

The Private Servant, the Public Servant, and the “Good and Faithful Servant” in Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*

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Abstract:

Charles Dickens’s basis for morality is Christianity—“the teachings of our great Master.” In *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens creates a moral fable based upon Jesus’ parable of the Good and Faithful Servant, who receives praise and profit from his Master. The working-class Nicodemus Boffin serves as literary portrait of this good, faithful servant, while his employees, a faithful and faithless servant, receive dissimilar rewards for loyalty and disloyalty. Dickens applies the parable not only in business but also in government: when the shallow Veneering stands for election to the Commons, other connotations of work (campaigning) and disservice (graft) are introduced to parallel the cases of employees in business. As Boffin and his workers illustrate Jesus’ parable and Thomas Carlyle’s Gospel of Work in employer/employee relationships, Veneering and his associates parody them in the citizen/politician realm.

Charles Dickens’s 1864-65 novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, has much to say about servitude: household servants, employees of business, servants of the Crown, and the “Lords and Gentlemen and Honorable Boards” whose role is to serve the poor, but who instead make grandiose speeches. Throughout the novel, these servants serve exceptionally well or ill, honorably or dishonorably. For Dickens, who claimed that his religion was based strictly on the teachings of the New Testament, the standard for a servant’s loyalty is Jesus’ Parable of the Good and Faithful Servant. In *Our Mutual Friend* the parable is primarily an exemplum for the business world, but the narrator adds political servants as well: “What is in such wise true of the public master and servant, is equally true of the private master and servant all the world over.”¹

The parable, offered as answer to the question of Jesus’ disciples whether the kingdom of God would soon appear, emphasized the responsibility of servants and workers in the intervening time, no matter how brief or how long. In the parable, a man preparing to travel into a far country summoned his slaves, giving them five, two, and one talent, respectively, according to their abilities. The five-talent servant traded upon his allotment, making five more talents, and the two-talent man also increased his master’s investment by 100%. But the slave that had been entrusted with only one talent, “went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord’s money.” When the master returned and was presented the earnings off the five talents and two talents, he commented, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I make thee ruler over many things: enter into the joy of thy lord.” Then the man who had received only one talent said, “Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine.” To this, his master responded, “Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. . . . And cast the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”²

The version of the parable in Luke 19 differs in that the master is no ordinary man but a nobleman going away to inherit a kingdom; the servants not only fear the master, but also despise him; and there are ten servants, compared to three in Matthew. Furthermore, instead of

¹ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*. Adrian Poole, ed. (London: Penguin, 1997), 294. (Further references to the novel will be parenthetical.)

² Matt. 25: 14-30.

each servant receiving a different amount in trust, each is given the same responsibility of investing a single pound, and upon the day of reckoning the first has increased it to ten pounds, the second to five. These tenfold and fivefold returns contrast the parable in Matthew in which the first two slaves only double their investment. In Luke, the timid servant, instead of digging a hole to bury the master's talent, folds it away in a napkin and hides it in a secret place. In both versions, additional money is given to those who have increased their initial investment, and money is taken from the one who has earned no profit. Only in Matthew is the unprofitable servant cast into outer darkness; in Luke, the nobleman threatens to slay those who will not submit to his rule. Arland J. Hultgren points out that the theme of a wealthy man leaving servants or slaves in charge of his estate or wealth is a recurrent one in the parables of Jesus, that the story in Matthew and that in Luke are two separate parables differing in many details, that the Matthew story places stress on the variation of talents—and therefore responsibility—among the servants, and that the Luke parable has within it another element that some have called the Parable of the Throne Claimant.³ Dickens blends elements of both Matthew and Luke and alludes to aspects of the Throne Claimant parable as well. The various servants/employees in *Our Mutual Friend* receive varying “talents,” and the fraudulent claimant to a share of the Harmon fortune is thrown into outer darkness.

