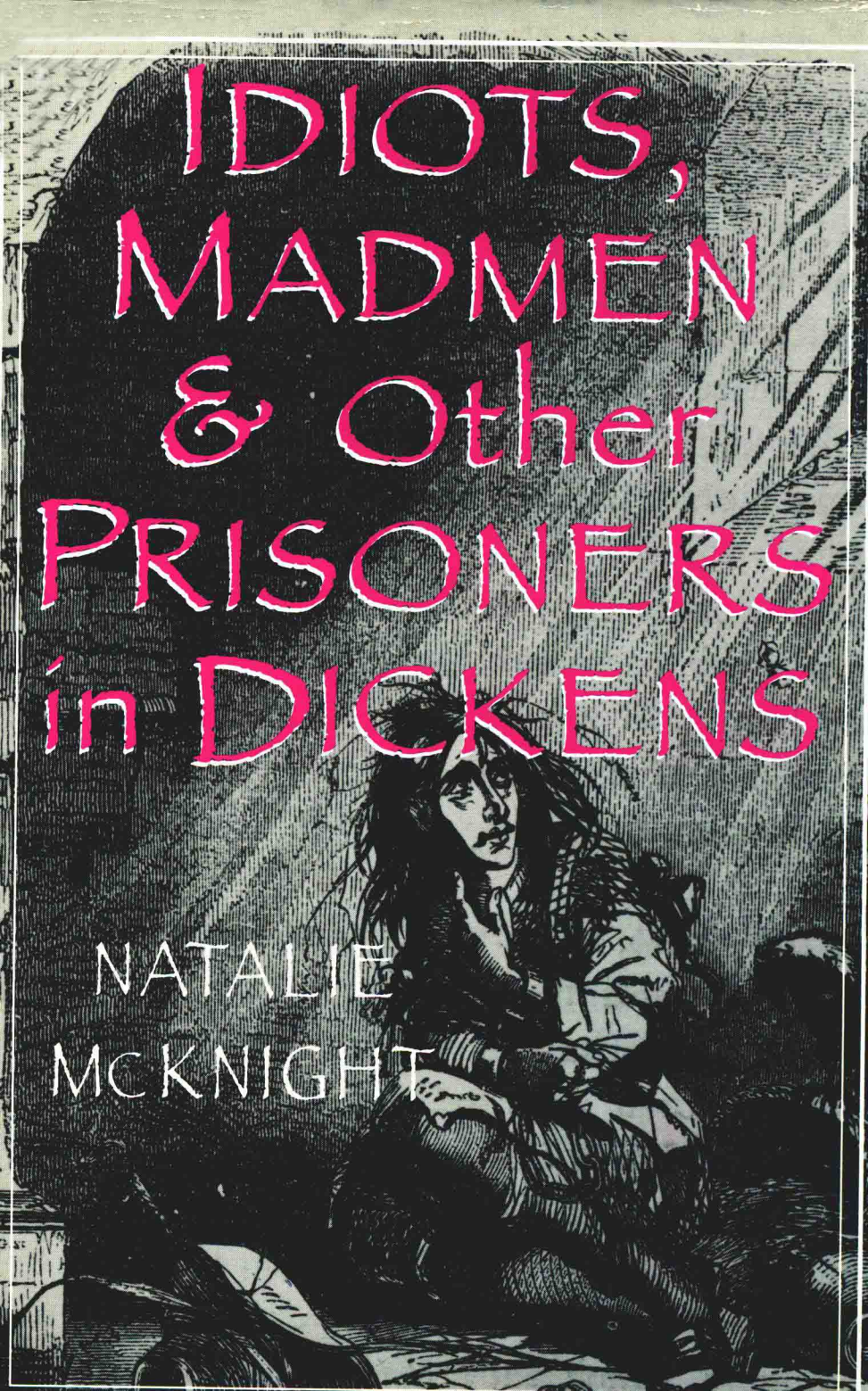
Idiots, Madmen & Other Prisoners in Dickens



