'Wot larx!': William Morris, Charles Dickens, and Fatherly Feelings

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At first glance, William Morris may not be a name we would associate with 'Mr Popular Sentiment', Charles Dickens. Despite the highly wrought emotions of Morris's poetry which was widely read and praised in his day, Morris's radical socialist views may make him more worthy of the epithet 'Mr *Un*popular Sentiment'. Both by temperament and philosophy, Morris could be said to have been the embodiment of the resistant Victorian reader: unresponsive to sentimentality, he was often out of kilter with popular literary tastes, preferring the literature of the past rather than the present. For instance, May Morris recalled that her father 'could never sympathize with the enthusiasm children had a little later on for *Alice in Wonderland*. It was a type of child-literature that "gave him the fidgets", he would say'.[1] Morris, however, certainly did share the Victorian affection for the works of Dickens, evident not only in *News from Nowhere*'s deliberate borrowing of the character name Boffin from *Our Mutual Friend* but in more mundane examples from the life of Morris. Recollections of friends, for instance, depict Morris reading aloud from Dickens, and Morris's letters are peppered with allusions to Dickens's novels. *David Copperfield*, *Dombey and Son*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* all make appearances in Morris's correspondence. As Morris's first biographer, J. W. Mackail, has described:

> Of Dickens himself, [Morris's] knowledge and appreciation were both complete. It is not without value as an illustration of his curiously compounded personality that in the moods when he was not dreaming of himself as Tristram or Sigurd, he identified himself very closely with two creations of a quite different mould, Joe Gargery and Mr Boffin. Both of these amiable characters he more or less consciously copied, if it be not truer to say more or less naturally resembled. The 'Morning, morning!' of the latter, and the 'Wot larks!' of the former he adopted as his own favourite methods of salutation. And one of the phrases that was most constantly on his lips, which he used indiscriminately to indicate his disapproval of anything from Parliamentary institutions to the architecture of St Paul's Cathedral, was, as all his friends will remember, the last recorded saying of Mr F's Aunt, 'Bring him for'ard, and I'll chuck him out o'winder.'[2]

Morris's mimicry provides another instance of the capacity of Dickens's characters to live beyond the page and to permeate the everyday lives of readers. The seemingly eclectic group of Dickensian characters that Morris imitated suggests how the work of Dickens

could provide a character, or an allusion, appropriate for almost any occasion: even unsympathetic characters such as 'Mr F's Aunt' from *Little Dorrit* could furnish a memorable catchphrase to be adapted to the contexts of readers' own lives. Through such means, Dickens's readers articulated a set of shared cultural references, readily understood and enjoyed by those around them, but also perhaps thus expressed — in a condensed or coded form — what could not otherwise be so effectively conveyed.

Morris's inclusion in the 'imagined community' of Dickensian readers, however, extended further than humorous mimicry and might be described as an emotional identification with *Great Expectations*'s Joe Gargery. What Mackail's observation does not make clear is that Morris's emulation of Joe was strongly associated with the intimate, familial Morris rather than the public Morris. While Morris referred to Dickens's works and characters in letters to a range of correspondents, his repeated usage of Joe's catchphrase 'Wot larx!' (variously spelled) occurs exclusively in letters to his wife and daughters, especially the latter. In this essay, I want to explore how Morris's affinity with Joe provided a conduit for the expression of emotions associated with fatherhood which combined a form of nurturing paternity with more conflicted feelings of familial intimacy. In this way, I will argue, a strange affinity also emerges between Morris and Joe's creator, as Dickens's own problematic performance of the role of 'intimate father' echoes some aspects of Morris's parenting style.[3] In the case of both men, their active and affectionate involvement in the lives of their children did not necessarily reflect a state of domestic harmony, as 'intimate fathering' was to some extent defined in opposition to the role of the mother in households where marital estrangement intruded into the life of the family to varying degrees.

Victorian masculinity and fatherhood have become topics of increasing scholarly interest. Although as early as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's landmark study, *Family Fortunes* (1987), middle-class fathers were depicted in more nurturing roles, the stereotype of the emotionally distant paterfamilias has proved difficult to overturn — not least because of its prevalence in Victorian literature.[4] More recently, however, other alternatives to the Victorian stereotype of the tyrannical or absent father have emerged. John Tosh, for example, has elaborated instances of the 'playful father' as well as the 'intimate father**',** insisting on the centrality of domesticity to the formation of middle-class masculine identity, and Valerie Sanders has explored a model of 'educational fatherhood', among others, in an attempt 'to restore the experience of fatherhood to a more central

position' in her study of eminent Victorian men.[5] Mamie Dickens's account of 'Charles Dickens at Home' (1885) describes her father's parenting as combining the different (positive) modes that Tosh and Sanders elaborate, including play and nurture as well as moral guidance and domestic management. 'He had a wonderful attraction for children', Mamie glowingly recalled,

> and a quick perception of their character and disposition; a most winning and easy way with them, full of fun, but also of a graver sympathy with their many small troubles and perplexities, which made them recognize a friend in him at once.[6]

William Morris may serve as another instance of a Victorian middle-class father whose parenting style eschewed detached authoritarianism, and instead combined nurture, play, instruction, lively conversation, and shared interests throughout the lives of his two daughters. May Morris describes her relatively liberated childhood, marked by both intellectual and physical freedom. As children, May and her older sister Jenny fished, punted, climbed trees, and roamed outdoors at will, unconfined by Victorian conventions of feminine dress or demeanour. May's penchant for climbing the gabled roofs of Kelmscott Manor — or 'roof-riding' as she called it — seems to have been a regular activity until one day she found herself stranded, unable to descend, and the gardener was sent 'post-haste for the longest ladders the village possessed'.[7] The Morris girls were given free access to the family library, educated outside the home, and included in social occasions as full participants, as May's memories of childhood conversations and friendships with famous denizens of the Morris social circle attest. Morris also seems to have had an enlightened view of the role of adult daughters in the home: the social expectation that (unmarried) daughters would serve their fathers' needs seemed entirely absent from the Morris household and Morris was known to undertake domestic duties at times (he was a keen cook, for instance).[8]