The capitalistic enterprise in the novel is the Harmon trash removal company, which has prospered through a service contract with the city of London. The good servant, Nicodemus Boffin, is a foreman of the Harmon company and a “man of high simplicity,” in contrast to the wicked servant, Silas Wegg, a “man of low cunning” (186); the former works for his pay, the latter connives to extort money. But John Harmon, the presumed heir to the Harmon fortune, lives for much of the novel under the name Rokesmith while serving as yet another faithful servant, Mr. Boffin's secretary. Although he is literally the only son of the capitalist king, Rokesmith is metamorphosed into the nobleman of Jesus' parable, the man who has traveled into a far country and, returning, rewards the servant who has served his interests so admirably. Boffin, Wegg, and Rokesmith are also the one-talent, two-talent, and five-talent men.

The one-talent Nicodemus (Noddy) Boffin, the “Golden Dustman,” inherits the estate of the senior Harmon through no designing on his own part. Only through his merit is his one talent multiplied many times over—that one talent taking the form of a single mound of dust that Harmon had, in an initial will, bequeathed to Boffin. Dickens's plot is confusing because he wishes to portray the machinations of the despicable capitalist/nobleman, who devises a series of wills, the authentic one dispossessing his own son and casting him, as it were, into outer darkness, while rewarding a trusted servant. Harmon had perceived in his “scratchy” heart that his money could not buy the “two faithful servants. . . honest and true,” Mr. and Mrs. Boffin (106), who would be trustworthy in all things from the greatest to the least” (506)—a phrase that sounds vaguely Biblical to the reader who knows the Old and New Testaments.⁴ But Boffin, who like everyone else believes that young Harmon has drowned in the Thames upon his return to England, finds the senior Harmon's final will in an old Dutch bottle hidden in the Boffin mound. Like the servant who digs a hole to store his talent—Boffin hides it again in the dust and

³ Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: MI, 2000), 284. Hultgren lists the five as: the “Talents” (Matt 25), the “Pounds” (Luke 19), the “Waiting Slaves” (Mark 13, Luke 12), the Faithful and Wise Slave (Matt 24, Luke 12), the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12, Matt 21, Luke 20).

⁴ The phrases “from the least to the greatest” and “from the greatest to the least” are often repeated in the King James translation of Old and New Testaments (e.g. Jonah 3:5, Acts 8:10, Hebrews 8:11), usually referring to the ranking of individuals by either social class or merit. Although the expression is not used in the parable of Matthew 25 and Luke 19, that parable, like many others, ends with the hint that least and greatest will be reversed.

debris because he has no desire to assume the Harmon legacy (as the Victorians would say, to step out of his “station” in life).

Even before the contents of old Dutch bottle are revealed, the one-mound responsibility of Harmon’s foreman is magically multiplied as Boffin becomes residuary legatee for the whole Harmon estate, worth upwards of a hundred thousand pounds. At the conclusion of the novel when his secretary, Rokesmith, is revealed as the junior Harmon, Boffin returns the money that has been put away and saved; he has not increased the fortune but neither has he squandered it nor worshipped it; by his Christian example of a good life he has simply effaced the old rust and tarnish of avarice.

Once the Boffins become caretakers of incredible wealth, however, Boffin begins to make himself worthy of the wealth. Considering himself too old for “alphabets and grammar books” (57), Boffin hires a tutor in the form of Silas Wegg, a peg-legged street vender who *can* “collar and throw” a text. Wegg reads Boffin the rise and fall of the Roman, or perhaps Rooshian, empire (a historical kingdom important to the theme of *Our Mutual Friend* because it fell by decadence and bad management, the condition that Dickens sees about him in 1860s England). Though named for the Biblical Nicodemus to whom Jesus promised a second birth, Nicodemus (or Noddy) Boffin expects something less than a spiritual resurrection. Rather, Boffin’s new life will come, he says, by his literacy: “This night, a literary man. . . will begin to lead me a new life!” (60) Kenneth M. Sroka notes that Boffin is the novel’s only character explicitly depicted as combining the knowledge of books and of experience, he consumes books about misers and “reads” the sincerity or insincerity of others, enabling his “religious sense of duty and desire to do right” (105).⁵ Howard W. Fulweiler notes too that the Boffins, having rejected the laissez-faire doctrine on economics and charity, set out actively to save other people’s children, Noddy Boffin becoming the Dickensian “good father” (often a man with no biological children).⁶ Among critics, there is no doubt that Dickens presents Boffin as a character of unwavering morality. His faithful service gilds the “Golden Dustman” in 18-carat worth.

