

“Clowns that beat Grimaldi all to nothing turn up every day!”: The Grimaldian clown in the work of Charles Dickens

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PhD thesis

Royal Holloway, University of London

September 2012

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Thesis Abstract

My thesis focuses on the figure of the pantomime clown in the work of Charles Dickens.

While a number of scholars have described Dickens's professional and imaginative relationship to the theatre and popular entertainment, few of these studies have attended to Dickens's ideas on pantomime. Moreover, the importance of the pantomime clown to the formation of Dickens's comic characters is also an under-studied field.

The first half of my thesis focuses on two early works that determined Dickens's attitude to the form and ideas of pantomime. The *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* (1838), the biography of a Regency actor who popularised the role of the pantomime clown, is a largely forgotten text, creatively inferior to much of Dickens's work, but I shall argue that it can be read as a working through of the ideas he had raised in his earlier essay 'The Pantomime of Life' (published in March 1837) around the theme of life as a theatrical performance. Moreover, through a close comparison of the *Memoirs* with the two novels of the same period, *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, it is possible to identify a clear line of thematic and stylistic continuity.

In the second half of my thesis I demonstrate how these ideas persist and develop in Dickens's subsequent fiction. I examine a number of Dickens's comic figures in relation to three tropes from Grimaldi's repertoire - excessive consumption of food and drink, transformative clothing and slapstick violence. These tropes are part of Deborah Vlock's 'imaginary text' of Victorian readers and theatre-goers, which carries its meaning beyond the playhouse to the novel.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge a number of important people who have enabled me to complete this doctoral thesis.

Above all, I would like to thank my partner Sarah for her personal support and great patience at all times, offering both her proof-reading expertise and unfailing encouragement when I have needed it the most.

This thesis would not have been possible without the help, support and patience of my principal supervisor, Dr Anne Varty, not to mention her advice and invaluable knowledge of pantomime during the Regency and Victorian periods. I am also extremely grateful for the good advice and support of my second supervisor, Professor Adam Roberts, particularly his understanding and appreciation of the true essence of Dickens.

I would also like to acknowledge the financial, academic and technical support of Royal Holloway and its staff, particularly in the award of a Postgraduate Research Studentship that provided invaluable financial support.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Professor Sally Ledger, my initial supervisor who sadly passed away during my first year of study. Although I was her student for just six months, I hope this thesis is in some way a minor tribute to the warmth, encouragement and expertise she offered to everyone that had the pleasure of knowing her.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work, and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university.

Signed _____

Date _____

Sections of Chapter 3 have appeared in different forms as:

- “‘We are all actors in The Pantomime of Life’: Charles Dickens and the Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi’, in *Victorian Network 3.2: Theatricality and Performance in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Winter 2011)
- “‘A man of great feeling and sensibility’ – The Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi and the Tears of a Clown’, in *19*, Issue 13 (May 2012)

CHAPTER 1 - Introduction

On 1st June 1837, the famous pantomime clown Joseph Grimaldi was found dead in his chambers at Pentonville, London. The inquest declared that the fifty-eight year old had ‘died by the visitation of God’, and so ended the life of one of the most popular performers of the Regency period.¹ Meanwhile, in nearby Camden, the twenty-five year old Charles Dickens was mourning another death, that of his sister-in-law Mary Hogarth on 7th May, but was also writing monthly instalments for his first two novels, *Pickwick Papers* (1836-37) and *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839).

Thus one artistic career had ended for good, while one was still in its early development. However, this thesis will describe how, through the work of Dickens, Grimaldi (and particularly his pantomime persona of Clown) would continue to occupy an important imaginative space within nineteenth century culture.

This Introduction will introduce Joseph Grimaldi and the world of Regency pantomime, briefly describe the cultural importance of the pantomime clown, and broadly outline Dickens’s awareness of and literary engagement with this figure. It will then explain the structure of this thesis, and introduce some of the key themes and ideas for discussion.

I. Joseph Grimaldi, pantomimes and clowning

Joseph Grimaldi performed on stage from his infancy, but his main pantomime career lasted from 1800 to 1823. During that time he performed the role of Clown during the regular Easter and Christmas pantomime cycles at London’s Drury Lane and Sadler’s Wells theatres.

The Regency pantomime was markedly different from the rather kitsch celebrity ‘gang show’ we know today. Pantomimes were typically an afterpiece for a more serious play and followed a rigid format, within which the spoken word was prohibited. It began with an

¹ Richard Findlater, *Joe Grimaldi: His Life and Theatre*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 225. Further references are given as *Grimaldi*.

opening section which depicted a fairytale or mythical story familiar to the audience, but this merely provided the pretext for the longer and more popular harlequinade. During this section, the initial characters were transformed into stock figures – principally Pantaloon (a villainous old man), Clown (his mischievous servant), Columbine (the heroine) and Harlequin (the hero). These figures performed in a rapid succession of comical or fantastical set-pieces, assisted by Harlequin's magical bat or 'slapstick', until a 'dark' scene, in which Harlequin and Columbine appear to have been defeated by Pantaloon and Clown. However, they are then transformed back to their original characters and the pantomime reaches a happy resolution.

At this point, it is worth considering Grimaldi's significance as a comic figure in the early nineteenth century. Sandra Billington states that 'the importance of Grimaldi in the history of the professional Fool cannot be overvalued', and A.E. Wilson regards Grimaldi as 'the pantomime genius' who 'established the importance of Clown' and 'raised clowning to a great art'.² Grimaldi's Clown looked back to earlier traditions and forward to a more contemporary style of clowning; for example, Richard Findlater links him to the *zanni* of the *commedia dell'arte*, the rustic yokels of Elizabethan theatre, and the folk traditions of fooling embodied in 'the fools of the fair, the merry andrews and Jack puddings'.³ Similarly, Charles Dibdin recognised Grimaldi's innovations when he commented that the 'present mode of dressing Clowns and painting their faces, was then invented by Mr. G., who, in every respect, founded a *New School for Clowns*'.⁴

² Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool* (Sussex: Harvester, 1984), p. 92; A. E. Wilson, *Christmas Pantomime: The Story of an English Institution* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1934), p. 65, p. 77.

³ *Grimaldi*, p. 154.

⁴ Charles Dibdin the Younger, *Professional and Literary Memoirs*, ed. by George Speaight (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1956), p. 47. Further references are given as *Professional Memoirs*.

Findlater further situates Grimaldi's evolution of the Clown character within a wider cultural shift from a countryside buffoon to a city comedian, asserting that 'Grimaldi's transformation of the rustic booby into the metropolitan Clown seems, in one sense, to mirror the wider transformations of country life'.⁵ Grimaldi thus became an avatar for the audience to make sense of the changes in their own world, a role that would later be adopted by some of Dickens's clowns.

