Review

Sarah Gamp - the role of the domiciliary nurse in literature

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Abstract: Hospitals in Britain during the Victorian period became increasingly involved with the education of health care professionals. Yet, despite the growing role of hospitals, there were wide variations in the quality of medical services available. This allowed for significant consequential choices and advancement to be made, though it was mainly in the medical sector. Campaigning through the Doctor's Registration Movement also left its mark in a social climate considered turbulent. Remarkably, nursing as a profession received almost invisible treatment as is seen from the feeble echo in the vast expanse of literature from that time. Acknowledging nursing's historical point of entry into the discourse, and its journey from the Medieval Period right through the Victorian era is paramount. However, this cannot be properly done without giving due emphasis to the community nurse. Examining the historical terrain and the historical influences that led to the demise of community nursing, through Dickens's fictional portrayal of Sarah Gamp, this paper will provide answers on the present status of this aspect of the nursing profession. It will offer a close reading of Dickens's Sarah Gamp from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and it will try to explore and elicit factual information from a rich and impressively extensive fictional plot. This paper also offers an analytical exposition of Gamp's peculiar potential for the reading of the nurse figure as unconstrained by Victorian codes of gender and economics.

Key words: Charles Dickens, Community nursing, Domiciliary nursing, Fictional narratives, Health humanities, Martin Chuzzlewit, Medical humanities, Nursing, Sarah Gamp.

"That's a very shrewd woman. That's a woman whose intellect is immensely superior to her station in life. That's a woman who observes and reflects in an uncommon manner."

– Charles Dickens.[1]

Introduction

The fictional figure of Sarah Gamp, the nurse who features in Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*, is one of the most well-known representations of nursing in literature.[1] Dissolute and drunk, the character became a notorious stereotype of the bad nurse in the early Victorian era. Even umbrellas became known as gamps, after her own contraption, which she displayed with "particular ostentation" and "clutched and shook in the course of delivering her lines".[1] At a time when home nursing was the norm, Dickens's portrayal of

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the alcoholic, penny-pinching Sarah Gamp gave home nurses a bad name, and indeed, scholarly work suggests that it contributed to the masculinization of the medical profession and the demise of the home nurse.[2] Dickens's comic invention was based on precise observation of the way domiciliary nurses arranged their working time and made a livelihood for themselves, but it was, "nevertheless, such a gross caricature that its rapid endorsement by his contemporaries requires explanation".[3] The nonfictional Sarah Gamps of the 1840s and 1850s, who worked largely as independent practitioners in the homes of their patients, offered a growing movement for nursing reform for reasons which had little to with their clinical proficiency. Male physicians and surgeons, religious reformers of both sexes, and all those anxious to expand professional opportunities for women, merged together both consciously and unconsciously, to deny Mrs Gamp and her ilk a respected place in the provision of care for the sick.

Scholarly work suggests that Nightingale's achievements were by no means the earliest or the only initiative in the field of British nursing reform; however, there is a dearth of research on the history of the "unreformed" nurse whom Nightingale and her peers set out to replace.[3] This continuing failure to dig below the surface of a literary stereotype reflects the preoccupation of most medical and nursing history with the development of the modern hospital, compared to a relative lack of interest in non-institutional practice in the nineteenth-century. Scholars posit that "hospitals and similar institutions provide excellent series of records for the historian to consult, whereas it is difficult to discover documentary sources on nurses working, as Sarah Gamp did, in patients' homes".[4] It was, moreover, through the establishment of hospital-based training programmes that the professionalization of nursing was ultimately achieved; because "domiciliary care has been seen as marginal to this story of progress, home nurses have been considered devoid of professional significance and scholarly interest".[4] It This paper is a close reading of Dickens's Sarah Gamp and it seeks to elicit factual information about domiciliary nursing in the Victorian era from a rich and impressively extensive fictional plot.

Sarah Gamp - A Stereotype in Literature and Historical Fact

Dickens introduces Mrs Gamp comparatively late in the novel, describing her physical characteristics in minute detail.

