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# Sadomasochistic Cyclicity: Appropriations of Shakespeare's "Dark Lady" Sonnets in Dickens's *Great Expectations*

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While Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*<sup>1</sup> is noted for its many appropriations of Shakespeare's plays, including *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, few have written about Dickens's use of early modern sonnets, including Shakespeare's. What little scholarship exists primarily deals with Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and its contributions to the novel's title, characters, plot, and metafictional qualities.<sup>2</sup> Yet Shakespeare's "Dark Lady" sonnets<sup>3</sup> most directly influence representations of sadomasochism within the novel. Despite many overlapping conventions – Sidney and Shakespeare both portray fruitless pursuit, represent the beloved's duality, and reassert masculinity through misogyny – Shakespeare particularly emphasizes sadomasochistic qualities such as overvaluation, fetishization, and control through specific elements that Dickens appropriates in order to destabilize assumptions regarding desire. Dickens then develops a narrative structure based on the cyclical repetition within several of Shakespeare's sonnets, establishing *Great Expectations* as the narrator's perpetual sadomasochistic fantasy.

Using a psychoanalytical approach, I argue that Dickens appropriates masochistic elements of Shakespeare's "Dark Lady" sonnets in order to express the "disavowal, suspense, waiting, fetishism, and abjection" that Gilles Deleuze claims "make up the specific constellation of masochism" (72). Sadism then becomes a reactionary element within

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<sup>1</sup> The 1999 Norton Critical Edition of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* is used throughout.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars like Jon B. Reed have attributed the title *Great Expectations* to Sonnet 21 in which Astrophil admonishes himself, "to my birth I owe / Nobler desires, lest that friendly foe, / Great expectation, wear a train of shame" (7-8), and Jerome Meckier has noted similarities between Phip and Pip, Stella and Estella, Rich and Drummle with Meckier asserting, "Philip Pirrip's miserable pinings for Estella, who throws herself away on Bentley Drummle, parallel the harmful cravings of Astrophel (sometimes *Astrophil*) for Stella, a married woman" (249). Additionally, Reed argues that Dickens appropriates the metafictional perspective of *Astrophil and Stella* (656).

<sup>3</sup> The 2006 Folger Shakespeare Library edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets and Poems* is used throughout.

the lover's fantasy as he lashes out in response to a perceived emasculation. Though Deleuze rejects the union between sadism and masochism due to their contradictory desires,<sup>4</sup> Lisa S. Starks-Estes notes that Sigmund Freud and contemporary theorist Jean Laplanche both consider sadism and masochism as "interrelated, emanating from the same primal drive" (45).<sup>5</sup> Historically, this fusion appears throughout the Ovidian and Petrarchan traditions within what Starks-Estes calls the "male masochist scenario" (43). Starks-Estes describes this construction as "a fantasy of female dominance and male submission" within the Western "erotic imagination" (43). The frequent results of this abjection<sup>6</sup> are misogynistic displays of sadism that Starks-Estes argues, "serve to enable the lover to submit to his mistress without fear of falling, of completely losing himself – his manhood – in dotage" (49). Sadomasochism emerges in early modern plays and poems despite the term not appearing until the nineteenth-century, and Dickens then appropriates the sadomasochism of Shakespeare's sonnets as the lover<sup>7</sup> mediates between abjection and authority, fashioning a narrative that is simultaneously beautiful and grotesque.

Such contradictions within *Great Expectations* and Shakespeare's "Dark Lady" sonnets develop an endless waiting and suspense since the lovers create sadomasochistic fantasies that guarantee stasis through strictly defined relationships. Deleuze argues that the male masochist constructs a kind of contract with the abuser since he is a "victim in search of a torturer and who needs to educate, persuade and conclude an alliance with the torturer in order to realize the strangest of schemes" (20). Pip and Shakespeare's persona strike a similar bargain in which they continually are able to interact with their love objects, but the lover creates a false persona for the beloved, overvaluing her in such a way that the abjection of the masochist is guaranteed. For instance, Pip reshapes Estella into a fairy tale princess and Shakespeare's persona imagines the

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<sup>4</sup> According to Deleuze, the masochists seek to teach their abusers and are, therefore, contract makers whereas sadists are contract breakers since they accumulate victim after victim through never-ending cycles rooted in the same "argument" (20).

