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Kathryn Sumsion
kathryn.pratt@byu.edu

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Kathryn Sumsion

Professor Jamie Horrocks

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“They Simply Act”: Muscular Christian and Domestic Soldiers in Charles Dickens’s and Wilkie

Collins’s *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*

In 1857 Victorian England, frustration among the general English populace regarding colonial government practices was running high in response to the Crimean War and Indian Mutiny. As Garrett Ziegler describes, the British peoples’ reaction was to “blame the government, citing the mismanaged Crimean war as foretelling the disastrous consequences of bureaucracy in India” (152). This reaction stemmed from a firmly rooted distrust of the government, especially when it became involved in matters of military, and is reflected in the writings of the period. Authors including Charles Dickens blatantly satirized what they perceived to be the ineffectiveness of government abroad, and its failure to live up to their expectations. While this distrust became widespread, many people turned to the military as an alternative source of power.

Charles Dickens’s and Wilkie Collins’s 1857 novella *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*, addresses the concepts of government and military directly. Each is initially portrayed having a kind of power, and true to form, Dickens mocks the power of government in his introduction of Commissioner Pordage: a fool babbling about diplomacy and stationery even while under siege by pirates. In contrast to Pordage’s bureaucratic absurdity, Dickens and Collins choose to show the military as the better-qualified institution to wield executive power. They make this claim by using two completely different ideologies, however. Dickens uses the

archetypal “Muscular Christian” (the Victorian figure of athletic faith and patriotism) as his model for the ideal soldier. By contrast, Collins’s versions of the soldiers are highly domestic and nurturing. Both Collins’s domestic and Dickens’s muscular Christian soldiers are portrayed as highly competent and effective individuals. Both versions are also indicative of the multifaceted role that the British soldier held in the minds of British citizens, and his influence especially on the British colonies. The influence that these soldiers held in the minds of the British people, including Collins and Dickens, shows that the military had effectively usurped the position of the government as the ideal ruling institution in colonial governance.

In his day, Charles Dickens was notorious for his distrust of government. Leslie Mitchell discusses the frustration Dickens felt with government in the wake of the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny: “The men of government disclaimed all responsibility for their actions. No one paid a price” (231). The “actions” Mitchell refers to are the mismanagement and mistakes that resulted from the appointment of incompetent officers in British government. These incompetent officers were in Dickens’s view “Nobody,” or at least nobody helpful, men who were more concerned with rank advancement than the actual managing of the government. Mitchell cites Dickens as saying, “for the sake of Everybody, give me Somebody! . . . Come, responsible Somebody; accountable Blockhead, come!” (Dickens qtd. in Mitchell 231). Dickens’s plea for someone, anyone to step up and take control of the situation shows Dickens’s longing, and the longing of Victorian society, for good leadership.

To express their frustrations, in *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*, Dickens and Wilkie Collins parody this government incompetency by introducing Commissioner Pordage, a bumbling idiot in a capital “D” Diplomatic coat. Pordage has bought his way into the rank of commissioner on the Island of Silver-Store, where he and his wife fuss about silly traditions and

red tape when they are no longer relevant. He refers to himself as “Government” throughout the story, and when the usual bureaucratic processes are not followed he threatens that “Government will take this up,” and calls for his Diplomatic coat (Collins and Dickens 15). His outward vestments, especially this coat, symbolize his authority as government. Each time trouble comes, he calls for his coat and puts it on as a sort of protective layer. Later the shredding of his authoritative garments and his response to the pressure of an oncoming pirate invasion show Dickens’s and Collins’s distaste for the people they are satirizing. Collins notes Pordage’s post-invasion discomposure over his “torn cuffs” and his lack of willingness to take any kind of action in their dire situation, instead babbling that “[he can’t] possibly recognize it [the situation] until the necessary minutes and memorandums” have reached him (49). He has lost his mind along with the red tape and Diplomatic coat he so desperately clings to. Pordage’s complete dissolution into madness under pressure demonstrates the authors’ irritation with the bureaucracy that dominates their government.