David Mayer also categorises Clown's role when he calls Grimaldi 'the personification of deliberate mischief and calculated satire'.⁶ These two separate aspects of Clown's function – an anarchic tendency and a considered critique of the times – are also reflected in a *Times* review that called pantomime 'a running commentary [...] upon the whims and speculations of the year' and 'a powerful engine – though sometimes a fantastical one – for striking, sharply and rapidly, at the monstrosities of the time'.⁷ For example, a common target for Grimaldi was the dress of fashionable society and faddish pastimes such as 'four-in-hand' clubs or the 'annual Easter fall-off' at Epping Forest, when 'merchants and tradesmen from the City played at being country gentlemen'.⁸ Some of Grimaldi's best satire was also directed towards events during the Napoleonic Wars, particularly the conduct and organisation of the military.

Charles Dibdin also noted Grimaldi's association with the popular visual culture of the time when he claimed that Grimaldi 'introduced a series of Caricature Scenes somewhat similar to the Print Shop Caricatures, and, like them, allusive to the reigning follies of the day'.⁹ Here Grimaldi operated as an eighteenth-century cartoon character as well as an actor, and these prints can be instructively compared with the illustrations of Dickens's works,

⁵ *Grimaldi*, p. 157.

⁶ David Mayer, *Harlequin in His Element: The English Pantomime, 1806-1836* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 36. Further references are given as *Harlequin*.

⁷ 'The Theatres', *The Times*, 27 December 1825, p. 3.

⁸ *Harlequin*, p. 104.

⁹ *Professional Memoirs*, p. 102.

particularly when one considers that George Cruikshank, Dickens's illustrator for the *Memoirs* and several other early works, was an integral part of the satirical print movement alongside artists like James Gillray.

Dickens's own interest in pantomime inevitably began during his childhood. His Introduction to the *Memoirs* and articles such as 'A Curious Dance Round a Curious Tree' (1852) and 'Dullborough Town' (1860) chronicle his experiences and opinions of pantomimes in local theatres or on travelling wagons, and he even claimed to have seen Grimaldi perform in London. This seemingly made him an ideal candidate to edit Grimaldi's memoirs when the opportunity arose in September 1837.

Grimaldi had written his own life story in December 1836, but engaged the services of the hack writer Thomas Egerton Wilks for correction and editing. When Grimaldi died in May 1837, Wilks sold an unpolished version, with additional material from their conversations and a transposition from first person to third person, to Richard Bentley. Bentley then approached Dickens, as one of his most promising young writers, with the task to make it publishable. Dickens was reluctant, telling Bentley that the manuscript was 'very badly done, and so redolent of twaddle that I fear that I cannot take it up on any conditions to which you would be disposed to accede'. However, he finally demurred after considerable negotiation and took the job in November 1837 on highly cautious terms, demanding '£300 in the first instance without any reference to the Sale' and stipulating that 'the book should not be published in Numbers'.¹⁰ As this thesis will demonstrate, the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* (1838) was one of Dickens's least commercially and critically successful projects, but nonetheless a case can be made for a place within the Dickens canon.

¹⁰ Letter to Richard Bentley, 30 October 1837, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Madeline House, Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, Angus Easson and Nina Burgis, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-2002), I, p. 327. All subsequent references to this edition of the letters are referenced as *Pilgrim*, followed by the volume and page numbers.

II. Thesis structure

This thesis is organised into two main sections.

Section 1 encompasses the review of the current critical debates (Chapter 2) and a reconsideration of Dickens's principal literary engagement with Grimaldi, the *Memoirs* (Chapter 3).

Section 2 discusses how three principal tropes of Grimaldi's pantomime clown persist and develop in Dickens's subsequent fiction. Horatio Smith in *The Drama* noted Grimaldi's ability to 'rob a pieman or open an oyster, imitate a chimney-sweep or a dandy, grasp a red-hot poker or devour a pudding, take snuff, sneeze, make love, mimic a tragedian, cheat his master, pick a pocket, beat a watchman, or nurse a child', and this thesis considers three of these fixed, observable themes – his excessive consumption (Chapter 4), his use of clothing (Chapter 5), and slapstick violence within his performances (Chapter 6).¹¹ These tropes form part of what Deborah Vlock calls the 'imaginary text' of Victorian readers and theatre-goers, which carries its meaning beyond the playhouse to the novels people read.¹²

The Conclusion (Chapter 7) will discuss how these investigations could be taken further and suggest some possible avenues for further research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Chapter 2 examines the prevailing critical thought on Dickens and the theatre (particularly in relation to pantomime) and negotiates a critical space for a new study on Dickens and clowns within this debate. The current accounts can be broadly categorised into a number of areas, which include the figure of the clown, Dickens's conception of the *theatrum mundi*, pantomime and the grotesque, and the reader as audience member. This chapter

¹¹ [Horatio Smith], 'Mr. Grimaldi', in *The Drama; or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, January 1822, p. 59.

¹² Deborah Vlock, *Dickens, Novel Reading and the Victorian Popular Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 6.

discusses the work of some of the principal critical thinkers in this area, including Edwin Eigner, Juliet John, Paul Schlicke and James R. Kincaid, and explains how their work can be developed into other directions to consider the significance of Grimaldi and the pantomime in Dickens's work.

Chapter 3 – The *Memoirs* Reconsidered

Chapter 3 focuses on two works that determine Dickens's attitude to the form and ideas of pantomime at a very early stage in his career. His *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* is a largely forgotten text, creatively inferior to much of Dickens's work, but this chapter will argue that it can be read as a working through of the ideas he had raised in his earlier essay 'The Pantomime of Life' (March 1837) around the theme of life as a theatrical performance. Moreover, through a close comparison of the *Memoirs* with *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, it is possible to identify a clear line of thematic and stylistic continuity.

This chapter initially considers the early reviews of the *Memoirs* and its critical reception to date, including the view of both Dickens and Grimaldi biographers on its value as a biography. It then proposes an alternative approach for reading the *Memoirs* and its accompanying illustrations, drawing on more recent theories of biographical writing and Dickens's other works of the period. This discussion centres on three principal themes – the presence of the audience/mob, the figure of the clown, and Dickens's depiction of other figures from the pantomime cast (particularly Pantaloon and the supernumeraries). Finally the chapter moves beyond the confines of the pantomime to consider Dickens's use of a theatrical structure, a pantomimic tone and his use of gesture and expression in his portrayal of Grimaldi's life.

