



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

A Marriage of Convenience?

By Dr Angela Richardson

Lucinda Dickens Hawksley, in association with the Charles Dickens Museum, has produced an unusual bicentenary book of Charles Dickens. It combines imaginative use of archive materials with a biography. Hawksley does not shrink from comment upon her ancestor's personal life and openly refers to his infidelity and his treatment of his wife. It is in no way a hagiography but it does pass on an assumption about Katey Dickens' marriage to Charley Collins which stems directly from the views of Dickens himself. I want to look more closely at his assumptions and to see if there is evidence from other sources to offset this negative view of their marriage.

Here is Hawksley's summary :

'Katey married twice: her first husband was the Pre-Raphaelite artist Charles ("Charlie") Allston Collins, younger brother of the novelist Wilkie Collins. The marriage appears to have been unconsummated; Charlie was possibly impotent and probably homosexual she and Charlie remained close and she nursed him through terminal stomach cancer.'" (Chapter 8, page 30). Hawksley consistently misspells the diminutive of Charles' name. The Collins family wrote it as Charley.

Peter Ackroyd's new biography of Wilkie Collins tells us more directly of Dickens' views of the marriage:

"Dickens believed that his daughter was getting married only to escape from him, and he regarded his son-in-law with suspicion as a weak-willed and dilatory individual; he may also have believed him to be impotent or even homosexual."

In his previous biography of Dickens, Ackroyd also states that Katey had an affair during her marriage with the artist Val Prinsep. This unreferenced statement is taken up by Caroline Dakers and used in her 'Holland Park Circle' and is in turn used by Hawksley in her biography of Katey. There is very little written about Val Prinsep and no evidence of an affair remains, if it ever existed.

Clare Tomalin, in her new Dickens biography went further than Ackroyd and reinforcing Hawksley, tells us, that Dickens not only thought, but *knew*: "Dickens blamed himself for Katey's decision knowing she was marrying without love and to get away from home....."

I do not expect to overturn these deeply entrenched views but will present material which at the very least offers a different kind of guesswork and speculation about a very private marriage.

A Collins view?

How wonderful it would be to discover a cache of manuscripts from 1860, the year of Charley and Katey's marriage. If only his indiscreet mother had written to her old friend Mrs Combe saying she feared her Charley was being manipulated. Might Millais have answered a note from Charley saying he was delighted to hear that he too had fallen in love? Or perhaps those gossiping Thackeray sisters might have noted in a diary that though poor Katey needed to get away, it was a shame to snap up such an eligible bachelor as the charming Charley Collins. Sadly there is no evidence from the Collins side of this marriage, what we have passed down to us comes entirely from what are believed to be the thoughts of Dickens.

Where then, is the evidence that confirms Dickens' views about this marriage, where no letters between the couple have surfaced and there were no descendants to write their memoirs?

Questionable quotations

It is well charted that Dickens was gloomy at the wedding and was found weeping and blaming himself when Katey had left. He had a lot to feel badly about, such as denying his wife the pleasure of seeing her first daughter married, but strangely these actions have been interpreted in relation to Katey, not to other, perhaps agonizing, regrets.

One of the main sources of information about Katey comes from the 1939 account by Gladys Storey (*Dickens and Daughter*). This is a fascinating book but it is written in a style which makes it difficult to disentangle Katey's statements from Storey's own views of them. The book is based on informal interviews begun when Katey was in her 70s, written in indirect speech in a merging of subject and writer. For example, Storey writes:

"Charles Allston Collins, a contributor to 'All the Year Round', had, for some time, been paying his addresses to Katey, who, although she respected him and considered him the kindest and most sweet-tempered of men, was not in the least in love with him."

It is difficult to be sure whether Storey was quoting Katey or giving her own view. Hawksley in her biography of Katey uses the latter part of this quote "she 'was not in the least in love with him'" which looks like direct speech from Katey, but when it is seen in context, it could be a piece of writing by Storey, describing the marriage in her own words. Michael Slater, in his recent biography of Dickens is more careful in his use of Storey's material:

"Katey *apparently* told Gladys Storey, the great confidante of her declining years, that her father had not desired the marriage..... As for Katey herself, Storey

reports her as saying that she saw in the marriage an escape from ‘an unhappy home’ and that her father knew this.’ (my italics).

