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Class-Based Prejudices in Dickens's *Dombey and Son*

In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens uses the relationship between Withers the page and Mrs. Skewton to reveal how prejudices toward wheelchair users are, at least in part, class-based. Through his satirical description of Withers's service, Dickens encourages the reader to pass judgment upon Mrs. Skewton for her laziness:

the chair having stopped, the motive power became visible in the shape of a flushed page pushing behind, who seemed to have in part out-grown and in part out-pushed his strength, for when he stood upright he was tall, and wan, and thin, and his plight appeared the more forlorn for his having injured the shape of his hat, by butting at the carriage with his head to urge it forward, as is sometimes done by elephants in Oriental countries. (317)

In this quote, Withers is reduced to a beast of burden, “butting at the carriage with his head” like an elephant (317). Furthermore, Dickens later describes Withers as another animal: “toiling after the chair, uphill, like a slow battering-ram” (321). Dickens’s furious humor levels an attack on Mrs. Skewton for her treatment of Withers as though he were an animal, an object for her personal use. Additionally, in characterizing Withers alternately as a battering ram and as an elephant, Dickens underscores the class dynamics inherited by the wheeled chair from its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century precursor, the sedan chair. Dickens alludes to such class tensions when he portrays Mrs. Skewton as

“calling to the page with all the languid dignity with which she had called in days of yore to a coachman with a wig, cauliflower nosegay, and silk stockings” (320). Her use of the wheeled chair thus exposes her to the narrator’s and the reader’s critical gaze, especially because she travels in it not out of necessity, but rather as a display of the wealth and status that she, in actuality, lacks. As the narrator indicates, after becoming accustomed in her youth to travel by barouche, Mrs. Skewton “[maintains] the wheeled chair and the butting page: there being nothing whatever, except the attitude, to prevent her from walking” (319). Through his rendering of the page, Dickens highlights the objectification of an often forgotten element in nineteenth-century wheeled chair transportation, the chairman, thereby positioning prejudices against chair users as somewhat class-based.

Work Cited

Dickens, Charles. *Dombey and Son*. London: Penguin, 2002. Print.