Chapter 4 – The Gluttonous Clown

Grimaldi's first Clown role was as Guzzle the Drinking Clown, who competed with Gobble the Eating Clown in an eating and drinking competition. Throughout his career, his

harlequinade routines were regularly characterised by gluttony and consumption to excess.

Chapter 4 examines the various perspectives and discourses through which both Grimaldi and Dickens examined issues of food in ways that can be linked to the bodily grotesque.

This discussion demonstrates the centrality of excessive consumption within Grimaldi's act and indicates its significance for both the popular conception of him and for the wider meaning of his act as a cultural commentary. This forms a framework through which Dickens's assessment of the clown can be established.

This chapter also examines the exaggerated and fantastical feats of eating and drinking performed by Grimaldi's Clown and Dickens's clownish characters, and suggests how certain characters push their bodies beyond their normal limits in fuller depictions of the bodily grotesque.

It further considers one of the central confluences of the ideas of gluttony, pantomime and Dickens, which is the excess associated with Christmas. Bakhtin associated the bodily grotesque with the festive tradition, as an opportunity to display and celebrate the body, and both Grimaldi and Dickens work within this tradition by using scenes in market places and other public spaces to celebrate the grotesque. The final section of this chapter shows how the excessive consumption within Grimaldi's act reflects contemporary debates around the wasteful consumer and demonstrates Dickens's awareness of this theme.

Chapter 5 – The Clothed Clown

Grimaldi's appearance was the subject of many popular prints of the time, and was a great development in the visual appearance of Clown. Grimaldi invented a new style of dress, which was 'more extravagant' and 'a whimsical mixture of colours and compositions'.¹³ The new style was a departure from the rustic garments worn by the Jack Puddings and Merry

¹³ *Professional Memoirs*, p. 48.

Andrews of the seventeenth century, and aligned Clown closer to the court Fool's motley, just as he would bring the wider satiric function of the court-Fool onto the pantomime stage – and perform a 'unique transformation of the bumpkin-clown into Harlequin's successor'.¹⁴

This chapter examines how Grimaldi and Dickens use the clothing of their clownish characters to explore ideas about the materiality of the world and the transformative power of garments. It draws on a number of ideas from fashion theory, particularly from Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34). By placing some of this text's central tenets within the context of fashion theory this chapter demonstrates the richness and importance of Carlyle's ideas on the subject, and uses these ideas as lenses through which to view the clothing of Grimaldi's clown and of Dickens's characters. It focuses on three key themes, which can be briefly summarised as follows: clothing as a symbol of individual liberty against the pervasive and oppressive mechanisms of conservative society; clothing as a means to both de-humanise and re-humanise the body; and the clothing of two related cultural archetypes – the dandy and the swell.

Chapter 6 – The Slapstick Clown

The final chapter of this section considers a darker element of Regency pantomime, which is its use of slapstick violence for humorous effect.

D. L. Murray feels that slapstick violence characterised the Regency period and claims that Grimaldi's 'whole conception of the Clown reflects that period of genteel blackguardism, pugilism and practical jokes'. Murray situates Grimaldi within the broader scope of Regency comedy (present in the other popular entertainments like the *Punch and Judy* show),

¹⁴ Billington, p. 80.

calling him 'a companion of Jerry Hawthorn and Corinthian Tom, whose recreations are breaking windows, tripping up old women and assaulting the constables'.¹⁵

This final chapter considers how Dickens's use of comic violence can be aligned with the pantomimic. Such violence regularly works against Dickens's more sentimental agenda for social reform and thus produces a morally fractured text, which invites us to both laugh at and pity the beaten simultaneously.

This chapter places Grimaldi's harlequinade violence and the comic violence of Dickens's work within a framework of theories around slapstick and physical comedy. It examines three principal characteristics of slapstick violence observable in Dickens's 'clownish' characters and their set-piece performances; the effect on the reader; the relentless and repetitive nature which creates a cycle of violence; and the indestructible nature of its protagonists. It then focuses on three groups who represented some of the most vulnerable figures within society, yet who were also the most common and popular targets for Clown's violence – women, the elderly and the young – and argues that the choice of these targets complicates Dickens's wider narrative concerns and turns the reader's moral compass, like that of Grimaldi's Regency audience, round 'topsy-turvy'.

¹⁵ D.L. Murray, *Candles and Crinolines* (London: Cape, 1930), p. 125.

CHAPTER 2 - Literature Review

I. Introduction

Charles Dickens's association with the theatre is a constant and ever-changing field of enquiry for Dickens scholarship. John Glavin comments that 'Dickens is by every standard account the most theatrical of Victorian novelists' and his theatrical sensibility and its impact on his work have been acknowledged from the earliest critical notices to the present day.¹⁶

A number of critical studies assert the centrality of the dramatic to Dickens's vision. For example, William F. Axton argues that 'Dickens' [*sic*] concept of the novel had at its cornerstone the dramatic presentation of the story', while Michael Slater asserts that 'Dickens's fascination with the world of the theatre is manifest everywhere in his writings'.¹⁷ In his study on theatricality in the nineteenth-century English novel Joseph Litvak opens his chapter on Dickens by observing that of 'all the canonical English authors, Dickens would seem to be the one obvious and inevitable candidate for inclusion'.¹⁸ He also observes Gillian Beer's comment on the pervasive influence of theatre on Dickens: 'More than any other Victorian novelist, Dickens draws upon the theatre's power of manifestation in his subject-matter, characterization, and in the activities of his style'.¹⁹

The connections between Dickens's life and the theatre are numerous. He was a regular theatregoer and wrote a series of non-fiction articles about what he had seen. Although his own aspirations of a professional acting career were curtailed by 'a bad cold' before an

¹⁶ John Glavin, 'Dickens and Theatre', *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 189.

¹⁷ William F. Axton, *Circle of Fire: Dickens' Vision and Style and The Popular Victorian Theater* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), p. 7; Michael Slater, 'Introduction', in Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 15.

¹⁸ Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 109.

¹⁹ Gillian Beer, 'Coming Wonders: Uses of Theatre in the Victorian Novel' in *English Drama: Forms and Development*, ed. by Marie Axton and Raymond Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 164-185 (p. 179).

audition in 1832, he enthusiastically wrote, produced and starred in his own amateur pieces and in later life fashioned a different kind of stage career with his public readings.²⁰

As a number of studies point out he also used theatrical metaphors to describe his writing, regardless of its final presentational form. For example, in a speech to the Royal General Theatrical Fund in 1858, he claimed that ‘every writer of fiction [...] writes, in effect, for the stage’ and in a number of his letters he regards characters in fiction like actors in a play, who should be autonomous, with an existence beyond the author’s pen.²¹ As Dickens observes, ‘my notion always is, that when I have made the people to play out the play, it is, as it were, their business to do it, and not mine’.²² This sometimes extended to direct authorial comment within his fiction; at the opening of Chapter 17 of *Oliver Twist* he justifies an abrupt change of scene by drawing an analogy between his own story-telling and that of melodrama.

