

Home Baked: Dickens's English Muffins and Corporate Characters

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Near the start of Charles Dickens's 1838 novel *Nicholas Nickleby*, the cruel and conniving Ralph Nickleby speculates on a new monopoly, the "United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company." The actual motivation for the company is quick and steep profit: "Capital, five million, in five hundred thousand shares of ten pounds each," as Nickleby's accomplice Mr. Bonney explains, and once the shares are at a premium, "you know what to do with them as well as any man alive, and how to back quietly out at the same time" (25). In order to obtain Parliamentary support and attract shareholders, Nickleby and his retinue rely on the comforting connotations of muffins themselves: "Why the very name will get the shares up to a premium in ten days," as Bonney says (25). This company, argues accomplice Sir Matthew Pupker, is vital to "the wealth, the happiness, the comfort, the liberty, the very existence of a free and great people"—in other words, muffins form the cornerstone of everything great about Britain, and this greatness must be maintained through corporate regulation (28). To validate the company, Nickleby and co. describe the present degeneracy of the muffin industry: the "whole Muffin system," according to Mr. Bonney, is "alike prejudicial to the health and morals of the people, and subversive to the best interests of a great commercial and mercantile community" (28). Bonney goes on to claim that, in its present manifestation, the muffin industry is an "inhuman and barbarous system" (29). The United Metropolitan would reform the industry, outlawing all private muffin selling. Ostensibly in the name of better working conditions for the muffin sellers, the plan's true intent is, of course, to serve as a cash cow for its creators.

This early scene is designed to establish Ralph Nickleby's profiteering character: in the space of a few pages, we learn that Nicholas's uncle is a ruthless investor, utterly without regard for the lower social orders he exploits to turn a profit. I will argue, however, that this scene also uses the muffin to illustrate the cultural significance of food for nineteenth-century British cultural identity at large. Along with *Dombey and Son* (1848), *Nicholas Nickleby* establishes a connection between food and the business corporation that is deliberate, pronounced, and often overlooked. While the muffin is a literal baked good in *Nicholas Nickleby*, it is at first glance more metaphoric and fleeting in *Dombey and Son*, where Dombey's son Paul is described as being like a muffin and is later consumed, much like that baked good. Yet in both novels, the muffin may be read to figuratively represent a cosy Britishness under siege—a homely national character now suddenly subjected to a new and avaricious corporate consumption. Food can illuminate the economic and cultural dynamics of a society; as one example of food in Dickens's works, the muffins in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Dombey and Son* afford us a new way of examining Dickens's representation of these dynamics in Victorian Britain. In both novels, Dickens employs food to warn us of the demise of individual character through incorporation.

This essay participates in what Suzanne Daly and Ross G. Forman describe as a current critical "obsession" with food studies, an obsession which in its most widespread form primarily surrounds work by the likes of Eric Schlosser and Michael Pollan on contemporary food production and mismanagement (363). Yet while food has become a popular mainstream topic, Daly and Forman observe that "food studies" has until recently remained a "devalued object of inquiry" in literary studies, and misconceptions about British food and the Victorians alike have produced a sense of Victorian food as "stodgy and dull"—and the

study of such food a kind of Victoriana rather than legitimate academic inquiry (364). This essay joins the food studies movement, begun in fields such as anthropology and history,¹ and now taken up in literary studies in general and Victorian literary studies in particular.² Critics have begun to treat food as a way to understand economic life, domestic life, the politics of plenty and want, or international relations. While some Victorianists have focused on actual food or drink products, others treat food or its absence categorically. Here I consider the particular as an index of the general by considering a particular food—the muffin—as literal as well as a figurative representation of the general. The muffin is a comfort food one literally consumes or incorporates, mimicking the more figurative function of the business corporation as it was being theorised and legislated in the early nineteenth century.

Muffins pop up across Dickens's oeuvre, including a majority of the novels: in addition to *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Dombey and Son*, they appear in four of the *Sketches by Boz*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *David Copperfield*, *Hard Times*, *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Dickens generally figures them in their proper place as foodstuffs served at tea; occasionally, they metaphorically express the diminutive size or particular shape of something. This muffin abundance is not surprising: increasingly tied through nineteenth-century periodicals and cookery books to a comforting ideal of domestic Britishness, baked goods like the muffin were products that sold nationalism and the cult of the home. *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Dombey and Son* use muffins—*Nicholas Nickleby* more literally, *Dombey and Son* more synecdochally—for characterisation, and these characterisations expose a contradiction inherent in the domestic British ideal. The process of eating violently mimics the process of forming a corporation. Both are processes of absorption, of a single entity consuming others. Dickens reinforces the connection by including literal and figurative muffins in his discussion of business practices. The selection of muffins is not a mistake: connoting the virtues of domesticity and a homey nationalism based on individuals and individual families, muffins contradict the burgeoning international corporate structure Dickens describes in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Dombey and Son*. Individually forgettable scraps of local flavor, together Dickens's muffins express a homey Britishness that has become dangerously predicated on and at risk of being destroyed by increasingly corporate commerce—a Britishness, Dickens implies, in dire need of reform.