<sup>5</sup> Starks-Estes goes on to explain that this basic drive results from the "hostility resulting from the initial trauma of sexuality which, for them [Freud and Laplanche], forms the foundation of subjectivity" (45).

<sup>6</sup> "Abjection" is used in the colloquial sense throughout as opposed to Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical use of the term "abject."

<sup>7</sup> I use "lover" to represent the role of "Shakespeare's persona" and the narrative persona of *Great Expectations* throughout. "Beloved" refers to the sexual object.

lady as an exotic yet faithful lover, but these are inherently flawed expectations that create a scenario in which the love object *must* disappoint.

Thus, Dickens and Shakespeare's lovers typically emphasize contradictions associated with the beloved, so both Estella and the "Dark Lady" come to embody the pleasure and pain inherent in sadomasochistic fantasies. As such, Pip's confession in which he states, "I stood looking at the house, thinking how happy I should be if I lived there with her, and knowing that I never was happy with her, but always miserable" (207) echoes Shakespeare's persona of Sonnet 131 who complains, "Thou art as tyrannous, so as thou art" (1) before returning to his proclamation, "For well thou know'st to my dear doting heart / Thou art the fairest and most precious jewel" (3-4). Once again this abjection has little to do with Estella or the "Dark Lady;" rather, the masochist demonstrates mastery as he assigns these roles to the love object while simultaneously orchestrating his own subordination similar to the masochistic scenario portrayed in Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten" essay that describes a dream in which an authoritative figure punishes a child whom the subject hates. In the second phase<sup>8</sup> of this fantasy, the subject himself becomes the bad child, constituting the male masochist scenario (185). The punishment is designed and administered within the subject's own mind, at once placing him in a position of authority and subordination just as Pip and Shakespeare's persona equally shape their own expectations of love and fidelity but suffer because of this very fantasy, revealing them as both torturer and victim. This paradox is then further developed through imagery related to early modern lovesickness, also called "love melancholy," an affliction that equally incorporates passivity and activity.

Sidney and Shakespeare each express this duality by contrasting light and dark imagery, beginning with depictions of black eyes in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*. Regarding Stella's eyes in Sonnet 7, Astrophil asks, "In colour black why wrapped she beams so bright? / Would she in beamy black, like painter wise, / Frame daintiest lustre, mixed of shades and light?" (2-4). He later depicts Stella's beauty as a

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<sup>8</sup> Freud describes this dream as undergoing three phases. In the first, a father figure beats the hated child. In the second, the subject becomes the child in question. In the third, an undetermined authority figure beats several children while the subject looks on. Freud also notes that "punishments and humiliations of another kind may be substituted for the beating itself" (185-186).

contradiction, describing her “miraculous power” (9) as her ability to “even in black doth make all beauties flow” (11). Similarly, Shakespeare’s persona describes eyes that are “raven black” (127.9) and “nothing like the sun” (130.1) while also professing to his beloved in Sonnet 132, “Thine eyes I love, and they, as pitying me, / Knowing they heart torment me with disdain, / Have put on black, and loving mourner be” (1-3). In either case, dark eyes become objects that convey the lover’s overvaluation of the lady as her exotic features clash with early modern conventions of beauty that give preference to fair skin, hair, and eyes.

The aesthetic contradiction implies a conflict between seeming and being as the lovers’ perception is out of joint with popular assessment. This opposition is clearest in Shakespeare’s “Dark Lady” sonnets when the self-aware persona admits that he “put fair truth upon so foul a face” (137.12) and must “love what others do abhor” (150.11). The lover further complicates the relationship between sight, truth, and love when he traces his confusion to a physical source in Sonnet 148 when he complains, “O me, what eyes hath love put in my head, / Which have no correspondence with true sight!” (148.1-2). In Sonnet 137, the persona specifically blames Cupid for causing his eyes to “behold and see not what they see” (2), an accusation that corresponds to the personification of love in Sonnet 148. The lover’s disconnect takes on a sadomasochistic quality as his eyes invite a cognitive dissonance that both pleases and punishes the persona through active and passive influences within his own mind. This duality takes on a psychophysiological significance during the early modern era, for, as Starks-Estes explains, the eyes were considered access points for lovesickness, an affliction in which a *dormant* cognition allows phantasms distorted by the *active* imagination to pass freely to and become embedded in memory (40-41). Similar active and passive attributes also exist within the sadomasochistic lover whose imagination constructs an overvalued phantasm in place of the love object before submitting to a masochistic experience.