Taking these more general comments as a starting point, then, this chapter will consider the principal theories and debates related to Dickens and the theatre, particularly in relation to pantomime, and reflect on how a new study on Dickens and clowns might proceed and mark out its own critical space within this broader territory. These theories and debates can be broadly categorised as discussions around the following areas: the pantomime in Dickens’s work; pantomime versus melodrama; the figure of the clown; Dickens’s conception of the *theatrum mundi*; Dickens the director; entertainment as a social necessity; pantomime and the grotesque; the reader as audience member; and the physical versus the vocal.

²⁰ Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 32. Further references are given as *Charles Dickens*.

²¹ Charles Dickens, ‘Speech to the Royal General Theatrical Fund’, 29 March 1858, in *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed. by K.J. Fielding (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 262.

²² Letter to Mrs Brookfield, 20 February 1866, *Pilgrim*, XI, p. 160.

II. The pantomime in Dickens's work

A number of theatrical forms were prevalent in the Victorian period, but the two to receive the most attention in relation to Dickens's work are pantomime and melodrama. In *The Dickens Pantomime* (1989), Edwin M. Eigner describes how Dickens was 'a delighted spectator' and 'serious critic' of pantomime and claims that all of the constituent parts of Dickens's novels – 'the dramatis personae [...], the movements of his plots, and even the meaning of his vision' can be read in relation to it.²³ In fact, Eigner feels that pantomime is as important to Dickens as other more 'serious' forms of theatre, claiming that his 'fascination with pantomime was as great, perhaps, as his general interest in the theater and equally long-lasting' (pp. 3-4).²⁴ He positions pantomime as the pre-eminent theatrical form within Dickens's imagination, regarding it as 'the essential pattern of Dickens' comedy, the basis for his psychological insights and his social vision, as well as the modus operandi of his aesthetics' (p. 8).

Eigner further explains precisely why pantomime was such a valuable tool for Dickens: its fluid, magical and somewhat anarchic free-form approach presented an important mechanism for 'changing genres and thus changing worldviews'. In this way, Dickens was able to disrupt 'the dogtrot of a cause-and-effect story' and resist other similarly rigid social and cultural constructs in order to reconstitute society on principles that he regarded as more worthwhile (p. 40). As he explains, 'pantomime magic' was needed to show his readers 'glaring instances of their disruptive worldview' as well as 'the possibility of a better vision' through the transformation scene that showed 'paradise and the lost green world' (p. 60).

²³ Edwin M. Eigner, *The Dickens Pantomime* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. x.

²⁴ Due to the inevitably large number of citations in this chapter, after the initial footnote citation, subsequent consecutive citations are given within the text as page numbers.

Eigner uses *David Copperfield* (1849-50) as his primary case study to demonstrate this new model of reading Dickens's novels based on pantomime plots and characters, although he widens his study to briefly consider a number of other novels, particularly *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), in order to offer 'a new reading of the entire canon' (p. x).

The path of Eigner's argument follows the cast list of principal pantomime characters - Harlequin, Columbine, Pantaloon, Dandy Lover, Clown, and Benevolent Agent – as he maps these roles onto the characters of *David Copperfield*. For example, Aunt Betsey is the Benevolent Agent figure, Murdstone and Steerforth are Pantaloon and Dandy Lover and so on, until he finally describes Dickens's 'most significant adaptation of the Clown', Wilkins Micawber (p. xi).

Eigner's study is the most substantial consideration of Dickens's imaginative relationship with the pantomime. Early on, he recognises that this aspect of Dickens's work had gained little critical attention and refers to the handful of comments that were available at the time – for example, J. Hillis Miller's observation that 'allusions to pantomimic gestures [...] are fundamental in the text of the *Sketches*'.²⁵

Since Eigner, a number of studies have at least partially considered Dickens's imaginative engagement with the pantomime, often as part of a wider discussion of Dickens's roots in popular forms of entertainment generally. For example in *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (1988), Paul Schlicke asserts that Dickens's favourite forms of entertainment were those that he enjoyed as a child, particularly the circus, pantomime and theatre. This has important implications for Schlicke's central thesis, in which he proposes that Dickens's 'adult association of entertainment with childhood' meant that he is invariably looking back into his past to re-imagine these entertainments and 'to explain and verify the authenticity

²⁵ See Eigner, p. 5.

of feelings aroused'.²⁶ As Schlicke demonstrates, this is borne out by Dickens's autobiographical essays, for example 'Dullborough Town' and 'Birthday Celebrations' (both 1860), which not only recall the childhood delight in these entertainments, but also ruefully recognise their decline, and (in some cases) pay tribute to their resilience.

However, Schlicke's extensive study does not include one principal articulation of these themes. According to Forster, Dickens 'had set great store' by his Introduction to the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* (1838), which characterises pantomime as a principal form of childhood entertainment that was now in terminal decline, a fact neatly symbolised by the death of its most famous exponent.²⁷ This omission persists through the rest of Schlicke's study; in a generally all-encompassing work he views particular novels through the prism of specific popular Victorian entertainments – the theatre in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Punch and Judy and waxworks in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41) and the circus in *Hard Times* (1854) — but pantomime receives little attention. He does allude to the pantomime when discussing *Hard Times*, claiming that there is a 'hint of pantomime transformation' in the 'plantation of firs' used to describe Gradgrind's hair, and the 'crust of plum pie' that stands for the top of his head.²⁸ But this is Dickens using Grimaldi's famous technique of animating the inanimate, rather than one of his characters.

When he does briefly discuss pantomime in general terms, Schlicke feels that Dickens saw pantomime as a salve for the poorer classes and recognised that it 'offered joyful consolation to people for whom affliction was all too real' (p. 218). But he does not expand on this to detail precisely what consolation the pantomime offered or, more importantly, how this was refigured in Dickens's fiction.

²⁶ Paul Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (London: Unwin, 1988), p. 7.

²⁷ Letter to Richard Bentley, 21 February 1838, *Pilgrim*, I, p. 377.

²⁸ Schlicke, p. 179.

Axton has more to say on the importance of pantomime; while it may have been less popular than melodrama, its wide diversity of style and tone meant that 'it bequeathed most of its mixed elements to the dramatic forms that grew out of it' and 'played a central role in the growth of the burlesque, extravaganza, and revue' (p. 20). He also recognises the pre-eminence of Grimaldi in the history of pantomime, claiming that 'the harlequinade tradition' that engendered the English pantomime was 'domesticated [...] by John Rich and Joseph Grimaldi' (p. 18).