Natalie McKnight

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To Jamie and Emily,
my partners in foolishness.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AN	*American Notes*
BH	*Bleak House*
BR	*Barnaby Rudge*
CC	*A Christmas Carol*
CS	*Christmas Stories*
DC	*David Copperfield*
D&S	*Dombey and Son*
GE	*Great Expectations*
HT	*Hard Times*
LD	*Little Dorrit*
MC	*Martin Chuzzlewit*
ED	*The Mystery of Edwin Drood*
NN	*Nicholas Nickleby*
OCS	*The Old Curiosity Shop*
OT	*Oliver Twist*
OMF	*Our Mutual Friend*
PP	*The Pickwick Papers*
SB	*Sketches by Boz*
TTC	*A Tale of Two Cities*
UT	*The Uncommercial Traveller*

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Chapter 1

Introduction: A World of Private Worlds

Throughout his life, Dickens was fascinated by isolated, imprisoned figures—people trapped in private worlds and private languages. As a boy, he experienced intense periods of isolation that haunted him all his life. As an adult, he made a habit of studying the isolated and imprisoned, in particular inmates of workhouses, prisons, insane asylums, and institutes for the deaf, dumb, and blind. He was moved by the way these people were trapped in extreme states of privacy, often unable to communicate with others at all, and marginalized from the mainstream of society. Dickens recognized isolation as a general human condition, yet he also recognized that for some, isolation was cruelly intensified: the solitary prisoner alone with his guilt and fears; the idiots and madmen adrift in their separate realities; the deaf, dumb, and blind cut off in a dark and silent void. With such fictional and nonfictional characters, characters trapped in physical and or mental prisons, Dickens explores extreme cases of isolation, often criticizing the social practices that create or enhance isolation and marginalization. But his characterizations offer more than just social commentary; they come to represent a philosophy of life, one that is intriguing if not systematic. In this study, I examine first the biographical and social contexts that influence Dickens's portrayals of these figures, then analyze the structural and thematic roles they play in his novels. Throughout, I emphasize and try to account for the strange and compelling vicissitudes in his treatments of idiots, madmen, and other prisoners.[1]

Discussing Dickens's prisoners, idiots, and madmen as a group is not only justified because of their shared experiences of marginalization and imprisonment, but also because Dickens repeats certain images and patterns in their characterizations that suggest he recognized and wished to explore their relation. These images and patterns frequently involve details of clothing, scene, and speech, all of which will be discussed in detail in following chapters.

Another significant similarity that binds these characters together is their use of problematic idiolects, or private languages. All people capable of communication have their own idiolects, but Dickens endows many of his isolated characters with idiolects that are particularly "private" since they overtly block communication. The prefix "idio," which comes from the Greek for "private," emphasizes the connection between idiots and idiolects, but other of Dickens's private characters display particularly isolating idiolects as well. The idiolects of Dickens's idiots, madmen, and other prisoners emphasize their extreme isolation while accentuating their similarities to each other. These private languages are sometimes comic, sometimes so sparse as to render the speaker a near mute, but invariably they help to identify and particularize characters. At the same time, idiolects are a product of isolation and contribute to, sometimes even cause, the alienation of these characters.[2] Occasionally these idiolects are almost incomprehensible, but other times they are simply rejected by more normalized, less marginalized speakers because of prejudice. One must speak the language of the realm to be accepted by it; Dickens's prisoners of private worlds, therefore, are often not accepted. Consequently, the issues of isolation, marginalization, and language become bound together in his portrayals of idiots, madmen, and other prisoners. Through these characters and their idiolects, Dickens explores the politics of language—the ways in which language becomes a tool of power, and the ways in which power is created through language.

The official nineteenth-century jargon used to discuss the physically and mentally imprisoned emphasizes their shared experiences of marginalization and isolation: doctors of the insane were referred to as "alienists," and the "separate" and "silent" systems were in vogue in prison reform. The term "asylum" itself suggests a physical and legal barrier from the rest of the world, for although an asylum offers refuge and sanctuary, its "protection" is brought about by a complete severance from society—from its hazards as well as its benefits.