She was a fat old woman, this Mrs Gamp, with a husky voice and a moist eye, which she had a remarkable power of turning up, and only showing the white of it. Having very little neck, it cost her some trouble to look over herself, if one may say so, at those to whom she talked. She wore a very rusty black gown, rather the worse for snuff, and a shawl and bonnet to correspond. In these dilapidated articles of dress, she had on principle, arrayed herself, time out of mind, on such occasions as the present, for this at once expressed a decent amount of veneration for the deceased, and invited the next of kin to present her with a fresher suit of weeds.[…] the face of Mrs Gamp – the nose in particular – was somewhat red and swollen, and it was difficult to enjoy her society without becoming conscious of a smell of spirits.[1]

In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Sarah Gamp is presented as the comedic jack-of-all-trades medical extraordinaire. She is a "female functionary, a nurse, and watcher, and performer of nameless offices about the persons of the dead".[5] She is a medical freelancer although her signboard outside her small house in Kingsgate Street, High Holborn, reads simply "Midwife". Mrs Gamp works alone and sometimes assists other "professional" ladies with their work because she is one of "great repute".[5] Sarah Gamp and her counterpart Betsy Prig are not presented as doctors' auxiliaries, so they are not dependent upon them for business. Dickens introduces Betsy Prig as a "day

nurse as was recommended from Bartholomew's", and speaks of "Mrs Prig, of Bartlemy's; or as some said Barklemy's or as some said Bardlemy's, for by all these endearing and familiar appellations, had the hospital of Saint Bartholomew become a household world among the sisterhood which Betsy Prig adored".[5] However, as his narrative makes clear, Bart's did not provide his character with a full time livelihood, and she was available to share day and night nursing of private cases which came Sarah's way. It is reasonable to assume that Betsy was a "supernumerary", a nurse whose name was kept on a hospital's matron's list and who could be brought in to work.[6]

Nonetheless, Sarah Gamp and Betsy Prig do find work, whether in sick-nursing, midwifery, or the laying-out of the dead, through their acquaintances in the neighbourhood of Holborn. It is because Sarah has laid out the body of Anthony Chuzzlewit that she has the opportunity to meet Jonas Chuzzlewit's new bride, "whom she greets with a leer of mingled sweetness and slyness"; while she "rummaged in her pocket again, and took from it a printed card".[1] Sarah Gamp is not the one to lose an opportunity and at the other end of life, the deathbed, she is equally pragmatic, not excluding her late husband: "Ah dear! When Gamp was summoned to his long home, and I see him a-lying in Guy's Hospital with a penny-piece on each eye, and his wooden leg under his left arm, I thought I should have fainted away. But I bore up". Indeed, she so bore up "as to dispose of Mr Gamp's remains for the benefit of science".[1] Capitalising on the situation at hand, she sold off his body for medical research.

When we first meet Sarah, she is recovering from the exertions of the previous night, when she "had been called in at a crisis, in consequence of her great repute, to assist another professional lady with her advice".[1] Clearly no doctor had been summoned to the case. That Dickens had no exalted opinion of doctors is reflected in this particular instance, and again when Lewsome is taken ill at the Bull in Holburn. A "medical gentleman" can prescribe little more than good nursing: a quiet, cool room and regular drinks. The narrator's observation that "the doctor came too. The doctor shook his head. It was all he could do, under the circumstances and he did it well",[7] shows the futility of doctors and the relative helplessness of medicine at the time. It also suggests the primacy of nursing in cases of fever and conditions such as cholera.

In his description of Sarah Gamp, Dickens can sometimes be inconsistent. He delineates her as a logical and sensible woman, while surprising his readers by comically juxtaposing the hard-working, practical female figure with harmless inebriation. Mrs Gamp's habit is so obvious that when she curtsies, Mrs Mould detects "a peculiar fragrance.[…] borne upon the breeze, as if a passing fairy had hiccupped, and had previously been to a wine vault".[1] Her love for the bottle, however, does not destroy her business; she cleverly succeeds in conveying what she charges for her services while at the same time advertising her own very moderate consumption of alcohol, as well as her need of it. She conveys this information through the imaginary Mrs Harris, who is supplied with both a husband and a brother-in-law and a back story, adding verisimilitude to her existence. Furthermore, it lets Mrs Gamp's listeners know what a hard but underpaid worker she is. Mrs Harris is a conduit for conveying information.