The Morris daughters' sympathy for their father's aesthetic and political philosophies, and the circumstances of their later lives, however, complicate this picture in a number of ways. Jenny Morris's epilepsy — which developed in mid-adolescence and left her a semi-invalid for the rest of her life — struck at the heart of Morris family life, taking a heavy emotional toll on all. For Morris, it meant that he always worked to include Jenny in conversations and correspondence about literature, politics, and art as a means of assuring her of his confidence in her intellectual capacities, despite her illness (much

misunderstood in this era, of course) and to compensate for her limited access to the outside world. May Morris's close collaboration with her father, both in Morris & Co. and socialist organizations, no doubt reflected an emotional dynamic in which passionately shared interests were inextricably bound up with shared affection, but one does not need to be an avowed Freudian to see May's short-lived marriage to an unprepossessing socialist of her father's circle as a conflicted — if unconscious — attempt to replace and please her father at the same time. The tone of Morris's correspondence with his daughters retained a childlike playfulness throughout their lives, despite (or because of?) the complexities of their adult relationships. Letters offering sustained accounts of political events or other weighty concerns were interspersed with affectionate asides to 'my darling child' or 'my dear little May' and gentle but humorous mocking of friends and associates.[9] In her recollections of her father, then, it is not surprising that May Morris emphasized this light-hearted aspect of her father's character in his dealings with the children. From May, we see glimpses of Morris's delight in his children and their happiness, very similar to that described by Mamie Dickens of her father. Describing her first trip abroad — when the Morris family, together with the Burne-Jones children, Margaret and Philip, travelled to France — May recalled that, during the train journey, 'Father smiled across at Mother above the scrambling swarm and said, with his heart in his voice, "It's worth anything to take the kids a treat, Janey, and see the little rascals enjoying it so."'[10]

Morris's identification with Joe, I want to suggest, provided another means of putting 'his heart in his voice' to express powerful fatherly feelings. The question remains, however, why — of all the literary father figures on which he could draw — Dickens's childlike blacksmith (not of course literally a father to Pip) should have figured so largely in Morris's emotional imaginary (by which I mean the cultural repertoire of forms, images, fantasies, narratives, and gestures regarding the emotions).[11] Joe's unorthodox position as a father figure in Pip's childhood may first of all have resonated with Morris's desire to move away from more conventional, emotionally distant forms of fatherhood but Joe may also be linked with Morris's disdain for the conventions of middle-class masculinity more generally. In Joe, Morris could see a figure who embodied an ideal of manliness that combined the intense feelings of childhood with the strength and skills of the adult man. Malcolm Andrews has argued that the characterization of Joe should be seen in the context of a wider debate about 'what constituted manliness and gentlemanliness', both within and beyond the novel.[12] Indeed, Morris's own life narrative can similarly be

understood as a conscious negotiation of shifting ideals of manliness and a desire to challenge conventions of middle-class masculinity. Morris's life was almost the reverse of Pip's narrative, or at least the narrative that Pip desires for much of the novel: raised as a gentleman within an affluent middle-class family, Morris came to reject the expectations and values of middle-class gentility — he relinquished a profession suitable for a gentleman and went into trade, married down instead of up, and advocated manual work and radical socialism. Further, Morris's adoption of a comic, buffoonish persona as a kind of self-protective strategy, evident from his university days onwards, could be seen as an attempt to eschew a class-specific decorum that for Morris was antithetical to plain speaking or decisive action. It is not surprising, then, that he responded so readily to a character like Joe whom Dickens himself described as 'a good-natured foolish man.'[13] If such a description sounds like faint praise from the author, it is not one, I would suggest, that Morris would see as dismissive; rather, he was ever suspicious of the merely clever or the socially charming.

In one sense, then, Morris's identification with Joe marked his discomfort with his own class position, his desire to identify with a man lacking in pretension or status and to emulate an 'authentic' masculinity, however fictional such an identity may inevitably be. For all his clear-eyed critique of the sufferings of the working class in industrialized modernity, Morris was not above romanticizing the apparent freedom or authenticity of feelings he attributed to workers in past times. As Ruth Livesey has shown, Morris's deployment of the term 'manliness' to denote the virtue and pleasure of embodied, non-alienated work demonstrates how the valorization of labouring masculinity was integral to his socialist aesthetic.[14] Joe as embodied labourer, deploying skill and strength in a craft which is valued by the community, corresponds closely to Morris's ideals concerning the integration of work and pleasure, beauty and utility, production and consumption. In a sense, Morris would have concurred with the young Pip's view of Joe and his forge as 'the glowing road to manhood and independence'.[15] Joe's trade as a blacksmith is integral to his character: Joe is at home in his work in every sense, as is shown through the fact that when he is not dressed in his everyday, work clothes he seems alienated from his true self ('Nothing that he wore then, fitted him or seemed to belong to him' (*GE*, p. 54)). Similarly, Morris also adopted a style of dress that signaled his identification with labouring masculinity: as contemporaries often noted, his usual attire was made of blue serge, not a fabric associated with middle-class gentility but one more accommodating to the messy or

strenuous tasks associated with Morris's various crafts. In a description curiously reminiscent of Joe, an early biography of Morris noted that Morris 'only looked really peculiar when in conventional attire'.[16]

