrimed by clay from the brick-field, and he has failed to read her pamphlet not because he refuses to be Christian but because Christians have not taught him to read (132). These responses do not
have an effect back on Mrs. Pardiggle, but they do elicit a reaction from Esther, who can recognize in them her own excluded status. When Mrs. Pardiggle complains of the brickmakers’ “untidy habits,” Esther puts herself in their place, asking whether “the best of us could have been tidy in such a place” (130). Even more to the point, Esther recognizes what Mrs. Pardiggle fails to see, the death of Jenny’s child.

However, popular agency as represented in Bleak House is fragile, limited by the extent of the individual’s mastery of discourse. Esther can resist class discourse precisely because she understands it sufficiently well to critique it. In the process of depicting herself as an excluded other who achieves social inclusion, she constructs a distinction between herself as agent of her own narrative self-making and the poor whose language can only intermittently challenge normative discourses. The brickmakers demonstrate that illiteracy need not prevent one from “reading” class discourse and its intentions, but their agency is also limited to the ability to affect the discourse of individuals like Esther and Allan. Even for Esther the brickmakers remain marginal, replaced by “the people” of Yorkshire who live near the new Bleak House and omitted from her summary of the fates of those who have featured prominently in her story.

If Esther’s narrative, as James Buzard suggests, envisions “a new Britain where every former nobody will be accorded consequence” (30), then the omniscient narrative represents a present in which the process of achieving agency has not yet begun. Whereas the brickmakers first appear in Esther’s narrative, Jo the crossing-sweeper, the only other inhabitant of Tom-all-Alone’s named in the novel, first appears in the omniscient narrative, where he is depicted as almost completely bereft of agency, a child swept along by circumstances, made merely to “move on” (308). Jo’s cultural literacy is so limited—he does not know even the rudiments of Christian doctrine—that the court of inquest denies him the right to speak as a witness. Lacking such literacy, he has no hope of producing a counter-discourse that reacts back on dominant discourse. Instead, the omniscient narrator must voice the critique that Jo cannot articulate, transforming his illiteracy, his inability to understand the “mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and at the corners of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows,” into a condemnation of a nation that fails to recognize him as one of its citizens: “I am here somehow, too, and everybody overlooked me until I became the creature that I am!” (257–58). However,
the power of the narrator’s discourse paradoxically confirms Jo’s own powerlessness.

This analysis of class discourse in *Bleak House* has suggested that we should not see the novel, or the novelist, as expressing, or promoting, the interest of a particular class, but instead as representing class identities that are instable and discontinuous. R. J. Morris has found, in his study of Victorian Leeds, that while certain groups might identify themselves as middle-class and define a course of action in relation to their economic interests, such moments of “class consciousness” were contingent and momentary, not the manifestation of an achieved identity that would be sustained continuously through time. In other situations, the same individuals might mobilize a religious or political, rather than class, identity; some industrialists, for example, opposed the opening of public parks on Sundays on religious grounds, even though this stance was at odds with their economic interest (273). At various moments in *Bleak House*, Dickens strategically mobilizes middle-class and radical critiques not in order to promote class interests, but in order to reimagine the nation. This is not to say that the novel seeks to suppress or conceal the underlying causes of social conflict; on the contrary, its representation of Victorian society demonstrates the ways in which class discourse serves to circumscribe popular agency and thus promote public discord.

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NOTES

1 A number of commentators have discussed the complex connotations of the title: the best recent discussion is Welsh 1–3; see also Shatto 13. The most recent essay to address the parallels between Bleak House and the Crystal Palace is Tracy. So far as I have been able to determine, no one has suggested an allusion to the Houses of Parliament. However, the various ways in which the novel deals with representation, parliamentary and otherwise, has been the subject of considerable discussion. J. Hillis Miller and D. A. Miller have, in different ways, argued that *Bleak House* critiques totalizing representations, even as it attempts to represent the totality of English culture. Bigelow extends their readings, treating Chancery as a depiction of the economic system and noting its similarity to the domain of the political (see esp. 79, 89). Buzard, however, suggests that the novel is more concerned with the way representation demarcates inclusions and exclusions than with claiming to represent the nation effectively; while he focuses on the achievement of inclusion in relation to excluded colonial others, my own concern is with the exclusion of “the people” within England.
I follow such historians as Joyce and Stedman Jones in regarding class as a discursive formation. Class, they argue, is not a form of consciousness determined by one’s relation to the means of production, but a category of social description through which identity may be constituted. This conception does not mean that the language of class is divorced from material culture; on the contrary, it insists that discursive formations must be understood in terms of social practices. For summaries of the development of this “linguistic turn” in the history of class, see Cannadine 11–15 and Joyce, Class 3–7, 13–14, 128–30, 150–54; Stedman Jones describes the evolution of his own linguistic turn in his introduction to Languages of Class (see esp. 19–22). I discuss more fully some of the implications of this work for literary history in “What Did Jane Eyre Do? Ideology, Agency, Class, and the Novel.”