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The word “muffin” was brought into English in 1703, most probably from the Low German *muffe*, or little cake, and the Old French *moflet* or *mouflet*, a noun describing a kind of bread or an adjective meaning soft and tender (*Oxford English Dictionary*, “muffin”). English muffins—not to be confused with their sweet American counterparts or the closely associated crumpet—were originally made from leftover bread, dough, and potato scraps. These scraps were put into a pan and later into muffin rings, and were initially used to feed house servants. In the nineteenth century, muffins rose in general popularity, and were purchased by servants in the streets for the middle and upper classes to enjoy at teatime. In her 1861 *Book of Household Management*, Mrs. Beeton lists muffins with bread as an “article of the first necessity,” a food for “civilized peoples” (1671). The muffin in particular, she notes, is “not easily made,” and is “more generally purchased than manufactured at home” (1727). Yet at its root, the muffin is a scrap, a leftover, and its upward mobility from servant food to purchased national symbol relies on the nostalgic mythos of its “humble” origin.

Muffins illustrate the complex history of food preparation and gender more generally. First a completely domestic and by association female foodstuff, prepared by a typically female cook, by the nineteenth century muffins—like so many other baked goods—had been outsourced to male bakers and muffin men serving as liaisons between bakers and kitchen staff. Beginning around 1810, muffin boys and men sold their products to house servants for the middle and upper classes in the streets, advertising their wares by ringing little bells. By the 1840s, writes Alan Davidson in *The Oxford Companion to Food*, the incessant bells became such a nuisance that Parliament passed an act intended to prohibit the ringing of the bells (517). This legislation, which was actually passed in 1850 as the “Bill to Prevent Unnecessary Trading on Sunday in Metropolis,” sought to limit the noise of hawking food in the streets on Sundays, and categorized muffins along with pies and other items as “not such necessary items as milk,” and therefore subject to the prohibition on “crying” or hawking goods from the streets (Select Committee 59). In his 1851 *London Labour and the London Poor*, however, Henry Mayhew observes that “the prohibition has been as inoperative as that which forbade the use of a drum to the costermonger, for the muffin bell still tinkles along the streets, and is rung vigorously in the suburbs” (Chapter 9). At this point, estimated Mayhew, there were some 500 muffin sellers in London, most of whom were boys and men, and most of whom sold their wares in winter, peak muffin-selling season.

The irritation caused by the muffin-men’s loud advertising techniques did not diminish popular interest in muffins or the boys and men who sold them. The popular child’s rhyme “Do you know the muffin man?” also dates from the nineteenth century and found its way into Matilda Anne Planche Mackarness’ 1888 ladies’ instruction manual, *The Young Lady’s Book: A Manual of Amusements, Exercises, Studies, and Pursuits*, in the chapter on “Games for the Little Ones Indoors.”³ The rhyme is brief and repetitive: “Do you know the muffin man, / The muffin man, the muffin man? / Do you know the muffin man, / Who lives in Drury Lane?” Associated thus with child’s play, muffins connote innocence.

Yet this view tends to obscure the larger context of the nursery rhyme, with its reference to Drury Lane and, by association, its marginally reputable muffin men.⁴ Drury Lane, culturally commemorated through this rhyme as the muffin epicenter of London, was part of the Victorian theatre district and was previously subjected to Regency renovation and gentrification. But despite the facelift, in the mid-1830s this street was still a locale of mixed social repute. In *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City*, Deborah Nord describes Regency “improvements” to the theatre district, but also cites Dickens’s sketch “The Pawnbroker’s Shop,” in which “three sets of women in different stages of social distress” are brought together in the same Drury Lane pawnshop (26, 68). While her ultimate argument is that Dickens created an image of middle-class London in part by establishing distance between the middling sort and the “lower orders,” Nord’s description of Drury Lane also reveals the extent to which the classes mixed within some of the spaces of London (50).⁵ The theatre district was situated in a neighborhood “that offered a wide selection of sexual and other sorts of illegal commercial pleasures” (182). The theatre district of which Drury Lane was a part was notable for its varieties of consumption—visual, sexual, and above all bodily. By association, then, the muffin was a popular product, but one still tied to lower—or, perhaps worse, indefinable and potentially mixed—class origins.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the muffin had become ubiquitous enough to serve as the subject of satire. In an 1892 issue of *Punch*, for example, a lengthy ode to the muffin entitled “Lays of Modern Home” appears alongside an illustration of a muffin man and lauds the “warm perfections” of this particular baked good. Admitting that the muffins sold in the

streets of London are advertised only by a “simple” bell, and are fit to “cheer the pauper’s dark abode,” the poet goes on to use the humble muffin to make a nationalist plug (13, 30). Whereas Venetian boys eat fruit and are beguiled by the “operatic” tricks of the fruit seller, the “simple” bell of the muffin man sends a more sensible message. The anonymous author of the poem writes that eating the “British muffin” makes one feel at “Home, where’er it be.” While satirically puffing up the muffin to grandiose importance, the poem nevertheless draws a connection between food products and an imperially grounded form of national identity. The “warm perfections” of the muffin, concludes the poem’s narrator, are best enjoyed over a cup of the “best Ceylon”—a reminder that British teatime and attendant accoutrements such as muffins are by definition tied to products that hail from the larger empire. The muffin thus symbolises humble Britishness at home and abroad in the empire. By implication, it is a symbol of comfort that puts a friendly face on the more imperial aspects of nationalism.