In *Great Expectations*, however, Joe is idealized not simply as the embodiment of honest labour but of manly sentimentality, an aspect of his character that may at first sight seem of limited appeal for William Morris. Joe is of course both sentimentalized and sentimental: as a man of strong feeling, Joe weeps and trembles, his voice gives way with the strength of his emotion, and he is demonstratively affectionate towards his beloved Pip. He combines 'strength with gentleness,' according to the narrator Pip, recalling that 'Joe laid his hand on my shoulder with the touch of a woman' (*GE*, p. 168). The significance of male weeping to express intense and authentic feelings of attachment in this novel is demonstrated by the tears of Pip's two non-bourgeois father figures, Joe and Magwitch, at highly charged moments when the relationship is under threat from external sources, forcing an unwanted parting from Pip. Pip's inability to respond in kind signifies both an emotional and ethical failure on his part, as when he observes, having left village life behind: 'If I had cried before, I should have had Joe with me then' (*GE*, p. 186). Ostensibly describing the possibility that if he had not suppressed his true feelings on parting from Joe, Pip could have prolonged their time together a little longer, the ambiguity of this statement also suggests that weeping, or the powerful expression of strong emotions, is itself a form of intimacy, of connection, with the loved person; Joe would be 'with me', in some sense, through Pip's tears. Later in the narrative when Joe returns to nurse Pip through the illness following his failed attempt to save Magwitch, Pip's acknowledgement of Joe's true worth will be underwritten by his newfound ability to express his feelings for Joe and to reclaim the intimacy the two had shared in his childhood. Finally recognizing Joe as the soothing presence by his bedside, Pip confides: 'Joe's eyes were red when I next found him beside me; but, I was holding his hand, and we both were happy' (*GE*, p. 473). Joe's embodiment of 'sentimental masculinity', then, which Pip belatedly emulates here, linking the two men through touch and tears, demonstrates the 'compatibility of physical strength and tenderness' within an ideal of manly virtue, as Holly Furneaux has noted.[17]

Joe's strength, however, coexists with his childlike characteristics, such as naivety, (near) illiteracy, and an inability to challenge the authority of his wife. As Andrews has observed, Joe is one of those 'exemplary male grown-up [children] in Dickens, the

sensitive, diffident and decidedly naïve man'.[18] The 'foolishness' of the child is a common literary trope for concealed wisdom, hidden from the insensitive or the prosaic, but the association drawn between the child and the man may also suggest a further reason for Morris's affinity with this character. Biographers have long attributed a 'childlike' quality to Morris as a way of capturing both the peculiar innocence of Morris's personality and the imaginative sweep of his work. Alfred Noyes, for instance, listed among Morris's 'childlike characteristics' his 'capacity for getting dirty' and his 'ungovernable temper which he still united with his dreaminess'.[19] It has been speculated that Morris's emotional outbursts, sometimes reminiscent of a child's tantrums, were due to an undiagnosed form of epilepsy (and hence that Jenny's illness was a result of heredity).[20] At times resulting in a kind of fugue state, Morris's episodic rants contrasted sharply with the qualities highly valued within normative bourgeois masculinity such as self-control and emotional reticence and must have been equally disturbing for witnesses and perpetrator alike. So the depiction of a character like the 'linguistically idiosyncratic' Joe who combined strength, skill and strong feeling, and was both childlike and nurturing in his parental role, may seem of obvious appeal to a somewhat unconventional middle-class father, given to sudden and sometimes inexplicable expressions of feeling and alienated from the gender roles that his class position prescribed.[21]

Was it true for Morris, then, as has been said of Dickens, that Joe represents 'the only kind of parent that Dickens could fully approve, one that remains a child'?[22] A refusal to observe the usual boundaries between childhood and adulthood was a significant aspect of Morris's relationship with his daughters. On the one hand, he referred to them in childlike or even infantile terms long after they had grown, which allowed him to continue a relationship of affectionate intimacy and informality such as is possible with small children. Writing to his wife in 1876, for example, when his daughters were both in their mid-teens, he concludes with the request: 'Kiss those dear babies for me.'[23] On the other hand, he discussed political and literary issues with them as equals, from late childhood onwards. Speaking to children as if they were adults, the father also at times spoke as a child and the two approaches seem to have coexisted without any conscious tension in his letters. Describing the aftermath of a socialist meeting broken up by police in 1886, for instance, Morris wrote to Jenny at Kelmscott:

> Such a knockabout day as I had on Monday! I saw in the *Daily News* that our men had been 'run in' [i.e. arrested] at Stratford, and expected what followed;

> namely that as soon as I got home I had to go off to West Ham Police Court (which is the Lord knows where) & see about cash for paying their fines […] I dined luxuriously off 2 Abernethy biscuits, but on the top of a tram which was rather nice […] This is a very shabby note for you my Jenny, but you know how busy I am …
>
> So no more at present from your old Nobbs.
>
> My very best love my dear.[24]

Downplaying the significance of his intervention here, Morris also refused to protect his daughters from the harsh realities of radical politics. It is perhaps surprising, then, that Morris rejected more modern or experimental approaches to parenting such as he observed in some of his more radical peers. May Morris recalled:

> I have heard my father speak of the children of X and Y and Z, who were being lovingly subjected to experiments in diet or clothing or training or play, as 'poor little devils', with real pity in his voice. 'Children bring each other up,' he often said, and as one of a large family he knew it by experience.[25]

In this anecdote, the role of the father disappears altogether, with parental intervention depicted as a cruel imposition on the freedoms of children and an implication that Morris's own experience of childhood was not characterized by parental affection or attention. Morris's empathy with the children ('poor little devils') rather than their parents suggests he still closely identified with the state of childhood and that 'bring[ing] each other up' could include a childlike parent as well, a view that seems to find an echo in Jane Morris's description of Jenny and William 'wander[ing] about the Downs together like two happy babies'.[26] Wilfrid Blunt — an interesting and interested observer, given his clandestine relationship with Jane Morris — described the reciprocity and gentle intimacy that existed between William and Jenny in his diary in August 1890: 'It is nice to see [Morris] with his daughter Jenny, who takes a kind of moral care of him, as he does a physical care of her.'[27]

