

CHAPTER 2

On the Genealogy of the Parasite²⁶

At one point in *The Confidence-Man*, the narrator remarks that “[t]he grand points of human nature are the same to-day they were a thousand years ago. The only variability in them is in expression, not in feature” (CM 71). This quote serves well to indicate the remarkable persistence of the comedic figure of the parasite, which exists in much the same manner today as it did in Classical Greece, at least in some of its incarnations; in the words of Northrop Frye:

Dramatic comedy, from which fictional comedy is mainly descended, has been remarkably tenacious of its structural principles and character types. ... the Joxer Daley of [Sean] O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* [1924] has the same character and dramatic function as the parasites of twenty-five hundred years ago. (163)

The reason for this persistence is undoubtedly that the figure embodies some of “the grand points of human nature”—or better yet, some of the not quite so grand ones, having to do with dependency upon others and the abuse of hospitality—whose basic features remain constant throughout the ages, and whose ethical relevance are felt anew by every successive generation. Even though these fundamental traits remain the same, the quote from *The Confidence-Man* indicates that innovations in their rendition are possible, something that is also stressed in Cynthia Damon’s *The Mask of the Parasite* (1997):

26 This chapter is an extended and reworked version of my article “Parasite,” which was originally published in *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon* in 2011. Reprinted with permission.

in making the parasite act, that is, in working out the behavioral consequences of his traits, the comic poets proved themselves highly innovative. New techniques, new areas of involvement, new complications—all of these are devised for the parasite as he processes through Greek and Roman Comedy. (24)

Such innovations are far from limited to Greek and Roman comedy, but can also be found in later writings. Before the importance of the parasite to Melville's works and whether the uses he made of it were original or derivative can be explored, a more fundamental understanding of the literary parasite's basic features, as well as of some of the most important innovations in its expression during the last 2500 years or so, is needed. Since a comprehensive history of the parasite in literature lies far outside the scope of the present book, I have limited myself to a few central stages in the evolution of the figure. Specifically, in the first part of this chapter, I address the religious origins of the term "parasitos" in Ancient Greece. This is followed by a discussion of how the adoption of the term by poets of Middle Comedy helped create the stock character of the parasite, which was later transported to a Roman context through the *commoedia palliata* of Plautus and Terence. The second part traces how renewed interest in these two authors during the Renaissance led to the reappearance of the parasite in Elizabethan drama, where the figure came to appear both in comedies, tragicomedies, and tragedies, and where, in certain works by Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, the figure becomes so complex that it breaks free of its origin. Finally, the third part discusses how the parasite appears in a pathologized form in the novels of Melville's contemporary, Charles Dickens. To explain this pathologization, the chapter addresses how naturalists gradually came to adopt the term "parasite," as well as some of the implications of this shift. Even though these brief overviews of the literary and scientific concepts of the parasite will by necessity contain many lacunae and omissions, in helping highlight both continuities and important innovations, they serve as a necessary background for the analyses of Melville's texts to come.

Religious Origins and the Greco-Roman Comedic Parasite

As previously indicated, the Greek term “parasitos” had its origin in religious practices, dating back at least to the fifth century B.C. Initially, the name designated temple assistants who, according to W. Geoffrey Arnott, “received free food and meals in return for services like that of the selection of the sacred grain for use in particular festivals” (“Studies” 162–63), most famously at the Heracleia, the annual celebration of Heracles at Cynosarges, near Athens.²⁷ Not much is known with certainty about this religious phase, but important clues can be found in the Greek rhetorician and grammarian Athenaeus’ monumental fifteen volume *The Learned Banqueters*, also known as *The Deiphnosophists*. Dating from the end of the second century A.D., the work contains a multitude of discussions about all sorts of topics from the guests attending a feast given by the wealthy Roman official Larensis. A chance remark about parasites in Book VI sets off long monologues from two of the characters present: Plutarch, who is largely concerned with literary parasites (6.234c–48c), and Democritus, who primarily focuses on the hangers-on of famous historical individuals (6.248c–62a). Both quote all manner of sources, many of which today are lost or exist only in fragments—be it comedies, the works of historians and philosophers, laws, or gossip about their contemporaries. While the objectivity of these speakers should *not* be taken for granted, they still offer many insights into the parasite’s role in Greek culture and religion.²⁸

Concerning the cultic origin of “parasitos,” Athenaeus’ Plutarch quotes the Stoic philosopher Polemon of Athens, who had claimed that “[p]arasite’ is today a disreputable term, but among the ancients I find

27 On the cultic origin of the parasite, see Wilkins (73–74), and J. Z. Smith (257–58).

28 Even though the parasite it is just one of many topics discussed by Larensis’ guests, Tim Whitmarsh has argued that it is central to an understanding of the combined poetics and politics of *The Learned Banqueters*. To him, Athenaeus playfully undermines the critical comments of Plutarch and Democritus by indicating that their own relationship to Larensis closely mirrors that of parasites and host. Whitmarsh therefore considers their attacks on parasitism as “humorously hackneyed and ill-conceived attempt to deflect from themselves the charge of precisely such conduct” (305).

that the parasite was sacred and resembled an invited guest at a meal” (6.234d), before listing a number of different facts about who were eligible to be parasites, how they were chosen, what the job entailed, how long they served, and how they were housed. He further indicates that this change from sacred to disreputable came about when poets started using the term as a name for comedic characters out to acquire free dinners. Exactly who did so first is a matter of some dispute. The primary candidates are the Middle Comedy rivals Alexis, who wrote a play called *Parasitos* sometime in the period 360–350 B.C., and Araros, who uses the word in his play *The Wedding Hymn*, dating from roughly the same period. Even so, Plutarch favors one of their forerunners, the Old Comedy poet Epicharmus, thought to have lived between c. 540–450 B.C.: “Carystius of Pergamum in his *On Dramatic Records* claims that the character referred to today as a parasite was invented by Alexis, forgetting that Epicharmus in *Hope or Wealth* introduced one at a drinking party” (6.235e). He then quotes Epicharmus’ unnamed glutton, who is said to have dedicated his talents to

[d]ining with whoever’s willing—all [the host] needs to do is issue an invitation!—as well as with whoever’s unwilling—and then there’s no need for an invitation. When I’m there, I’m on my best behavior, and I generate a lot of laughs and flatter the man who’s hosting the party; if someone wants to quarrel with him, I attack the guy and get similar grief back. Then, after I’ve eaten and drunk a lot, I leave. No slave goes with me carrying a lamp; I make my way alone, slipping and sliding in the darkness. And if I meet the night-patrol, I credit the gods with having done me a favor if all they want to do is give me a whipping. When I get home, in terrible shape, I sleep with no blankets. At first I don’t notice, so long as the unmixed wine envelops my mind. (Athenaeus 6.235f–36b)

Even though this character’s behavior perfectly fits that of the comedic parasite, later scholars have opposed the view taken by Plutarch. Arnott, who holds Alexis to have been first, stresses that in Epicharmus’ lifetime the glutton from *Hope or Wealth* would not yet have been understood as a parasite. In the fragment quoted in *The Learned Banqueters*, he is simply called “a low-priced perpetual guest” (6.235f), but it would also have been

possible to label him a *kolax*: a flatterer who pretends to be a true friend, but who is only looking for personal gain.²⁹ One typical trait of such flattering hangers-on in comedies is that they tended to be given comic nicknames illustrating their character or personality, often having to do with their hunger or willingness to debase themselves for food.³⁰ One of the remaining fragments from Alexis' *Parasitos* reads as follows: "All the young men call him Parasite by way of a nickname. He doesn't mind at all" (qtd. in Arnott, *Alexis* 542–45). Based on this fragment, Arnott argues that the play must originally have used the religious term "parasitos" as a comic sobriquet for one of its characters:

Up to the moment when Alexis produced his *Parasitos*, we may be sure, the term ... was still reserved for the priestly dignitary who received free meals in the sanctuary of his god or hero. Alexis' originality lay in decking out his parasite with a nickname that evoked for his audience a picture of priestly gormandisers, and especially doubtless those at Cynosarges in the service of Heracles, the archetypal glutton and patron of comic parasites. And we may guess that what began as a colourful nickname for one stage parasite so impressed the audience by its aptness that they began to use it themselves as the *mot juste* for the type as a whole. ("Studies" 167)

To follow this argument, one could distinguish between the comic parasite proper, who only comes into being once the religious term had been appropriated sometime during the Middle Comedy period, and proto-parasitic forerunners such as Epicharmus' "perpetual guest" and other

29 Elizabeth Ivory Tylawsky maintains that the first known instance of the word *kolax* occurs in a poem by the seventh- or sixth-century elegist Asius of Samos, quoted in Athenaeus, but that the *kolax* as a fully-fledged comedic type only came into being with Eupolis' play *Flatterers* from 421 B.C.: "Eupolis took the next step and in 421 created a type, the *kolax*, which was neither an abstraction nor an historical individual; and this may be the first time that a character labeled *kolax* stepped upon the stage" (18–19).

30 Such nicknaming was usual both prior to and after the adoption of the term "parasitos." For an abundance of examples, see Alciphron's "Letters of Parasites." The parasites sending and receiving these 42 fictional letters all go by such telling names as "Dinnerchaser," "Dish-Crazy," "Doorbolt-Pecker," "Loaf-Lust," "Savoury-Soup," "Ready-for-Cuffing," "Brothy-Breath," "Wine-Choker," "Cup-Guzzler," "Olive-cake-Hound," "Crumb-Breaker," "Stuff-Cheek," "Full-Mouth," "Lick-Platter," "Table-Licker," "Napkin-Filcher," "Breakfast-Fighter," and "Meat-Maimer."

practitioners of the art of *kolakeia* (flattery), prior to the transfer of the term from the cultic to the comedic sphere.³¹

Regardless of whether Arnott's hypothesis is correct, the consequences are clear: Over time, the parasite ended up as an interchangeable rival to the earlier comedic stock character of the *kolax*, with whom he shared most of his defining traits. While different scholarly attempts to differentiate between the two figures have been made, in most plays their traits tended to blend together, causing Elizabeth Ivory Tylawsky to conclude that "[i]n Middle and New Comedy the two terms were almost interchangeable because what the *parasitos* did was to practice *kolakeia*" (4).³² In addition, Cynthia Damon points out that the term *kolax* never really gained currency in the Roman world, meaning that "[i]n Latin, there is no easily identifiable boundary between the parasite and the flatterer" (14). For the sake of convenience, in the following, I will treat the two as synonyms.³³

Since they are primarily known through fragments, quotations in Athenaeus, as well as through later authors like Plutarch, Lucian, and Alciphron, who wrote in other genres, direct access to the parasites of Greek Middle and New Comedy is scarce.³⁴ The situation is better

31 Tylawsky offers an overview of different proto-parasites dating back to the *Odyssey*, with Odysseus himself as the parasite's oldest known ancestor. Not only did he pass himself off as a hungry beggar upon his return to Ithaca, but in some way or another his "adventures and misadventures all hinged on having to ask for help, food, or shelter of the right person at the right time and in the right way" (9). She also argues that other characters in the *Odyssey*, including the beggar Irus, the herald Medon, and the bard Phemius, embody traits typically associated with the figure later named "parasitos."