Eating food is an implicit act of cultural self-understanding, writ large across an increasingly global trade network and by definition bound in the economics of that food’s production.⁶ As Sidney Mintz writes in *Sweetness and Power*, “Nothing the newborn infant does establishes so swiftly its social connection with the world as the expression and satisfaction of its hunger. Hunger epitomises the relation between its dependence and the social universe of which it must become a part” (4). Food, in other words, is an individual and bodily matter, but it is also a social fact, for “What we like, what we eat, how we eat it, and how we feel about it” ties us to the social world (4). Furthermore, what one eats becomes an economic act, defining the economic character of the larger society: as Mintz shows, the Western desire for and consumption of sugar was tied, throughout its history, to imperial capital expansion. The choice of certain foods over others has cultural meaning, and this meaning is shaped in large part by economics. It is no coincidence that consumption is at once an economic and a gastronomic term.

Eating is a bodily—if not a conscious—reminder of the individual’s position within a community as well as within a market economy. The biology of economic life was an innovative concept in the early nineteenth century: beginning with Thomas Robert Malthus’s *An Essay on Population* (1797), writes Catherine Gallagher, political economy “radically reconceptualized the social organism” into an ambivalent one capable of both reproduction and destruction (36). Late-eighteenth-century political economy, Gallagher notes, focused on the “interconnections among populations, the food supply, modes of production and exchange, and their impact on life forms generally”—what she describes as “bioeconomics” (3). Developing the concurrence of economic theory and food in particular, Penny Bradshaw writes that during the Romantic period in England, “motifs of food proliferate at a cultural level and this can be closely linked to sociohistorical factors” (59). Connecting consumerism to food imagery in particular, Bradshaw maintains that “during periods of extreme social unrest one of the most important uses of food as signifier is political” (59). The kind of food one eats and how one eats it becomes a significant and potentially volatile act. Following a different line of inquiry, Denise Gigante describes what amounts to an aestheticisation of taste in the Romantic era: “Romantic gastronomers,” or “Various ‘committees of taste’ established in early nineteenth-century Britain elevated food to the status of the fine arts, adopting the same juridical language and concern with philosophical principles that defined the eighteenth-century discourse of aesthetics” (1). Food, in other words, can be read as economically, politically, or aesthetically charged during the early nineteenth century. It remains all three for the mid-century muffin.

Taken together, cultural records from Mrs. Beeton to *Punch* portray the nineteenth-century muffin as both a figure of comforting domesticity and a representation of potential danger and exploitation. Indeed, both of these connotations permeate Dickens's treatment of the muffin trade in *Nicholas Nickleby*. A humorous episode contained within the second chapter of the novel, the proposed United Metropolitan Company quickly establishes the avaricious Ralph Nickleby as villain, for who else but a villain would seek to profit through the exploitation of domestic comfort foods and the impoverished boys who sell them in the streets? Rather than a superfluous detail, muffins do much to establish Ralph's character and the tenor of his subsequent relationship with Nicholas and his family. The humor and the villainy of this scene both rely on the fact that readers would have perceived muffins as domestic, comforting, and wholesome, while also somewhat problematically tied to the world of commerce and the lower-class muffin sellers.

With the United Metropolitan Company Dickens continues his satire of the trend of financial speculation, a satire begun in the first chapter of the novel when we learn that Nicholas Nickleby, father of our title character and brother of Ralph Nickleby, has unwisely speculated with his capital and as a result "ruined" himself (20). Speculation, the "action or practice of buying and selling goods, land, stocks, shares, etc., in order to profit by the rise or fall in the market value, as distinct from regular trading or investment" famously led to the massive economic crisis of 1720, the collapse of the South Sea Bubble (*OED*). The timeframe narrated in *Nicholas Nickleby* coincides with the similar—though smaller-scale—panic of 1825-26, which was the result of wild speculation and became the first financial crisis of the nineteenth century. The United Metropolitan Company is designed by its architects Bonney and Nickleby to make muffins such a vehicle for speculation and quick profit. John Bowen writes that "We are presented with capitalist and entrepreneurial activity in its purest, most speculative and exploitative...Dickens then is portraying, in the most specific and yet general way, the particular exploitative dynamics of which Ralph is an embodiment" (159). The focus of this speculation—muffins—highlights this exploitation. Dickens is also, writes Norman Russell, establishing a division between branches of the family: whereas Nicholas the elder is a speculator who finds himself ruined, Ralph "is an encourager of speculative imprudence, joint promoter of a company that comes into existence solely to enrich its principles at the expense of the poor and feckless" ("*Nicholas Nickleby*" 149). The novel's 1830s readers would have recognized this speculative venture and Ralph Nickleby alike as corrupt—doubly so, considering the concurrent homey and nationalist valence of muffins, the subject of this particular speculation.

