



George Cruikshank

"Oliver recovering from the fever"



George Bucktonke

Rose Maylie and Oliver.

"The Fireside Plate"

Cruikshank's Peacock Feathers in *Oliver Twist*

MICHAEL STEIG

TWICE in his etchings for *Oliver Twist* George Cruikshank included peacock feathers as room decorations: in the illustration for chapter xii, "Oliver recovering from the fever," and in the etching originally designed for the final chapter (liii), the so-called Fireside Plate; the latter was, at Dickens' and Forster's insistence, replaced by one of Oliver and Rose in church, after some copies had already been printed and distributed with the first design, but the caption, "Rose Maylie and Oliver," remained the same. As I shall suggest, it is possible that the peacock feathers had something to do with the rejection of the picture of Rose, Oliver, Harry Maylie and his mother; but first, it is necessary to try and establish why the feathers are in Cruikshank's two etchings at all.

One might suspect that the explanation is simply that peacock feathers were a common Victorian ornament, and that Cruikshank included them in the later plate because he thought, mistakenly, that both depicted the same room (the first in fact shows Mrs. Bedwin's little room in Brownlow's London house, the second the parlor of Harry Maylie's parsonage). Such a mistake, however, seems most unlikely, for none of the other details are similar. As for the assumption that the feathers are merely a common Victorian room ornament, this runs into another kind of difficulty as an explanation. The peacock itself, of course, is a symbol of pride, and its feathers could symbolize the same thing; we find this in Phiz's cut for chapter xx of *Barnaby Rudge*, where feathers adorn the looking-glass in

which Dolly Varden is admiring her own image. But a meaning which probably would have occurred just as readily to a contemporary reader is the superstition that peacock feathers in a house are unlucky, either in the general sense of immediate or impending misfortune, or the more specific one of causing the young women of the house to remain spinsters. Both the general and specific meanings of this superstition could apply to Dolly, since she is about to be accosted and robbed by Hugh, and will soon thereafter reject the devoted Joe Willet. The prevalence of these superstitions in nineteenth-century England has often been attested.¹

Checking through Phiz's illustrations to Dickens, one finds that peacock feathers are nearly always used in situations where the idea of misfortune is clearly applicable, sometimes allied to the theme of pride: in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Plate 1, showing Ralph's visit to his relations in their poverty, and Plate 22, "Emotion of Mr. Kenwigs on hearing the family news from Nicholas"; in "Mr. Dombey and the World," where pride and the spying "eyes" are relevant along with the misfortune of Edith's elopement; and in *David Copperfield*, Plate 4, "My musical breakfast," where they probably symbolize Mr. Mell's poverty, as well as David's unhappy state. Peacock feathers also appear in Plate 24, "Mr. Micawber delivers some valedictory remarks," and although here a symbolic function may seem doubtful, in fact the feathers appear above and between Micawber and Tommy Traddles, and most of the "valedictory remarks" concern Micawber's having given his I.O.U. for £14/10/12½ to Traddles, and thus misfortune is indeed impending for at least one member of the company. Phiz's final use of peacock feathers in a Dickens illustration is to adorn Mr. Dorrit's Marshalsea room in "The pensioner entertainment," an etching which focuses on varying degrees of poverty and pride.

These examples from Phiz demonstrate the readiness of Cruikshank's young fellow-artist to make use of the con-

ventional meanings of peacock feathers. But the older man himself had used them at least once in the same way, some years before *Oliver Twist*. In 1822, Cruikshank published a comic print — based upon a design or suggestion from Captain Marryat — “Mixing a Recipe for Corns” (*British Museum Catalogue of Personal and Political Satires*, No. 14443); it shows an old maid complacently boiling her mixture in a pot while attending to one of her corns, not noticing that her cap and a cat are catching fire, while another cat is chasing a mouse up the cockatoo’s perch, threatening destruction to objects in the room. Upon the mantelpiece are three peacock feathers, and they here surely signify imminent misfortune, although the associated meaning of spinsterhood is also nicely appropriate.