Unlike Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*, blackness and its sadomasochistic qualities quickly expand beyond the eyes and become more wholly and negatively associated with the love object within Shakespeare’s “Dark Lady” sonnets. This connection is particularly evident when the persona complains, “nothing art thou black save in thy deeds” (131.13) and describes the beloved as “black as hell, as dark as

night" (147.14), yet the lover continues to develop dualities inherent in lovesickness when he inverts the valuation of blackness, declaring, "Thy black is fairest in my judgment's place" (131.12) and "beauty herself is black" (132.13). The persona fetishizes blackness, alternately using it as a misogynistic symbol of feminine immorality and of the lover's blind devotion. In this way, tension between desire and displeasure as well as activity and passivity is simultaneously represented by the same attribute.

Though the narrating Pip does not fetishize blackness, he does associate Estella with light and dark imagery to express sadomasochistic dualities that equally pull and repel his past self, the lover. And just as Shakespeare extends this imagery from the eyes to the whole body, Dickens further applies it to setting. When Pip works in the blacksmith forge, for example, pumping the bellows in the dark while Joe hammers to the tune of a work song, he recalls seeing "Estella's face in the fire with her pretty hair fluttering in the wind and her eyes scorning me, – often at such a time I would look toward those panels of black night in the wall which the wooden windows then were, and would fancy that I saw her just drawing her face away" (87). In this moment, Estella is both horrible and mesmerizing. The violence and elegance of the flames, the brilliance of the light within the pitch blackness of the nighttime marsh landscape, and the ephemeral elusiveness of a phantasm within the enclosure of a window's wooden frame all recall Stella and the "Dark Lady's" duality as well as hints of early modern lovesickness. Pip's overstimulated imagination subordinates him by situating Estella as one who haunts and disapproves as well as one who ultimately delays satisfaction, symbolized by Estella's appearance within the window frame and her eventual fading from it, denying her confinement.

The waiting cultivated by Pip and Shakespeare's persona is an essential component of sadomasochism, for they both endure pain while harboring an anticipation of fulfillment. Yet it is not erotogenic, what Freud describes in "The Economic Problem of Masochism" as "pleasure in pain" (161); instead, the masochist considers the delay of satisfaction and any discomfort that results as a necessary prelude to pleasure. According to Deleuze, "As pain fulfills what is expected, it becomes possible for pleasure to fulfill what is awaited" within the male masochist fantasy (71). So Pip revels in the impossibility of satisfaction, declaring that he loved Estella "against reason, against promise, against peace,

against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be,” submersing himself in a chivalrous fantasy in which he would “do all the shining deeds of the young Knight of romance and marry the Princess” (179). The repetition of “against” as well as the naïve fairy tale resolution reveals the willful ignorance and overvaluation that fuel Pip’s fantasy and deny any progression due to sadomasochistic cyclicity. He reenacts the pageantry of courtly love, elevating his lady and embracing the delay of satisfaction, a suspense that heightens his desire and promotes a continuation of his idealized fantasy, but Estella is more the unobtainable Petrarchan love object than the fairy tale princess since possession is not just postponed but impossible. She can only ever commit to Pip’s rich rival, the detestable Bentley Drummle, yet Pip continues to desperately wait for the realization of his fantasy, a masochistic obstinacy that rejects progression both within the narrative and in its retelling.