In order to convince potential investors to buy into the idea of the company, Bonney must first paint a grim picture of the muffin industry, but then also show the extent to which muffins are an indispensable part of British identity. To begin with, Bonney argues, those working in the muffin-selling industry are an alarming lot: "He had found that among muffin sellers there existed drunkenness, debauchery, and profligacy, which he attributed to the debasing nature of their employment as at present exercised." There is something "debasing" in being a muffin seller, but this is qualified by the addendum "as at present exercised." Something has happened to this trade, and we soon learn it is, counter-intuitively, the *absence* of muffins. Bonney finds the "same vices among the poorer class of people who ought to be muffin consumers, and this he attributed to the despair engendered by their being placed beyond the reach of that nutritious article, which drove them to seek a false stimulant in intoxicating liquors" (28-29). Tragically, Bonney notes, he himself "had visited the houses of the poor in the various districts of London, and had found them destitute of the slightest

vestige of a muffin, which there appeared too much reason to believe some of these indigent persons did not taste from year's end to year's end" (28). The problems with the current muffin trade—and, by extension, with society as a whole—have to do with the high price and therefore the inaccessibility of muffins. While the muffin itself is a "nutritious article"—its wholesome properties physical and, by extension, moral—the muffin sellers are another matter: disreputable and *unwholesome*, by implication precisely because they do not eat their own products. Muffins, Bonney suggests, are a necessary element in the construction of wholesome Britons, and are essential for the reform of the muffin trade and working-class degeneracy at large. Dangerously tied to the potential degeneracy of its seller, the muffin is simultaneously figured as a national symbol: domestic, moral, and British.

Dickens inflects this entire scene with a large dose of sarcasm, and Bonney and Nickleby are implicitly criticised for their outlandish claims and dark motives. Perhaps it is a bit much to suggest that an entire class of people are downtrodden for want of a particular kind of baked good; perhaps it is a bit too convenient—and ironic, as Russell suggests—that this industry reform requires a corporate monopoly (148). Yet to create such an effective satire, Dickens must rely on a pre-existing association of muffins with wholesome and everyday British life, as well as a more obscured connection between muffin *selling* and the disruptive, potentially dangerous lower orders. What makes the scene humorous, in other words, is the innocent simplicity muffins seem to connote; what keeps it from being absurd is the pre-existing ambivalence surrounding muffin men.⁷

Continuing to lambast the seedy underbelly of the muffin industry, another man at the meeting in *Nicholas Nickleby* pipes up and tells a tale of "the cruelties inflicted on muffin boys by their masters," including "the case of an orphan muffin boy, who, having been run over by a hackney carriage, had been removed to the hospital, had undergone an amputation of his leg below the knee, and was now actually pursuing his occupation on crutches" (29-30). While this anecdote continues to draw a somewhat hyperbolic connection between muffin selling and general social depravity, it also brings us closer to a genuine concern of Dickens's—the institutional exploitation of the working classes, and in particular working class children. Echoing the sincere critique of the social injustice to orphans featured in *Oliver Twist*, which he was finishing as he began work on *Nicholas Nickleby*, this brief story tempers Dickens's satire, or at least clarifies its focus: muffin sellers and the problems with such an unregulated industry are not the primary focus of attack here; rather, Dickens critiques those who would exploit this situation for their own profit. For all their perceived degeneracy, the muffin sellers are not the antagonists. Dickens's satire relies on the juxtaposition of financial speculators and an exploited group, muffin sellers whose marginal status does not outweigh the value of their product. Dickens deliberately misdirects the call for reform: ostensibly demanding muffin industry reform through Nickleby and Bonney, Dickens is instead calling for a much wider financial reform—one that would regulate corporate policy and financial speculation alike, and thereby protect investors—and families—from financial ruin. Instead of calling for middle-class British reform, Dickens redirects the call outwards, to practices of speculation and incorporation that threaten middle-class families such as the Nicklebys.

The muffin and those who sell it do the cultural work of helping to reinforce an image of Britain as domestic, homey, and simple—yet at the same time under the threat of domestic financial corruption. Instead of being "subversive" to the country as Mr. Bonney would have it, the muffin industry serves as a microcosm for the nation's many inconsistencies. The muffin man himself—or, in this novel, the impoverished muffin boy—is a representative of

the inescapable dangers his class suggests as well as a provider of homey baked goods. The muffin boy embodies a contradiction: an image of Britishness as internally embattled and for that somehow all the more valuable. In this novel the muffin does not represent mere amusing cultural flavor; rather, it helps to establish the novel's themes of the destructiveness of greed and the value of family, as well as to articulate the Victorian ambivalence surrounding a class-inflected domestic comfort.