For relevant discussions of constitutional narratives, see Epstein, In Practice ch. 3, and Radical Expression ch. 1 and 75–77; Fulcher; Joyce, Democratic Subjects ch. 15, and Visions 105–07; Stedman Jones 97–109; and Vernon, Politics ch. 8.

The rise of the middle class, as Wahrman argues, is yet another formation within class discourse that was produced in political debates. In short, what triumphed with the passage of the Reform Bill was not the middle class, but the idea that the middle class had triumphed (333).

On these genres, see Ferris ch. 4 and Trumpener ch. 3. I do not mean to suggest that Bleak House is either a national tale or historical novel, but rather that it draws on a novelistic tradition that has absorbed these traditions. Criticism of the Victorian novel is only beginning to notice the later history of the national tale. I would also like to thank Michael Tomko and Sara Maurer for drawing my attention to the place of North and South in this tradition. Corbett has also noted the similarity between national tales and such novels as North and South and Sybil (86–87).

My discussion in this and the following paragraph draws on Perkin’s seminal study, which remains invaluable for its analysis of the logic of what he calls “class ideals.” Whereas Perkin treats class ideals as produced by the social classes they valorize, I treat them as discourses through which class identity is produced. As discussed above, economic explanations of the source of class ethos are themselves therefore elements of class discourse, their purpose being to assert the authority of class by making values the effect of a material cause.

My attention was drawn to this allusion by Sen’s excellent article, which does not, however, discuss the way this figure stands behind the representation of Turveydrop and dandyism in Bleak House.

Esther similarly invokes the gender assumptions that link class discourse to the discourse of separate spheres, opposing the aggressive and energetic but also competitive and ruthless middle-class male entrepreneur to the cultivated and morally refined, but also idle and passive, domestic woman. In Esther’s narrative, the transgressions of the philanthropists and dandies are thus compounded by gender transgressions. Instead of extending the virtues of the private domestic sphere to the outer world—as understood in Esther’s belief in a “circle of duty” (141)—Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby cross into the public sphere seeking publicity, treating philanthropy as a “business” and neglecting their families (128). Skimpole and Turveydrop, as dandies concerned with beauty and fashion, transgress gender boundaries by being decorative rather than active and industrious, and their principal activities—piano-playing, drawing, dancing, and deport-
— are feminine accomplishments. Like Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby, they are bad parents, but whereas the former fail their children by attending to public matters rather than the home, the latter fail to assume a proper public role that would enable them to provide financial security for their families.

9On this critique of the aristocracy, see Blake 11. The fullest discussion of Rouncewell is Blount. For a suggestive discussion of Dickens’s models for Rouncewell and Sir Leicester, see Tracy 46–48.

10I am indebted to Sucksmith for identifying this source for the allusion (119–23). However, he does not comment on the fact that these events took place in the West Riding of Yorkshire, almost certainly the location of Rouncewell’s home and factory, or on the fact that Jefferson was a blacksmith. Nor does he note the importance Tyler had obtained in radical discourse owing to Southey’s play.

11In her helpful analysis Goodlad provides a complementary perspective on the ways that both the aristocracy and the middle class are responsible for deadlock (see esp. 88).

12As Sen suggests, the “Dandy of Sixty” in Hone’s satire—meant to be recognizable as the prince regent—serves as a model for Dickens’s dandies and the dandyism of Chesney Wold (945). Dickens’s journalism frequently draws on this tradition of parliamentary satire, nowhere more clearly than in “A Haunted House,” which satirizes bribery in the 1852 electoral campaign. In 1854, shortly after completing Bleak House, he contemplated writing a series of articles displaying what biographer John Forster called his “contempt for the House of Commons” (qtd. in Slater 211). Finally, the party of Boodle and his kin, notably Noodle, was inspired in part by another long-standing satiric tradition, specifically Sidney Smith’s “Noodle’s Oration” (1825), in which a fictitious Tory MP anticipates Sir Leicester by declaring himself “an enemy to all change, and all innovation” and a defender of the lord chancellor (387–89; see Brice and Fielding 237 and Shatto 124).

13Pope (132–35) and Tobin (131–36) provide useful discussions of Dickens and district visitors. On the history of this movement, see R. J. Morris ch. 8; Prochaska ch. 4; and Seed.

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