A serious charge against the novel’s use of religious allegory is leveled by Janet L. Larson, who notes that Noddy Boffin comes alive, goes dead, then comes alive again, his later miserliness a pretense that parallels John Harmon’s supposed drowning and John Rokesmith’s phony identity. To Larson, Boffin’s succumbing to the stories of misers whose written histories he has hoarded is “spuriously ironic” and prompts a “spurious rebirth” of what has never died.⁷ I disagree with Larson in that Boffin’s initial “rebirth” is not moral or religious: he has always been and always remains an upright Christian and an honorable and trustworthy servant, although he is being put to a greater test than ever before. His first coming alive is merely the attainment of the rudiments of education, always in Dickens’s fiction a commendable “rising” in the world. Granted, because the “going dead” (or practicing the misers’ morality of “scrunch or be scrunched” [470]) is merely an act, there is also no second rebirth. But the death/rebirth motif is not the key-note to Boffin; the parable of the Good and Faithful Servant is a more appropriate source text.

⁵ Kenneth M. Sroka, “Dickens’ Metafiction: Readers and Writers in *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and *Our Mutual Friend*,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 22 (2998): 58.

⁶ Howard W. Fulweiler, “‘A Dismal Swamp’: Darwin, Design, and Evolution in *Our Mutual Friend*,” *Nineteenth-century Literature* 49.1 (1994): 68.

⁷ Janet L. Larson, *Dickens and the Broken Scripture*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 300. Larson says that the “rebirth” of Boffin locates the religious ideal outside the actualities of the novel.

Like the one-talent servant in the parable, Boffin—although now residuary legatee of great wealth—is still according to his solicitor, Mortimer Lightwood, free of the responsibility of industrious labor:

And what is particularly eligible in the property, Mr. Boffin, is that it involves no trouble. . . . no estates to manage, no rents to return so much per cent, . . . no voters to become parboiled in hot water with, no agents to take the cream off the milk before it comes to table. You could put the whole in a cash-box to-morrow morning, and take it with you to—say, to the Rocky Mountains (94).

In other words, all that is required of Boffin is that he bury the wealth in the ground. Here Dickens departs from the parable: the one-talent servant was chastised by the master for a failure to take a risk and multiply the wealth, but Dickens seems to believe that a man of limited education and ambition would do just as well—maybe better—to sit on a mountain of gold. Having observed that wealth just made old Harmon more avaricious and more miserable, Dickens no doubt prefers his reader to believe with Boffin, “It’s a’most a pity . . . that he ever went and made so much money. It would have been better for him if he hadn’t so given himself up to it” (94). Harmon’s wealth possessed him, but it never possesses Boffin.

Although not possessed by dreams of earning dividends, the servant Boffin is, like his creator, Charles Dickens, a believer in the gospel of work. As Mrs. Boffin says, “When we worked like the neighbors, we suited one another. Now we have left off work, we have left off suiting one another” (104). The Gospel of Work is both Christian and Carlylean, but also Dickensian. In *Past and Present*, Carlyle says that “all true Work is Religion,” and in *Sartor Resartus*, he advises, “Produce! Produce! . . . Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might. Work while it is called Today; for the Night cometh, wherein no man can work.”⁸ While the Victorian Gospel of Work placed emphasis upon industry and activity as religion, the New Testament doctrine specifies that works of mercy and charity are the Christian’s specific vocation—for example, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked as taught in the epistle of James, which repeatedly emphasizes that “faith without works is dead.”⁹ In a series of 1850 letters to Emmely Gostchalk, Dickens posits that religion is best experienced in the active life, not the contemplative. We will never understand the great mystery of life, he says, so long as we live: “The mystery is not here, but far beyond the sky.” Further, the preparation for eternity is not in “brooding over mysteries” but “doing duty.” Not only are we “placed here to work,” but our divine example for the active life is Jesus himself: “Our Saviour did not sit down in this world and muse, but labored and did good.”¹⁰ Boffin has no inclination for investing in “mighty Shares” and counting the dividends, as is the monomania of the Lammles and their ilk, but he can now embark on good works on a scale that his modest salary of old could never have supported. Having worked his whole life in a menial post, he knows no other value, and he tells the idle Eugene Wrayburn, Mortimer’s law partner, “But there’s nothing like work. Look at the bees” (98). This simplistic recipe for life fails to impress Wrayburn, who is lethargic and listless and who considers work highly overrated. Moreover, Boffin’s comment follows upon

⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present, Sartor Resartus, The Works of Thomas Carlyle in Thirty Volumes* (New York: AMS Press, 1960), 10:210; 1: 157.

⁹ James 2: 17, 20.

¹⁰ Charles Dickens to Emmely Gostchalk, 1 February 1850, 23 December 1850. *The Pilgrim Edition Letters of Charles Dickens*, eds. Madeline House, Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1988) 6: 26, 244, 26.

Mortimer's recommendation that Boffin do nothing at all with the Harmon estate, and it represents one of the basic Christian virtues that Boffin practices.

Our Mutual Friend is, in fact, to some degree a novel about workers and work: Lizzie Hexam in a paper-mill factory; Riah in money-lending; Venus as taxidermist and dealer in oddities; Wegg a street seller of ballads, fruit, and gingerbread and runner of errands (before he is made the overseer of Boffin's Bower); Miss Abbey Potterson operating a drinking establishment and Pleasant Riderhood a pawn shop; Sloppy as a mangler and later a foreman for Boffin; Rogue Riderhood operating Plashwater Weir Mill Lock (after other plots for parasitical existence fail); Bradley Headstone, Charley Hexam, and Miss Peecham as educators; even the octogenarian Betty Higden as a "minder" of infants and the disabled Jenny Wren earning a living by fashioning doll clothes. Of the working poor in the novel Brian Cheadle notes that the underclass is connected by the necessity of work: ". . . a function of the stark need to scrape a living—the starkness making accommodations to bourgeois norms almost beside the point." Further, the feverish activity of the middle class "holds at bay the most fearful of all threats to the bourgeois self, that of falling into the more shameful namelessness of those who do menial work."¹¹ Yet work is also applauded for the middle-class and rising classes. As previously noted, John Rokesmith is industrious, but so too, in her own way, is his bride, Bella Wilfer. Upon marriage, the pampered Bella admittedly becomes a doll in her own "doll house"—but she is a doll happily at work gardening, cleaning, cooking, and studying her copy of *The Complete British Family Housewife*, as well as the newspaper. She works at studying commodities in the markets and gold in the Bank, topics that will make her a worthy companion to Rokesmith, the man of business she has just married.

Conversely, the novel is decidedly unfavorable to those who avoid work: Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightwood, for example, who lack the initiative to attract clients to their firm, or Rogue Riderhood, the Lammles, and Fascination Fledgby, who live as parasites feeding off those who do work. Dickens shows no admiration for the "bran-new wealth" of the Veneerings, and the schemes of a good many of the characters to live without work and receive without merit. When Wrayburn is resurrected to a new life of love, he plans to emigrate with his bride, Lizzie, to one of Britain's colonies and work at his vocation there, a commendable plan for one formerly indifferent to the industry of the bees. In other words, he adopts the active life that Dickens recommended to Emmely Gotschalk.

When Rokesmith reveals himself as the lost heir, a fairy tale ending occurs for the capitalist prince and Bella, his princess bride. Harmon's old money is "at last a beginning to sparkle in the sunlight!" after its "long long rust in the dark" (757)—the long, long time in which the unjust master had hoarded it and the good servant has kept it buried. Both Boffins, happy to relieve themselves of the burden of Harmon wealth, are "exquisitely happy and daily cruising about to look at shops" and "staying indefinitely" with the Harmons (789). In business matters, the dustman should (and finally does) remain a one-talent man content with a one-mound inheritance. While the Boffins have made no radical social commitment with their wealth, opened no schools, supported no hospitals, and funded no philanthropic organizations, they have dispensed charity one person at a time. Dickens's social gospel is conservative; it involves no liquidation of one's assets to feed the poor, as Jesus recommended to the rich young ruler, but only prudent philanthropy to deserving individuals.