Stasis is less obvious within Shakespeare’s “Dark Lady” sonnets since they do not develop a narrative sequence, but some do convey a sense of waiting for the sake of a postponed pleasure. For example, the persona in Sonnet 128 declares,

Do I envy those jacks that nimble leap  
To kiss the tender inward of thy hand,  
Whilst my poor lips, which should that harvest reap,  
At the wood’s boldness by thee blushing stand. (5-8)

The lover looms, watching the keys brush his beloved’s palms as he waits for the song to end, for only at the conclusion of her performance can he have any hope of pleasurable fulfillment. That space of time is fraught with displeasure, however, as the persona feels jealous of the instrument’s keys when he personifies them, creating a masochistic fantasy that accuses the love object of infidelity through her caress of the jacks. Thus, the lover illustrates masochistic waiting, displeasure, and suspense.

Dickens appropriates the erotic obsession with hands in Sonnet 128 in order to represent Pip’s disavowal through fetishization. Upon Pip’s initial visit to the decaying Satis House, Miss Havisham, the jilted corpse bride, forces him to play the card game *Beggar My Neighbor* with Estella. As he loses repeatedly, Pip recalls her disgusted exclamations when she disdainfully notes, “He calls the knaves, Jacks, this boy!” before

pointing out his “coarse hands” (52), emphasizing the “common” origins that Pip later attempts to deny. Afterward, Pip characterizes Estella as cruel yet irresistible, establishing her as a love object that both tortures and titillates. Pip, himself a jack or common fellow who wishes to “nimble leap” sexually and socially, fetishizes hands throughout the novel because they reflect those of the “Dark Lady” of Shakespeare’s sonnets, representing his sense of abjection and desire. Whereas Estella’s hands are “sweet,” “gently sway’st,” and “walk with a gentle gate,” suggesting eroticism and gentility, Pip’s coarse hands only reveal his shame. As a result, they become a fetishized object as the narrating Pip obsessively includes 450 uses of the word “hand” in the novel, according to Peter J. Capuano (187).

Deleuze connects this kind of infatuation to castration anxiety, or lack, the split that Jacques Lacan describes as occurring upon a misrecognition of the Self during the mirror stage<sup>9</sup> of subject formation. He argues that fetishization is an attempt to disavow lack when he asserts, “The constant return to this object, this point of departure, enables him to validate the existence of the organ that is in dispute” (31). In this case, Pip associates hands with the shame related to his “low-lived bad way” (55), so their fetishization becomes a means of disavowing his common past and reclaiming his dignity. Furthermore, Dickens’s appropriations of Sonnet 128 may also have a “moral masochism” component, described in Freud’s “Economic Problem of Masochism” as “a sense of guilt that is mostly unconscious” (161), since representations of hands and their association with Pip’s shame and desire haunt him just like repetitions of the uncanny<sup>10</sup> throughout the novel – animated objects, personified livestock, and spectral noises that punish him through constant reminders of his shame.

Despite this abjection, Pip’s sadomasochistic fantasy also has much to do with demonstrating authority through repetition and possession as a sadistic reaction to his lack of agency. Throughout the first stage of development in *Great Expectations*, Pip is completely controlled by his sister, Mrs. Joe, as he endures “punishments, disgraces,

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<sup>9</sup> Mitchell explains Lacan’s description of the mirror stage as the misrecognition of the Self by “identifying with others’ perception of it” (5). This misrecognition establishes subjectivity. Deleuze, however, specifically addresses male-centered masochism and sadism.

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud explains representations of the uncanny in his essay “The Uncanny” as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (220).

fasts and vigils, and other penitential performances” that make him “timid and very sensitive” (54), and he is additionally subordinated by Pumblechook and Wopsle, who seize every opportunity to chastise and humiliate him. Even Pip’s socio-economic rise is orchestrated by an invisible hand, that of Magwitch the convict, which denies Pip any meaningful contribution to his own gentrification. But because Pip is the architect of his own fantasy, he is able to demonstrate the authority he lacks by reducing Estella to an object and attempting to exert control through the construction of his own narrative despite its basis on a continual abjection that requires repeated attempts at mastery over her in response.