Throughout his representations of imprisoned characters, Dickens questions and sometimes indicts the system and the authorities that lead to the institutionalized segregation of these types, taking a perspective comparable to that of Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish*.[3] In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault examines the increasing confinement and the increasing linguistic segregation of the mad in modern times:

> In the serene world of mental illness, modern man no longer communicates with the madman. . . . As for a common language, there is no such thing; or rather,

> there is no such thing any longer; the constitution of madness as a mental illness, at the end of the eighteenth century, affords the evidence of a broken dialogue, posits the separation as already effected, and thrusts into oblivion all those stammered imperfect words without fixed syntax in which the exchange between madness and reason was made. The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason about madness, has been established only on the basis of such a silence.[4]

According to Foucault, when late-eighteenth-century insane asylum reforms ushered in more "humane" treatment, treating madness became a process of conditioning normalization; as soon as patients could consistently mimic normalized behavior, they were considered cured. Under this practice, "madness no longer exists except as seen."[5] Foucault traces another insidious and systematic process of normalization occurring in the modern and "humanized" penal system. Judges no longer simply determine whether or not a crime was committed by a certain person; now they attempt to determine *why* the crime was committed and what conditions—environmental, social, psychological—led the criminal to commit the crime. In other words, they judge the "soul" of the criminal, "and the sentence that condemns or acquits is not simply a judgement of guilt . . . it bears within it an assessment of normality and a technical prescription for a possible normalization."[6]

Dickens reveals a similar distrust of segregation, normalization, and prevailing definitions of insanity. Like Foucault, he traces the spread of disciplinary mechanisms in society, at times attacking their normalizing tendencies. Dickens rebels against a utilitarian approach to behavior, advocating a freer, unjudged, prerational psyche. Through his sympathetic idiots, madmen, and other prisoners, Dickens calls into question accepted concepts of insanity and normality. His fictional explorations of these issues prefigure Foucault's more extensive analysis over a century later. Indeed, as shall be shown below, the experiences of some Dickensian idiots and prisoners recapitulate the history of the treatment of the insane and prisoners as interpreted by Foucault.

Dickens's questioning of norms naturally leads him to a questioning of authority. What often seems most admirable about his idiots is their admission that they "know nothink," yet as an author-authority Dickens must assume a position of knowing something (BH 220; ch. 16). He partly escapes the paradox of his position by undercutting the value of sophisticated linguistic constructions in celebrating inarticulate characters, in making those trapped in private worlds and private languages the unspoken or nonsensical centers of his novels.[7] But Dickens's treatment of characters trapped in private worlds and private languages is not always so liberal or so

open. He actually participates in their segregation by ultimately marginalizing them structurally in some novels of the first half of his career. The dynamic between his desire to incorporate the aberrant and an underlying urge to silence or seclude them dramatically shapes his narratives. When he is not critiquing the "discipline-mechanism[s]" that imprison and normalize, he is re-creating them in his characterizations, narrative voices, and structures.[8] These contradictory impulses lead to an odd and disturbing tension in his novels, but he seems to overcome his more conservative, restraining nature in later works. The novels I focus on in the last four chapters of this work—*Nicholas Nickleby*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *Dombey and Son*, and *Little Dorrit*—works representative of his early, middle, and late career, demonstrate an increasing liberalization and complexity in his portrayals of figures trapped in private worlds and private languages.

Throughout his career, however, Dickens failed to see, as Foucault often failed to see, that the imprisonment and isolation of *female* idiots and prisoners is exacerbated.[9] Theirs is an intensified entrapment that the author never fully acknowledges. Even in later novels, when Dickens allows his idiots and fools freer rein, when he seems to celebrate the foolish more wholeheartedly, he disciplines his women, continuing to restrain them to the norms he rebels against with other characters. Dickens's inability to recognize the intensified entrapment of women and his *participation* in their entrapment through his characterizations and narrative structures underscore his own imprisonment in a patriarchal self created through Victorian norms.[10]

Dickens's attitude toward the imprisoned changed between his fiction and nonfiction. In his nonfictional accounts of idiots, Dickens often seems to praise the institutions that have segregated them, only occasionally suggesting that segregation may not be the only answer. Moreover, as Philip Collins has shown in analyzing Dickens's magazine articles and letters, Dickens's attitude toward prisons and prisoners became increasingly conservative as he grew older.[11] It seems as if the opinions Dickens expressed in his nonfiction were always more conservative than those he expressed in his fiction, and as he got older the differences between the opinions he expressed in each grew more profound: his fictional portrayals of idiots, madmen, and prisoners became more liberal, and his nonfictional accounts, at least of prisoners, became more conservative. Reasons for these differences and changes will be examined in Chapter 2. There I also discuss Dickens's biographical connection with idiots, madmen, and other prisoners and his portrayal of them and their respective institutions in his nonfictional writings, in addition to placing his observations in perspective with his contemporaries' opinions.