The "rapacious" retainer Silas Wegg (759) is a two-talent servant cast into outer darkness—literally into a street-cleaner's cart filled with garbage. His ignominious end,

¹¹ Brian Cheadle, "Work in *Our Mutual Friend*," *Essays in Criticism* 51.3 (2001): 315, 322.

however, is just desserts because his narrative is that of the husbandman who turns against his master and the master's servants in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. In his station, Wegg begins the novel lower in rank than the trash foreman, but his literacy offers him a higher social and earning potential that he has not yet achieved—hence his two talents to Boffin's one. The key-note of Wegg's character is jealousy and avarice. He first resents his new employer, considering himself worth five hundred times as much as Boffin. Wegg considers it an unjust world in which a "literary man" capable of reciting a ballad or reading a purloined will must accept a position in service to an illiterate garbage collector. Wegg also resents Boffin's secretary, the "talking-over stranger" who is Harmon junior in disguise, as well as Sloppy, the orphaned love child whom Boffin promotes to foreman. Recall Cheadle's comments about the bourgeois wage-earners of this novel and the wall of separation between them and the lower menials whom they wish to keep in their place. Before his benefactor found Wegg, his station as street-vendor was very low indeed—proof that he had not used his two-talent literacy to advantage. His was the "hardest little stall of all the sterile little stalls in London. . . . the stall, the stock, and the keeper were all as dry as the Desert" (53). But once he works for Boffin and oversees the Harmon mansion, Wegg immediately disassociates himself from the working poor and aggrandizes his merit.

As in the Parable of the Good and Faithful Servant, in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants a substantial man goes traveling, but in this parable he leaves his vineyard in the care of tenants who will harvest the grapes. Recounted in all three Synoptic gospels,¹² the parable narrates that when it comes time to reap the fruits of harvest, the owner sends various servants to collect on the crop, but the "husbandmen" beat or kill the servants. Finally the owner sends his own son, who is also slain by the tenants. Traditional exegesis of the parable is that God owns the vineyard and Jesus is the slain heir. In Dickens's hands, however, the parable is contrasted to the Good and Faithful Servant Parable, with Wegg and his partner, Venus, playing the role of plotters who will attack the servants *and* the one and only heir of the landowner.

In one of the dust mounds on the property, the scavenging Wegg discovers the supposed final will of Harmon, a will that leaves Boffin his one mound but bequeaths the remainder of Harmon wealth to the Crown. To "shear the black sheep Boffin" (759) Wegg steals the document and blackmails Boffin to split the inheritance with the tenant of Harmony mansion (Wegg) and Venus, his partner in crime. Wegg's action against the master's son is his demand that Boffin fire Rokesmith. Wegg has no doubt that the supposed miser Boffin will become slave of his own servant by coming to terms—essentially agreeing that a third of a fortune is better than a single mound of trash—but he misjudges his co-conspirator, whose conversion prompts Venus to alert Boffin.¹³

When Wegg's scheme is foiled, Boffin—ever the good Christian man—offers to reinstate Wegg in his former profession because "I shouldn't like to leave you, after all said and done, worse off in life than I found you" (768). Comparing Boffin's generosity to the harshness of any nobleman or master in the parables is revealing because in the Bible, justice equals punishment: to take away all that the unprofitable servant possesses and to cast him into the outer darkness (presumably hell, although Wegg, like Milton's Satan, carries his hell inside himself, no matter

¹² Matt, 21:33-46, Mark 12:1-12, Luke 20:9-19.