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This early scene does the work of revealing Ralph Nickleby's avaricious character, and—this work accomplished—we hear no more of muffins or the monopolies exploiting them. Similarly, the muffin makes an early and even more fleeting appearance in *Dombey and Son*. This novel begins by introducing us to father and son:

Dombey sat in the corner of the darkened room in the great arm-chair by the bedside, and Son lay tucked up warm in a little basket bedstead, carefully disposed on a low settee immediately in front of the fire and close to it, as if his constitution were analogous to that of a muffin, and it was essential to toast him brown while he was very new. (11)

While the businessman Dombey has not yet been described, "Son," we learn here, is like a muffin: a consumable baked item that must be toasted before eating. At first glance, this analogy seems to be a throw-away metaphor—a cute description that does not really describe much of anything, except "son's" pasty complexion. Yet "Son" here is more than a son to Dombey—he is the fulfillment of Dombey's fiscal dreams; he is the final, necessary element required to make the company "not only in name but in fact Dombey and Son" (11). Dombey and Son is a family company, and Dombey has been waiting for his wife to give birth "to a new partner" (12). This muffin-like son is consumed into the company before he is an hour old.

This muffin-as-description appears much more abstract than Dickens's direct description of the muffin trade in *Nicholas Nickleby*, but it is working in the same capacity, suggesting an unpleasant portrait of consumption and business that is all the more jarring for the simultaneous sense of homey comfort it conveys. Whereas *Nicholas Nickleby* uses the muffin to depict the unequal and even dangerous class structure undergirding Britishness, *Dombey and Son* goes a step further in suggesting an association between the muffin and the consumption and reconstitution of a company engaged in international trade. The uneasy hominess connoted by *Dombey and Son's* muffin is an expression of mid-Victorian British self-definition—a self-definition Dickens opens up to critique as well as potential reform. This critique is paradoxically more powerful for being less literally substantial and more figurative: used figuratively, the muffin here does not just illustrate one character's flaws or virtues, but may be interpreted as a broader exposure of the corruption on which a burgeoning business system—and by extension a nineteenth-century Britishness—is founded.

Although its appearance is fleeting, I will argue that as in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the muffin in *Dombey and Son* similarly illustrates Dickens's concerns about British corporate practices. "A commodity," writes Karl Marx, is "an object outside us" (41). But what if the commodity is us? In *Dombey and Son*, the commodity of the muffin implicates the entire family in a lower class and yet intrinsically British identity. This relationship between individual-muffin-Paul and company is synecdochic, for Paul Dombey is part of the whole Dombey and

Son, a shipping company with a trade route to the West Indies and a business structure that is in flux. The muffin in this novel may seem less tied to the world of business and to Britishness, but it is in fact more so, and the implications of these associations create a more somber vision of reform.

The novel implicitly responds to the Registration Act of 1844, which for the first time in England collected multiple individuals under one company name and legal identity. Dombey and Son desperately needs a son in order to preserve its business identity, and the novel represents the more inhumane aspect of corporate consolidation by making that son a muffin—a consumable foodstuff. Paul seems born and bred to be nothing other than a part of his father’s company. Yet as part of the whole company Dombey and Son, son Paul also comes to represent a figurative resistance to corporate identity precisely by being a muffin that may, it turns out, be utterly consumed and thereby undermine the company’s identity. While Dombey and Son is ostensibly a partnership company, the synecdochal division of consumable part (Paul) from whole (the company Dombey and Son) in Dickens’s novel anticipates the legal limits on individual liability, which were codified in the Limited Liabilities Act of 1855 and the Joint Stock Companies Act of 1856. Together, these acts limited individual economic liability in corporate ventures in order to protect individual capital from bankruptcy. This legislation, as Andrew H. Miller has written, “distinguished sharply between private and public identities,” and “paradoxically retained for the corporation as a whole a legal facsimile of the undivided individual. The emergent, limited corporations were thus designed on a model of identity which they themselves, in their very formation, help to antique” (139). The paradoxical, undivided-yet-split individual ideal Miller reads in the 1856 legislation is prefigured here in Dickens’s novel, eight years earlier. Through this initial, seemingly throw-away metaphor of the muffin, *Dombey and Son* theorises a shift from partnership enterprise to a joint-stock corporate business model.

Critics such as N. N. Feltes, Mary Poovey, Bruce Robbins, Donna Loftus, James Taylor and Andrew H. Miller have all analysed the interrelation of Victorian fiction and the joint-stock debate. Focusing on novels by Dickens, Trollope, Eliot, and Gaskell written in the 1850s and ‘60s, these scholars trace the narrative legacy of the limited liability legislation to the late 1850s. Yet novels did not merely reflect these debates: as Taylor puts it in his history of joint-stock enterprise, they operated as cultural products that “helped to shape how commerce and particularly the new phenomenon of joint-stock enterprise was understood” (14). *Dombey and Son* also participates in the debates which resulted in the 1855-56 Acts, and comes to the limited liability conclusion novelistically some seven years before Parliament.⁸ Through the muffin Paul, the novel weaves the language of food and business together, articulating both a “discourse of liability” similar to the discourse Miller traces in Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853), and the language of consumption and selfhood (140). Whereas in *Nicholas Nickleby* the literal muffin trade establishes Ralph’s greed, in *Dombey and Son* the more metaphoric muffin subtly indicates a broader greed inherent in emerging corporate models. Paul can be consumed, and yet his very absorption by others signals the failure of corporate consolidation: utterly consumed, Paul dies and throws the very identity of the company into chaos. Made part of the whole to the point of death, Paul is no longer a part of the company at all, revealing the self-destructive limits of the unregulated corporation.