32 For an overview of various attempts to differentiate between the *kolax* and the *parasitos*, see Damon (11–14).

33 The parasite may also be situated in relation to basic types of Greek comedic characters outlined in the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, such as the *alazon* (the impostor or boaster), the *eiron* (a self-deprecating character), and the *bomolochos* (buffoon). While parasites would usually function as variants of the latter type, in the plays where they had an active role in exposing the *alazon*'s lies and imposture, they could also be *eirones*. On the *Tractatus coislinianus*, which has sometimes been held to be Aristotle's lost work on comedy, and the relationship between the *alazon*, *eiron*, *bomolochos* and the fourth basic stock character of Greek comedy, the *agrikos* (the rustic churl), see Frye (172–76).

34 On the difference between parasites in Middle and New Comedy, see Tylawsky (59–106). As noted in Chapter 1, in his "How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend," Plutarch is warning his readers against falling prey to parasites. Chapter 4 returns to Lucian's quasi-Socratic dialogue "The Parasite: Parasitic an Art." On parasitical imagery in Lucian's "Symposium," and on Alciphron's "Letters of Parasites," see König (247–65).

when it comes to the Roman world, where the authors of the *comoedia palliata*—most notably Plautus and Terence—would rework Greek material into Latin, in the process transposing the figure of the parasite to a new culture; as Tylawsky puts it: “The parasite of the *palliata* was a hybrid, a Grecized character on a Roman stage” (5). Of the 21 surviving, complete comedies from Plautus, eight contain easily recognizable spongers: *The Comedy of Asses*, *The Braggart Soldier*, *The Two Menaechmuses*, *Stichus*, *The Captives*, *Curculio*, *The Two Bacchises*, and *The Persian*. The same also holds for two of Terence’s six extant plays, *The Eunuch* and *Phormio*.

Even though Roman authors often took liberties with their Greek source materials, their parasites seem to have corresponded closely to those of their Hellenic forerunners.³⁵ A brief comparison of these ten plays therefore helps pinpoint the defining traits of Greco-Roman parasites of comedy. First, in these plays, the Latin term “parasitus” is most often used in a descriptive, rather than in a pejorative sense; to quote Damon: “In comedy the term *parasitus* is the *vox propria*: it is used by patrons of their parasites and by parasites of themselves. The word is nearly neutral in tone in this genre” (15).³⁶ Indeed, to the parasites themselves, it is often seen as a term of honor indicating their belonging to (what they consider) a long and venerable tradition; in the words of Saturio from *The Persian*: “The ancient and venerable vocation of my ancestors I continue, follow, and cultivate with constant care. For never a one of my ancestors was there who didn’t provide for his belly as a professional parasite” (54–57). This self-identification as parasites is most often made known in introductory monologues where the more successful hangers-on will brag about their adeptness at their parasitic art, whereas the less successful complain about the difficulties of earning a dinner. As Kathleen McCarthy has argued, these monologues differ from other types of soliloquies in

35 Damon points out two important differences between the Greek and Roman parasites. The first is that the former “preyed on whoever was offering a good meal on any given day,” whereas the latter “tended to have one particular patron and to take regular potluck at his house” (29). The second is that Greek parasites often appeared uninvited, whereas “[o]btaining an invitation is crucial for the success of parasites in Roman comedy” (59).

36 As Damon notes, “the term could also be used as a reference to someone who was not ostensibly a parasite, in which case it was indeed insulting” (15). Accordingly, the line between descriptive and derogatory usage is not always clear, but when I use the term “parasite” regarding Melville’s characters, it is meant in the descriptive sense.

the comedies in several ways. First, “the parasite’s monologues are all direct addresses to the audience, with no semblance of a realistic dramatic motivation; the parasite is baldly introducing himself across the footlights” (McCarthy 62). As she sees it, the primary reason these monologues make no attempts at realism is due to the defining traits of the parasite as a stock character:

the most distinctive feature of these speeches is the way they are so emphatically focused on the description of the ‘trade’ of parasitism itself. ... no other character type is so pervasively associated with such a distinctive subject matter and expression. These monologues serve to establish the unusually fixed (and unusually explicit) spectrum of characteristics of the parasite and to establish him in a close relation to the audience. His character, rigidly defined by comic convention, has so few traits that it is reducible to a single motivation, and therefore is both more comic and more explicitly artificial than the other character types. (McCarthy 63)

While she at times goes too far in her descriptions of the parasite’s lack of complexity, McCarthy is correct that in many respects, it was a rigid character type.³⁷ Even so, it could be put to a variety of different uses in comedy. Accordingly, the importance of the different parasites in the plays varies greatly: Sometimes, they are brought in as little more than comic interludes, but in other cases, they are central to the plots, for example as catalysts who help the hero get the girl he wants. On one end of this spectrum are the two unnamed hangers-on appearing in *The Comedy of Asses* and in *The Two Bacchises*. Simply listed as “Parasitus” in the *dramatis personae*, both are clearly very minor characters. On the other end of the scale are Curculio and Phormio, who are both protagonists of sorts, and give their names to the plays in which they appear. While not even Phormio can be said to transcend his function as a stock character, he still stands out as one of the most original and positive portrayals of a

37 See for instance the following, reductive claim about Plautine parasites: “The several parasites in the corpus are so similar as almost to merge into a single character” (McCarthy 202). My own view lies somewhere between those of McCarthy and George E. Duckworth, who goes too far in the other direction: “Both the character of the parasite and the role he plays differ from comedy to comedy, so that it is unwise to refer to him as a conventional type” (266).

parasite in ancient comedy; a charming scoundrel who easily outwits his opponents to acquire a dinner invitation.

While the Roman parasites are all freeborn, rather than slaves, they are most frequently poor, lacking a secure place in society as well as family ties of their own.³⁸ They are almost always portrayed as excessively hungry, driven into dependence upon those more powerful than themselves by the demands of their stomachs; as Damon argues: “To reveal the first of the parasite’s features, his dependency on his patron for food, the comic poets made him hungry, indeed insatiable” (25). Time and again, the parasites in these plays clearly express this overriding interest of theirs; as Gelasimus puts it in his opening lines in *Stichus*: “I suspect that Hunger was my mother: from the time that I was born I’ve never been full” (Plautus 155–56). Moreover, Plautus and Terence often follow the Greek tradition of giving their parasites comic nicknames having to do with their hunger or their willingness to entertain others for food. Gelasimus, which means “funny,” has earned this name because poverty has taught him that being amusing is the best way to acquire a dinner (Plautus, *Stichus* 173–78), whereas Peniculus in *The Two Menaechmuses* explains his own sobriquet as follows: “The youngsters have given me the name ‘Peniculus, the Brush’ because ... when I eat I wipe the table clean” (Plautus 77–78). Other telling examples in Plautus and Terence include Artotrogus (“Crust-muncher”), Curculio (“Weevil”), and Gnatho (“The Jaw”), from *The Braggart Soldier*, *Curculio*, and *The Eunuch*, respectively.

Damon stresses two different sorts of tactics parasites use to attach themselves to their superiors: *flattery* and *services*. Many are master flatterers who heap mountains of praise upon their hosts, labeling them *rex* (king) or even comparing them to gods, as does Artotrogus when he insincerely tells his patron, the boastful and cowardly soldier Pyrgopolinices, that “Mars wouldn’t dare to call himself such a warrior or compare his exploits to yours” (Plautus, *Braggart* 11–12). Services can be of different types, ranging from keeping others amused with jokes and stories, to delivering letters or presents, acting as a go-between (especially

38 The single known exception in Roman comedy is Saturio in *The Persian*, who “alone of literary parasites is endowed with the rudiments of a family, a daughter” (Damon 51).

in romantic affairs), going to the forum or doing the shopping for his patron, defending his honor or fighting for him, or appearing on his behalf in court. No matter what services are offered, though, in all cases they seem to have primarily been remunerated in food.

Wealthy hosts capable of providing their parasites with fine dining can be found in several of the plays, including *The Comedy of Asses*, *Curculio*, *The Two Menaechmuses*, and *The Captives*. Others must settle for less, as is the case with Saturio, whose patron is only a rich man's slave. Some hosts treat their parasites well; others, knowing that they will endure anything to fill their stomachs, abuse or make fun of them. An excellent example here is the unfortunate Gelasimus, who not only fails to acquire a dinner invitation, but is also ridiculed and mistreated by everybody he encounters. In Damon's words, "he is more thoroughly abused than any other Roman parasite" (65).³⁹

There is also a marked difference when it comes to the willingness to put up with such mistreatment. Whereas Gelasimus is all too willing to abase himself and Saturio is even ready to sell his daughter into prostitution to avoid being cut off from his dinners, Peniculus is so angry when he thinks his patron has tricked him out of a promised meal, that he exposes his infidelities to his wife: "All those insults will fall back unto you. I'll make sure that you haven't eaten that lunch without punishment" (Plautus, *Menaechmuses* 520–22). Even though few other parasites are willing to actively alienate their patrons in this manner, this does not mean that they are necessarily to be trusted, as their advice and friendship is informed by the desire to fill their own bellies, rather than a sincere concern for the well-being of their hosts. Still, some parasites appear to truly hold their patrons in high esteem, as in *The Captives*, where Ergasilus' respect for the old Athenian Hegio and his son, Philipolemus,

39 However, some of Gelasimus' Greek ancestors are much worse off. The parasites in Alciphron's letters are repeatedly beaten (3.3, 3.18), force-fed (3.4), whipped and imprisoned (3.7), and drenched in sticky broth (3.25). Some have cups smashed in their faces (3.9) or various substances, including pitch and blood, poured over their heads (3.12), and two of the letter-writers barely avoid having kettles of boiling water poured over them (3.2 and 3.32). On these abuses, see König (256–58). Consequently, being a parasite was not the easiest line of work; as Hectodictes ("Hour-of-Six-Chaser") puts it to Mandalocolaptes ("Doorbolt-Pecker"): "we are fed on deceptive hopes, and end by getting more insults than pleasures" (Alciphron 3.2.3).

seems sincere. Others, though, take every opportunity to ridicule those who feed them. This is especially the case for the ones that are teamed up with the stock character of the *miles gloriosus*, the braggart soldier. In *The Eunuch*, Gnatho switches between flattering the vain and cowardly Thraso to his face, and making fun of him behind his back, as does Artotrogus, who pretends to be the faithful companion of Pyrgopolinices in *The Braggart Soldier*.⁴⁰

These examples begin to make clear the many possibilities inherent in the relationship between the parasite and his patron, possibilities comic poets could experiment with as part of their quest to make their audiences laugh. Depending on what the plays were aiming for, parasites could be charming or wicked; clever or foolish; full and content or starving and desperate; useful help for their patrons or blocking characters trying to ridicule or even hinder them, as in the case of Peniculus; intruders at the dinner table or welcome guests.⁴¹ As Damon puts it:

The relative prominence of the parasite's basic traits could be adjusted to suit various themes. Emphasize the importance of food, as Plautus does in [*The Persian*] ... and you have a memorable demonstration of a free man's servility. Increase the parasite's cleverness vis-à-vis his benefactor, and you get the flatterer who takes advantage of a fool; that is, you get someone like Artotrogus or Gnatho. Make him a helpless dependent like Ergasilus, however, and you reveal a generous patron in a Hegio. (99–100)

Before moving on to the next important phase of the parasite's career, a few remarks must be made about a social institution that was central to the birth of the comedic figure of the sponger in the first place, namely patronage (*clientela*). Following the definition suggested by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, it may be understood as

40 For a third version of the pairing of the parasite and the *miles*, see the interaction between the title character and the soldier Therapontigonus Platagidorus in *Curculio*.