An intimacy based on equality between father and child, however, potentially threatens to exclude another member of the family circle: the mother. How might this aspect of the parent–child dyad be illuminated by Morris's regard for Joe? Writing to Forster regarding the first installment of *Great Expectations*, Dickens disclosed: 'I have put a child and a good-natured foolish man, in relations that seem to me very funny.'[28] Dickens's labeling as 'very funny' the scenario between Joe and the young Pip may be at odds with how readers today respond to the depiction of Pip's bleak childhood but what is most significant here is the way Dickens foregrounds Pip and Joe, implying they are the

focus of the narrative and the central relationship in the household. By its very omission, Dickens's comment draws attention to the presence of Joe's wife in this familial setting. As her name suggests, 'Mrs Joe' functions as a powerful structuring device in this early part of the novel: defined by her relationship within the family, she is both the reason why Pip and Joe are so closely united in their shared suffering and also the means by which Joe's nurture and sympathy are upheld as ideals, in contrast to her abusive neglect of Pip. Joe's inability to protect Pip against his wife's tirades is explicitly attributed to Joe's own family history (of a violent father and a victimized mother) which has left him 'dead afeerd of going wrong in the way of not doing what's right by a woman' (*GE*, p. 80). The circumlocution through which Joe expresses his sympathy for women here reflects the fraught, if not contradictory, relation between father, mother, and child in the Gargery household where a mother's authority is equated with violence but paternal impotence is associated with ethical restraint and sympathetic understanding. Rather than alienating Joe from the reader's sympathies because of his failure to protect Pip, this disclosure concerning Joe's childhood endows Joe with a newly heroic status in the eyes of the young Pip: 'I had a new sensation of feeling conscious that I was looking up to Joe in my heart' (*GE*, p. 80). Through the focalizing perspective of Pip, the emphasis is squarely on the warmth and intimacy that exist between the boy and the childlike father figure in a loving partnership, complete in itself. Such an idyllic dyad seems to require no maternal presence, given the father figure's nurture and avowed sympathy for the suffering of mothers.

The fictional embodiment of apparently irreconcilable characteristics in Joe (such as active nurture/passive forbearance) may then explain another aspect of this character's appeal for a Victorian father whose affinity with childhood and close attachment to his daughters could suggest a desire to retreat from the complexities of adult intimacy. Dickens's representation of a father–child dyad as a form of intimate camaraderie between equals, without any competing claims for affection from a mother (deserving or otherwise), allows a fatherly reader to see himself in/as the child, and to imagine such a relationship as a lost plenitude that he can regain. Wilfrid Blunt reads the relationship between Jenny and her father in these terms (although Blunt, of course, had his own reasons for emphasizing the Morrises' marital estrangement), describing Morris as bestowing all his 'home love' on Jenny.[29] Blunt — serial adulterer but also a sentimental romantic idealist, as his diaries reveal — believed that Morris 'did not know, much as he

has written about it, […] the love of women. Here he had no real experience and remained a child'.[30] Such a picture is consistent with Morris's identification with Joe, a character capable of devotion, intimacy, and loyalty in familial relationships but who is largely de-sexualized (despite his second marriage to Biddy). Fathers, one might say, were once children but will never be mothers: through childhood memories, fathers at least have the capacity to enter into the feelings of another (their own child). Despite Joe's expression of sympathy for the lot of wives and mothers, however, such imaginative identification may prove more difficult within the demands and conflicts of adult relationships. As Eileen Gillooly has noted in relation to Dickens, fathers may vicariously revisit their own childhood through the experience of observing their children, potentially complicating the experience of sympathetic identification with one of narcissistic projection.[31]

As the 'violated letter' episode in the breakdown of the Dickenses' marriage implies, however, a father's appeal to filial solidarity with his children could mask other, less ideal, feelings among families and exclude the mother from the charmed circle of affection. The story of the dissolution of the Dickenses' marriage does not need to be rehearsed at length here but, as others have noted, Dickens's public statements on his separation depicted Dickens as an intimate — and innocent — father while impugning Catherine as a bad mother who had alienated her children's affections.[32] In his first published statement on the matter, appearing on the front page of *Household Words* under the heading 'Personal' on 12 June 1858, Dickens announced his 'domestic trouble' but claimed the circumstances 'have been, throughout, within the knowledge of my children.'[33] This depiction of idealized familial intimacy between father and children was repeated in the so-called 'violated letter' — a letter Dickens wrote to Arthur Smith, outlining his version of events surrounding the formal separation from his wife, which was subsequently 'leaked' to the press — in which Dickens said of his relationship with his children, 'All is open and plain among us, as though we were brothers and sisters.'[34] While Michael Slater suggests we understand Dickens's negative depiction of Catherine as a displacement of Dickens's self-pity onto his apparently suffering children, it is also worth noting that it implies an (intra-generational) equality of status between a father and his children, marked by an admirable transparency of relations: 'There is not a shadow of doubt or concealment' between him and his children, Dickens repeatedly asserts in this letter.[35] The romanticized family of equals that Dickens thus constructs in both the 'Personal' statement and the 'violated letter' not only depicts a negative form of maternal

agency but also lacks a powerful patriarchal figure that might challenge the domestic harmony implied between father and children. The authority of both mother and father is thus effaced in this idyllic image of the family, leaving only common purpose and shared affection among loving companions, 'bringing each other up', one might say.