Dombey and Son uses the muffin as a metaphor to hint at the dangers of a new business paradigm. The movement towards joint-stock corporations and the eventual limitation of liability codified by the 1855 and 1856 Acts of Parliament were, as Taylor writes, more “ideological intervention” than “a pragmatic attempt to maximize economic efficiency” (3).

The public was largely hostile to the notion of joint-stock enterprise, for though these corporations had the legal status of individuals, they were difficult to sue.⁹ After the Bubble Act of 1720, joint-stock concerns were prohibited in England—unlimited partnerships, writes Miller, were left as “the central form of economic enterprise” (141). Nineteenth-century industrialisation, however, soon outpaced the partnership model, and projects such as the railway required large-scale investment in order to finance their technological advances.

The Registration Act of 1844 attempted to define the corporate status of companies and to limit the legal loopholes exploited by the large companies: “The first great requirement” of modern corporations, “the corporate suing capacity of a trading association, had at last been met” (Shannon 371-72). After 1844, companies were compelled to “incorporate, register, and publicize their accounts,” and they could sue and be sued as individuals (Loftus 96). The individuals in a joint-stock company were thus personally liable for the company’s shortcomings. The Limited Liability Acts of 1855 and the Joint Stock Companies Act of 1856 corrected the problems inherent in this formulation: they protected individual shareholders from utter financial ruin by limiting their personal liability to the company and instead enabled the courts to seize only corporate profits and assets. However, “while producing the distinction between the private and public capacities of the individual subject, the movement to limit liability simultaneously appeared to create in the corporate subject a fetishized emblem of subjective unity” (Miller 148). In the company, the limitation of liability appears to preserve the ideal of the unified individual, yet this undivided individual is not any one shareholder in the business, but the company itself. The notion of a company with the legal power of an individual and the implicit threat to the individual-status of those comprising that company were “alarming and unfamiliar concepts in the nineteenth century” (Taylor 12). Consuming as it does Paul Dombey like a muffin, *Dombey and Son* illustrates these anxieties around limited liability well before the legislation that protected joint-stock corporations.

Dombey and Son—a vaguely identified shipping company¹⁰—is a partnership corporation, an older business model juxtaposed against the more recent beneficiaries of the Registration Act such as the railway company, a much larger corporation that appears as a harbinger of destructive modernisation and death in the novel. The Registration Act made it possible for a large number of investors to pool their resources to fund a large corporation; without it, companies like the railway would not have been possible.¹¹ Based on the family name and comprised of family members, *Dombey and Son* is ostensibly a family—not a joint-stock—company. Yet from the first page, when Dombey proves that his interest in “Son” is a matter of business, *Dombey and Son* foreshadows the impersonal dimension of the joint-stock model. This disconnect, between what the company *Dombey and Son* *is* and what it *acts like*, is Mr. Dombey’s crisis when little Paul does not make it past childhood: Paul, after all, “has to accomplish a destiny”—to exist so that the company can exist “not only in name but in fact *Dombey and Son*” (12, 11). The literal-minded Mr. Dombey desires the complete coincidence of name and fact and must have *Dombey and Son* literally comprise a Dombey and a son—anything less threatens his corporate identity as he understands it. Paul is therefore economically over-determined. Yet as a muffin, he threatens the company through his own future dissolution: he is designed for consumption. Rather than an individual, he is a corporate partner in a company, the constitution of which is the subject of a larger parliamentary debate about corporate identity. He is also notably a corporate partner that is by metaphoric definition consumable. As a consumable *muffin*, Paul evokes the dangers of and to a Britishness besieged by corporate consumption.

The debate surrounding corporate identity touches on the broader issue of social collectivity. According to Jacob Korg in his work on “Society and Community in Dickens,” Dickens saw a conflict between society (as the impersonal, unfeeling, and dangerous industrial age) and community (as everything comforting, intimate, and fulfilling). The family company Dombey and Son illustrates this tension. From the moment of his birth, our metaphorical muffin man Paul is consumed by the family business as his father’s partner in a move that is not yet business incorporation, but which is more social—and hence impersonal and unfeeling—than it is familial. Dombey and Son:

Those three words conveyed the one idea of Mr. Dombey’s life. The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and the moon were made to give them light. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships; rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre. Common abbreviations took new meanings in his eyes, and had sole reference to them. A.D. had no concern with anno Domini, but stood for anno Dombei—and Son. (12)

The sun never sets on the British Empire—or, it would seem, on merchants of the Empire such as Dombey and Son. As he sees it, Mr. Dombey’s “life” is dedicated to industrial exchange and dominance over nature, the cosmos, and historical time—a far cry from the world of hawking foodstuffs in the street. His family is significant insofar as it conforms to his business model. *Dombey and Son* is, as Andrew Sanders writes, a family story about emotional deprivation and fulfillment,¹² and yet its very strength as an emotional family tale is the consequence of its negotiation with its economic moment.