Mrs Gamp's constant evocation of Mrs Harris is thus superficially self-serving: "Mrs Harris not only makes Mrs Gamp look good, but she also exists to let the world know what Mrs Gamp is thinking and that she is not the only one thinking it".[8] In this way Mrs Gamp manages to create her own consensus of opinion, solely through the act of imaginative assertion. For all her bravado, she did not have an easy life. Her alcoholic, one-legged husband beat and abused her while her three children all died before reaching maturity. Mrs

Gamp's life has been, according to her own favourite expression, 'a vale of tears'. Her description of why she must eat her buttered toast without the crust is "in consequence of tender teeth, and not too many of 'em; which Gamp himself.[…] at one blow, being in liquor, struck out four, two single and two double".[1]

Thus, a more important role played by Mrs Harris emerges as readers become better acquainted with Mrs Gamp. The evocation of Mrs Harris seems to undercut the violence of what happened to Mrs Gamp's teeth by shifting the focus away from Gamp's blows to the contents of Mrs Harris's pocket, shrouding in comedy an ugly facet of Mrs Gamp's existence and making it more bearable.[8] Mrs Gamp is old and she is lonely and must depend on her own labour to make a living. Mrs Harris, the creature of her own imagination, thus provides comfort and companionship. As Dickens puts it, Mrs Harris is Mrs Gamp's "talisman against all earthly sorrows".[8] No wonder then that Mrs Harris is Mrs Gamp's best friend; she has been manufactured to Gamp's satisfaction. The crucial question in our understanding of Mrs Gamp is how we read her creation of Mrs Harris. Dickens makes it abundantly clear that Mrs Gamp believes in the existence of Mrs Harris. It is this fact that lends a wonderful poignancy to the climactic scene in which Betsy Prig asserts: "[Mrs Harris] I don't believe there's no sich a person".[1] As may be expected, Mrs Gamp takes this attempted erasure of her favourite person very hard, exclaiming in her distress: "The words.[Betsy Prig] spoke of Mrs Harris, lambs could not forgive. No Betsy!.[…] nor worms forget".[1]

By calling into question the existence of Mrs Harris, "Betsy Prig has gone too far; that instating an apparent truth she has nevertheless desecrated a higher truth, the truth of the imagination".[9] Dickens takes this into the "psychological realm implying the uses of the creative self to alleviate loneliness and despair while at the same time establishing and anchoring identity".[5] Through this portrayal, Dickens negates the negative connotations of Mrs. Gamp as "a blowzy, overweight, gin-swilling, snuff-taking, cucumber-loving, umbrella-carrying old lady"[5], insinuating that as a midwife, nurse and watcher of the dead, "she is on intimate terms with the most crucial stages of life, and who in her ability to narrate those stages of life with great eccentricity, humour and verve". [5], she carves her own ideal as a working class woman.

Dickens did not approve of Sarah Gamp - nor of her profession - however, Dickens's fictional character Sarah Gamp features the tenacity of an independent woman worker, and provides readers with portraits of life on the periphery of middle-class respectability. Dickens in fact cannot seem to make up his mind about Mrs. Gamp. While he does not approve of her and "takes every opportunity to underline her cunning, her callous nursing, her drinking", he endows her with so much vitality, eccentricity and humour "that her humanity - and the pathos that is linked to it - easily transcends her more negative qualities".[5] Dickens asks us to laugh at her while at the same time providing us with good reason to laugh with her. As a result, the role of Mrs Gamp has two facets. Some scholars treat Mrs. Gamp as a negative character while acknowledging her vitality. Other critics, however, believe that she functions as the "central moral figure of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, because she represents a morality that is decidedly anti-moralistic".[10] By bringing attention to struggles unique to working class women, Dickens demonstrates not only his awareness of the socioeconomic diversity in Victorian London but also demonstrates his empathy for women who must work in order to survive.