Without imputing to William and Jane Morris the kind of marital breakdown that was all too obvious in the case of the Dickenses — the dramas of the Morris marriage notwithstanding, of course — the dynamics of the Joe–Pip relationship problematize the inclusion of a mother figure in a nurturing family in a way that may have resonated within the Morris family.[36] In the narrative of *Great Expectations*, Orlick's vicious attack on 'Mrs Joe', and her subsequent invalidism and death, more than symbolically remove the mother from the family scene but the marginalization of the mother-as-invalid may also speak to a contemporary context in which feminine invalidism could have a profound impact on gender roles as well as family routines in a middle-class household. As I have argued elsewhere, Jane Morris's invalidism has been much misrepresented and misunderstood but her bouts of ill health meant that her degree of participation in domestic life varied considerably.[37] During her absences from home for convalescence, Morris would often reassure his wife of his presence at home: 'Don't come back in a hurry if it is doing you good: I will look after the babes on Saturday & Sunday' — although 'the babes', on this occasion, were sixteen and fifteen, respectively.[38] Jane Morris was the primary caregiver for Jenny Morris throughout her life, supplemented by professional nursing assistance when Jenny was an adult, but there were occasions when William also took his wife's place in this task.[39] In July 1891, for instance, when Jane's health had been undermined by the demands of caring for Jenny through another illness, Morris wrote to Aglaia Coronio, describing how he had taken over responsibility for Jenny, allowing his wife to convalesce elsewhere:

> I have been here a good deal keeping company with Jenny who has been here [convalescing at Folkestone] mostly since her illness. She now seems better than she has been for a long time — in fact quite well. On Friday week I am going to take her over to France on Friday week [*sic*] if all goes well. This is the doctor's orders; otherwise I should stay at home & get on with my work, which interests me very much.[40]

In a household where the mother could be both invalid and carer, then, it seems fair to assume that the role of the husband/father may at times have been subject to conflicting loyalties.

The ill health of a family member has consequences for the management of emotions within a family, permitting the expression of feelings that mundane routine may preclude, whether a renewed awareness of love or loyalty in the anxiety surrounding a loved one's care, or of resentments or conflicts that surface with the upheaval of domestic arrangements that a health crisis could create.[41] The correspondence between Morris and his wife articulates a range of responses to illness in the family, from practical concerns about domestic management during times of crisis to anxious solicitude for his wife or daughters' condition, suggesting a certain fluidity of roles within the family that does not conform to the stereotype of 'separate spheres'. The surviving letters from Morris to his daughters also extend our insight into the complexities of this family's affective dynamics. Morris often used letters to his daughters as an opportunity to pass a message indirectly to his wife, suggesting that he did not always correspond directly with her, whether due to his hectic schedule (usually the overt reason stated) or because of a more fundamental estrangement between husband and wife. In these mediated messages, moreover, Morris foregrounds Jane's position as mother — through directly naming her in formulaic expressions ('give my best love to mama') or through an emphasis on their shared responsibilities as parents ('Mama must send me minute instructions') — rhetorical moves that can variously and ambiguously suggest intimacy or distance between parents but which also emphasize Morris's strong sense of participation in the care and nurture of his daughters, throughout the vicissitudes of family life.[42]

The well-known tensions within the Morris marriage may help to explain why Morris found the closed circuit of intimacy between Joe and Pip a consolatory image that differentiated a father's relationship and role from a mother's. Against his own struggles and disappointments as a husband and father, Morris could possibly see in Joe's idealized masculinity — combining strength and tenderness — a form of emotional agency that was reassuring, if fictional. Joe's affectionate benevolence towards Pip combined both the lighthearted mode of play and 'larks' in childhood with the tender nursing of the adult Pip through adversity and illness. This held a potentially powerful appeal for Morris, as he dealt with the tragic reversals of Jenny's health and his wish to provide better care for her. Like all good fantasy resolutions, the figure of Joe reconciled contradictory elements not so easily resolved in reality: Joe not only represented fatherly intimacy but a repudiation of masculine brutality — as embodied by Orlick — combined with a reverence for feminine frailty. Without explicitly effacing the mother's importance, then, Joe removes

the need for a mother figure, rendering him safe as an embodiment of ideal fatherly feeling and the primary object of a child's affection.

Turning to Morris's use of Joe's catchphrase 'Wot larx!' in letters to his family, we can now see how Morris's repetition of this phrase encodes some of the conflicting resonances of a model of parenting in which intimacy was grounded in a presumed equality between parent and child, in marked contrast to the formalities or other constraints of adult relationships. While 'lark' — denoting a 'frolicsome adventure, a spree' — was a colloquial term used widely throughout the nineteenth century (the *OED* records usages, for instance, by Byron, Thackeray, and Jane Welsh Carlyle), there is no doubt that Morris's inclusion of the phrase 'Wot larx' in his letters was an explicit reference to Joe. Not only does Morris copy Joe's wildly variant spellings but he also sometimes follows the phrase with a direct reference to *Great Expectations*, as in a letter to May in January 1878 which he ends:

> Love to you all, my dear: & don't work too hard at your play-acting, though it be Larx: I was reading Joe & Pip aloud at the Grange [home of the Burne-Jones family] last night.
> Your loving father
> William Morris[43]

Morris's most concentrated usage of the phrase in his correspondence occurs in a sequence of letters in the winter of 1877–78. These were letters written during the absence of Jane and her daughters, then aged sixteen and fifteen, as guests of Rosalind and George Howard (Earl of Carlisle) in Italy. Jenny's epilepsy had first manifested in the summer of the previous year (1876) and had failed to respond to medical treatment, motivating Rosalind Howard's invitation to the Morrises, in line with current beliefs concerning the therapeutic benefit of wintering in the South. The Morris women's absence in Italy included two significant milestones of family life — Christmas and Jenny's birthday in January — and while William's correspondence with his family during this winter offers an often humorous account of daily annoyances, political developments, household affairs, and gossip concerning friends, family, and their animals, it is, above all, a touching depiction of a father bereft without his family.