41 Parasites are often understood as *unwanted* guests, but, as Tim Whitmarsh has argued, the "tradition of the welcome parasite is an important one, stretching from Philippus in Xenophon's *Symposium* (who turns up uninvited, but amuses all with his jokes) down to the Gnathon in Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* (who is clearly in the favour of his master)" (311).

a social relationship which is essentially (i) reciprocal, involving exchanges of services over time between two parties, (ii) personal as opposed to e.g. commercial, and (iii) asymmetrical, i.e. between parties of different status. Most would accept a fourth element ..., namely that it is voluntary, not legally enforceable. (3)⁴²

As Wallace-Hadrill and other scholars have shown, this institution often had very real and tangible effects on the ordering of Roman society, helping to ensure relative stability through binding the poorer and the richer together through mutual responsibilities, where the *cliens* (client) would typically offer various services in return for the meals and the protection given by his patron. The transactions involved in relationships of patronage were remarkably similar to the ones in comedy between the parasite and his host. Damon therefore claims that to the Romans, the figure of the parasite became a rhetorical tool for attacking this system when it did not work as intended, as in those cases where either of the parts involved in the patron-client relationship did not—or were perceived not to—live up to their end of the bargain or tried to get more out of it than was deemed to be fair. Whenever clients became successful due to the support of their patrons, they were always at risk of the accusation of being flattering parasites. To Damon, the figure therefore

served Roman authors well when they wanted to evoke the frustration, envy, and outrage that could arise from frictions due to the functioning of patronage. If the parasite is always a mask and if the fit between the mask and its wearer lies in the eyes of the beholder, that the mask seemed to fit people in so many different situations ... indicates how well it satisfied those who wanted to complain about or criticize the system. (9)

In other words, there is always a question of *perspective* involved whenever people are accused of parasite-like behavior. This becomes especially obvious in the genre of satire, where authors such as Horace, Martial, and Juvenal all used the figure of the parasite as a rhetorical tool for satirizing

42 Wallace-Hadrill's definition combines the work of Richard P. Saller, and Peter Garnsey and Greg Wolf. For points i-iii, see Saller (1); for iv, see Garnsey and Wolf (154).

contemporaries and denouncing rivals.⁴³ Since authors prior to the birth of the literary marketplace typically had to rely on the favors of patrons if they were to be able to dedicate themselves to writing—Horace himself a dependent on the financial support of Maecenas, for example—this was nevertheless a double-edged sword that could easily be turned against the accusers.⁴⁴ Tim Whitmarsh has for instance argued that in *The Learned Banqueters*, “the denial of *kolakeia* [flattery or parasitic behavior], or the attribution of it to another, may well be a strategy of self-authorization by one who is himself vulnerable to the charge” (308). It is thus important to bear in mind that even from very early on, the parasite did not only come to inhabit different literary genres—dramatic as well as non-dramatic—but it also took on two related, yet separate identities: one as a comedic figure meant to make audiences laugh, the other as a rhetorical tool meant to degrade others.

The Elizabethan Literary Parasite

While neither Plautus nor Terence was ever totally forgotten, after the death of the latter in 159 B.C., the genre they had adapted from their Greek sources—and with it, the stock character of the parasite—lost much of its momentum, lying largely dormant until the Renaissance.⁴⁵ Nicholas of Cusa’s discovery of twelve lost Plautine plays in 1428 ushered in a revival for both of the comic poets, whose fame increased as their work was staged anew from the last quarter of the fifteenth century and onwards.⁴⁶

43 See Damon (105–91).

44 For analyses of the forms literary patronage took during different historical epochs, see Gold, Holzknacht, and Griffin. For a typology of five different forms of literary and artistic patronage throughout the ages, see Williams.

45 For a discussion of the respective afterlives of Plautus and Terence during the Middle Ages, see Segal (255–58). A genre that did not forget the parasite was that of religious writings, where the figure served as a useful trope both to warn readers against sinful behavior and to criticize religious rivals for failing to live up to biblical standards, see Welborn, Blowers (“Pity”; “St. John”), and König (323–51).

46 On the Renaissance rediscovery of Plautus and Terence, see Duckworth (396–433). The two playwrights often appealed to different audiences. The former was long held to be more vulgar, and the latter more refined. On the Renaissance debates concerning the respective qualities of the two, see Hardin. For an assessment of their popularity among the Romans that challenges the common view that Plautus was much more successful than Terence, see H. N. Parker.

This renewed popularity meant that they came to serve as inspirations to contemporary authors, who often borrowed freely from them.

That this, in turn, also entailed a new dawn for the figure of the parasite, is evident if we turn to what is generally held to be the first regular comedy written in English, Nicholas Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister*. While potentially written several years earlier, the play was most likely first performed in 1553 or 1554, and then published in 1567, well after the death of its author.⁴⁷ In the prologue, Udall explicitly mentions Plautus and Terence as his main sources of inspiration, and the play functions as a modernized version of the relationship—already familiar from *The Braggart Soldier* and *The Eunuch*—between the ridiculous bigmouth and the scheming parasite who pretends to be his friend. In Udall's version, the title character is the braggart, whereas his false friend is called Mathew Merygreeke. That the latter is modeled on the parasite is obvious from his comic introductory monologue in Act I. As many a sponger before him, here he raises the question of who is going to be supplying his dinner: "wisdom would that I did myself bethink/ Where to be provided this day of meat and drink" (1.1.11–12). However, he is in no danger of starvation, bragging about the many hosts at his disposal, including "Lewis Loytrer," "Watkin Waster," "Davy Diceplayer" and others. This abundance of opportunities for free meals notwithstanding, the patron who offers him the most pleasure is Ralph Roister Doister, "[f]or, truly, of all men he is my chief banker/ Both for meat and money, and my chief shoot-anchor" (1.1.27–28). In fact, so great is Merygreeke's delight in getting Ralph to make a fool of himself that he actually makes the—for a parasite unheard of—suggestion that if need be, he would even abstain from dinner in order to have his fun: "such sport I have with him as I would not lese,/ Though I should be bound to live with bread and cheese" (1.1.53–54).

47 On *Ralph Roister Doister* as candidate for the first proper English comedy, see Duckworth (408–10), and Thorndike (58). On the dating of the play, see Clarence G. Child's introduction in Udall (42). Earlier English parasites exist in other genres. For example, Book 1 of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) contains an anecdote known as "A Merry Dialogue between a Friar and a Hanger-On," but here the word "parasite" is never used, even though More's hanger-on is obviously modeled on the classical Greco-Roman figure, see Perlette. According to the *OED*, the first documented use of the word parasite in English is from Richard Taverner's 1539 translation of Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Proverbs or Adages*, where it is mentioned that "[i]t is the fascion of a flatterer and parasyte to lyue of an other mans trencher" ("parasite").

Here a new tendency can be discerned, where parasitical characters turn out to be somewhat less concerned with food than their Greco-Roman forefathers. Instead, they may focus on fun, as does Merygreeke, or, more often—and especially in genres other than comedy—on acquiring money and power through their relationship with their hosts.⁴⁸

This indebtedness to Plautus and Terence—in general, as well as specifically regarding the parasite—is not only felt in Udall, but in a number of the dramatic works of sixteenth-century England. Particularly during the reign of Elizabeth I, one finds an abundance of literary hangers-on of all types. As E. P. Vandiver has argued, these can be grouped in two different classes. The one Merygreeke belongs to is the one most closely resembling the classical sources: the jolly, lighthearted and amusing parasite who entertains others in return for food. Vandiver terms this the “un-moral Italian parasite” (412), a creature commonly influenced by the spongers of Italian *commedia erudita* and *commedia dell’arte*, as well as by the comic figure of the Vice, often associated with medieval morality plays.⁴⁹ Even though there are several examples of this kind of hanger-on in Elizabethan comedies, such as Pasyphilo in George Gascoigne’s *The Supposes* (c. 1566) and Appetitus in Thomas Tomkis’ *Lingua* (1607), they were less common than those belonging to the other class, namely “the immoral parasite of the German-Dutch school drama” (Vandiver 412–13). The authors of the school drama—or “Christian Terence,” as it was also known—were often clergymen and teachers associated with the Reformation.⁵⁰ Even though these authors were inspired by the Greco-Roman sources, they often combined biblical and allegorical characters with the classical ones to improve upon the latter’s morals and to bring them more in line with their own religious beliefs. As opposed to the amusing spongers of the Italian tradition, when parasites of the second class appeared, it was usually in the form of wicked counselors bringing

48 In some cases, the focus on food disappears completely, as in the case of scheming but ignorant Selincour in Friedrich Schiller’s comedy *The Parasite, or the Art to Make One’s Fortune* (1803). Only out to further his own career, he makes absolutely no references to hunger or food.

49 On the relationship between the parasite and the Vice, see Withington. For a different explanation of the origin of the Vice, see Mares.

50 On “Christian Terence,” see Herrick.

destruction to others through their intrigues at court.⁵¹ And whereas Plautine and Terentian parasites tended to be rewarded with dinner (if they were lucky) or, at worst, a good beating (if they were not), those inspired by the “Christian Terence” school were usually made to pay dearly for their evil ways; in Vandiver’s words:

The didactic impulse from the morality plays, the “Christian Terence” school drama, and the English inclination to look with disfavor upon parasites were among the influences that caused the so-called parasite of Elizabethan drama to be regarded as an opprobrious character and as one who should be punished. (416)

As opposed to the amusing Italian parasites, these Germanic ones were better suited for more serious genres like tragedy or tragicomedy than they were for comedy. Hence, parasites were to make their first of many appearances in the former genre in Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville’s *Gorboduc* (1561), where the evil counselors Hermon and Tyndar—both of whom are listed as parasites in the *dramatis personae*—set the two sons of the British king Gorboduc against each other, leading in the end to death, insurrection, and civil war throughout the realm. As Vandiver argues, similar appearances by scheming court parasites are found in several tragedies based upon historical materials. Examples include Gaveston and Spencer in Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1593), Sir John Bushy and Sir Henry Greene in Shakespeare’s *King Richard II* (c. 1595–1596), and the title character of Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus His Fall* (1603). During this period the flattering parasite had thus gone from being perceived as a humorous, minor nuisance to a potentially acute danger to political stability.⁵²

There are several reasons Jonson and Shakespeare are important to the history of the parasite. The former has created several flattering spongers, three of them explicitly listed as parasites in the plays’ *dramatis personae*:

51 Whereas this second class of parasites does not make any significant appearances in the Roman comedies, several potential forerunners for the Elizabethan parasite as evil advisor are mentioned in Democritus’ monologue in *The Learned Banqueters* (6.248c–62a).

52 That scheming or incompetent counselor-parasites were perceived as a serious problem in the world of politics can be seen from Chapter 23 of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (1532), “How Flatterers Should be Avoided.”

Mosca in *Volpone, or The Fox* (1606), Fly in *The New Inn, or The Light Heart* (1629), and Mistress Polish in *The Magnetic Lady, or Humours Reconciled* (1632). In addition to these and Sejanus, other parasitical characters include Bobadill in *Every Man in His Humour* (1598/1616),⁵³ Carlo Buffone and Shift in *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599), and Tucca in *Poetaster, or His Arraignment* (1601). Not counting Mistress Polish—who is something as rare as a “she-Parasite” with a female patron—two of these deserve further mention.