Throughout his characterizations of prisoners of private worlds and languages, Dickens alludes to the holy idiots and wise fools of history, folklore, and literature through certain details of language, dress, action, and mannerism. His allusions recall similar characters who *had* a place in society, who played a role and were part of a community, characters who were valued for their abnormalities. By alluding to these historical and literary fools, Dickens implicitly asks if there is any way his society can find a place for these types and a place for their visions and language. Through them, he advocates keeping fancy and foolishness alive in a utilitarian world. In Foucault's terms, Dickens encourages the renewal of reason's dialogue with madness. He suggests that putting idiots away is not only detrimental to them but detrimental to the rest of society as well, for the roles they have played historically have been important, even vital, to the societies in which they lived. Dickens symbolically uses physical details of dress and mannerisms from the holy idiot tradition to develop a philosophy of the fool. Clothing images often link Dickens's holy fool characters particularly to Carlyle's philosophy of clothes in *Sartor Resartus*. In Chapter 3, I discuss the semiotics of the physical images that Dickens transforms from the tradition, showing how these images form major structural and thematic motifs in the novels.

Other critics have, of course, looked at isolated, abnormal types in Dickens. Leonard Manheim surveys abnormal characters in "Dickens' Fools and Madmen"; Susan Shatto's two-part article, "Miss Havisham and Mr. Mopes the Hermit: Dickens and the Mentally Ill," analyzes the treatment of two mentally aberrant characters in particular; J. Hillis Miller in *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* explores the general isolated plight of all of Dickens's characters but does not focus on those particularly entrapped; Michael Hollington examines Dickens's grotesques, but traces different influences on this element of Dickens's fiction and different rhetorical roles that they play; Robert Golding in *Idiolects in Dickens* does a fine job of categorizing and describing Dickens's idiolects, but he does not deal with the larger thematic and critical issues they entail; and the theme of prisons and Dickens's social commentary on them has been discussed by many renowned critics, such as Trilling and Collins, to name two of the most eminent.[12] But as yet no one has written a full-length study exploring the thematic, linguistic, structural, and imagistic interconnections of Dickens's idiots, madmen, and other prisoners and the ways Dickens uses them to comment on specific social practices, larger philosophical issues, and his own role as an author. Nor have the allusions that Dickens makes through many of these characters—particularly his idiots and madmen—been thoroughly analyzed. I do not attempt to illuminate all these allusions here, just those

that play pivotal roles in the novels or have not been previously analyzed. The Foucauldian aspects of Dickens's presentation of these figures have also not been sufficiently explored, nor has anyone yet analyzed the *progress* of Dickens's treatment of idiots, madmen, and other prisoners throughout his career. Such is the territory I hope to cover in this study.

Studying this territory entails analyzing particular social issues as well as universal conditions that are described in Dickens's writings. Sometimes in Dickens's densely metaphoric portrayals of these characters, their entrapment in private languages becomes our own; their victimization by authorities and institutions becomes representative of a universal condition; their alternative realities call into question our stable, commonplace notion of reality. The idiots' idiolects merely emphasize the universal limitations of language. The madmen's visions are only a slightly intensified version of our own waking and sleeping nightmares—our own frightening sense of the slipperiness of "reality." The prisoner's scream when first confronting the confines of his narrow cell simply focuses the inescapable human anguish of confronting one prison after another from cradle to grave in a body that is itself a prison. The particular situation of each imprisoned type becomes universal because Dickens manages to create characters who are at once unique, isolated individuals and at the same time indicative of the epistemological and ontological plight of humankind.

Analyzing these imprisoned figures, then, illuminates major aspects of Dickens's imaginative vision and his understanding of society. In addition, his repeated portrayals of characters without a voice suggest that their plight is fundamental to his view of his role as an author. Dickens adopts the role of an author-authority to take up the cause of those traditionally denied authority, even authority over themselves. But his approach to the imprisoned resists simple generalizations; it changes dramatically in the course of his fiction. From the early pity with which he treats these types, he progresses to a far more complex and celebratory approach, valuing them in a way that defies all utilitarian standards. Throughout these changes, his determination to give voice to the voiceless fundamentally shapes his life and work.