Katey’s choices

There is a lot of corroborating evidence that would make it seem highly likely that Katey wanted to leave home. In 1858 when Katey was 19, her father had removed her mother, had put into print his views of her as neglectful and had forbidden his children to see her again. At the same time, he was having an affair with someone of Katey’s own age. Marriage was Katey’s only route out of her home life. She could not defy her father, as her older brother had done and move in with her mother. She would still be financially dependent. After 1858 she no longer lived in the conventional Victorian household where a mother would make sure her daughter met with eligible bachelors. As far as is known, she had no other suitors. Does this necessarily mean it was a loveless choice? Charley was a handsome man and had his full share of the Collins charm. He was also, like Katey, interested in art, and in contrast to her father, was engagingly modest.

Convenient for both parties?

In the recent Dickens’ biographies, there is a suggestion that the marriage was convenient for *both* Katey and Charley. This reading of the few facts about their marriage mitigates Katey’s choice, as if the couple had made a rational arrangement. But is there any evidence that Charley had something he wanted to hide, so much so that he would enter a passionless and loveless marriage to keep his secret?

A sex-less union?

Not long after their marriage, Charley, in a letter to his mother in January 1861 said ‘we sleep in two beds like sensible people’ but this is hardly proof that they were not sexually active. Even the virile Wilkie had his own bedroom in his homes with Caroline and Martha. The fourteen years of their marriage counts most heavily against the speculation that they did not consummate their marriage. They were close to John Everett Millais and Effie Ruskin and must have been well aware of how to gain a divorce on those grounds. They did not divorce or separate.

Impotence?

The obvious case for Charley’s impotence rests on the fact that there were no children and that Katey went on to have a child in her second marriage. Put more precisely, all we know is that Katey did not have any live births during her marriage to Charley but did have one with her second husband. We do not know if she had any miscarriages. We know she had a period of unspecified illness in 1866. In 1873 Hawksley speculated that marrying again only five months after Charley’s death, could be because ‘she thought she was pregnant’. Katey must have either

been mistaken or miscarried because she did not give birth until 1876. It does seem strange that Katey should marry as a widow during the period of full mourning. Her only child lived for just seven months which raises the question that his could have been a premature birth.

Was Katey unfaithful?

As Hawksley points out, love affairs are secret and therefore no evidence will be available. There are hints of 'fast' behaviour in the correspondence of the Collins' old friends the Lehmanns and there is a proximity to the Kensington circle of artists where Val Prinsep and the Collinsees were near neighbours. That is all. Katey having an affair is not in itself proof of Charley's impotence, celibacy or homosexuality. If she did, it could much more likely stem from Katey's role as wife turning into that of nurse.

Illness

We do know that Charley had poor health but it did not seem to have become a settled part of his life until 1863, three years after their wedding. He had an undiagnosed stomach complaint which was likely to have been inflammation of the intestines leading to stomach cancer. This illness could have prevented their love making, but not for the entire length of their marriage. He was well enough to drive and manage a horse and caravan, without the help of a servant, during their honeymoon.

It is also probable that Dickens *thought* he was impotent. He would have put together the absence of a child with Charley's modesty and lack of ambition and concluded that he was not a 'manly' man, unlike the 'Inimitable' with his fantastic energy and ten children. It is then a highly subjective and stereotyped assumption.

Was Charley gay?

Hawksley puts together the following list in her biography 'Katey' to show that Charley could be homosexual:

- (1) he hero-worshipped John Everett Millais
- (2) his religious fervour in his 20s was fuelled by guilt at his sexuality
- (3) he selected Maria Rossetti to court because it was likely to be unconsummated due to her desire to be a nun
- (4) he wrote a 'Cruise on Wheels' as an account of two male friends journeying together instead of revealing his honeymoon with Katey
- (5) Dickens and Frederick Lehmann considered he should not have married.

This list contains all the views that can be found from the few known facts of Charley's life. It might be a stronger list if we add to it the fact that he waited until he was 32 to be married.

To take the assumptions of Dickens and Lehmann first, they rest on a charge that Charley knew he was impotent/gay/an invalid at the time of his marriage. These are 'had he but known' views and though Charley might well have known his potency and sexual preferences, he kept those to himself. At the time of his marriage I think we can say he had no idea that he'd suffer a debilitating illness leading to a premature death.