First, the quick-witted deceiver Mosca is one of the most remarkable comedic parasites of the age. In many respects, he belongs to the more lighthearted and amusing class of literary spongers, a comic hanger-on helping repeatedly foil the plans of Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, the three “birds of prey” (*Volpone* 1.2.89) who aspire to inherit the fortune of Mosca’s sly patron, Volpone. Still, his ambitions and his utter shrewdness—some would say evil—far exceed those of his Greco-Roman forefathers, and when the chance occurs, he gladly fools Volpone, too, almost getting away with all his riches. However, in the end Mosca’s plans fail and he is harshly punished by the Venetian court: “our sentence is, first thou be whipped;/ Then live perpetual prisoner in our galleys” (Jonson, *Volpone* 5.12.113–14); a punishment of the kind usually reserved for the parasites of “Christian Terence.” Taken together, these aspects all play an important part in the unsettling effect of the play, which critics have often struggled to properly categorize; to quote Northrop Frye: “*Volpone* is exceptional in being a kind of comic imitation of a tragedy” (165).⁵⁴

Jonson’s portrayal of Mosca thereby serves as an example of how authors could combine traits from the two different traditions of parasites for new effects. Moreover, he also exemplifies how the figure needs no longer be particularly concerned with food, at least in the literal sense. True, in his monologue in Act 3 where he brags about his talents as a parasite, he does refer to the traditional kind of sponger,

53 In the 1598 quarto version, his name was Bobadilla, but this had been changed to Bobadill in the 1616 folio version of the play.

54 In this regard, see Partridge (70–71).

those that have your bare town-art,
 To know who's fit to feed 'em; have no house,
 No family, no care, and therefore mould
 Tales for men's ears, to bait that sense, or get
 Kitchen-invention, and some stale receipts
 To please the belly and the groin. (*Volpone* 3.1.14–19)

As Mosca forcefully stresses, the base tricks these creatures use to feed are far beneath his dignity. Contrary to them, he considers himself a

fine, elegant rascal, that can rise
 And stoop, almost together, like an arrow,
 Shoot through the air as nimbly as a star,
 Turn short, as doth a swallow, and be here,
 And there, and here, and yonder, all at once;
 Present to any humour, all occasion
 And change a visor swifter than a thought.
 This is the creature had the art born with him;
 Toils not to learn it, but doth practise it
 Out of most excellent nature: and such sparks
 Are the true parasites, others but their zanies. (Jonson, *Volpone* 3.1.23–33)

For Mosca, nothing but the final food is good enough, and—as Edward P. Partridge has pointed out—“the final food is man” (107).

No less important than Mosca is the title character of *Sejanus His Fall*. In his portrayal of the rise and fall of the ruthless Sejanus, Jonson created a character who undoubtedly embodies many of the traits typically associated with parasites, and who is at one point also labeled Emperor Tiberius’ “private parasite” by his enemies (1.386). Coming from a humble background, he attaches himself to the emperor through cunning and flattery. Helping the latter brutally get rid of his rivals, he makes himself invaluable to Tiberius, who terms him the “great aid of Rome,/ Associate of our labours, our chief helper” (Jonson, *Sejanus* 1.528–29). In the end becoming no less influential than his mighty patron, he almost succeeds in outmaneuvering him, too, only to be exposed by Tiberius’ agent, Macro, summarily condemned as a traitor and executed. His parasitic

traits notwithstanding, Sejanus clearly transcends the parasite as a type or stock character; in Vandiver's words:

This material the dramatist enlarged upon and presented in such a forceful and original manner that he made Sejanus the most towering and impressive historical parasite in Elizabethan tragedy. The parasitical evil counselor ... here breaks all bounds of the stock figure and looms up as an individual, a dramatic creation which one almost fears to call a parasite. (420)

Thus, here a great author has turned a stock character into something as rare as what, following the narrator's discussion in Chapter 44 of *The Confidence-Man*, might perhaps be termed a truly "original" literary creation: "As for original characters in fiction, a grateful reader will, on meeting with one, keep the anniversary of that day" (*CM* 238).⁵⁵

Shakespeare, too, has created two truly original characters with parasitic traits—one of them more of the merry Italian kind, the other wholly Teutonic. Lesser parasite-like characters also appear in several of his comedies as well as his tragedies, and, just like Jonson, he draws upon both the comic and the evil type and is also capable of mixing them in original ways.⁵⁶ In regard to the comedies, Vandiver notes as follows: "Surveying all the Shakespearean parasites, it is evident that, although none of this dramatist's creations exactly resembles the Plautine or Terentian parasite, approximations to the type occur in Parolles and Falstaff especially and to a less extent in Sir Toby Belch" (422–23).⁵⁷

Sir Toby's relationship to the rich but foolish Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night* (c. 1601) resembles the pairings of Gnatho and Thraso, Artotrogus and Pyrgopolinices, or Mathew Merygreeke and Ralph. That

55 The narrator's discussion of originality in *Confidence-Man* will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 6.

56 In Chapter 5 and 6, we will encounter the hatred of parasites expressed by the titular character of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (c. 1604–1607). In the one Shakespearean play where one would expect to find a parasite, there is none, though. This is *The Comedy of Errors* (c. 1594), which takes from Plautus' *The Two Menaechmuses* most of its key elements, including the identical twins mistaken for each other, yet omits its angry parasite, Peniculus.

57 Vandiver fails to mention the trickster Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale* (c. 1609–1610), who is brought up during the discussion between Frank Goodman and Charlie Noble in *The Confidence-Man*. As will be argued in Chapter 6, he, too, embodies clearly recognizable parasitic traits.

is, he is yet another merry and gluttonous jester who happily drains his patron's resources, flattering him one moment, having fun at his expense the next; in Robert S. Miola's words, he is "an English version of the classical *parasitus*, a great gorging of food and drink at others' expense" (42). The roles of Parolles and Sir John Falstaff, on the other hand, depart from this relationship: The former appears in *All's Well That Ends Well* (c. 1602–1605); the latter is the unruly companion of Prince Hal in *King Henry IV, Part 1* (c. 1597–1598) and *Part 2* (c. 1598–1600), as well as the cheerful butt of many a joke in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (c. 1597–1599). In both characters the figures of the parasite and the braggart soldier came to be merged, something that is also the case for Jonson's Bobadill, and, to a certain degree, Don Adriano de Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost* (c. 1594–1595).⁵⁸

Of these comedic Shakespearean spongers, the fat and jolly Falstaff is by far the most significant literary creation. As John W. Draper has pointed out, in the true spirit of his Greco-Roman forefathers, he "is more, and more continuously, interested in food than any other character in Shakespeare" ("Falstaff" 393). When it comes to feeding, this cowardly soldier is a veritable tornado that repeatedly lays waste to his various patrons' larders without regret, living off anybody he can through a combination of flattery, jests, good cheer, and playing the buffoon. He is filled with an infectious comic energy that breaks down social hierarchies, loves playing tricks on others, but is himself also repeatedly tricked; in Draper's words:

Falstaff, indeed, is no respecter of his social inferiors, his equals, or his betters: he seems to respect only those who may provide his dinner and only when they do it. He is like the Roman parasite not only in being at once a wit and the butt of wit, but also in combining flattery and fawning with impudence and brag. ("Falstaff" 396–97)

58 On Parolles as a combination of parasite and braggart soldier, see Miola (127–29). When Vandiver claims that "[t]hese two stock figures, parasite and *miles gloriosus*, [were] entirely distinct in Latin comedy" (421), he overlooks that there was a touch of the braggart in many classical parasites, too, though not to the same extent as in the boasting spongers of Elizabethan comedy.

Indeed, Shakespeare's "parasite extraordinary plenipotentiary" (Draper, "Falstaff" 392)—whom Melville, as previously noted, commemorated in the late poem "Falstaff's Lament over Prince Hal Become Henry V"—is the only true rival to Mosca as the Elizabethan comic parasite *par excellence*.

Similarly, with the creation of "honest" Iago in *Othello* (c. 1603–1604), Shakespeare also came to rival Jonson's Sejanus as the most memorable parasite-like character in tragedy. Obviously, his scheming master villain is a very different creature from the classical Greek and Roman hangers-on, showing little or no interest in food, as well as far exceeding his predecessors in complexity. Even so, he still embodies several of the most usual traits of the parasite; in Vandiver's words: "Perhaps it is not too bold to suggest that Shakespeare was partly influenced by the preceding English dramatic parasites in the creation of Iago, who at first appears to be a villain of the Machiavellian type" (421).⁵⁹ This can both be seen in his relationship with Othello, whose confidence he gains in order to ceaselessly pursue his downfall, but most explicitly in his dealings with the rich Venetian gentleman Roderigo, whom Iago not only manipulates through a combination of flattery and cunning, but whose resources he is also steadily draining.⁶⁰ This becomes especially clear at the end of Act I, where he convinces the heart-broken Roderigo, who has just learned that Othello has wedded Desdemona, to sell his lands in order to finance their supposedly joint revenge against the Moor. After Roderigo departs, Iago lets it be known what he really thinks of his companion, whom he will later label "this poor trash of Venice, whom I trash/ For his quick hunting" (2.1.300–1), before finally murdering him in cold blood in Act V: "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse:/ For I mine own gained knowledge should

59 For others who have discussed Iago's possible parasitic traits, see Draper ("Poor Trash" 512–13), Withington (747–48), and Gilchrist. Even though it makes no reference of the figure of the parasite, see also the discussion of Iago as a flatterer and false friend in Evans, where it is argued that Shakespeare was likely influenced by Plutarch's aforementioned "How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend," either directly or through Sir Thomas Elyot's "The Election of Friends and the Diversity of Flatterers" from *The Book of the Governor* (1531).

60 In their introduction to *Twelfth Night*, J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik claim that the relationship between the aforementioned parasite and host, Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, "are models for the more lethal relationship between Iago and Roderigo in *Othello*" (1191).

profane/ If I would time expend with such a snipe/ But for my sport and profit” (1.2.381–84).

Scholars have also noted the many similarities between Iago and Mosca, both of whom are from Venice, and—more importantly—both of whom are master storytellers who beguile others through their complicated narratives. Stephen Greenblatt for example notes that “[l]ike Jonson’s Mosca, Iago is fully aware of himself as an improviser and revels in his ability to manipulate his victims, to lead them by the nose like asses, to possess their labor without their ever being capable of grasping the relation in which they are enmeshed” (233). In addition, the similarities between Mosca’s soliloquy and Iago’s distinction between different forms of knavery at the beginning of Act I may serve as an indication that in the creation of the former, Jonson was partly inspired by Shakespeare’s villain. As will be remembered, in his monologue, Mosca distinguishes between base parasites that flatter for food, and “true parasites,” such as himself. Similarly, in his dialogue with Roderigo, Iago distinguishes between base and elevated forms of knavery. The former type he defines as follows: “You shall mark/ Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave/ That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,/ Wears out his time much like his master’s ass,/ For naught but provender” (*Othello* 1.1.43–47). This type of knave, who flatters for “naught but provender,” obviously resembles the type of parasite whom Mosca looks down upon. Just like him, Iago too holds himself to much loftier ideals:

Whip me such honest knaves! Others there are
Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves
And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
Do well thrive by them, and, when they have lined their coats,
Do themselves homage: these fellows have some soul
And such a one do I profess myself. (Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.1.48–54)

That Jonson’s great comic parasite clearly echoes Shakespeare’s villain serves as an additional indication that the latter, too, has much of the parasite in him. However, even more than does Mosca, Sejanus, and Falstaff, as a character Iago transcends all kinds of literary types and stock characters, ending up as so much more than the different parts and influences

that went into his making; as Vandiver puts it: “In Shakespeare’s great creations the stock character disappears, becoming an indissoluble part of the new figure that escapes the bounds of rigid classification” (427).