What is immediately striking about Morris's usage of Joe's catchphrase in these letters is that it is always either addressed directly to his daughters or used concerning them in a letter to their mother. Sometimes, Morris used the phrase as a closing salutation, after signing off.[44] In these instances it is as if Morris is anxious to end on a positive note,

by a restatement of the cheerful, comic persona that he wanted to display to his family, downplaying the potential pathos of any preceding statements concerning his solitude at home. More commonly, however, Morris uses the phrase within the body of his letter, perhaps most poignantly in his Christmas Day letter addressed to both of his daughters where, after having devoted the first half to a humorous but detailed account of the latest developments in the Eastern Question Association — his main political preoccupation at this time — and the second to news of his extended family, with whom he was spending the day, he concludes: 'I am whiles a bit dull without you: but still, Wot Larks!'.[45] The ambiguity of the phrase in this context is interesting: *whose* larks? Is Morris referring ironically to the Christmas activities of his extended family in which he is a reluctant participant? Or to the delights of a Christmas abroad which he imagines his daughters were experiencing? Perhaps it holds open both possibilities, encompassing Morris and his daughters in an imagined community of three who share the joke and the playful attitude to life it implies, in contrast to Morris's family of origin. In his letters of early 1878, as spring approached when Morris planned to join his family in Italy for a trip of their own, his usage of the phrase again invokes this shared emotional community, and the imagined pleasures arising from the reunited family's adventures in the near future:

> […] but a very few more letters before I shall see my dears again & then WHAT LARX.[46]

> This is the last letter I shall write to you […] before I come out: Wot larx![47]

In this phrase, then, Morris could, in a shared shorthand way, project an image of an idealized family characterized by lighthearted affection and a childlike capacity for enjoyment that reassured his daughters of the emotional connection he shared with them, despite their physical separation.

This line of analysis may seem a long way from Joe and Pip at the forge, and the question may well be asked whether Morris's use of the phrase was just a phatic expression to fill an awkward gap: like the latest iteration of mass culture, a signifier of familiarity but empty of substance. In a recent consideration of Dickensian feeling, Emma Mason describes how Dickens's writing 'encourages us as readers to interpret the world through its emotional content' and I think Morris's letters to his daughters served a similar purpose.[48] Whether describing his own thoughts and activities or more directly offering advice or instruction to Jenny and May, Morris encouraged his daughters to attend to their surroundings wholeheartedly, to respond with their intellect, emotions, and senses. The

enthusiasm evident in his reiterations of 'What larks!' encoded an attitude to life marked by wonder, energy, and passion. Paradoxically, through repeating a borrowed phrase, Morris seemed to imply the value of resisting the conformity of thought or action that he associated with so much of middle-class social life. In a letter to his wife from this period, Morris used the verb form — 'larking' — in relation to his daughters in a way that bears out this attitude towards playful creativity in daily life. Discussing the leasing of a new house in Hammersmith (Kelmscott House), William described to Jane the floor plan and the uses to which rooms could be put. Of the upper storey — the usual location of a schoolroom or similar space for the younger inhabitants of a household — Morris wrote: 'the maidens could have the two queer little rooms above for larking rooms'.[49] For Morris, it might be said that play, creativity, and education were mutually imbricated. The curiosity and experimentation that characterized his pursuit of new arts and crafts (which usually involved a rediscovery of past methods and artefacts) was remembered by May Morris as an exciting process in which the children were included. Morris's growing interest in the weaving and dyeing of textiles and carpets in the 1870s, for instance, was not confined to the workshop but was brought home, to the children's delight:

> The air at home was saturated with dyeing: bits of madder and indigo lay about […] Even we children were presented with a set of dye-stuffs — how well I remember the look of the broad-stoppered bottles filled with queer powders and lumps and grains that stood in an inviting row on a shelf in the schoolroom, and what distressing messes we made with them![50]

Such fatherly encouragement of creative play further emphasized the way in which Morris was invested in the role of 'playful father' as the defining feature of his paternal persona.

As late as 1887 (when Jenny was 26), Morris again used Joe's phrase in a letter to his eldest daughter: 'Good bye my darling — Wot larx when you come home again.'[51] Fiona MacCarthy has described Morris's relationship with Jenny in her later life as that of 'a second mother' but Morris's letters of this period construct the letter writer as both nurturing parent and naughty co-conspirator, combining touching expressions of loving concern with playful banter.[52] The existence of these letters of course attests to Morris's frequent absences from home, especially in the years of his most intense involvement in socialist campaigning, so while Morris was not the emotionally distant father of Victorian stereotype he was nonetheless often the *physically* absent parent. Something of his unexpressed guilt for his conflicted allegiances between politics and family may lie behind the view he expressed in a letter to Jenny in 1883 concerning Florence Dombey's loyalty

to her father: 'I have been reading some Dombey; tis after all very amusing, but O, I don't think Mr Dombey was worth taking so much trouble about as his daughter took.'[53] Here again Morris refers to a Dickens father and child relationship that excluded the mother figure but in this case without the consolation that Joe's virtuous performance of fatherhood implied. Perhaps even Joe was not entirely a source of consolation; after all, a childlike figure may embody fears as well as desires. Just as a child has limited agency, so a childlike father could embody an anxiety about the limits of parental power that both Morris and Dickens were forced to confront in painful circumstances concerning the health of their children. In Mamie Dickens's recollections, the death of her infant sister Dora represented a new awareness of a father's vulnerability as well as a painful bereavement:

> An evening or two after her death, some beautiful flowers were sent and were brought into the study, and the father was about to take them upstairs and place them on the little dead baby, when he suddenly gave way completely. It is always very terrible to see a man weep; but to see your own father weep, and to see this for the first time as a child, fills you with a curious awe.[54]

Far from being an all-powerful protector, fathers could not always save a child: like Joe, they too could feel powerless against harm or evil. The childlike aspect of Joe's character could thus convey the fears of fatherhood in a disguised form, expressing the disparity between the legal authority and physical strength attributed to a father with his limited capacity to protect a child from suffering in the real world. Seen in this light, Morris's penchant for Joe's catchphrase 'Wot larx!' could also represent a father's determined attempt to maintain a cheery disposition by refusing to acknowledge destructive or demoralizing emotions — such as fear, regret, or melancholy — that the painful vicissitudes of life could provoke and thus protect his daughters from his *own* negative feelings.