¹³ J. Hillis Miller makes the interesting observation that the reader is neither wholly outside nor wholly inside Venus, Wegg, or Boffin, a result of Dickens's third-person objectivity (*Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*, 290). Venus's change of heart, however, seems less authentic in motivation than do the objectives of either Boffin or Wegg.

where he goes). Wegg proceeds to haggle with Boffin until Rokesmith steps in as the parable's son and heir. Moreover, Rokesmith deals out a hard justice for the "scoundrel," precisely that of the parable. He merely signals to Sloppy, who has already been told to dump Wegg into outer darkness (the dark road outside), but Sloppy cannot resist administering the final indignity, not to mention a symbolic finish to Wegg's career. Sloppy "shoots" the scavenging Silas Wegg into a scavenger's cart, a feat accomplished "with a prodigious splash" (770).

The servitude of five-talent Rokesmith/Harmon is the most interesting of the novel because as manager of the Boffins' wealth, he is in fact managing his own. As a colonialist estranged from his father, the junior Harmon had made his livelihood abroad as a proprietor and grower of Cape wine. Like the nobleman in the parable, he has gone away into a far country to achieve his fortune; like the five-talent man, he has great aptitude and is profitable to his employer. As secretary for Boffin, the "faithful. . . serviceable" Rokesmith organizes Boffin's correspondence and appointments and protects him from the Alligators of "Dismal Swamp"—that is, writers of begging letters who endlessly try to separate Boffin from his cash. Everybody, it seems, wants some of the gold dust of the Golden Dustman, and the begging letters entreat Boffin to donate to churches, parsonages, inventors, and orphans. Boffin is overwhelmed, and it would seem that the one-talent servant is incapable of outsmarting shrewd solicitors. Rokesmith assists the Boffins in many ways (for example, the adopting of an orphan); but the secretary's brave struggle against the metaphorical drowning of Mr. Boffin is actually saving *himself* from the dismal swamp of alligators. It also reiterates Dickens's position against radical philanthropy and endorses the practice of ranking by economic class.

The Harmon happy ending, however, raises a question about the nature of work. It is noted by the narrator that John Harmon had worked while he was away from England, and the reader witnesses Rokesmith's efficiency and industry as secretary-treasurer of the Harmon wealth. After he marries Bella and before he reveals to her that he is a very rich man, the young husband goes forth every day to work in the "China house." But neither the narrator nor the character ever reveals exactly what he does, and Bella never inquires. Upon unmasking, Harmon explodes the China house, leaving the reader to wonder whether he went into the city to idle about London until day's end or whether he spent his hours with the Boffins, still fighting alligators. George Orwell has said that Dickens does not understand work, or at least that he does not depict its nature, and furthermore that his heroes ascend to a state of "radiant idleness" usually with "a hundred thousand pounds, a quaint old house with plenty of ivy on it, a sweetly womanly wife, and a horde of children, and no work."¹⁴ Alexander Welsh notes that the general requirement of English novels is a hero who is also a gentleman, and among his heroes Dickens follows the classical "disparagement of work"—although Dickens (as novelist, journalist, editor, and performer) worked with a frenzy. Welsh objects that Dickens is willing to rely on fairy-tale figures to liberate the hero from labor, and among those fairy godfathers, he lists Boffin.¹⁵ It is very odd that a man as industrious as Dickens would deprive his capitalist prince of meaningful activity in the world. Furthermore, it is a conundrum that the reader is required to respect Eugene Wrayburn for his project to practice law in the colonies but especially to respect the John Harmon because he can afford to be idle.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens also makes a case against the unfaithful public servant, a topic on which he had long held distinct opinions. Dickens had observed the workings of

¹⁴ George Orwell, "Charles Dickens," *A Collection of Essays* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1954), 94.