III. Melodrama

While pantomime has received limited attention, a number of critics have fully explored the link between Dickens and melodrama. The most extensive of these is Juliet John's study of Dickens's villains, in which she acknowledges that 'Dickens's 'dramatic' techniques of characterisation have correctly been linked to [...] contemporary forms of popular theatre like pantomime'. However, she chooses to focus on 'arguably the most popular form' of nineteenth-century theatre, melodrama (which is also described by Axton as the 'most characteristic form of the nineteenth-century theater').²⁹ She does also make brief references to the pantomime, recognising the debt that melodramatic players owed to the 'quick, stirring actions' of their pantomime training (p. 32). Accordingly, she describes the actions of Charley and the Artful Dodger as 'pantomimic representations' of the life of the criminal underworld and Newgate myths (p. 130).

However, she purposefully justifies the omission of pantomime villains from her work by explaining that in pantomime 'selfhood is metamorphic from the outset' because 'the surreal nature of the spectacle demands that selfhood is not circumscribed but protean'. According to John, this lack of fixity prevents us from formulating a complex response: we

²⁹ Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 8; Axton, p. 24.

do not see 'pantomimic characters as emotional – or psychological – beings but as fantastical, kaleidoscopic figures' (p. 12). To John, this precludes both Seth Pecksniff and Daniel Quilp, who she describes as 'comic and pantomimic, rather than melodramatic', from her study (p. 11).

John's argument here precipitates the first key contention that this thesis will offer. While it is true that Dickens's 'pantomimic' clowns do not have the depth of character observable in his villains, their characters are not quite as ephemeral and evanescent as John suggests. The harlequinade may have had the appearance of improvised business but was in fact carefully choreographed, and the popularity of certain elements ensured that a regular and predictable pattern was observable across a series of performances. In a similar way, Axton notes that the contingencies of serial publication meant that Dickens repeated certain patterns of action in various episodes, with comic variations and inversions generating the novelty factor.³⁰ Certain behaviours were expected of pantomime clowns and were invariably delivered in the more successful productions as well as reinforced in the popular imagination through a number of contemporary prints (which will appear through the course of this thesis). In fact, as A.E. Wilson puts it, pantomime was 'a stereotyped and heavily conventionalised business'.³¹ Furthermore, Dickens's experience from editing Grimaldi's memoirs, a project entirely grounded in the living reality of the clown as a human being, meant that in the translation from figure on the stage to character in a novel, Dickens could invest his 'clownish' figures a unique emotional and psychological depth.

³⁰ Axton, p. 19.

³¹ *Christmas Pantomime*, p. 92.

IV. The pantomime clown

The most sustained consideration of Dickens's imaginative relationship with the pantomime clown to date is Helen Lorraine Kensick's unpublished thesis 'The Influence of the Pantomime Clown on the Early Novels of Charles Dickens' (1984). According to Kensick, 'the pantomime clown represents nothing short of the human condition for Dickens' and Dickens's clowns are the ultimate symbol of 'the expressivity of the human body as proof of the existence of the human soul and the spiritual realm to which it belongs'.³² In representing this expressivity, Dickens privileges 'the clown's silent, physical mode of expression over the verbally explicit descriptive possibility inherent in the writer's domain' (p. 23).

Kensick asserts that 'The pantomime stage for Dickens is a reflection of real life' and that the world Dickens creates for his characters 'is a stage itself', which aligns her with conventional views of Dickens's view of the *theatrum mundi*, discussed further in Section 5 of this chapter (p. 10; p. 13). However, after briefly suggesting the centrality of 'The Pantomime of Life' to his articulation of this, and making reference to the *Memoirs* as indicative of Dickens's 'strong interest in clowns' she does not return to these texts or consider any of Grimaldi's performances as a possible influence on Dickens (p. 13). Instead her study focuses on Dickens's 'early' novels, which she defines as *The Pickwick Papers* to *Dombey and Son*, because his 'obsessive interest in the figure of the pantomime clown [has] a more active role' in these novels. However, she also recognises that the clown's potential to heal 'remains constant throughout all of Dickens' novels' (p. 2).

In order to position Dickens's pantomime clown within the world of his novels, Kensick considers the work of Jean Starobinski, and asserts that the 'frantic pantomime

³² Helen Lorraine Kensick, 'The Influence of the Pantomime Clown on the Early Novels of Charles Dickens' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Massachusetts, 1984), p. 1, p. 7.

performances create a space apart in Dickens' world very similar to the void created by Starobinski's circus clowns' (p. 48). She describes the role of the Dickensian clown within this space as two-fold: 'Affirmation and negation as the two crucial dynamics of the clown's domain translate into Dickens' prose into wildness and brooding' (p. 58). She then explains the difference between these dynamics: 'Dickens' affirmation of life takes the form of a mute, expressive performing body who draws his life force from the pantomime clown', while 'his negation of life takes the form of an emotive facial mask (also drawn from expressive face of the pantomime clown) cut off from life and forever forced to face death' (p. 141).

She also divides the novels according to this split between 'affirmation' and 'negation'; the affirmative clown, whose wild soul 'creates a happy void, a space apart from society', appears in *The Pickwick Papers*, *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (p. 52). In these novels, Kensick feels that 'full body pantomime performances usurp the space of a normal world, take center stage, and demand attention' (p. 91). She recognises the clown's animating spark in clothes, furniture, and 'the representation of the human face and figure in portraiture, statues, waxworks [and] puppets', noting that, for example, 'clothing in Dickens never loses the shape or ambience of the human clay it covers and it quite easily and thoroughly absorbs and reflects its expressivity' (pp. 80-81).

However, rather than focusing solely on the superhuman nature of the pantomime clown, Kensick feels that 'In transforming ordinary men into clowns, Dickens comes up against the painful realisation that such a transformation is possible only because clowns are, unfortunately, also men' (p. 67). Accordingly 'the act of transforming the clown into a mere man entails for Dickens an unhappy admission of the weaknesses of men', which she feels has particular poignancy in 'The Stroller's Tale' of *The Pickwick Papers* (p. 69). However, she

does not consider Grimaldi's own suffering as a man, which surely offers a painfully real example of this phenomenon.