Pip and Shakespeare’s persona each exercise authority in similar ways when they construct their own fantasies, choosing a love object who guarantees displeasure and situating her within repeated sadomasochistic cycles that require passive subordination and active control or aggression in response. These patterns recall Freud’s *Fort/Da* formulation. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Freud describes a male child who repeatedly plays a game in which he casts a toy away only to retrieve it, yet the act of casting away occurs more often. Freud argues that the child engages in this game as a kind of revenge upon the mother who has left him (15-16). By repeatedly throwing a toy away, the child essentially reenacts an experience in which he lacked agency, but he transforms it into a game-like fantasy, a construction in which the child sets the rules and prompts the action. Therefore, Freud notes, “At the outset he was in a *passive* situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took an *active* part” (16). Much like the child in the *Fort/Da* scenario, Pip and Shakespeare’s persona are able to demonstrate mastery by crafting their own fantasies in which they repeatedly engage in casting away and retrieving their desired objects, establishing a sadomasochistic cycle. Sadism merges with masochism as the subject exhibits the sadistic desires for what Deleuze describes as “institutionalized possession” (20).

Whereas Pip attempts to exercise authority as a response to a lack of agency during his earliest stage of development, Shakespeare’s persona provides no such origins for the lover’s “revenge,” yet he partakes in his own casting away through misogynistic sadism, providing a satisfaction that Leo Bersani describes as a “narcissistic gratification of exercising so

much power” during the *Fort/Da* fantasy (58). Accordingly, the lover responds to the beloved’s infidelity and rejections by mocking her appearance and behavior through the language of damnation, such as in Sonnet 147 when he calls her “black as hell” (14) or in Sonnet 144 when the devil embodies the love object’s persona and hell represents her diseased genitalia. In an effort to regain authority, the masochist becomes sadistic, yet the “Dark Lady” is still the lover’s object of desire, so what does it mean to continue to yearn for a body and mind so corrupt? The sadomasochist cannot escape abjection even as he attempts to exhibit authority; thus, the duality of sadomasochism emerges, a dynamic that Bersani identifies when he argues, “Mastery is simultaneous with self-punishment” (58). Similar to Shakespeare’s persona, Pip’s attempt at authority is actually contingent upon his abjection, for the casting away consists of transforming Estella into something she is not, the fairy tale princess, a metamorphosis facilitated by her physical absence, yet it is a fantasy that completely frustrates him.

Consequently, the quest for mastery is elusive in both *Great Expectations* and Shakespeare’s sonnets, particularly because sadomasochistic fantasy serves to prolong stasis since every attempt at authority is met with equal abjection and failure. In this regard, Cynthia Marshall argues that the cycle of casting away and retrieving inherently rejects any resolution (71). None of the sonnets, for example, regardless of their misogynistic displays of dominance or amorous pleas for sexual consummation, end with any kind of final mastery or attainment of pleasure. Likewise, even when Pip engages in his most sadistic display, defeating Herbert Pocket in a homoerotic boxing match that results in winning Estella’s kiss, he complains, “I felt that the kiss was given to the coarse common boy as a piece of money might have been, and that it was worth nothing” (75). Even in this instance when he appears to possess the object, it proves elusive and illusory. What, then, does the lover truly seek?

It appears that the lover does not pursue an actual sexual object but merely a fetishized symbol of desire. Estella and the “Dark Lady” are merely overvalued phantasms attributed to characters living in a “reality,” representing Jacques Lacan’s *objet petit a*. Since desire only occurs as a response to the missing thing, the *objet a* is nothing, an illusory object that stands in for the aim. Once that aim is accomplished, desire remains

and requires a new objective.<sup>11</sup> As Kaja Silverman explains, fantasy turns a “desire for nothing” into a desire for something since “It posits a given object that which is capable of restoring lost wholeness to the subject” (20). Hence, the love object becomes a representation of lack, or more specifically, the desire to restore lack. For Shakespeare’s persona, this lack is not clearly defined, but Pip’s lack is obvious from the opening scene, and it is further emphasized in his initial meeting with Estella. Throughout the novel, he seeks to either disavow his common origins by rejecting Joe and Bidley or by compensating for his lack by legitimizing himself through marrying the fairy tale princess. Unfortunately, such compensation is impossible since both the “Dark Lady” and Estella merely represent desire, nothing, the *objet a* that resists fulfillment. As Starks-Estes notes, “It seems the subject does indeed want *objet a*; but, of course, desire for the object amounts to desire itself, for longing can never truly be satisfied, nor can any sexual desire” (102). As a result, the lover pursues the love object in an endless cycle, a sadomasochistic fantasy in which the waiting never ends.