If the above evidence can be taken to establish a nineteenth-century graphic convention regarding peacock feathers, we are then faced with the question of why George Cruikshank should have introduced such omens into the *Oliver Twist* etchings, when they are not mentioned in the text nor, as far as we know, specified by Dickens to his illustrator. “Oliver recovering from the fever” depicts the first time in the Parish Boy’s Progress that he has felt as though he may escape from the harsh, unloving environment in which he has grown up, into a community of gentleness and mutual concern. In this context, the peacock feathers are a perfectly appropriate graphic symbol to be hovering over the picture of the Good Samaritan, since Oliver’s great expectations are soon to be rudely disrupted by his recapture and return to Fagin’s gang. Whether Dickens specifically made this latter point to Cruikshank we do not know, but it seems likely that the illustrator was given some general idea of the immediate progress of the tale (Oliver’s accidental meeting with Sikes and Nancy takes place in the next monthly installment). The Fireside Plate is complementary to the illustration for chapter xii, in that it too depicts Oliver in the Brownlow-Maylie world, only this time firmly settled there, with

all threats from the worlds of the workhouse and the thieves' den eliminated. But the peacock feathers would seem to have no discernible function here, as an emblem of either misfortune or spinsterhood, or of pride, for that matter. And yet there they are, and executed in such a way that they appear to be looming over the whole scene in a menacing way, in particular over the reflection of what seems to be the picture of a Madonna and child, which is itself probably intended as a vague, religiose comment on the orphans, Oliver and Rose.²

As far as I can determine, there is only one plausible explanation for the second set of peacock feathers: that they have no iconographic function in harmony with Dickens' text, but rather are a private comment by the artist. As such, they could imply that the happy resolution depicted is only temporary, and that misfortune will dog these characters after the conclusion of the novel. There is also conceivably a hint that Rose's marriage will not last, given the association of peacock feathers with spinsterhood; and further, there may even be a sardonic comment upon the complacency and pride of these comfortably middle-class characters. Cruikshank's reason for thus laying a curse upon the novel could be a desire for a symbolic revenge upon Dickens, after two years of having to submit to the will of the strongest-minded author with whom he had ever collaborated. In ridiculing the happy ending he is practicing, in a light-hearted way, a form of primitive magic which is a carry-over from his days as a caricaturist — graphic aggression against those perceived as enemies.³ That Cruikshank was fully capable of vindictiveness towards an employer can be seen from the two technically dreadful etchings he did for the publisher Bentley, when their relationship was strained to the point where only Cruikshank's contract kept the artist working for *Bentley's Miscellany*.⁴ Perhaps because he did not seek an open break with Dickens — who was, though a dominant per-

sonality, far more engaging than Bentley — the revenge in *Oliver Twist* is of a less direct, more ingenious kind.

Dickens and Forster were unhappy with several of the later etchings for *Oliver Twist*, but objected most strenuously to the Fireside Plate, and ultimately it was the only one to be re-done. Forster described it and another as "a vile and disgusting interpolation on the sense and bearing of the tale,"⁵ though whether the novelist and his friend took exception specifically to the peculiar use of peacock feathers does not emerge in the surviving correspondence. But if they did remain unaware of the graphic curse Cruikshank was placing upon the novel, the artist surely felt, for what it was worth, that he was having something of a last laugh, despite the ignominy of being required to re-design the Fireside Plate.

NOTES

¹Frederick Thomas Elworthy, *The Evil Eye* (London: John Murray, 1895) pp. 119-20, cites a number of reports of the survival of this belief. See also E. and M. A. Radford, *Encyclopaedia of Superstitions* (London: Hutchinson, 1961), p. 260.

²What is apparently the working drawing for this etching, in the Department of Prints and Drawings, Victoria and Albert Museum, contains the feathers quite clearly; but they are especially strongly emphasized in the etching itself.

³See Ernst Kris, "The Psychology of Caricature," in *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1953), pp. 173-88.

⁴The etchings in question are "The unexpected recognition," *Bentley's Miscellany*, 13 (1843), 614; and "Regular Habits," 14 (1843), 400.

⁵For Forster's letter (of 3 November 1838), see Madeline House and Graham Storey, eds., *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), I, 451, n.1. For Dickens' on the same subject (9 November 1838), see *ibid.*, 450-51. And see also Kathleen Tillotson's discussion of the subject in the Clarendon *Oliver Twist* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. xxiv, 392-93. The Fireside Plate is reproduced in this latter edition, facing p. xxiv.

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