The negative clown inhabits an entirely different series of novels; Kensick explains how 'The somber overcast in *Oliver Twist*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Barnaby Rudge*, and *Dombey and Son*, shifts Dickens' focus [...] from the performing body to a closer examination of the facial mask' (p. 114). According to Kensick, the facial mask in Dickens's work becomes 'a beacon of feeling, an embodiment of vices or virtues' as he 'follows the literary convention of the 'brown study' or thoughtful state in coloring the physical stance of sadness' (p. 116). This leads to a 'trancelike meditative state', in which characters become 'untouchable' and subject to hallucinations (pp. 52-53).

Her belief in the importance of the pantomime clown to Dickens leads her to conclude that 'the mute, performing images conjured up by Dickens' coercive imagination convey no less than all of the magic and mystery life holds for him' (p. 142). However her study is based on more general conceptions of the clown that are not specifically pantomimic – her argument focuses on gestures, masks and broader theories of performance, and takes no account of the actual performances of the pantomime clowns that Dickens would have enjoyed himself.

In *The Dickens Pantomime*, Eigner's conception of the pantomime clown is largely based on Joseph Grimaldi (the clown also most celebrated by Dickens), who had 'developed [the clown] into the ruling, the most energetic and energising, character in the Christmas pantomime'.³³ As the principal figure in pantomime, Eigner believes that the clown corresponds to the villain in melodrama, an interesting correlation in light of John's work. He initially traces the compelling power of the clown through his relation to wider social

³³ Eigner, p. xi.

rituals, supported by a number of critical studies that variously describe the clown as ‘a Cockney incarnation of the saturnalian spirit’, a figure of Bakhtinian ‘carnival violence [who] expands boundaries, ignores limits, overrides taboos, even that of death’ and ‘a release of pure animal spirits’ (p. 10).

When discussing Dickens’s work, Eigner describes a wide cast of Dickensian clowns across a range of novels including Smike, Kit Nubbles, Tom Pinch, Mr. Toots, Guppy, John Chivery and Sydney Carton and briefly demarcates some of their clownish traits. For example, Newman Noggs’s excessive appetite for drink, his gestures and his appearances are all regarded as pantomimic.

However, after an initial focus on the clown’s less-regulated aspects and essential characteristics, he adopts a more structural approach and concentrates on the narrative patterns of the pantomime as a whole, rather than the central, somewhat *anti*-narrative harlequinade. Eigner asserts that the pantomime structure is also ‘the essential pattern of Dickens’s comedy’ and focuses on the clown’s position within this (p. 8). He feels that Dickens’s clown needed a function within the plot ‘to make their way as at least somewhat believable characters in supposedly mimetic works of Victorian fiction’ (p. 156).

He frames this narrative function around Clown’s relationship with the pantomime/novel heroine, to whom he provides ‘significant assistance’, and states that ‘the function of the Dickensian Clown from Swiveller to Carton’ was to ‘rescue [the good characters] from death’ (p. 145; p. 148). After they have detached themselves from the evil, repressive forces that originally control them, Dickens’s clowns offer assistance to the heroes and heroines of the novel and avert destructive conclusions. For example, Swiveller reclaims the Marchioness from ‘the Kingdom of Death’ and ‘[gives] her an identity, [brings] her up out of the darkness into light’ (p. 157). Similarly, Sydney Carton does ‘a far, far better thing’

by replacing Darnay at the guillotine and Micawber battles ‘the threatening and hostile world of practical or commercial reality’ using ‘the comic world of the imagination’.³⁴

However, this character-based structure belies the nature of Eigner’s exploration, which is generally plot-centric and only concerned with characterisation in terms of its service towards the narrative. For example, despite acknowledging Clown’s pre-eminence in the pantomime cast (akin to the villain in melodrama), Eigner’s study is limited to Clown’s function as servant to Pantaloon and sometime assistant of Harlequin and Columbine. This reading omits much of the rich material of the harlequinade, which is the most diverse and creative section of the pantomime and, arguably, the section in which Clown’s character is most fully realised.

As other critics have recognised, clowns serve other purposes besides this narrow narrative function. One of the primary roles of the clown is to generate laughter and James R. Kincaid’s *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (1971) considers the many categories of laughter that are generated by Dickens’s novels and the uses Dickens intends for them. Some of these uses would also have been familiar to a pantomime audience, and are here realised by Dickens through his own clowns, so Kincaid’s work is worth consideration within the scope of this thesis.

For example, in his chapter ‘Laughter and the Rhetoric of Attack’, Kincaid identifies *Oliver Twist* as the first Dickens novel in which ‘the aggressive element in laughter’ is prominent.³⁵ Just as Kincaid feels that ‘an underlying maliciousness’ is ‘central to the novel’s humour’, this thesis will indicate how this maliciousness and black humour ran through certain elements of Grimaldi’s routine to similarly expose ‘the potential darkness within us’ (pp.

³⁴ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. by Arthur Waugh and others (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch Press, 1937), p. 363; Eigner, p. 162.

³⁵ James R. Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 20.

56-57). Kincaid also considers the comic value of the Artful Dodger, who he regards as a 'consistent and effective use of Freudian humour' and a 'brilliant parody of social convention and dull, regularized conduct', which again are comments applicable to the Grimaldian clown and worthy of further attention (p. 69).

Kincaid thus develops Eigner's limited definition of the clown but also sees Micawber as 'perhaps the most organically complete of [Dickens's] comic characters' and the apotheosis of Dickensian clowns (p. 177). To Kincaid, Micawber is able to engender comic transformations in a similar way to Grimaldi and constructs high comic drama from the most minor setbacks. However, in contrast to Grimaldi, Micawber relies largely on language to construct his comic worlds and as such represents a different style of clown to the Regency model and one more attuned to the Victorian theatre, which privileged the vocal over the physical.

Eigner also investigates the traditionally complex relationship between Clown and his master (typically the Pantaloon). Clown often confounds his master's plans, distracting him from his mission against Harlequin and Columbine and drawing him into painful and humiliating situations. Eigner regards Clown and master as a double act, a married couple, or even a shared identity.

Other critics have also recognised Dickens's tendency to create pairs or clusters of characters in order to avoid inward or private subject-centred characters, and instead externalise opposite emotions or different facets of the same personality. For example, Juliet John traces some of these groupings amongst Dickens's villains, such as Bill Sikes and Fagin and Bradley Headstone and Eugene Wrayburn. However, the more comic alter egos of Dickens's villains have not yet been explored in any detail although Eigner mentions several Clown/Pantaloon duets, some within a single character (Samuel Pickwick, Fagin,

Seth Pecksniff) and others composed of two characters (Seth Pecksniff and Tom Pinch, Ralph Nickleby and Newman Noggs).