Before leaving the Elizabethan parasite, a few remarks must be made about the two supposedly parasitic counsellors in Shakespeare’s *King Richard II*, Bushy and Greene.⁶¹ Not only do they have little stage-time and few memorable lines, but they also end up being summarily executed at the beginning of act III by Richard’s rival, Henry Bolingbroke, the future Henry IV. Even though they are thus obviously minor characters, they are frequently referred to by other characters, either by name or indirectly. It is obviously them the Earl of Northumberland has in mind when he claims that “[t]he king is not himself, but basely led/ By flatterers” (2.1.241–42). Bolingbroke explicitly refers to them as “[t]he caterpillars of the commonwealth,/ Which I have sworn to weed and pluck away” (2.3.165–66), whereas, after the execution, Richard’s gardener labels them as “weeds” that have been “pluck’d up root and all by Bolingbroke” (3.4.50, 52). To Vandiver, the two are typical examples of the evil, Teutonic parasitic counselors whose scheming leads to the king’s downfall. As he puts it, their influence “results in their death as well as the king’s. They create civil discord and domestic trouble, estranging Richard from his wife . . . ; moreover, Bushy and Green[e] are rewarded with the possessions of the men they have wrongly injured” (420).

This view corresponds well with the opinion concerning the lives of the real Sir John Bussy and Sir Henry Green given in many of the historical writings about the reign of Richard II available to Shakespeare. Examples include Edward Hall’s *The Union of the Two Noble & Illustre Families of Lancastre & Yorke* (1548), Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587), and Samuel Daniel’s *The Civil Wars* (1595). All of these explain the king’s unpopularity and his fall from grace as being in large part occasioned by his reliance, in Hall’s words, on the influence of “his pasesites [sic] and flattering foloers [sic]” (qtd. in Gaudet 142). Even though the historical evidence seems to be on his side, there

61 The historical sources for the two characters were King Richard II’s advisors, Sir John Bussy (also known as Bushy) and Sir Henry Green. While some editions of the play and some scholars, including Vandiver, spell the latter’s name in this manner, I have followed *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works* in calling him Greene.

is nonetheless a fundamental problem with Vandiver's claim. As Paul Gaudet has argued, Shakespeare's portrayal of Bushy and Greene does not actually present them as given to flattery, as offering bad advice, or as having much influence over the willful king at all; in his words: "Shakespeare has not dramatized their flattery as a calculated attempt to create personal advantage by misleading a king; their behavior is rather a tacit acceptance of Richard's will, a form of passive encouragement" (147). For example, the king alone is responsible for banishing Bolingbroke and, upon the death of the latter's father, John of Gaunt, for confiscating the family's property, thereby setting in motion the events that will lead to his own downfall.

This helps us see the many accusations against Bushy and Greene for what they truly are: In labeling the two as parasitical "weeds" and "caterpillars" that have led the king astray and which must be removed for the health of the commonwealth, Richard's rivals have acquired a powerful rhetorical weapon capable of legitimizing their military intervention. Under cover of helping the king get rid of these damaging "foreign bodies," Bolingbroke is easily able to pursue his real goal, forcing Richard to step down so that he can capture the crown for himself.⁶² In accepting Bushy and Greene's status as parasites as a given, Vandiver seems to be unaware that he is simply reiterating as an objective fact something Shakespeare's play strongly indicates is ruthless political propaganda; to quote Gaudet: "The principal case against Bushy, ... and Greene is in the form of assertion and accusation. These are essentially partisan censures that can be taken as true only if we are willing to disregard the political motives in which they originate and only if we accept allegation as proof" (145).

The rhetorical strategies here indicated by Gaudet may be contrasted with those found in *Sejanus His Fall*. In both plays, the figure of the parasite is actively used to undermine the authority of political opponents, but Shakespeare withholds all evidence whether Bushy and Greene deserve the label given them. Jonson, on the other hand, shows that the jealousy

62 In fact, in the play, it is not Bushy and Greene, but Bolingbroke's followers that come across as fawning flatterers. The Earl of Northumberland, in particular, offers his patron the type of praise that could easily have been expressed by any Plautine parasite, for instance telling Bolingbroke that "your fair discourse hath been as sugar,/ Making the hard way sweet and delectable" (Shakespeare, *Richard II* 2.3.6-7).

and anger of Sejanus' aristocratic enemies plays an important part in their invectives; his most vocal critic, Arruntius, condescendingly claiming that he has been "raised from excrement to side the gods" (4.406). Moreover, Jonson's deceitful courtier is clearly guilty of much of what he is accused of, but this does not make his opponents model citizens, even though they do their best to appear as such. Ironically, Sejanus, too, at one point indirectly invokes the figure of the parasite against them. Trying to convince Tiberius to act against these noblemen, he offers the following depiction of their frequent attendance at the feasts of Agrippina, the widow of Germanicus, the popular general in whose death in 19 AD the emperor was suspected of being involved. Playing upon his patron's fears, Sejanus strongly indicates that these feasts are little more than excuses for plotting against Tiberius and in favor of Agrippina's sons:

Days and nights

She spends in banquets and ambitious feasts
 For the nobility, where Caius Silius,
 Titius Sabinus, old Arruntius,
 Asinius Gallus, Furnius, Regulus,
 And others of that discontented list
 Are the prime guests. There, and to these, she tells
 Whose niece she was, whose daughter, and whose wife;
 And then must they compare her with Augusta,
 Ay, and prefer her too, commend her form,
 Extol her fruitfulness; at which a show'r
 Falls for the memory of Germanicus,
 Which they blow over straight with windy praise
 And puffing hopes of her aspiring sons. (2.216–29)

While this accusation should not be taken at face value, the play shows that "windy praise" indeed is *everywhere* in Imperial Rome, and not solely the domain of Sejanus. In fact, even those characters in the play claiming to abhor such strategies turn out to be all too willing to apply them. For instance, even though Arruntius seemingly takes the high road when he states that "[o]f all wild beast, preserve me from a tyrant;/ And of all tame, a flatterer!" (1.437–38), he has no qualms about flattering Tiberius'

son, Drusus. And the cunning Macro, too, shows his capacity for flattery when he tricks Sejanus, who, echoing Iago's frequently repeated epithet in *Othello*, addresses him as "[h]onest, and worthy Macro" (5.380). How honest and worthy he really is can be seen after Sejanus has been beheaded and literally torn to pieces by the crowd, when Macro hands over his fallen adversary's son and daughter to their brutal end:

because our laws
 Admit no virgin immature to die,
 The wittily and strangely cruel Macro
 Delivered her to be deflow'ed and spoiled
 By the rude lust of the licentious hangman,
 Then to be strangled with her harmless brother. (5.831–36)

Hence, trading in Sejanus for Macro hardly seems an ethical improvement for a society where political flattery is everywhere, and where the senate is ready to redirect its allegiance at a second's notice; in the words of Arruntius: "I prophesy, out of this Senate's flattery,/ That this new fellow, Macro, will become/ A greater prodigy in Rome than he/ That now is fall'n" (Jonson, *Sejanus* 5.732–35). The play thus illustrates Michel Serres' claim that "history has never lacked for political parasites. History is full of them, or maybe is made solely of them" (*Parasite* 5).⁶³

In their different ways, *King Richard II* and *Sejanus His Fall* can therefore both help clarify a point I made about parasites in Roman satire: One should never forget the question of the speaker's perspective when it comes to accusations of parasitic behavior leveled against others. In addition to their inventive use of parasitic traits for a variety of purposes, both in their comedies and tragedies, Shakespeare and Jonson have offered important examples of how literature may explore the uses of the parasite as a rhetorical tool for political purposes.

⁶³ The political world depicted in *Sejanus His Fall* also brings to mind the following quip, no less fitting for being etymologically incorrect: "The word 'politics' is derived from the word 'poly' meaning 'many,' and the word 'ticks' meaning 'blood sucking parasites'" (origin unknown, but sometimes ascribed to Larry Hardiman).

Charles Dickens and the Pathologization of the Parasite

From Elizabethan England, it is time to move ahead to September 20, 1845, when a band of merry amateurs in London gave the first of several performances of Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*. Directing the play, as well as filling the role of the vain, boastful, cowardly, and parasitic Captain Bobadill, was none other than Charles Dickens, whose works Melville was well acquainted with.⁶⁴ Even though the punishment Bobadill receives at the end of the folio version of the play staged by Dickens is far lighter than the one he received in the original quarto version, for a parasite it would perhaps have been even more bitter. Whereas everybody else is either invited to the lavish wedding feast of Edward Knowell and Bridget, or at least offered food, Justice Clement tells Bobadill and Matthew—the false soldier and the false poet—that “while we are at supper, you two shall penitently fast it out in my court without; and, if you will, you may pray there that we may be so merry within as to forgive or forget you when we come out” (Jonson, *Every Man*, folio version, 5.5.42–44).⁶⁵

That Dickens was familiar with the figure of the parasite is also obvious from his writings, which contain several explicitly parasitic characters. This is most clearly the case in what H. M. Daleski has termed Dickens' “first major attempt to come to grips with the society in which he lived” (186): *Bleak House* (1852–1853). In fact, along with *The Confidence-Man*, it is one of the novels of the nineteenth century most overrun with spongers. Since the portrayals of the various parasitic characters in these two works are very different, having a closer look at *Bleak House* is useful both as a contrast to Melville, and because it helps explain a new stage of the evolution of the literary parasite. On the one hand, Dickens shows how the figure may come to function in the novel, as opposed to drama.⁶⁶

64 On Dickens' staging of *Every Man in His Humour*, see Tambling. On Melville and Dickens, see Jaffé, Arac (32–57), and Weisbuch (36–54).

65 For Bobadilla's original punishment, see the quarto version of *Every Man in His Humour* (Jonson 5.3.301–8).

66 This is not to say that Dickens is the first novelist to make use of the figure of the parasite: Regine May has for example argued that Lucius, the protagonist of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass* (c. late second century AD), is endowed with parasitic traits (143–81).

