THE OTHER DICKENS: A LIFE OF CATHERINE HOGARTH

Lillian Nayder
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REVIEWED BY DEBORAH HELLER

No retelling of the story of Dickens's treatment of his wife in 1858 can blunt its sheer awfulness, even for those familiar with earlier accounts. The novelist who had so movingly championed the disempowered and vulnerable in his great imaginative fictions demonstrated an appalling blindness to his own behaviour when, after more than 22 years of marriage and ten children, he effectively forced his wife out of their house, justifying himself to his public by suggesting in print that she was mentally unbalanced and had always been an incompetent mother. Eager to seize the happiness that appeared to offer itself in summer 1857, when he met and fell in love with the young actress Nelly Ternan, as well as to exonerate himself from guilt—in his own and his public's eyes—Dickens recreated the story of his marriage, casting himself as the hapless victim of a grossly deficient wife.

This frequently recounted story, however, is not the principal one Lillian Nayder proposes to tell in *The Other Dickens: A Life of Catherine Hogarth*. Her professed aim, instead, is to "[dislodge] Dickens from the centre of Catherine's story." And yet as the double title suggests, it is, after all, because Catherine was married to the great genius of the English novel and he behaved in such an appalling manner when he wished to free himself from her that her life is of such interest to biographer and reader.

Nayder admirably reconstructs a far fuller life for Catherine than can be found in any biography of her husband. Additionally, she contextualizes that life through her rich exploration of the social and legal position of women in the Victorian era, often illuminating Catherine's experience through women contemporaries whose lives touched hers. Still, since one of Nayder's important objectives is to vindicate her subject from the false image of her that Dickens presented to the public, too readily accepted by many Dickens scholars, the story of the Dickenses' marriage and separation necessarily looms large.

Examining banking records and letters by both Catherine and Charles, Nayder refutes the novelist's claims of his wife's "lassitude," incompetence as a household manager, estrangement from their children, and displacement by her sister Georgina. Banking records reveal that up until 1857 Catherine received, "usually more frequently, the larger sums necessary to run the household, whereas Georgina . . . received an allowance roughly equivalent to the wages paid to a governess, housekeeper, or head nurse." Moreover, Catherine's "own accounts of daily life in the mid-1850s" show her as "busy and energetic, not leisurely or lethargic." To Dickens's "hurtful and unjust" charge that she was an incompetent mother, unloved by her children, Nayder reminds us that children by law belonged to their father and could not live with their mother even if they so desired. Only the oldest son, Charlie, 21 at the time of separation, could choose to go with her, though another son expressed the wish to do so. Dickens claimed the children could see their mother whenever they wished, but in practice, as his daughter Kate later related, he made it clear he disliked their visits. Catherine remained close to Charlie and, later, his wife and children, and after Kate's marriage (within a year of the separation) and Dickens's death a dozen years later, she was able to spend more time with her other children and grandchildren as well.

Catherine had had no say in the arrangements Dickens made before their separation to send their sons abroad (initially temporarily), four of them when they were eight or nine years old. Subsequently, Dickens was described by someone he consulted as "only too anxious to send his sons away to the ends of the earth." When Walter died in India, one of several colonial outposts to which Dickens dispatched his sons, Dickens refused a friend's entreaty to send condolences to Catherine: "A page in my life which once had writing on it, has become absolutely blank . . . it is not in my power to pretend that it has a solitary word upon it."

Nayder's most striking new information concerns Catherine's life after the separation. Even sympathetic women scholars have dismissed her last 21 years as "an empty life" (Claire Tomalin) and "a living death" (Phyllis Rose). By contrast, Nayder describes these years as "much busier and happier than critics acknowledge." Catherine kept old friends, made new ones, led an active social life, and "remained a steady concert-and-theatergoer and an avid reader." The novelist Annie Thomas asked her to be godmother to her child. Harriet Martineau wrote that Catherine had "revived" since 1858 and appeared "to more to advantage than perhaps ever before . . . cheered by the affection of her son-in-law . . . who had brought her daughter [Kate] back to her."

Along with renewed enjoyment of her children and grandchildren, Catherine developed a close bond with her younger sister, Helen Hogarth, a singer and voice instructor whose career she helped manage. She "spent much of her time in the 1860s and 1870s with her sister, her neighbors, and the members of their musical circle, hosting and attending dinners, participating in impromptu concerts, and discussing vocal and instrumental compositions." While Dickens's shocking conduct often upstages his wife's story in this engrossing book, Nayder also shows that, against strong odds, Catherine Dickens was able to preserve her selfhood and continue to grow and find new joys in life.

*Associate Professor Emerita of Humanities at York, Deborah Heller's most recent book, T*he Goose Girl, the Rabbi, and the New York Teachers: A Family Memoir, *is forthcoming.*