NOTES

1. Some of the characters whom I discuss as "idiots" in this study may not seem at first to deserve that label, for I have included the profoundly uneducated and the illiterate because Dickens portrays them in a similar

fashion to the more typical idiots. Those characters ignorant of the workings of the world around them are as isolated as idiots, no matter what their mental capacities may be. Similarly, some of the madmen I discuss are not necessarily "mad" throughout their respective novels, but they at least exhibit or experience a spell of insanity.

2. In "Dickens and the Language of Alienation" (*English Language Notes* 16 [1978]: 117-28), Charles Schuster examines the connection between language and isolation, emphasizing that "community" and "communication" come from the same Latin root, which suggests the necessity of effective communication in maintaining ties to the community. "Dickens reveals an intuitive grasp of the relationship between communication, community, and alienation," Schuster asserts; "he does so by including in his fiction a steady outpouring of alienated individuals who demonstrate their pariah-like status by being wholly or partially inarticulate" (117).
3. See Jeremy Tambling's useful analysis of representations of prisons in Foucault and Dickens in "Prison-bound: Dickens and Foucault," *Essays in Criticism* 36, no. 1 (1986): 11-31.
4. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization, A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Pantheon, 1965), x.
5. Ibid., 250.
6. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 19-20.
7. The multiplicity of Dickens's narrative voice also indicates his ambivalence to his role as authority by avoiding a single, controlled perspective and tone. For an excellent analysis of this multiplicity, see Janet Larson, "Designed to Tell: The Shape of Language in Dickens' 'Little Dorrit' " (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1975). In *Carlyle and Dickens*, Michael Goldberg also has a good analysis of the multiplicity of Dickens's style and compares it with that of Carlyle (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1972.)
8. Foucault, *Discipline*, 209.
9. In *Disciplining Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 1991), Jana Sawicki points out that "as focused as Foucault was on domains of power/knowledge in which many of the bodies disciplined and the subjects produced and rendered docile were female, he never spoke of 'male domination' per se; he usually spoke of power as if it subjugated everyone equally" (49). In "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," Sandra Bartky concurs: "Foucault treats the body throughout as if it were one, as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and as if men and women bore the same relationship to the characteristic institutions of modern life. Where is the account of the disciplinary practices that engender the 'docile bodies' of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men?" (*Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, ed. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby [Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1988], 63-64). Although in *The History of Sexuality* (trans.

Robert Hurley, New York: Pantheon, 1978) Foucault does discuss the hysterization of women's bodies, in general he pays little attention to female experience as it differs from that of males (104).

10. As D. A. Miller argues in *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), novelists in general perform a disciplinary function in their art; they function as "police" in their examination and recording of their subjects and in providing order and closure in conclusions (21, 93).
11. Philip Collins in the definitive *Dickens and Crime* (London: Macmillan, 1965) thoroughly explores the discrepancies between Dickens's various statements about prison reforms. Collins's work is excellent, and I am deeply indebted to it, but I would suggest that he overemphasizes Dickens's harsher statements concerning prison reform in his eagerness to prove that the traditional concept of Dickens as a lifelong liberal was inaccurate. Collins underemphasizes the attitudes that Dickens's fictional portrayals suggest, and he credits Dickens's later statements as being more indicative of his real attitudes than his earlier statements. I do not agree; however, I realize that Collins was attempting to correct the oversight of many preceding critics who had stressed Dickens's earlier, more liberal views.
12. Leonard Manheim, "Dickens' Fools and Madmen," *Dickens Studies Annual* 2 (1972): 69-97; Susan Shatto, "Miss Havisham and Mr. Mopes the Hermit: Dickens and the Mentally Ill," Part 1, *Dickens Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1985): 43-50; Shatto, "Miss Havisham and Mr. Mopes the Hermit: Dickens and the Mentally Ill," Part 2, *Dickens Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1985): 79-84; J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965); Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Robert Golding, *Idiolects in Dickens: Major Techniques and Chronological Development* (London: Macmillan, 1985); Lionel Trilling, "Little Dorrit," *Dickens: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Martin Price (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 147-57; Philip Collins, *Dickens and Crime*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1965).