Collins and Dickens express their distrust of government in the form of Pordage, but offer an alternative solution as they transition power over to the military. In the text, as Pordage proves increasingly impotent as a leader, his decision-making power transfers to the military officers, including Captain Carton, who is the beautiful “Somebody” of Dickens’s imagination. Carton is one of the leaders on Silver-Store and is shown to be much more qualified to wield authoritative power than Pordage. He is set up as what Lara Karpenko refers to as a “muscular Christian,” experiencing a “heightened state of healthy embodiment,” and feeling very strongly the influence of God in his life (134). He is sure of his own physical prowess and the rightness of his actions. In an interesting exchange of authority, Dickens writes that when the ridiculous Pordage advocates mercy towards the native islanders of Silver Store, crying that “Government

requires you to treat the enemy with great delicacy,” Captain Carton responds swiftly that he will work his hardest to “treat the enemy” by working to “exterminate [them] from the face of the earth” (24). After this point, Pordage slinks off, fully recognizing that the powerful military man has taken control of the situation. Institutional power is now fully in the hands of the military, where in Dickens’s and Collins’s view it belongs. During this transition, Alex Tickell notes the “allowance of God” Carton invokes as the right by which he is enabled to “override any legal-constitutional consideration for his enemy,” (481). This perspective lines up perfectly with the muscular Christian archetype, as Carton justifies violent action by claiming that his commission has come from God. Tickell cites this example as the point in which this “violent exception” to the usual contractual governing style leads into the “effective state of war that now exists on the island of Silver Store” (475). War is not a government specialty, it is the military’s specialty. The very idea of Commissioner Pordage holding his own in a fight is laughable. Thus, Captain Carton and his soldiers step forward to defend the island in a way that Government never could.

To Dickens, this transfer is important because it allows the opportunity for him to assert military institutional importance as representing all things masculine and patriotic. The archetype of these values in military leadership is Dickens’s Captain Carton. In the first and third chapters of *Perils*, he plays a key leadership role. As cited above, he is the man to whom power transfers when Commissioner Pordage is effectively overthrown. He is also the man who heads the ships that retrieve the prisoners at the end of the story. Dickens describes Carton standing “at the helm of the first boat, . . . eager and steady” (99). His is the boat that takes the prisoners onboard, and the descriptors “eager,” and “steady” are important insights into Carton’s character as an enthusiastic but reliable leader. Carton is also the man at the end of the story who provides leadership in wrapping up the matter of the “traitorous” Christian George King, the “Sambo”

who initially allied himself with the pirates. Dickens describes the reaction that Gill has to the Captain's powerful demeanor: "That eye of his was so easy to understand, that I obeyed by not so much as looking either to the right or to the left . . ." (106). This description is perhaps the most demonstrative of the charisma and influence that Carton possesses. He has that certain air, that flashing eye, that engenders in the lowly private's mind respect and willingness to follow without question,

The respect that a leader like Carton inspires requires willing and dutiful soldiers to follow him. Dickens introduces a character that fits the bill of the ideal low-ranking military man in the form of Harry Charker, a simple, masculine soldier who rather than leading, specializes in following, and is willing to die to protect his countrymen and women. As Ziegler says, "Charker makes no plans, draws no resolutions, deliberates over nothing: he simply acts, rushing into battle without a moment's hesitation, eventually accepting even his own death heroically, without vacillation" (158). This description seems to show how Dickens felt that the ideal English private should act in the face of mortal danger. Charker is raised up as an example of heroism and Duty, that most Victorian of Christian values. Indeed, the introduction Dickens gives of Charker is as "one of the best of men," because he has "always one most excellent idea in his mind. That [is] Duty" (5). Charker's sense of duty is the ultimate patriotism. Near the end of the first chapter, as he is on his deathbed, Charker makes "no complaint of pain, or of anything," and says simply, "Good bye, old chap . . . I've got my death" (Collins and Dickens 34). The way he behaves is the prime example of dutiful self-sacrifice. He is portrayed by Dickens as accepting his death calmly and bravely, without fear. In perfect muscular Christian form, he follows, trusts, and finally sacrifices himself for his leaders and his people.