Eigner also posits a similarly close and complex relationship between Clown and another pantomime figure: Grimaldi played both Clown and the semi-villainous Dandy Lover in his lifetime, and the two 'were never very far apart in Dickens' imagination' as evidenced by characters like Dick Swiveller and Mr. Toots.³⁶ According to Eigner, pantomime 'provides [a] comprehensive vision within which villains can be transformed by a wave of the fairy's wand into comical fellows, the victims of their own greed and awkwardness and of an absurd universe' (p. 102). This also applies to Dickens's villains as well; even if their ultimate punishments are often the severest type (shooting, drowning or hanging) there is often a humiliating component that is reminiscent of the sort of justice meted out to the mischievous Clown, for example in the treatment of Pecksniff and Heep.

Schlicke's reading focuses on circus clowns, and so the pantomime clown is largely unexamined. He recognises a number of Dickensian clowns that are emphatically *not* Grimaldi, but does not consider any that are. For example, he makes reference to Kit Nubbles's initial role as a clown, but is more interested in his altered character in the latter chapters, concluding that 'he is noteworthy not for Grimaldi-like antics but for cheerful, honest and earnest devotion to duty'.³⁷ In his later discussion of *Hard Times* Schlicke discusses Jupe as a figure of the circus clown and makes clear that this was 'quite distinct from the stage clown created by Grimaldi for the pantomime' (p. 166).

Most obviously he traces the ancestry of Daniel Quilp across a wide range of figures from popular entertainment – a waxwork figure, a real dwarf from Bath, the folklore figure of the dwarf-devil, the fairytale Yellow Dwarf, Punch and even Grimaldi's father. However

³⁶ Eigner, p. 175.

³⁷ Schlicke, p. 101.

Grimaldi himself is conspicuously absent from this list, as the similarities between Punch and Quilp might equally apply to comparisons between Grimaldi and Quilp as well. For example, Schlicke's comment that 'the audience can indulge in the anarchic holiday which [Punch's] activities represent, secure in the knowledge that all of the puppets will pop up again for the next performance' echoes a number of contemporary reactions that encapsulate the imaginative release that pantomime provided (p. 127). For example Walter Freewood, in his recollections published in the *Theatrical Journal* (1865) commented that 'I think we felt a little nervous in the ancient scene when Clown was mangled as flat as a flounder, but we were relieved by his appearing down the chimney immediately afterwards in his natural shape just as if nothing had happened'.³⁸ In similar vein, a *Times* review of *Harlequin and Red Dwarf; or, The Adamant Rock* (Covent Garden, 1812) observed that 'Serious tumbles from serious heights, innumerable kicks, and incessant beatings, come on [Grimaldi] as a matter of common occurrence, and leave him every night fresh and free for the next night's flagellations'.³⁹ Clown's affinities with Punch, particularly his apparent indestructibility will be explored further in Chapter 6.

Quilp is also described by Schlicke as 'a potent emblem' of 'aggressive self-gratification', exhibiting the kind of boundless physical excess that characterised Grimaldi's clown.⁴⁰ Kincaid uses similar terms to describe Joe the Fat Boy in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37) who is 'a slightly sadistic eating-machine' representing 'all the grasping and blatant physical egocentricity particularly associated with childhood'. To Kincaid, Joe is 'a cry from the nursery' and 'the elemental naughty boy', 'strongly sexual and always extraordinarily physical' who 'drains off our mischievous impulses'.⁴¹ These are all terms equally applicable to Grimaldi's Clown who is described by the theatre historian D. L. Murray as having a

³⁸ *Christmas Pantomime*, p. 102.

³⁹ 'Covent-Garden Theatre', *The Times*, 5 January 1813, p.3.

⁴⁰ Schlicke, p, 127.

⁴¹ Kincaid, p. 29, p. 96.

‘white face larded with red like a schoolboy’s that has been dipped in a surreptitious jam-pot’.⁴²

Schlicke regards Quilp as a conscious performer of a role, rather than an unwitting turn for our amusement; his ‘antics’ are ‘performances with spectators in mind’ or, as Kincaid puts it, represent ‘exaggerated ‘showing off’’, when chewing on cutlery or eating his whole eggs (both typically clownish turns).⁴³ Quilp, however, is ultimately left to stand as the antithesis of the values of popular entertainment, the ‘qualities of that culture which ought not to survive’, in diametric opposition to the figure of Dick Swiveller.⁴⁴

Thus Quilp is refigured as a clown in many ways, only to be then summarily dismissed as an undesirable. However, further investigations could certainly draw parallels to Grimaldi and tie Quilp even more closely to traditional popular entertainment and indicate how he represents a culture that *should* survive.

A more sustained discussion of the negative connotations of clowning is Joseph Butwin’s ‘The Paradox of the Clown in Dickens’ (1976), which considers the small handful of professional clowns within Dickens’s work. He asserts that Dickens is ‘the first English writer to absorb the image of the clown’ and is one of the few scholars to address Dickens’s editing of the *Memoirs* fully.⁴⁵ He does give the work some credit, recognising its comprehensive vision of Regency England, but he feels that it ‘betrays very little of the master’s style, probably very little of clown’s’ (pp. 116-117). This highly debatable point will be taken up in some detail later in this thesis, because by reading the *Memoirs* in relation to Dickens’s other works of the time it is possible to observe a large number of similarities and echoes that clearly demonstrate thematic and stylistic continuity.

⁴² Murray, p. 125.

⁴³ Schlicke, p. 128; Kincaid, p. 96.

⁴⁴ Schlicke, p. 130.

⁴⁵ Joseph Butwin, ‘The Paradox of the Clown in Dickens’, *Dickens Studies Annual* 5 (1976), p. 116.

Butwin's thesis is predicated on the popular perception of the clown that Grimaldi's own life history seems to make a reality – the dichotomy between the public performance that elicits our laughter and the private, hidden suffering that should elicit our sympathy. Rather than considering Dickens's tendency to confuse or even collapse the boundary between the staged and the natural, Butwin examines examples in which Dickens makes the differences between fantasy and reality as clear as possible. He feels that Dickens, in repeatedly returning to these ideas, displayed a 'persistent interest of what the clown is and what he pretends to be' (p. 118).