In her article on William Morris and Victorian manliness, Jan Marsh discusses Morris as scholar, friend, businessman, author, political radical, and husband, but does not mention fatherhood as a significant dimension of masculine identity.[55] Through this consideration of Morris's connection with Joe Gargery, I have argued that not only was fatherhood a crucial aspect of Morris's subjectivity, but that the work of Dickens provided a rich cultural resource with which a diverse readership could identify and through which they could, paradoxically, express deeply personal feelings. Of course, as Sally Ledger has noted, 'That Dickens was a radical political writer on the side of the poor and the

dispossessed was blazingly clear to his contemporaries', so it is not entirely surprising that a passionate socialist like Morris would have found some powerful resonances in the novels of Dickens.[56] It was in the domain of the personal, however, that Morris may have found the greatest appeal in Dickens, through the novelist's depiction of nurturing masculinity and unconventional family relationships that spoke to Morris's own misgivings, fears, or doubts about the fragility of domestic equilibrium. Nurture was so closely linked with the maternal in the Victorian emotional imaginary that a father who wished to share in the emotional labour and intimacies of family life could face limited options in expressing a masculine form of nurture: he risked, that is, supplanting the mother, who in turn was inevitably found wanting, or imagining himself as a kind of child who could recapture an emotional plenitude relinquished in conventional adulthood.[57] Dickens and Morris — for all their differences of taste, reputation, or audience — shared a propensity for play, nurture, and active participation in domestic arrangements, as well as a creative affinity with childhood that distanced them both from an earnest bourgeois masculinity, even as it also reflected an anxiety about the maternal role in the family that was not easily resolved.

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[1] May Morris, *The Introductions to the Collected Works of William Morris*, 2 vols (New York: Oriole, 1931), I, 105.

[2] J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, 1899), I, 220–21.

[3] The term 'intimate father' is used by John Tosh to describe a form of nineteenth-century fatherhood in which fathers exhibited tenderness and valued spontaneously affectionate relationships with their children. See his *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 99. While Mamie Dickens emphasized this aspect of her father (see n6 below), others have charged Dickens with remoteness and a vigilant supervision of his children's lives that became more controlling as they grew older. See Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990), p. 879, and Natalie McKnight, 'Dickens's Philosophy of Fathering', *Dickens Quarterly*, 18.3 (2001), 129–38 (p. 136). Even Mamie Dickens's rosy account of her father noted that 'He was a strict master in the way of insisting upon everything being done perfectly and exactly as he desired.' (Mamie Dickens, 'Charles Dickens at Home: With Especial Reference to his Relations with Children,' *Cornhill Magazine*, n.s., 4 (January 1885), 32–51 (p. 47).

[4] Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1859*, rev. edn (London: Routledge, 2002).

[5] Tosh, 'Authority and Nurture in Middle-Class Fatherhood: The Case of Early and Mid-Victorian England,' *Gender and History*, 8.1 (1996), 48–64 (pp. 56–57); Tosh, *A Man's Place*, pp. 99–100; Valerie Sanders,

'"What Do You Want to Know about Next?" Charles Kingsley's Model of Educational Fatherhood', *Gender and Fatherhood in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Trev Lynn Broughton and Helen Rogers (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 55–67; Sanders, *The Tragi-Comedy of Victorian Fatherhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 21.

[6] Mamie Dickens, 'Charles Dickens at Home', p. 33. Interestingly, one of the maternal failings Dickens would later attribute to his wife was that 'she never played with [the children] in their infancy' (letter to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 9 May 1858, quoted in Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women* (London: Dent, 1983), p. 145.

[7] May Morris, *Introductions*, I, 233.

[8] Tosh, 'Authority and Nurture', p. 51.

[9] *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), I, 428, 421. Morris, for instance, described an amusing dinner party at which 'there were seldom more than 3 people speaking at once […]. Oh! as Jenny used to write' (*Collected Letters*, II, 414).

[10] May Morris, *Introductions*, I, 289.

[11] The formulation 'emotional imaginary' is my adaptation of a term that can be traced back to Lacan but which is most directly derived from Cornelius Castoriadis's formulation of the 'social imaginary' in *The Imaginary Institution of Society* [1975] (Cambridge: Polity, 1987) and is also often used in adapted formulations such as the 'political imaginary' or 'cultural imaginary'. Graham Dawson, for instance, has described cultural imaginaries as 'vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture' and that shape both our social knowledge and the internal domain of our psychic lives; see his *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994) p. 48. See also Louis Montrose, 'Spenser and the Elizabethan Political Imaginary', *English Literary History*, 69.4 (2002), 907–46 (pp. 907–08).

[12] Malcolm Andrews, *Dickens and the Grown-Up Child* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), p. 89.

[13] Quoted in John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (London: Palmer, 1928), p. 734.

[14] Ruth Livesey, 'Morris, Carpenter, Wilde, and the Political Aesthetics of Labour', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32.2 (2004), 601–16 (pp. 607–09).

[15] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Angus Calder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 134. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

[16] Alfred Noyes, *William Morris* (London: Macmillan, 1908), p. 106.

[17] Holly Furneaux, *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 222, 226. A similar view is expressed in William A. Cohen, 'Manual Conduct in *Great Expectations*', *ELH*, 60.1 (1993), 217–59 (pp. 226, 227). Catherine Waters, however, takes a different view, describing 'Joe's feminization in the novel [as] an indication of Mrs Joe's emasculating power', in her *Dickens and the Politics of the Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 153.

[18] Andrews, *Dickens and the Grown-Up Child*, p. 89.