Acknowledging that the ideals he sets up in Carton and Charker are not the only probable results of military rule, Dickens recognizes two potential problems with this hyper-masculine military power. One of these is shown in the example of Serjeant Drooce. Drooce is another representative masculine figure, embodying the virtues of power and strength that Dickens portrays in Carton. When Gill awakens Drooce to the impending pirate invasion, Drooce springs into action “like a tiger” (Collins and Dickens 28). The comparison of the Serjeant to a wild animal shows how Drooce is a bit of a double-edged sword. He represents what Holly Furneaux calls the “soldierly pluck and derring-do” of the period (76), but he can be forceful and tyrannical; so much so that Dickens describes him as “the most tyrannical non-commissioned officer in His Majesty’s army” (6). Dickens is careful to note that Drooce is non-commissioned, which means he has not bought his way into his position, nor does he hold governmental influence, but he is still tyrannical. Despite this acknowledgment, Dickens still prefers the tyranny of a Drooce to the blundering circumlocution of a Pordage. Indeed, Dickens praises Drooce’s heroism in the battle as he rushes in, “armed with a broadsword” and doing “such things with it” that he strikes fear into the hearts of the pirates and becomes a distraction away from the women and children (37). Despite Drooce’s flaws, he is still portrayed as a true hero and a good soldier.

The other problem that Dickens acknowledges is that the hypermasculinity of the military can never quite mask the human weakness that hides beneath the surface. He demonstrates this through Gill. Gill is the essential appendage to Captain Carton, a loyal if occasionally grudging follower, and willing to “have died in . . . defense” of the people he protects (Collins and Dickens 31). Nonetheless, Dickens portrays Gill as having more human weakness than the appointed leaders, and Gill weeps at one point in the story. Although he succumbs to his

emotions in private, immediately afterwards Gill justifies himself by saying, “a man can’t at all times be quite master of himself,” indicating that he is ashamed of his weakness in allowing himself to cry (Collins and Dickens 26). He also refers to himself as a “man,” perhaps to reassure himself of his own masculinity. Using this need for reassurance, Dickens portrays Gill as somewhat of a fallen character at the beginning of the narrative; the young private experiences redemption as he learns patriotism and self-sacrifice. Following this character development, in his introduction, Gill complains that he has “had a hard life, and the life of the English . . . [seems] to easy and too gay,” to please him (Collins and Dickens 7). He is bitter and feels that the world has left him behind. In effect, he begins the narrative selfishly, without true regard for his country. By the end of the story, however, Gill has learned that he must be willing to be a good soldier and sacrifice himself for England, exemplified in the form of the beautiful Englishwoman, Miss Maryon. Near the end of the story, Maryon tells Gill he must “not say that England is nothing” to him (96). Her patriotic attitude toward her homeland shapes his attitude. His trust in Miss Maryon translates into trust in England and the military, and he dies without any change in station, but a significant change in outlook. Despite his shift in perspective, Gill is never allowed by Dickens to wield authoritative power, in part because of his illiteracy, but also possibly because he shows a kind of gentleness as a character that would override Dickens’s idea of true masculine power.

In contrast to Dickens, Collins portrays Gill and the other soldiers as ideally playing a much more domestic role in colonial society than Dickens’s battle-ready soldiers. Thus, within the first few pages of chapter two, Collins shows the tyrannical Drooce as incapacitated and mad, giving the tyrant a taste of social justice by entrusting him to the power of a lower-ranking soldier. Drooce is not allowed by Collins to be tyrannical, rather, he is painted as dangerous and

volatile. Collins also does away with Carton's character altogether, and instead introduces more domestic soldiers into the mix. These characters interact admirably with the children, and Gill joins them in their nurturing endeavors. During the hike through the woods, Collins writes that Gill and Short "set the example of taking two of [the children] up, pick-a-back" (54). This scene shows the importance of the military as nurturers as well as protectors. The men are no longer able to wield weapons in defense of the children, but they still provide for their physical well-being in any way they possibly can.