On the other, and more importantly, contrasting his parasites with those of Shakespeare and Jonson, it becomes evident how major a change the figure has gone through between the beginning of the seventeenth century and his own, and Melville's, time.⁶⁷

Even though parasites seem to be everywhere in *Bleak House*, the word "parasite," either in the singular or the plural, is only used three times, all three appearing in the chapters told by Dickens' anonymous and omniscient third-person narrator, rather than by the novel's somewhat anemic heroine, Esther Summerson. The second instance, found in Chapter 16, is particularly instructive.⁶⁸ Here is the narrator's description of the rundown tenements known as "Tom-all-Alone's" where the poor street-sweeper Jo survives as best he can:

It is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people; where the crazy houses were seized upon, when their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants, who, after establishing their own possession, took to letting them out in lodgings. Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint than ... all the fine gentlemen in office ... shall set right in five hundred years. (256–57)

To understand how the "vermin parasites" in this passage differ from all the older references previously encountered in this chapter, a few words about metaphors are needed. As Regine May has noted, in classical comedy "parasites are often metaphorically associated with greedy animals" (98), and several works where they have been compared to animals and insects have already been mentioned: Plutarch likening parasitic flatterers to "vermin" (49c); Bolingbroke labeling Bushy and Greene "caterpillars of

67 In addition to Dickens and Melville, several other nineteenth-century authors have contributed to the evolution of the figure of the parasite. While I will not discuss these here, two deserve particular mention: Honoré de Balzac and George Eliot. On parasites in the former's work, see Baran, and Paulson (38–52); on Eliot's parasites, see Zwierlein ("From Parasitology" 165–68).

68 See also the references to botanical parasitism in Chapter 10, and to biological parasites in Chapter 47 of *Bleak House* (Dickens 155, 724).

the commonwealth” in *King Richard II*; and Voltore accusing Mosca of being a “flesh-fly” in *Volpone* (5.9.1). Or, to invoke another example, the English poet William King concludes his *The Art of Cookery* (1709) with the claim that if he were allowed to choose, he would rather encounter “a ravenous Wolf or Bear got loose” than a parasite, because the latter will “eat and talk, and talking still will eat,/ No quarter from the Parasite you’ll get;/ But, like a leech, well fix’d, he’ll suck what’s good,/ And never part till satisfied with Blood” (630–35).

Parasites have thus often tempted authors prior to Dickens into drawing comparisons with the lowest living creatures on the *scala naturae*, “the great chain of being” thought to hierarchically organize everything that exists, from God and down to inanimate objects.⁶⁹ However, to claim that “vermin parasites” crawl over “the ruined human wretch” would simply not have made sense to any of these authors. The reason is that to them, even though the degraded behavior of hangers-on might be likened to that of various entities in nature, the *only* creatures recognized as parasites in the *literal* sense of the word were human beings. In *Bleak House*, on the other hand, we encounter a dramatic reversal: In the quote, the label “parasite” refers to non-human entities such as fleas and lice, and is only subsequently metaphorically transferred to the wretched and poverty-stricken humans that inhabit these pestilent lodgings; in H. M. Daleski’s words from *Dickens and the Art of Analogy* (1970): “In terms of the simile, the ‘crowd of foul existence’ that the slum has bred ‘in maggot numbers’ is clearly a crowd of human parasites, of miserable mendicants whose begging exemplifies the most primitive and precarious form of social parasitism” (171). In other words, Dickens heralds a stage where humans and animals come to change places as the metaphor’s tenor and vehicle, as attested to by one of the explanations of the noun parasite offered by the *OED*: “a person whose behaviour resembles that of a plant or animal parasite; a sponger” (“parasite”).

69 On the importance of the *scala naturae* to Western thought, see Lovejoy. On Melville and the great chain of being, see Marovitz, and Wilson. The latter argues that *Moby-Dick* foreshadows many of the ideas later to be found in Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), including its attack on the *scala naturae*. On Darwin and Melville, see also Gottlieb, Franzosa, and Howarth.

Before looking in more detail at *Bleak House*, it is necessary to briefly address this shift, which came about due to the gradual adoption of the term “parasite” by naturalists. The *OED* helps outline how the class of parasitic entities was thus significantly extended: The first known usage of the adjective “parasitical” in English to indicate sponging among non-humans is from the middle of the seventeenth century. In his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), Sir Thomas Browne—much admired by Melville, who labeled him a “crack’d Archangel” (qtd. in Metcalf 56)—argues that, contrary to common belief, mistletoe does not grow upon trees as a result of seeds dropped by birds.⁷⁰ In passing, he notes that wherever it grows, “it is of constant shape, and maintains a regular figure; like other supercrescences, and such as living upon the stock of others, are termed parasitical plants, as polypody, moss, the smaller capillaries, and many more” (Browne 203). As a noun, parasite was first used in the botanical sense in Ephraim Chambers’ *Cyclopædia* (1728). Under the heading “PARASITES, or PARASITAICAL [sic] Plants,” he defined the subject as “in Botany, a Kind of diminutive Plants, growing on Trees, and so called from their Manner of living and feeding, which is altogether on others” (351).

This was only the second meaning given to the term by Chambers; the first dealt with the social origins of the concept.⁷¹ That is to say, to him, there were only two kinds of parasites: men and plants, listed in that order. As late as 1785, the former meaning was the only one included in Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language*, which defined parasite solely as “[o]ne that frequents rich tables, and earns his welcome by flattery” (277). As Jonathan Z. Smith notes, it is also revealing that the 1838 edition of *Allegemeine Encyklopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste* featured a grand total of *two* sentences on botanical parasitism, as

70 On Browne’s influence on mid-nineteenth-century American literature, see Matthiessen (100–30); on his influence on Melville, see Brian Foley, who argues that echoes from *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* resonate strongly throughout *Moby-Dick*.

71 In Chambers’ words: “PARASITE, PARASITUS, among the Greeks, was originally a very reputable Title; the Parasites being a Kind of Priests, or at least Ministers of the Gods ... They took care of the sacred Corn, or the Corn destined for Service of the Temples and the Gods, viz. Sacrifices, Feasts, &c. They had even the Intendance over Sacrifices, and took care they were duly performed. At Athens there was a Kind of College of twelve Parasites; each people of Attica furnishing one; who was always chosen out of the best Families” (350–51).

opposed to the preceding seven pages (13 columns), which were dedicated to various issues relating to the social meanings of the term (280).

Exactly why the term parasite came to be applied to plants in the first place is not certain, but what is clear is that such usage did have literary antecedents. For instance, the gardener in Shakespeare's *King Richard II* at one point describes his king's downfall to two servants in terms that duplicate those of Bolingbroke and his circle. Referring to Bushy and Greene, as well as to another of Richard's close associates, the Earl of Wiltshire, he claims that "[t]he weeds which his [Richard's] broad-spreading leaves did shelter,/ That seem'd in eating him to hold him up/ Are pluck'd up root and all by Bolingbroke" (Shakespeare, *Richard II* 3.4.50–52). It is not a far stretch to go from metaphorically depicting those perceived to be court parasites as like weeds drawing their nourishment from other plants, to adopting the terms "parasitic," and later "parasite," for plants that live on others. No matter how the adoption of the term originated, though, botanists themselves originally understood it as a figure of speech, as can be seen from Almira H. Lincoln's *Familiar Lectures on Botany* (1831). In an explanatory footnote after a reference to parasitic plants, she mentions the etymology of the term, its classical origin in Greek religion, and its afterlife in the spongers of comedy, before going on to note that, "by analogy, the term is now applied to plants which live upon others" (34; emphasis added). Today, the "by analogy" has long since been forgotten, and botanists simply understand a parasite as a "plant that lives on another plant and derives its nourishment from it" (Hickey and King 30).

The idea that animals and insects could be labeled and understood as parasites is of even more recent origin. The first example noted by the *OED* is the fourth volume of William Kirby and William Spence's *An Introduction to Entomology*, published in 1826.⁷² While the two authors had also applied the term in the earlier volumes, published from 1815 and onwards, and while I have come across a reference from as early as 1769 describing cuckoos as "animal parasites," it seems this new

72 For an analysis of the ideological implications of the joint entomological venture of Kirby and Spence, the former a parson-naturalist, the latter a capitalist and political economist, see Clark (14–33).

meaning probably only gradually started coming into common usage in English in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.⁷³ An even more recent occurrence, dating from 1857, is the adoption by naturalists of the concept of the “host,” which many take for granted as the natural companion to the parasite. This year not only saw the publication of *The Confidence-Man*, but also of Edwin Lankester’s translation of Friedrich Küchenmeister’s influential *On Animal and Vegetable Parasites of the Human Body*.⁷⁴ In his explanatory footnote after the word is first used, Lankester notes that “‘Host’ is a literal translation of the German ‘Wirth,’ and although not perhaps previously used in the above sense in the English language, I have adopted it to prevent a somewhat tedious circumlocution” (in Küchenmeister 4).⁷⁵ Thus, for a period of about 30 years or so, a situation existed in which Anglo-American naturalists had access to the concept of the parasite, but not of the host.⁷⁶

As mentioned in the introduction, these conceptual adoptions helped pave the way for the emergence of the biological subfield of parasitology sometime in the last half of the nineteenth century.⁷⁷ Even though

73 An anonymous book review in the British periodical *The Monthly Review* mentions the work of one M. Gleditsch on the parasitical plant *Cytinus hypocistis*: “The *Hypocistis* is one of that family of plants called parasites, and which we may, perhaps without much impropriety, term the cuckoos [cuckoos] of the vegetable kingdom. They exceed this animal parasite however in rapacity and perseverance: as many of them are not only hatched and brought up by, but during the whole state of their vegetable life owe their subsistence to, plants of another genus” (“The History of the Royal Sciences” 558).

74 According to Jonathan Z. Smith, Küchenmeister’s original, published in 1855 as *Die in und an dem Körper des lebenden Menschen vorkommenden Parasiten*, is most likely the first major work in biology to have used the word “parasite” in its title (280).

75 Earlier naturalists only used the term host in order to indicate multiplicities, as in *A Flora and Fauna within Living Animals* by Melville’s aforementioned contemporary, Joseph Leidy: “When piles of decaying sticks or dry leaves were stirred up, or the dust was blown about by the wind, a host of most incongruous objects could be obtained from the air; none, however, which could be supposed capable of producing disease” (15). Additional proof that naturalists were aware that the concept had been imported to their field from a different origin can be found in T. Spencer Cobbold’s *Entozoa: An Introduction to the Study of Helminthology* (1864), which switches back and forth between writing host with and without inverted commas, as if not entirely sure what status to accord the term.

76 Thus, the following claim from J. Hillis Miller is not entirely correct: “‘Parasite’ is one of those words which calls up its apparent opposite. It has no meaning without that counterpart. There is no parasite without its host” (“The Critic” 178).

77 There seems to be a general agreement that, important predecessors notwithstanding, the scientific field of parasitology should be dated to the last half of the nineteenth century: Reinhard Hoeppli suggests “about 1850” (xiv); Arthur William Meyer the period 1840–70 (43); John Farley

awareness of the existence of the kinds of non-human creatures that came to be known as parasites has a long history, several different factors were necessary for the study of such creatures to become scientific.⁷⁸ First of all, as Jonathan Z. Smith has put it,

awareness of parasitism's ubiquity had to await the late seventeenth-century development of the microscope. This resulted in a decisive shift of intellectual interest to the scientific, philosophical, and literary topos of the intricately small. Even after this point, despite the enormous increase in data, theoretical issues with respect both to taxonomy and "spontaneous generation" had to be settled before the discipline of parasitology could emerge. (254)

The question of "spontaneous generation" partly concerns the origins of the miniscule creatures that were finally made visible after Anton van Leeuwenhoek's 1673 invention of an improved microscope. According to Edward S. Dunster, this "brought into view a new outlying territory which swarmed with animal life in numbers and kind before unsuspected" (157). The question of where these "animalcules"—as they were known—came from and how they lived, was one that puzzled the scientists of van Leeuwenhoek's day. Building on the tradition stretching back at least to Aristotle, the commonly accepted answer was that such creatures were not the offspring of any preceding animals. Rather, they were thought to have been spontaneously generated from living elements different from themselves (*heterogenesis*) or out of non-living elements (*abiogenesis*); as Aristotle describes it in his *Historia animalium*:

some [animals] come into being from animals whose natural form is of the same kind as their own; others spontaneously and not from animals of the same kind as themselves: and the latter are subdivided into (a) those which arise out of putrefying earth and plants, which is the case with many of the insects; and

dates parasitology, as distinct from the earlier and much more limited field of helminthology, to the 1880s ("Parasites" 55); whereas Michael Worboys operates with three periods: the field's prehistory (the mid-nineteenth century to 1900), its emergence (1900–1918), and finally its proper establishment during the interwar period (2). For an overview of the history of parasitology, see also Power.