[19] Noyes, *William Morris*, p. 107. See also Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber, 1994), pp. vii–viii. Morris's deliberate retention, if not cultivation, of childlike qualities in adulthood

— closely linked to his ideals concerning the intrinsic role of creativity in everyday life — differs, however, from the idealization of (feminine) childhood that Catherine Robson attributes to other Victorian gentleman in *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). In this instance, the 'childlike' adult male figure does not hark back nostalgically to a lost state of 'original girlhood' (Robson, *Men in Wonderland*, p. 3) but rather signals a critical distance from gender and class expectations concerning masculine identity.

[20] See MacCarthy, *William Morris*, p. xiii.

[21] McKnight, 'Dickens's Philosophy of Fathering', p. 134.

[22] Robert Stange, 'Expectations Well Lost: Dickens's "Fable for his Time"', *College English*, 16 (1954), 9–17 (p. 14). Childlike mothers, however, do not attract the same approval, as the example of Mrs Nickleby may demonstrate.

[23] *Collected Letters*, ed. by Kelvin, I, 309.

[24] *Collected Letters*, ed. by Kelvin, II, 552–53.

[25] May Morris, *Introductions*, I, 155–56.

[26] Letter, 16 July, 1891, in *Jane Morris to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt: The Letters of Jane Morris to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt together with Extracts from Blunt's Diaries*, ed. by Peter Faulkner (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1986), p. 55.

[27] Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *Secret Memoirs 1889–90*, Fitzwilliam Museum, XIII, 335. On another occasion, Blunt described Morris's solicitude for Jenny as 'touching' to observe (*Secret Memoirs*, XIII, 125).

[28] Forster, *Life*, p. 734.

[29] Blunt, *Secret Memoirs*, XIII, 124.

[30] Blunt, *Secret Memoirs*, XIII, 130.

[31] Eileen Gillooly, 'Paterfamilias', *Contemporary Dickens*, ed. by Eileen Gillooly and Deirdre David (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), 209–30 (pp. 210–12).

[32] For fuller accounts of the breakdown of Dickens's marriage and these specific episodes, see, for example, Slater, *Dickens and Women* pp. 135–62; Waters, *Politics*, pp. 1–12.

[33] Quoted in Waters, *Politics*, p. 1.

[34] Quoted in Slater, *Dickens and Women*, p. 374 ('Appendix A: The Violated Letter').

[35] Quoted in Slater, *Dickens and Women*, p. 374.

[36] Space precludes extensive discussion of the Morris marriage or its representation in subsequent accounts, especially in the light of revelations concerning Jane's affairs with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt. As I argue in *Jane Morris: The Burden of History* (forthcoming), however, a certain orthodoxy has prevailed depicting Morris as a long-suffering husband and adopting a more pejorative view of his wife that is not fully supported by careful analysis of the source material.

[37] See Wendy Parkins, 'Jane Morris's Invalidism Reconsidered', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 4.2 (2008) <http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue42/parkins.htm> [accessed 27 April 2012].

[38] *Collected Letters*, ed. by Kelvin, I, 353.

[39] After Jane's death, Marie Spartali Stillman (Jane Morris's closest friend, according to May Morris) wrote: 'Mrs Morris wanted to live on for Jenny's sake, because she felt how Jenny would miss her.' (28 January 1914, London, National Art Library, Victoria & Albert Museum, Cockerell Papers, MSL/1958/692/64, 129).

[40] *Collected Letters*, ed. by Kelvin, III, 327–28.

[41] See Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[42] *Collected Letters*, ed. by Kelvin, I, 423, 475.

[43] *Collected Letters*, ed. by Kelvin, I, 439.

[44] *Collected Letters*, ed. by Kelvin, I, 416, 419.

[45] *Collected Letters*, ed. by Kelvin, I, 423.

[46] Letter to Jenny and May, March 1878, in *Collected Letters*, ed. by Kelvin, I, 468.

[47] Letter to May, April 1878, in *Collected Letters*, ed. by Kelvin, I, 475.

[48] Emma Mason, 'Feeling Dickensian Feeling', in *Rethinking Victorian Sentimentality*, ed. by Nicola Bown (= *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 4 (2007)), 1–19 (p. 1) <http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/viewFile/454/314> [last accessed 12 April 2012].

[49] *Collected Letters*, ed. by Kelvin, I, 469.

[50] 'Introduction', in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. by May Morris, 24 vols (London: Longmans, Green, 1911), XI, pp. i–xxix (p. xv).

[51] *Collected Letters*, ed. by Kelvin, II, 614.

[52] MacCarthy, *William Morris*, p. 438.

[53] *Collected Letters*, ed. by Kelvin, II, 160.

[54] M. Dickens, 'Charles Dickens at Home', p. 38. Mamie also noted that her father was a 'longed for' and 'invaluable' presence in the sick room of his children, p. 49.

[55] Jan Marsh, 'William Morris and Victorian Manliness', *William Morris: Centenary Essays*, ed. by Peter Faulkner and Peter Preston (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), pp. 185-199.

[56] Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 2. According to Edward Burne-Jones, Morris had hoped to publish works by Dickens at his Kelmscott Press. In a letter to Frances Horner in November 1893, Burne-Jones wrote: 'Mrs Gamp — that reminds me that Morris vows he will print Dickens (if he lives) at the Kelmscott Press. Oh, if I could see the words "Mrs Gamp" in floriated initials — perhaps in red — thick — (then an imitation of K.P. type) in the sentence "Mrs Gamp's apartment in Kingsgate Street, High Holborn, wore metaphorically speaking a robe of state." Wouldn't it be nice? — and having reached as it were beatitude — for to be printed so finely is equivalent to beatification, from the Vatican' (Burne-Jones Papers, XVIII, Fitzwilliam Museum, 36).

[57] For an account of Victorian fatherhood and the problem of masculine nurture, see Claudia Nelson, 'Deconstructing the Paterfamilias: British Magazines and the Imagining of the Maternal Father, 1850–1910', *Journal of Men's Studies*, 11.3 (2003), 293–308.