Dickens’s novel gives us an ambivalent, multifaceted view of business collectivity through the company of Dombey and Son. This company and implicitly thereby this novel, as Deirdre David, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, and Suvendrini Perera have argued, are “predicated on an economy of empire” (Perera 605). For David, this view of empire is critical of its commercial manifestation, while nostalgic about the loss of a less mercantile, more romantic imperial past. Yet if *Dombey and Son* is a modernising corporation and its imperialism a locus for critique, it is nevertheless not *quite* like a modern joint-stock corporation: too small to require the degree of shareholder support required by the railway and other new joint-stock corporations and therefore not subject to the impending limited liability law, instead it obeys the older code of partnership. Indeed, initially in the novel liability has no limitations. The individual Mr. Dombey is fused with his business, and this fusion is somewhat of a point of honor: Dombey is personally “ruined” when his business is bankrupted, for he is, as Mr. Morfin says,

a gentleman of high honour and integrity. Any man in his position could, and many a man in his position would, have saved himself, by making terms which would have very slightly, almost insensibly, increased the losses of those who had had dealings with him, and left him a remnant to live upon. But he is resolved on payment to the last farthing of his means. His own words are, that they will clear, or nearly clear, the House, and that no one can lose much. (882-83)

This is a man whose business lacks the financial stop-gap of limited liability, but this fusion is figured as a point of “honour and integrity.” Yet despite Mr. Morfin’s description of him

as a gentleman, Dombey is participating in a society—a business society—but not a community.¹³ Dombey's vow to essentially go down with the ship may be financially honourable, but this is not the end of his development as a character: this only comes when he is at long last able to admit his daughter Florence and her family into the family business. Dombey and Son is thus a partnership, but one in transition.

Dickens uses the muffin in *Dombey and Son* to describe an individual who himself represents a widely debated type of corporation. Initially a metaphor, this image of the muffin becomes more synecdochic as well as more literal as the novel progresses: Paul Dombey is legally part of the whole Dombey and Son, and the muffin itself is treated not only a consumable object, but one that is lower class in origin and implicated in an imperial economy.¹⁴ When the company Dombey and Son literally and figuratively consumes the “Son,” it is implicitly bringing these elements into the heart of the middle-class family business. The name of the company—and hence its public identity—requires the existence of Paul “the Muffin” Dombey. The company must take him in, consume him, *eat him up* in order to exist as it is named. Notably, Paul wastes away and dies of consumption.¹⁵ Roy Porter has noted that the eighteenth century linked economic consumption to the disease of the same name,¹⁶ and Paul's death signifies this same link. The irony here is that Paul's incorporation is also his death; thus the realisation *and* the demise of Dombey and Son amount to the same thing. The company is a monstrous consumer, and the culture responsible for this consumer is in dire need of reform.

Unlike the tongue-in-cheek muffin industry reform suggested in *Nicholas Nickleby*, business reform adopts a more serious tone in *Dombey and Son*. Critics have described *Dombey* as a novel about the business man's reformation,¹⁷ and here I would suggest that Dombey's redemption comes in the form of a split between business and family life, a split that can only happen after Paul Dombey is consumed to death. Learning to love his daughter Florence, Dombey also learns for the first time to be soft and tender like a muffin himself. Mrs. Toots' concluding optimism that “from his daughter, after all, another Dombey and Son will ascend...triumphant!” is a bit erroneous (946). The Dombey name ends with Dombey himself; his daughter and her children will not bear the family company name. Although she is reconciled with her father, Florence has established a distance from the Dombey house, name, and company. Her children's liability is therefore limited, their domestic space their own: participants in a possible reformed corporation Dombey and Son, but not really a part of it.

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In *Dombey and Son* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens represents muffins as a domestic concern, a political problem, an imperial topic, and above all an economic issue. Dickens's more figurative treatment of the muffin allows him more space to critique international business practices and the British identity that increasingly constitutes itself around these practices. Using the muffin to represent what is lost by unregulated corporatisation, Dickens advocates a degree of separation between individuals and their business concerns, and holds out hope for the return of a national character that is soft and tender rather than coldly corporate. Dickens reminds us that food literally matters, not only for our individual bodies but for our businesses, our nations, and our empires. Figuratively, food gives us room to imagine new possibilities for these businesses, nations, and empires. As a literal substance freighted with figurative significance, food defines us still, whole nations and individual parts.

Notes

¹ Sidney Mintz's work on sugar in *Sweetness and Power* is one of the more notable examples in anthropology; for work in history, see, for example, Erika Rappaport's recent essay on tea "Packaging China: Foreign Articles and Dangerous Tastes in the Mid-Victorian Tea Party" in *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*.

² See Penny Bradshaw's and Denise Gigante's work on food and taste in the Romantic period. For recent work in Victorian food studies, see the essays on "Food and the Victorians" collected in the September 2008 issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture*.

³ This rhyme remains with us, and can be found in films such as 1989's *Troop Beverly Hills* and 2001's *Shrek*. The rhyme has made its way into other films, where the muffin man is a figure of danger: a 1989 television movie about child molestation (*Do You Know the Muffin Man?*), a 2003 mockumentary about food consumption (*Muffin Man*), and a 2006 independent horror thriller about a demonic serial-killing baker (*The Muffin Man*).