An even more important debate emerges from Dickens' Sarah Gamp - why does it matter whether she was a fictional caricature or a fair representation of many of the old hospital nurses? It matters greatly because the fact that Gamp presents a "reasonable picture of many hospital nurses" provided

nursing reformers substantiated evidence to enforce severe discipline on newly trained nurses.[11] This was to have a major impact on 20th-century nursing. For most of the 19th century, strict discipline, "although its harshness was unimaginative and unconstructive, was justified, and it was necessary both on the wards and in the nurses' off-duty hours".[11] However rigid discipline continued long after. By 1900s, "the Sarah Gamps were gone, but the harsh discipline that had been designed to make them into more efficient nurses continued". The emphasis on "regulations, obedience, Bible classes and chapel twice a day was no longer as appropriate [in 1900] as it had been in 1860".[12] The failure to attract qualified nurses coupled with the high dropout rate continued and "was due in part to the training being out of step with 20th-century standards". [12] The Gamps, a very sizeable number of whom really did exist, had made a major impact on later nursing.

Dickens' Working Woman

Sarah Gamp is a single, independent woman; her female emancipation hinges on entrepreneurship with the masculine realm of business. Dickens also succeeded in placing Sarah Gamp in the economic domestic space; she is not a commodity in the imperial marketplace, but instead her trade skills enabled her to participate in the traditionally masculine world of commerce while abiding by the strict Victorian moral code which places the women in the domestic sphere.

Sarah Gamp is a shrewd businesswoman and never loses an opportunity to expand her clientele. Advertising her business to a prospective client, she "rummaged in her pocket again, and took from it a printed card, whereon was an inscription copied from her signboard".[1] Discerning a potential case she continues "would you be so good, my darling dovey of a dear young married lady,.[…] as put that sometimes where you can keep it in your mind? I'm well beknown to many ladies, and it's my card".[1]

Sarah Gamp speaks to the very real anxieties of economic commodification and morality; she is not allowed to participate in the mainstream systemised economic culture, yet she fills a role that was once needed in England's pre-industrial era. In an exchange with Mrs Prig, Sarah Gamp remarks, "Wishin' you lots of sickness, my darling creetur and good places. It won't be long, I hope, afore we works together, off and on, again Betsy; and may our next meetin' be at large family's, where they all takes it reg'lar, one from another, turn and turn about, and has it business like".[1] This exchange is both crucial and pivotal to the entrepreneurship of home nursing at the time.

The fictional Gamp gives voice to the rising presence of female workers in England; working women, who did not have husbands to support them. Most importantly, *Martin Chuzzlewit* paints humorous, endearing portraits of a social class often overlooked by literary elites.

Dickens humanises the labouring classes; he portrays "them in all their variety and peculiarity, not as a social problem; still less as a political threat, but as human beings pursuing their trades".[13] Mrs Gamp enjoys her work and her independent lifestyle. For her, female emancipation is achieved when one works for oneself. Mrs Gamp operates within a business realm where the domestic and the economic continually overlap. Dickens alludes to a mercenary spirit in Gamp as she watches over the sick. Mrs Gamp reflects the actual life experiences of many British people at the time. There is nothing newly gentrified about Mrs Gamp; she is an honest, working-class woman, keeping her end up as best she can.

The Anti-Bourgeois Woman

Mrs Gamp is in opposition to the Victorian bourgeois ideal of woman. More than just comic relief, Sarah Gamp becomes a historical gem mined from the nineteenth century novel. According to historian James

Walvin, most Victorians sought the advice of individuals similar to the fictional Mrs Gamp who practised folk medicine.[14] More specifically, Walvin argues that “local or travelling quacks, herbalists and most important of all, local women well versed in coping with the trials and tribulations of life, were more important than formal doctors for much of the population until late into Victoria’s reign”.[14] Mrs Gamp is much needed and much sought after in her community and stands in stark contrast to the growing Victorian trend toward systematic, institutionalised medicine. Dickens also speaks to the larger social concerns surrounding the Victorian bourgeois ideal woman. Dickens employs Mrs Gamp as a visual spectacle which preoccupied the moral sensibilities of many middle class Victorians at mid-century.[15] Mrs Gamp’s career grants her liberties denied to middle-class married women. As a self-employed woman and widow, Gamp is allowed to come and go at all hours and associates with all levels of society. Mrs Gamp is legally less constrained than her professional medical-schooled male colleagues. Certainly, “quacks”, “empirics”, and drug peddlers practised freely with no legal sanctions against them, “while a physician in London could be disciplined by his college for preparing and selling a prescription to his patient”.[15]

Scholar Michael Slater asserts that Mrs Gamp is “developed out of masculine fears’ since she reigns over the ‘great twin mysteries of our existence, birth and death”. [13] Her wisdom reflects an “arcane female wisdom on these matters” which is not available to men. With Mrs Gamp, Dickens crafts matters of life and death into subjects for laughter.[13] On one level, Mrs Gamp operates outside the boundaries of law; her behaviour, no matter how inebriated and how inept, is exempt from professional and legal retaliation. Mrs Gamp works in the public sphere, yet she is marginalised to its periphery as a female practitioner of old-fashioned, folk medicine.