78 On knowledge prior to the modern age of the biological entities later to be termed parasites, see Hoeppli, and Power.

(b) those which arise inside animals themselves out of the residues in their parts. (5.1.539a 20–25)

The Italian naturalist Francesco Redi launched an attack on the validity of this view as early as in 1668, when he showed the presence of maggots in putrefying meat to be caused by eggs from blowflies, rather than by spontaneous generation. Even so, his work and that of those following in his footsteps only managed to reduce the area the theory was applied to, rather than disprove it. More specifically, whereas Aristotle's point (a) came to be overthrown, his point (b), which concerns the existence of animals living inside others (what would later be known as endoparasites), was held to be valid by many of the foremost naturalists throughout at least the first half of the nineteenth century.⁷⁹ As John Call Dalton puts it:

spontaneous generation lost its rank as a great natural division of the reproductive function; and came to be regarded as an exceptional phenomenon, confined to a very few species whose existence could not be accounted for in the ordinary way. Its territory was narrowed exactly in proportion as the knowledge of natural history advanced; and it became reduced almost exclusively to the class of animals known as *entozoa* or internal parasites. (qtd. in Dunster 154)

The adherents of spontaneous generation considered the presence of such entozoa to be caused by a sick body, rather than as something making the body sick. This was not finally disproven before the mid-nineteenth century, in part due to the work of such naturalists as the Danish zoologist Japetus Steenstrup in 1842 and Küchenmeister in the 1850s.⁸⁰ From this

⁷⁹ On the struggle between the supporters and the opponents of spontaneous generation, see Farley ("Spontaneous Generation").

⁸⁰ Küchenmeister's work involved feeding bladder worms to men sentenced to die and then searching through their intestines after they had been executed. On his and Steenstrup's importance, see Farley ("Spontaneous Generation" 117–23), and Zimmer (6–10). The theory of spontaneous generation is often considered to have been disproven, once and for all, with Louis Pasteur's famous 1860 experiments on bottled broth, which proved that microbes are transferred to their destination through the air, not generated *ex nihilo*. However, as Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch have argued, Pasteur's work only gained gradual acceptance, with many holding on to the old paradigm. For example, when the British scientist Henry Charlton Bastian died in 1915, he was still convinced the theory of spontaneous generation was correct, see Collins and Pinch (79–90).

point on, parasites could no longer be viewed as *symptoms*. On the contrary, scientists had to accept the fact that these were creatures that could be independently studied, and from this the field of parasitology proper could finally come into being.

Before returning to Dickens, a final point must be made concerning the transfer of the parasite to the natural sciences. Crucially, it was not only the word itself that naturalists adopted, but also a number of negative associations that came with it. From a humanist perspective, the scientific language of parasitology is therefore interesting because it is so utterly suffused with remnants of the social origins of its object of study; in the words of Michel Serres:

The basic vocabulary of this science comes from such ancient and common customs and habits that the earliest monuments of our culture tell of them, and we still see them, at least in part: hospitality, conviviality, table manners, hostelry, general relations with strangers. Thus the vocabulary is imported to this pure science and bears several traces of anthropomorphism. (*Parasite* 6)⁸¹

As a result, throughout the parasitological writings of the nineteenth (as well as parts of the twentieth) century, the parasite is not treated simply as scientists would treat any other natural phenomenon. Instead, by blending the descriptive and the normative, naturalists very often presented it as an “immoral” creature whose “unethical” behavior must be condemned or actively defeated.⁸² A clear-cut example of this tendency of describing nature in ethical terms derived from relationships among humans is found in “Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism,” an 1879 lecture by E. Ray Lankester, the son of Küchenmeister’s translator and a renowned

81 Or, as Serres also notes: “The intuition of the parasitologists makes him import a common relation of social manners to the habits of little animals, a relation so clear and distinct that we recognize it as being the simplest” (*Parasite* 7).

82 Exceptions do exist. For instance, Charles Darwin usually refers to parasites in an objective manner, but even he was not entirely able to avoid ethical judgments, as evident from the following passage from *On the Origin of Species*: “The acquisition of a *useless* part can hardly be said to raise an organism in the natural scale; and in the case of the *imperfect*, closed flowers above described, if any new principle has to be invoked, it must be one of *retrogression* rather than of progression; and so it must be with many parasitic and *degraded* animals” (175; emphasis added). On nineteenth-century naturalists who defended the parasite against accusations of unethical behavior, see Zwierlein (“From Parasitology” 157–62).

evolutionary biologist in his own right. In the lecture, social Darwinism converges with the different theories of *degeneration* in vogue in Europe after the publication of Bénédict Augustin Morel's *Treatise on the Physical, Intellectual and Moral Degeneration of the Human Race* (1857).⁸³ As one of the most important British advocates of the theory of degeneration, Lankester perfectly exemplifies how the diffuse relationship between the human and the non-human parasite allowed the concept to function as a bridge between nature and social policy.⁸⁴ He argues that evolution can take three different forms, respectively termed "balance," "elaboration," and "degeneration." The latter category he primarily illustrates through references to animal parasites, which represent a swerve in the exact opposite direction from the ever-increasing complexity he considers the ideal of evolution.⁸⁵ As he sees it, the degenerate parasites are content to become steadily less complex due to too easy an access to food:

Any new set of conditions occurring to an animal which render its food and safety very easily attained, seem to lead as a rule to Degeneration; just as an active healthy man sometimes degenerates when he becomes suddenly possessed of a fortune; or as Rome degenerated when possessed of the riches of the ancient world. The habit of parasitism clearly acts upon animal organisation in this way. Let the parasitic life once be secured, and away go legs, jaws, eyes, and ears; the active, highly gifted crab, insect, or annelid may become a mere sac, absorbing nourishment and laying eggs. (Lankester 27)

As the quote clearly indicates, to Lankester, parasitism in nature is not simply one possible mode of life among many; it is a thoroughly despicable one. This is even more explicitly spelled out in a book influenced by

83 In construing social deviance as a question of heredity, as something that is passed on from generation to generation, Morel offered a new and powerful vocabulary for addressing the existence of unwanted social elements deemed harmful to the common good. His theory, which originally grew out of a Lamarckian context, came to receive widespread scientific legitimacy because it could easily be adapted to a Darwinian model of evolution, see Gissis. On the importance and longevity of the theory of degeneration, see Pick.

84 On Lankester's importance and views, see Pick (216–18), and Zimmer (15–22).

85 That Lankester's idealizes complexity is clear from his definition of "elaboration" as "a gradual change of structure in which the organism becomes adapted to more and more varied and complex conditions of existence. In Elaboration there is a new expression of form, corresponding to the new perfection of work in the animal machine" (27).

Lankester, *Natural Law in the Spiritual World* (1883) by the Scottish evangelist and naturalist Henry Drummond, who makes the following claim:

Why does the naturalist think hardly of the parasite? Why does he speak of them as degraded, and despise them as the most ignoble creatures in Nature? ... The naturalist's reply to this is brief. Parasitism, he will say, is one of the gravest crimes in Nature. It is a breach of the law of Evolution. Thou shalt evolve ...—this is the first and greatest commandment of nature. But the parasite has no thought for its race, or for perfection in any shape or form. It wants two things—food and shelter. How it gets them is of no moment. Each member lives exclusively on its own account, an isolated, indolent, selfish, and backsliding life. (158)

In addition to their mutual distaste for the “indolent, selfish, and backsliding life” of the biological parasite, in their respective writings, both Lankester and Drummond present the degeneration resulting from a parasitic lifestyle as no less of a danger to humans than it is to their sponging brethren in nature; as the former contends, “it is well to remember that we are subject to the general laws of evolution, and are as likely to degenerate as to progress” (Lankester 48). Anne-Julia Zwierlein has noted that in Victorian England, such comparisons were very common: “In Victorian accounts of biological parasitism, we almost always find explicit parallels between parasitic stagnation in the animal world and the ‘contented life of material enjoyment accompanied by ignorance and superstition’ that human beings had to shun at all costs” (“From Parasitology” 163).

Lankester, Drummond, and contemporaries in England and abroad sharing their views thereby ended up giving scientific legitimacy to a new, reshaped conception of the human parasite.⁸⁶ In the process those so judged were literally marked as little or no better than what was considered the lowest and most useless of all animals; as Carl Zimmer puts it: “People had been referred to as parasites before the late 1800s, but

86 On contemporary scientists, political theorists, criminologists, and novelists who similarly addressed social problems in terms of biology, see Pick's thorough discussion of the respective situations in France, Italy, and England.

Lankester and other scientists gave the metaphor a precision, a transparency, that it had never had before” (18).

More precisely, in *King Richard II* and *Sejanus His Fall* it became apparent how the figure of the parasite could function as a rhetorical means of accusing individuals of fawning, selfish, and sycophantic behavior. However, after the transformation caused by the natural sciences, the destructive potential inherent in the parasite as a rhetorical tool for political purposes infinitely multiplied. It thus became a very effective weapon for labeling entire groups of people as “less than human,” and consequently, not entitled to the same basic rights and protections as others. The most infamous instance of how the new, scientific concept would be abused for political purposes is the National Socialists’ widespread propaganda concerning the Jew as a parasite that had to be exterminated for the good of the social body. Through the rhetorical creation of the Jew as *lebensuntwerten Leben* (“life that does not deserve to live”), the scientific concept became an important factor in legitimizing the Holocaust. To give one particularly horrifying example, a 1944 manual issued by the “nationalsozialistischer Führungsstab der Wehrmacht” makes the following claim:

The Jew wants us to be forced into a life of slavery so as to live among us as a parasite who can suck us dry. Our people’s sound way of life opposes the parasitic Jewish existence. Who can believe it possible ... to reform or convert a parasite (a louse for example)? Who can believe in a compromise with the parasite? We are left with one choice only, either to be devoured by the parasite or to exterminate it. The Jew must be exterminated wherever we meet him! We do not commit a crime against life acting like this; on the contrary, we serve the law of life by fighting against all that is hostile to a sound existence. Our fight serves, indeed, the preservation of life. (qtd. in Bein 33–34)⁸⁷

As a corollary, one should avoid the temptation to think that the adoption of the term “parasite” within the natural sciences had little to do with the figure’s earlier history or that it has had no political consequences

87 On the importance of the figure of the parasite for legitimizing the Holocaust, see Bein, and my “Parasite.” On “life that does not deserve to live,” see Agamben (*Homo Sacer* 136–43); on dehumanization, see D. L. Smith.

to speak of; to quote Michel Serres' conclusion about modern science: "These epistemologies are not innocent" (*Hermes* 28). In this case there is rather a mutual influence between literature, politics, and science, where these spheres constantly influenced, modified, and fed back into each other.⁸⁸ Hence, as Han-liang Chang has argued, any clear-cut distinction between a purely literary and purely biological discourse is simply not possible:

From this fictitious distinction one may develop accordingly a literary semiotics and a biological semiotics, as if the latter could be immuned from the containment of language. This, of course, is to miss the encroachment of rhetoric on biology and the fact that even parasitology as a positive science is encoded in language in the first place. (8)

In other words, what the adoption of the figure of the parasite makes particularly clear is that no matter how much the positive sciences lay claim to an access to natural phenomena, this access will always have to be articulated in a language shaped by cultural norms and traditions.