His portrayal of the soldiers' interactions with the children translates into the kind of trust that Collins is hoping to have the military exemplify. In "Children of the Regiment," Furneaux discusses why the domestic soldier ideal is incorporated into Victorian literature such as *Perils*. She actually cites an example of Dickens creating a domestic soldier in one of his own books, saying that "the soldier's physical gentleness towards the child [translates] into a measure of social worth" (81). Similarly, in *Perils*, the soldiers in the story are admired for their ability to comfort the children. Gill bonds with a little dumb-and-deaf child, and the relationship is "of benefit . . . to both soldier and child," just as Furneaux describes (82). This kind of bond is also established between Robert the ship-boy and many of the young prisoners, and he is praised for his "attentive ways with the children" (Collins and Dickens 69). Attentiveness turns out to be key in Collins's part of the tale, as the children must be quiet in order for the escape to be successful and it is attentiveness that endears Robert to the children. Dickens omits both Robert and Short from his part of the story, but they are important characters to consider when discussing the role of the domestic soldier in *Perils*: to comfort, nurture, and guide, rather than do battle.

These attributes do seem somewhat feminine, but Collins works to revitalize the masculinity of the soldiers by juxtaposing them with the pirates he has queered. Ziegler mentions

that Collins's Pirate Captain actually "out-feminizes the women" by his "flamboyant dress," and he is characterized as ostensibly emasculated (160). This ultra-demasculinizing of the Pirate Captain works as a nice contrast to the soldiers' domestic, yet manly efforts on behalf of their women and children. Karpenko believes that Collins intentionally changes the perception of masculinity in his novels by "standardizing a nonstandard form of embodiment" (137). Rather than portraying his male characters as muscular and heroic, Collins focuses more on the gentler aspects of their natures. In *Perils*, this nonstandard embodiment is shown through the soldiers that Collins throws into piratical custody. They are not the muscular Christians, but the domestics. By doing this, Collins works to tear down the muscular Christian stereotype that Dickens has set up, but he doesn't allow himself to take it too far. After all, Short still says to the young girl he carries, "I expect you'll marry me . . . when you grow up" (54). Strange as this statement seems, it reaffirms Short's and the other soldiers' heterosexuality, allowing them to be domestic without being queered, "sexually ambiguous comic figure[s]" like the Pirate Captain (Ziegler 161).

The combined role of the two ideals of military power, incorporating both Collins's domestic and Dickens's aggressive English soldiers solidifies the idea that military has replaced government as the ideal ruling institution in English colonies. The military can occupy multifaceted roles: friend, leader, protector, or provider. The end of *Perils* demonstrates this idea nicely. Once the domestic soldiers have done their duty in nurturing the women and children while they are prisoners, Dickens's gallant Captain Carton steps back in to wrap up the story. He pulls the prisoners to safety, kills the man who betrayed them, and provides for the needs of the colonists, while Pordage and the government are barely mentioned. The military has completely displaced government, and it seems to be for the best. In the end, as Ziegler observes, the men

who save the colony are not the government officials like Commissioner Pordage, they are “the dutiful, uneducated soldiers” under the leadership of Captain Carton (158). Dickens and Collins assert that this is a better form of governance. The military will take care of the people and then conduct everyone home safely at the end of the battle.

Dickens’s and Collins’s offering of military as a solution to the manifold issues with colonial governance indicates the need that Victorians felt for stability abroad. The growing civil unrest the colonies experienced forced them to look for more reliable forms of institutional power, and the combination of the domestic and hyper-masculine soldiers gave the people what they wanted. What could be more comforting than knowing the nation’s sons were off, not only fighting for England, but protecting and providing for England as well? On Silver-Store, the soldiers fight for their fellow Englishmen, they nurture the colony’s children, and are portrayed as all-around good people. As Dickens says at the close of *Perils* through the mouth of Miss Maryon, England must “be much, yet—everything” to its soldiers, and the people of England owe the soldiers “gratitude and attachment and respect” (96). By demonstrating the differences in the kinds of soldiers in the military, Collins and Dickens use *Perils* to assert that both kinds of soldier are necessary and deserving of respect and power in colonial government.

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