Mary Poovey contends that the “feminine” is given its identity not “by its mimetic or natural relation to something outside language but by its relation to something else within a signifying system of difference, [and] in this scenario it is the masculine”.[16] For female and male critics, Poovey opines that the act of naming or assuming the “feminine” as the position of otherness, has opened the possibility for identifying and enacting the subservience of irrationality; the wayward possibilities always already present in all acts of communication.[16] Extrapolating this to Sarah Gamp, Dickens’s representation of her as a financially independent woman, emphasises “the precipitation of gender of sex”.[16] The focus on gender alters the way in which both men and women see the feminine; that is through implicit acceptable codes of behaviour. If these accepted norms are displaced, the woman is marginalised, mocked and ostracised. Mrs Gamp operates from the periphery both as a widowed woman and as a nurse. Sarah Gamp is a contradiction in a society in which such women can only be fallen, or embody the virtues culturally ascribed to Victorian domestic angels.[13] Gamp is an odd model of a free labouring woman outside the family symbolic; she delivers a sympathy she does not authentically proffer. Her power comes from the fact that she is outside of the regulation and law of medical practice. She has more freedom and thus control over her practice than male, college-educated doctors bound by the law.[13]

Underneath Mrs Gamp’s outspoken inebriation is an implicit challenge to what Catherine Judd, in her book Bedside Seductions, called “the image of the homebound, healing woman” who “became a subspecies of the angel in the house”.[18] Mrs Gamp is never the archetypal angel in the house; she is cast as the “hiccupping fairy in attendance in the homes where there is a lying in or a laying out”.[17] This “apparent shortcoming” in a female character increases Mrs Gamp’s “roundness”; she is not a “one

dimensional angel, but a flesh and blood woman who appreciates a strong drink".[13] Judd accordingly argues that Mrs Gamp represents the "unrefined working class nurse" because she works outside of the parameters of an established institution.[17] Some critics read Mrs Gamp as "what needed to be driven out of the medical profession". [17] In accordance with the image of the angel in the house, the nineteenth-century medical profession wanted to polish their public images and banish the "madwomen" to the attics. More specifically, "in wishing to rid themselves of the Gamps", nursing reformers wanted to open up hospital and workhouse nursing to a relatively young female workforce. [17] Young, impressionable women would be relatively easy to indoctrinate into a conservative, patriarchal professional system.

Certainly the glorification of self-sacrifice and vocation were blended to create a perfect picture of femininity and subservience. This new role widely diverged from the role of Mrs Gamp, whose autonomy is described in clear terms by Sarah Gamp herself: "I goes out workin' for my bread, 'tis true, but I maintains my independency, with your kind leave, and which I will till death.[…] don't try no impogician with the Nuss, for she will not abear it".[1] Mrs Gamp's autonomy is also alluded many times throughout the book, where it is thus claimed that her "professional coolness was not so easily disturbed, an eligible opportunity for concentrating the whole resources of her powerful mind and appetite upon the toast and butter, tea and eggs"[2], satirically alluding to her hearty appetite.

Conclusion

This commentary effectively delineates Dickens's attitude toward eighteenth-century nurses. Sarah Gamp constituted the very antitype of what Florence Nightingale dreamed that the nursing profession might become. Dickens' indictment of community nurses in this fictional piece suggests a no-win situation for this nursing specialisation. His portrayal of Mrs Gamp only serves to perpetuate the negative connotations that were associated with community nursing at the time and confirms the profound impact of the interrelationship between fiction and reality. Because domiciliary care has been seen as marginal to the story of nursing progress, home nurses have been robbed of professional significance.

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