Yet readers often are tempted to interpret the ending of *Great Expectations* as a moment of closure. After all, Pip undergoes a period of cleansing during his third stage of development. Once the tragic fire kills Miss Havisham, disfigures Pip’s hands, and results in his brain fever, Pip reunites with Estella in the final moments of the novel where he recalls that “as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw the shadow of no parting from her” (358). Readers are tempted to assume the best since the fire and illness suggest a cleansing of the fetishized object and afflicted mind, yet the “mists” and “shadow” seem phantasmagoric. The moments about which Pip reminisces – his departures from the forge – are instances that are pivotal in the origins of his sadomasochistic fantasy. The first time he leaves the environment of the forge leads to his initial traumatic and alluring encounter with Estella, and the night before his trip to London is

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<sup>11</sup> Lacan argues that desire can never be quenched because lack is an essential part of subjectivity. This leads Marshall to explain, “Desire persists as an effect of a primordial absence and it therefore indicates that... there is something fundamentally impossible about satisfaction itself” (6).

marked by repeated nightmares<sup>12</sup> of stage coaches that take him every place but where he wants to go (124), suggesting a denial of closure and of satisfaction.

Instead of a resolution, this ambiguous ending appears as a re-ignition of a sadomasochistic fantasy believed to have been erased in the third stage. Pip's final words, "I saw no shadow of parting from her" (358) do not express a concrete declaration of possession expected from the narrative persona who recalls past events. He does not say there "was" or "will be" no parting, only that he "saw no parting," which amounts to no more than yet another hopeful fantasy mirroring the cycle of desire in Sonnet 129 where Shakespeare's persona writes,

Mad in pursuit and in possession so;  
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;  
A bliss in proof and [proved a] very woe;  
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.  
All this the world well knows, yet none knows well  
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell. (9-14)

The lover describes a sadomasochistic experience in which "bliss" and "woe" are both essential elements within a "joy proposed" that, like Pip's prediction of "no parting," amounts to merely a dream or fantasy. Furthermore, the endless cycle is alluded to in line 10 when Shakespeare's persona begins with the past tense "had" before moving into present and future tenses, "having and in quest to have," suggesting a lack of closure, that past possession is somehow insufficient and requires a continuance of the fantasy. The sadomasochistic experience is then described in decidedly punitive terms with the reference to "this hell" in line 14, an image that, aside from its sexual connotations, also recalls a place where those who partake of forbidden desires are doomed to a torment based on eternal cyclicity and punishment.

By appropriating the sadomasochism of Shakespeare's "Dark Lady" sonnets, Dickens establishes *Great Expectations* as a fantasy itself, a sadomasochistic loop that denies any sort of resolution and parallels the cycle of desire and frustration endlessly repeating throughout Shakespeare's sonnets. As such, the biographical retelling constitutes a

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<sup>12</sup> At the close of Pip's first stage of expectations, he recounts, "All night there were coaches in my broken sleep, going to wrong places instead of to London, and having in the traces, now dogs, now cats, now pigs, now men – never horses. Fantastic failures of journeys occupied me until the day dawned and the birds were singing" (124).

return to abjection and authority since Pip reconstructs a narrative that emphasizes the overvaluation, fetishization, and repetition that establishes the novel as a continuation of a sadomasochistic fantasy. *Great Expectations* is not simply a *Bildungsroman*; it is a tragedy of stasis. In the Victorian age of Bardolotry, Shakespeare portrays nostalgic obsession and false hope as his own corruption of the Petrarchan sonnet with his cuckolded lover, spiteful vitriol, and desperate compromises contributes to fashioning *Great Expectations* into a warning and a challenge to those who would recoil from the gritty realism of Dickens's previous novels: relinquish fantasies of exceptionalism and confront that which society would disavow.

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