¹⁵ Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens* (London: Oxford University, 2005), 79-82.

government firsthand; he began his professional life as a shorthand reporter for the House of Commons, and later in life was encouraged to become a candidate for the Commons. He declined, claiming to have no political ambition, but he was nevertheless quite opinionated on government. In *The Pickwick Papers* the electioneering at Eatanswill makes a farce of elections; in *Hard Times*, the Parliament is “a little noisy and rather dirty machinery” made up of “honourable gentlemen” deaf, dumb, blind, lame, and dead to every other consideration;¹⁶ in *Bleak House*, the Court of Chancery ruins people’s lives rather than expediting their cases; in *Little Dorrit*, the Circumlocution Office is a model of bureaucratic inefficiency. To the autobiographical David Copperfield, also a Parliamentary reporter, Britannia is “like a trussed fowl: skewered through with office-pens, and bound hand and foot with red tape.”¹⁷ Dickens believes that the whole apparatus of British government is a shambles. Rosemarie Bodenheimer comments that—because he is not really a political thinker—Dickens never offers solutions to the multiple political problems he exposes, but that he is sensitive to language as a con game and senses that much of the political jockeying of Parliament is “obfuscating oratory.”¹⁸

Throughout *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens indicates that the government is either indifferent or ineffective, and Veneering’s campaign and political career are the epitome of the unfaithful public servant. An example of indifference is the chauvinist Podsnap, a supporter of Veneering’s campaign for the House of Commons, who touts the English welfare system as the greatest on earth, says that the poor deserve poverty, and resists poor relief because Jesus himself said that we will always have the poor among us. An example of government’s ineffectiveness is that old Betty Higdon chooses to die on the highway rather than accept the indignity of the workhouse. The *nouveau riche* Mr. Veneering is elected to the House of Commons to represent the borough of Pocket-Breaches, not because he has any grand scheme for public service, but because it will grant him personal prestige that his “bran-new money” cannot buy. But Veneering abuses power, “over-jobbed his jobberies”—that is, he makes corrupt deals or takes bribes.¹⁹ He is forced to resign, although the Government finds a way for him to save face, whereupon the Veneering family retires to Calais. There the former M. P. boasts of his powerful friends and relives his glorious past. So much for the “public servant” as good and faithful.

As previously noted, *Our Mutual Friend* is a novel about work, and the Veneerings expend much labor “bringing in” Mr. Veneering, although once elected, he wastes no labor upon serving the citizens of Britain. After Veneering lays down his crisp new five thousand pounds for the privilege of adding the two letters M. P. to his name, he and his wife repeatedly remind one another, “We must work” (244, 248, an ironic echo of Mr. and Mrs. Boffin mutually affirming the value of work). The Veneerings do indeed work, and they also enlist other campaign workers: Mr. Twemlow, first cousin to Lord Snigsworth, is “up and at the British Public” (246); Mr. Podsnap, a wealthy marine insurance businessman, works by mixing with “influential people” (247); Lady Tippins “really does work” by calling upon everyone she knows, requesting votes for Pocket-Breaches in order that Veneering can be “brought in by the spontaneous thingummies of the incorruptible whatdoyoucallums” (248, 249). It is ludicrous that, although Veneering has no opponent in the race and is therefore guaranteed a seat in the Commons, they all “‘work’ to the last” (251), as if Britannia really requires the service of Veneering. Once the new M. P. is elected, however, Dickens loses interest in him—possibly

¹⁶ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, Paul Schlicke, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 123

¹⁷ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, Nina Burgis, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 610.

¹⁸ Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 30.

¹⁹ Adrian Poole, ed. “Explanatory Notes,” *Our Mutual Friend* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 839.

because Dickens did not care about the day-to-day monotony of public service. Yet the Veneerings' parody of the Gospel of Work makes very clever satire, and the shallow Veneering as an unscrupulous public servant parallels various flawed private servants, especially Silas Wegg from the opposite end of the economic scale.

Dickens claims that the basis for his moral doctrine is “the teachings of our great Master . . . Founder of our religion.”²⁰ In *Our Mutual Friend*, he advocates serving that great Master through good works—in loyalty as an employee and in the works of unselfish benevolence. Moreover, he advocates with Carlyle that work is a form of worship (although it is a conundrum that his middle-class heroes often retire young to lead lives of leisure). Dickens proposes no radical restructuring of the class system in the question of who should work for whom, but he employs the parables of Jesus to teach readers of every station how to be good workers—good private and servants.

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²⁰²⁰ Charles Dickens to Rev. David Macrae, 1861, *The Pilgrim Edition Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Graham Storey (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1997), 9: 556.