To return to *Bleak House*, it in many ways foreshadowed arguments such as Lankester and Drummond's. As several scholars have shown, a strong influence from contemporary developments in the natural sciences runs through Dickens' writings.⁸⁹ The previously quoted passage on the state of Tom-all-Alone's and its inhabitants show that, like many of his Victorian contemporaries, he not only drew heavily on the biological metaphor of the organism, but that he was also, in the words of George Levine, "extremely alert to modern scientific and technological developments" and "characteristically used scientific facts and method for moral purposes" (122, 121). One of the things the metaphorical and conceptual reservoir offered by the natural sciences of his day helped him do, was draw a clear distinction—closely resembling the one later to be found in

88 On the mutual influence between science, literature, and politics in the Victorian era, see Beer, Levine, Otis (*Membranes; Literature and Science*), and the texts in Zwierlein (*Unmapped Countries*).

89 On the influence of science on Dickens, see Wilkinson, Arac (123–38), and Levine (119–52). There is much to indicate that he, in turn, also influenced contemporary scientists: Gillian Beer has for example argued that "the organization of *The Origin of Species* seems to owe a good deal to the example of one of Darwin's most frequently read authors, Charles Dickens" (8).

Lankester and Drummond—between the active and productive, on the one hand, and the idle and non-productive, on the other. Time and again, Dickens depicts characters belonging to the latter category to condemn their behavior; as Zwierlein puts it, “Dickens’s novels evince a fascination with members of the social organism who refuse to contribute their own share of work and energy, parasitically benefiting from other people’s labour” (“From Parasitology” 164). Significantly, those described as parasites will often belong to all layers of society, from the very top and all the way down: “While we can detect in Dickens a tendency to reproach aristocrats and exploitative capitalists with parasitical existences, the phenomenon is by no means restricted to them—in fact, parasitism is shown to be so ubiquitous that one has to be constantly on the alert against it” (Zwierlein, “From Parasitology” 163).

In the case of *Bleak House*, lawyers as a class are particularly targeted. At one point describing them “like maggots in nuts” (158), the novel offers several characters whose only goal seems to be to bleed their clients dry of all their resources. Chief amongst these is the vampiric lawyer, Mr. Vholes, thus described by protagonist Esther Summerson: “As he gave me that slowly devouring look of his, while twisting up the strings of his bag . . . , he gave one gasp as if he had swallowed the last morsel of his client, and his black buttoned-up unwholesome figure glided away to the low door at the end of the hall” (975–76).

In fact, *Bleak House* describes as parasitic not only individual lawyers like Vholes and Mr. Tulkinghorn, but also the very institution they belong to—the Court of Chancery, an institution whose American counterpart will be addressed in Chapter 5. Daleski therefore argues that law as it appears in Dickens’ novel “has little to do with justice and is simply a socially condoned form of parasitism” (165). As he stresses, Chancery, in turn, is “symbolic of the functioning of a parasitic society,” and “is from the outset associated with the spread of a noxious infection and corruption in the body politic. . . . Chancery and all its works is presented as the blight of public life, the parasite that consumes the social organism” (167, 169). However, the quote where the poverty-stricken inhabitants of Tom-all-Alone’s are likened to “vermin parasites” indicates that this blight spreads throughout society in its entirety, meaning no social class

is exempt from its taint: “The image of being of this society, it becomes clear, is a chain of parasites” (Daleski 172).

As a corollary, in Dickens can be found the germ of how the metaphor of the parasite has often been applied both by the political left *and* the right ever since the middle of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, through his portrayals of Vholes, Tulkinghorn, and the evil money-lender Mr. Smallweed, he foreshadows the common trope of the capitalist as a useless parasite who nourishes himself on society without offering anything in return.⁹⁰ While versions of this trope appear in the writings of several prominent theorists on the left, including those of Karl Marx himself, an explicit example can be found in “Let Us Free Ireland!” (1899) by the Irish socialist James Connolly.⁹¹ Here he touches upon the topic of what exactly those who own the means of production can be said to contribute to society:

The capitalist, I say, is a parasite on industry; as useless in the present stage of our industrial development as any other parasite in the animal or vegetable world is to the life of the animal or vegetable upon which it feeds. The working class is the victim of this parasite—this human leech, and it is the duty and interest of the working class to use every means in its power to oust this parasite class from the position which enables it to thus prey upon the vitals of labour.
(Connolly)

On the other hand, through the portrayal in *Bleak House* of the parasitic, unproductive poor, as well as of so-called “telescopic” philanthropists like the selfish Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle, and Mr. Chadband (49), Dickens’ novel also helped clear the path for the way the metaphor of

90 In its portrayals of the relatives of Sir Leicester Dedlock sponging off his fortune, *Bleak House* also resonates with contemporary attacks on the aristocracy as a parasitic institution, see William Howitt’s claim from 1846 that “[o]ur aristocracy are like parasitical plants ... Above, hang perhaps parasitical blossoms of great beauty, but all beneath is rottenness and decay. Such is the gay and aspiring, but fatal nature of an aristocracy, parasitical in all its qualities” (324).

91 See Marx’s reference to the “state parasite” in his writings on the Paris Commune, as well as Lenin’s elaborations of the same point (Marx and Lenin 59–60 and 121–23, respectively). On the role of the parasite in Marx’s argument, see LaCapra. For a more recent example, see the section “Parasite” in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (359–61).

the parasite came to be used by the political right.⁹² Here, it is typically directed against those in need of welfare, and sometimes also social reformers trying to alleviate poverty. These uses are both evident in a talk given by Ayn Rand on February 9, 1961, where she claimed that the only kind of men that “can be of value to one another” are “rational, productive, independent men in a rational, productive, free society,” before making the following assertion:

Parasites, moochers, looters, brutes and thugs can be of no value to a human being—nor can he gain any benefit from living in a society geared to *their* needs, demands and protection, a society that treats him as a sacrificial animal and penalizes him for his virtues in order to reward *them* for their vices, which means: a society based on the ethics of altruism. No society can be of value to man’s life if the price is the surrender of his right to his life. (Rand; emphasis in the original)⁹³

Comparing Connolly and Rand, we see that the only thing they have in common, is the shared view that the parasite—no matter if in animal or human shape—is a useless creature draining the health of its host organism. That a socialist attacking capitalists, and a supporter of *laissez-faire* capitalism attacking socialists and recipients of social benefits, did so in identical manners perfectly illustrates a point made by Susan Sontag about the effectiveness of metaphors: “Like all really successful metaphors, the metaphor of [tuberculosis] was rich enough to provide for two contradictory applications” (24–25). Or, as Jeanette Samyn has put it, “[t]he parasite can be left or right, weak or strong, rich or poor, healthy or sick—it just depends on who’s talking” (“Anti”).

To return to *Bleak House*, if one were to further describe Dickens’ parasites, they are often entertaining literary figures lacking anything

92 The appetite of the hypocritical philanthropist, Mr. Chadband, leads the narrator to describe him as “a consuming vessel” capable of wielding “such weapons of the flesh as a knife and fork, remarkably well.” Although “attached to no particular denomination,” he is “in the ministry” (Dickens 303–4). Thus, he represents a type of literary sponger not yet mentioned: the religious parasite who gains access to his host’s larder through promises of salvation and threats of eternal damnation, as famously found in Molière’s *Tartuffe, or the Impostor* (1664).

93 In addition to its usefulness for criticizing welfare recipients, the metaphor of the parasite has also allowed the populist right to conceptualize immigrants as “foreign bodies” doing damage to the society hosting them, see Inda, and Musolf (73–92).

resembling depth, functioning as little more than the embodiment of sneakiness and evil.⁹⁴ Moreover, to Zwierlein, “[p]arasites in Dickens have the advantage of being easily recognizable—at least for privileged focalizers like Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*, or, through their grotesque physicality, for the reader” (“From Parasitology” 164). This might be slightly unfair to Dickens. After all, Esther takes a long time to see through the most original parasite in *Bleak House*, Harold Skimpole, who is introduced in Chapter 6 as being “grown up ... but in simplicity, and freshness, and enthusiasm, and a fine guileless inaptitude for all worldly affairs, ... a perfect child” (87). While the strange charisma of this jovial, lighthearted and absolutely irresponsible sponger, who lives off everybody he can with absolutely no regret, is proof that Zwierlein’s assessment is not entirely accurate, there is no doubt that the claim is valid for such utterly grotesque characters as the aforementioned Vholes and Smallweed, as well as for the pompous Mr. Turveydrop, a “model of Deportment” who, “having never in his life before done anything but deport himself,” sponges off his hard-working son and daughter-in-law in order to “lead an idle life in the very best clothes” (Dickens 225, 226).⁹⁵ Nor can there be any doubt that readers are meant to condemn the dependent mode of life of these parasitic villains, striving instead for the independence exemplified by the novel’s kind and moral, but also fairly uncharismatic heroine, Esther, and her equally bland allies.⁹⁶

In Dickens there appears not only an early stage of the process that would lead to sponging humans switching places with animals and insects, thereby going from being literal to metaphorical parasites, but also a strong tendency toward pathologizing spongers. Drawing upon the natural sciences, but in many ways also foreshadowing the results of the

94 Levine has argued that this is typical of Dickens, whose characters tend to “behave as though they had single, discoverable selves that constitute their essence” (144).

95 On the correspondence between outward appearance and inner character in *Bleak House*, see Levine, who claims that “Dickens had the confidence of natural theology, in which material reality corresponds meaningfully to a moral reality. The great analogy of natural theology, between physical and spiritual nature, is embedded in his imagination” (134).

96 As has been pointed out by many scholars, the villains in *Bleak House* are for the most part far more fascinating than the protagonists. Daleski for instance argues that the latter—including Esther, young Turveydrop, Rouncewell, Allan Woodcourt, and Mr. Jarndyce—are all defined by a lack of “imaginative vitality” (187).

later convergence between evolutionary theory and the theory of degeneration, Dickens wove together human beings and the creatures in nature commonly considered the lowest in ways that would simply not have made sense to his Greek, Latin, or Elizabethan precursors. Even though Melville, too, was familiar with the adoption of the term “parasite” by the natural sciences, in his mode of describing parasitic relationships, as well as in the attitude toward parasitic characters found in his texts, he differs from his British contemporary. That the Melvillean parasite has little to do with the Dickensian one, becomes clear already in the former’s debut, *Typee*, to which it is now time to turn.