⁴ Another version of the song places the muffin man in "Cherry Lane," but as suggested by its inclusion in *The Young Lady's Book*, the Drury Lane location is the more common of the two.

⁵ Rappaport similarly describes the mixed social demographic of London's West End before the 1870s in her *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End*: between East and West there was "never a hard-and-fast division. Wealthy men joined the working-class audiences at the music halls...until the end of the nineteenth century, the working classes filled the pit or the gallery in West End theaters such as the Adelphi, the Princess, Drury Lane, and the Gaiety" (181).

⁶ Cross-culturally and temporally, writes Maggie Kilgour, eating food "is a means of asserting and controlling individual and also cultural identity; one nation will refer pejoratively to another in terms of a habit of eating that it itself is repelled by" (6).

⁷ Dickens had already established a dark and dangerous edge to the domestic comfort of muffins in his *Sketches by Boz*. In the scene "The streets—Night" Dickens writes of the "muffin-boy" who trolls the "dark, dull, murky winter's night" at dinnertime (75). Residents of this suburb scream for muffins when they hear his bell, and "Mrs. Peplow, over the way, lets loose Master Peplow, who darts down the street, with a velocity which nothing but buttered muffins in perspective could possibly inspire, and drags the boy back by main force" (75). The humor here comes through in the unexpected juxtaposition of muffins, a respectable teatime food, and the violent manner in which this food is acquired: screaming for muffins and chasing the muffin boy down a dark street seems at odds with the "snug and comfortable" family meal at which muffins are served (74).

⁸ That is, seven years from the time the novel was published. As Kathleen Tillotson has shown in her *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, the novel's inauguration of the railway places the narrative time between 1835 and 1845, right before and at the moment of the Registration Act.

⁹ While corporations were legally treated as individuals under British law before 1844, "lawsuits involving these companies were virtually impossible to pursue...For legal action to be taken against a firm the names of all the partners had to be presented to the court; because each partner was fully liable, each had to be named in the suit. Companies cunningly used this requirement to obstruct prosecution" (Miller, "Subjectivity LTD" 144).

¹⁰ Norman Russell speculates on the exact nature of Dombey's business, concluding that Dombey is a ship owner trading mostly in the West Indies. The stature of West Indies trading at the time would have contributed to what the novel describes as Dombey's pride and powerful rank among his British peers. Andrew Sanders, however, points out that "readers become aware that they have learnt very little about what exactly the esteemed firm

of *Dombey and Son* actually *does* trade in... What his title more fully and properly implies is that the ‘dealings’ the novel describes are with a dysfunctional family” (*The Novelist and Mammon* xi).

¹¹ In *Creating Capitalism*, James Taylor writes that “New technologies, first gas, then steam, then electricity, prompted booms in company promotions, and seemingly broadened the scope of legitimate joint-stock enterprise... Certainly, railways were the most visible embodiment of joint-stock power, revolutionising communications for all classes and in the process bringing about what has justly been described as ‘the most dramatic infringement of private property rights in England since the Civil War’” (6-7).

¹² Sanders believes that “Despite its being set firmly in the new railway age, and despite its commercial sounding title, *Dombey and Son* is less a critique of the social and economic condition of the 1840s than an exploration of emotional deprivation and emotional fulfillment” (xi). Stanley Tick shares this view, and argues in “The Unfinished Business of *Dombey and Son*” that the novel abandons its economic theme in favor of a focus on portraiture. My own argument is that this novel preserves its economic focus more implicitly throughout, in the multivalent figuration of consumption.

¹³ According to Ian Duncan, Dickens does not reconcile the new social and economic forces with individual morality; thus, for this critic, this is not a novel of collective transformation. Yet Korg’s distinction between the community and the social helps to reconcile Dickens’s criticism of the social with his novel’s conclusion.

¹⁴ In *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*, Elaine Freedgood distinguishes metaphor from metonymy, arguing that by reading metonymically—rather than metaphorically—we can uncover “fugitive” meanings—rather than author-sanctioned, metaphoric meanings in those things. I would suggest that, in the case of *Dombey and Son*, the author himself sanctions a move beyond metaphor.

¹⁵ For a description of Paul’s disease as consumption, see Tamara S. Wagner’s *Longing: Narratives of Nostalgia in the British Novel, 1740-1890*, pg. 144. See also Janis McLarren Caldwell’s “Illness, Disease and Social Hygiene.”

¹⁶ The word “consumption” is versatile indeed: Gail Turley Houston observes that consumption itself described numerous diseases in the nineteenth century, including anorexia nervosa (xiii). “Consumption” thus encompasses both the consumption of food as well as its opposite. For a critique of consumption’s metaphoric valences, see Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor*. Sontag argues that “Illnesses have always been used as metaphors to enliven charges that a society was corrupt or unjust” (72).

¹⁷ Deborah Nord is one critic among many to make this argument for the ultimate redemption motif in the novel. Nord focuses on Florence, who recuperates the corrupt feminine influence Edith has upon the novel.

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