Point four is something of an over-reading as Charley was not writing an autobiography. 'Cruise on Wheels' is a novel and the play between the two male protagonists creates much of the mild humour that characterizes it. If it were the norm for 19th century novels to have a husband and wife as the two main characters, then there would be a case for Charley's choice to be psychologically revealing, but this was not the literary convention of the time.

The two points concerning Millais and Maria Rossetti are more fruitful of influence upon Charley. However, there is very little known about his relationship with Maria Rossetti. They had Italian and a love of Dante in common and they knew each other's families. Charley and Wilkie knew the Rossettis through their friendship with the Pre Raphaelite Brotherhood. Charley took Maria to meet his mother.

We can see from Maria's writings that she was both intellectual and eloquent. We know from her photographs that she had a round and jolly face, not at all like the nun in Charley's best known picture. If she was having convent thoughts in 1850 when Charley was painting it, she did not start to act on them until 1857 when she became associated with the Anglican Sisterhood. In fact, she did not become a nun until the year after Charley died, in 1874. These significant time delays undermine the suggestion that Maria was deliberately chosen because she was unavailable.

It is true that Charley did show signs of religious fervour in the 1850s. He abstained from dancing (which he loved) and fasted. Millais teased him and Wilkie was concerned about him. He was not the only member of the PRB to show signs of religious fervour. James Collinson, who also courted a Rossetti sister, moved from Protestant to Catholic and back again.

There are so few scraps of information about Charley, there is a tendency to focus too much meaning on those we have. It must be remembered that in 1850 Charlie

was only 22, an average age for the PRB. This letter from Hunt at that time gives a great sense of their youth:

“I regret to say there is a dreadful inclination coming on both of us to drink, it may be the excess of misery brought on by breathing pure country air. We acknowledge to be London Cockneys and long to imbibe city atmosphere... Collins cannot be half an hour without a swig of pure brandy. The bottle is before me now... We find great pleasure in reading aloud Pickwick it is so funny”

The letter was to Millais and shows the affection between the PRB members. There is no denying that Millais was a powerful influence on Charley. However, correspondence between Charley and Holman Hunt shows that he feared Millais' comments and his dominant behaviour. Millais had every reason to have magnificent confidence in his abilities and could not resist telling his artist friends how they could improve their pictures. He even made a sketch of a sinner opening the door to Christ for Hunt to put in 'Light of the World'. Hunt dismissed the idea but Charley did not possess as strong an ego. In 1856 he set out a six page argument with himself about his art and sent it to Hunt. Charley felt that Millais had taken over his latest painting, bombarding him with suggestions and making him fear he could no longer honestly say it was his own picture. Hunt recommended a holiday. Charley never finished that picture and in 1858 gave up art for writing.

Money

Finally, does the fact that he married later in life, and was considerably older than Katey, add any weight to the negative assumptions about their marriage? Up until 1860 both Wilkie and Charley used their mother's bank account paying in their earnings and drawing from her what cash they needed. 1860 was a pivotal year. The lease was running out on their family home and Harriet Collins was starting to visit friends outside of London, looking for a place to retire. Wilkie published 'The Woman in White' and set up a home with Caroline Graves. Charley got married to Katey. Wilkie and Charley opened their own bank accounts. Clearly Wilkie had enough money to establish his own home and Harriet had sufficient in the legacy from her husband to live on outside of London. Charley was the poor relation. He earned very little from the few paintings he had managed to sell but was starting to have a more regular if low income from his journalism. Charley could hardly afford to keep a wife. He would have been taking Katey home to live with his mother had Harriet not split her legacy with him so that they both had £300 a year. Dickens also gave the newly weds a cash wedding gift of £450. It was poverty that was most responsible for keeping Charley out of wedlock until he was 32 years old.

And in conclusion....?

This closer look at the latest crop of popular assumptions about Katey and Charley's marriage cannot lift the charges of non-consummation, impotence or homosexuality. These views could be taken of the few scraps of information that we have; but they are inconclusive and leave room for other views, other possible interpretations. It was a marriage that endured many trials, of childlessness, low income and illness. The Thackery sisters describe it as an artistic and attractive home. We can see that this was a complex relationship between two rather vulnerable people who stayed together for as long as Charley lived. What the physical side of their marriage was, we will never know and that, I am confident, is what they would prefer.

Angela Richardson is an independent scholar who is researching the life of Harriet Collins.