Butwin examines Dickens's professional clowns, especially the dying clown in 'The Stroller's Tale' and Signor Jupe of *Hard Times* and therefore situates the clown as a *locus* of failure. He notes how Dickens, in drawing parallels between their failure and drinking, closely parallels Henry Mayhew's work *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851). Butwin also pinpoints a feeling of shame within these clown figures, contrary to Schlicke's positive view, which identifies a warmth in Dickens's description of the circus and its inhabitants. Instead, Butwin feels that Dickens presents the circus as 'a mixed bag of absurdity wrapped in the inevitably false dignity of modern publicity', as exemplified by the ending of the novel (p. 128). It closes on a note of shame and humiliation that is explicitly associated with clowning, as Gradgrind and his son become defeated and ridiculous clowns in the centre of the ring – 'Mr. Gradgrind sat down forlorn, on the Clown's performing chair in the middle of the ring' and his son was 'detestably, ridiculously shameful [...] in his comic livery'.⁴⁶

Ultimately, Butwin posits a re-reading of Mr. Sleary's observation that 'People mutht be amuthed ... You mutht have uth' that again differs from Schlicke's.⁴⁷ Rather than reading this as a signal of the basic human need for entertainment, Butwin interprets it as a 'fairly

⁴⁶ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* ed. by Fred Kaplan and Sylvère Monod (London and New York: Norton, 2001), p. 211.

⁴⁷ *Hard Times*, p. 35.

desperate plea' by the performers – despite their deficiencies they are a burden that the public must accept. To conclude his negative reading of the Dickensian clown, Butwin asserts that the clown's failure is reflected in his ragged costume, which is 'a badge announcing him to be the prince of flops and failures'.⁴⁸

V. Dickens's conception of 'the theatrum mundi'

Another important concept pivotal to Dickens's relationship with the theatre is 'the *theatrum mundi*', which has been examined in a number of studies. Axton identifies Dickens's early essay 'The Pantomime of Life' (1837) as an important articulation of Dickens's own understanding of the *theatrum mundi*, which would have a profound impact on his work at the time. Appearing at the same time as *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, Axton feels that it represents 'a summary of the ideas that occupied the novelist's mind during the period of composition of these volumes'.⁴⁹

In it, Dickens posits that 'A pantomime is to us, a mirror of life; nay more, [...] to audiences generally, although they are not aware of it' and cleverly interweaves the world of the stage and that of reality without saying which is which.⁵⁰ In this way, the essay moves us towards 'the author's view of the congruence between the grotesqueries of theatrical pantomime and the characteristic types and events of ordinary life'.⁵¹

Critics seem divided as to whether Dickens's other works adequately demonstrate this.

While Eigner believes that Clown's excesses had to be curbed in any semblance of verisimilitude, Axton feels that Dickens believed that any attempt at mimesis must embrace the whole clown. So although Axton observes that Dickens sometimes makes his

⁴⁸ Butwin, p. 131, p. 132.

⁴⁹ Axton, p. 39.

⁵⁰ Charles Dickens, 'The Pantomime of Life', in *Dickens's Journalism: Sketches by Boz and Other Early Papers 1833-1839* ed. by Michael Slater (London: Phoenix, 1996), pp. 500-507 (p. 501). Further references are given as 'Pantomime'.

⁵¹ Axton, p. 40.

characters too caricatured through the 'manic persistence of a few eccentric traits', he does not think that this spoils the overall effect because even 'the gross and antic exaggerations of pantomime clowns do not belie reality but represent its grotesque dimensions faithfully' (p. 31; p. 41).

Eigner links Dickens's idea of the *theatrum mundi* to the wider social rituals of the carnivalesque. In this conceptual space where people are always playing a role and never have a place 'offstage' clowns and fools become 'the constant accredited representatives of the carnival spirit out of carnival season' and thus a permanent presence in our lives rather than merely a holiday release.⁵² Here it could be argued that Dickens follows Shakespeare's model of Falstaffian comedy, which C.L. Barber regards as a fusion of the two main 'saturnalian traditions', the clowning customary on stage and the folly customary on holiday occasions.⁵³

Axton's discussion of the *theatrum mundi* in Dickens looks to the present rather than the past. To Axton, the *theatrum mundi* represented for Dickens not just a means to develop his method of characterisation, but also 'a means of depicting an emergent bourgeois England' and satirise the mores and histrionic antics of the middle classes.⁵⁴ This begins as early as *Sketches by Boz* (1833-36) and shapes other works such as *The Pickwick Papers* (which Axton describes as 'the vision of a grand *theatrum mundi* in which the actor-in-mufti is the central archetype') and to some extent, *Oliver Twist* (p. 82).

In *Dickens, Novel-Reading and the Victorian Public* (1998), Deborah Vlock also examines the *theatrum mundi* in Dickens. Part of her study demonstrates the interchangeability between the novel and the stage, but she also shows how these shared signs broke from the

⁵² Eigner, p. 14.

⁵³ C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 195.

⁵⁴ Axton, p. 37.

confines of playhouse and page and were present and readable in the streets outside as well. She comments that 'Victorians read in their world the same signs they read at the theatre' which meant that the 'theatrical structures, gestures, and postures' were regarded as 'socially authentic'.⁵⁵ Thus actual reality was constantly viewed, interpreted and articulated through the same paradigms that operated in the theatre. Vlock gives the example of Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, which is ostensibly an earnest sociological study of London's lower classes, but one which is actually circulated through a generous use of 'dramatic and literary stereotypes' and a 'reliance on theatrical conventions' (p. 118). According to Vlock, this is not merely attributable to standard Victorian discursive practice and serves particular ends; the use of theatrical tropes domesticates, sanitises and defuses the threat of the lower classes for Mayhew's middle-class readership.

Vlock also discusses Dickens's tendency to conflate the real and the theatrical, explaining how he 'frequently mixed his personal, social, and theatrical observations in this way, producing a creative genre which rarely confines itself to either the fictive or the "real"' (p. 140). This construction of the *theatrum mundi* by Dickens can be traced in his fiction as well as in works like 'The Pantomime of Life' and *Sketches*, but like most of the other critics discussed here, Vlock does not consider it in relation to Dickens's foray into biography with the *Memoirs*, written at the same time as some of this material. Despite Dickens's claims in his introduction to the *Memoirs* that 'there has been no *book-making* in this case', the *Memoirs* displays a large degree of mediation between Grimaldi's life and Dickens's presentation of it.⁵⁶ Dickens once commented to John Forster that it 'does not seem to be to be enough to say of any description that it is the exact truth. The exact truth must be

⁵⁵ Vlock, p. 91.

⁵⁶ Charles Dickens, *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1838), I, p. xviii. Further references are given as *Memoirs*.

there; but the merit or art of the narrator, is in the manner of stating the truth' and as a text which claims to offer the 'exact truth' while constantly drawing attention to 'the manner of stating the truth', the *Memoirs* offers some interesting perspectives on the issue of the *theatrum mundi*.⁵⁷

Although he does not use the term explicitly, Schlicke also considers Dickens's work in terms of the *theatrum mundi*, particularly *Nicholas Nickleby*. For example, he claims that 'the conventions of the theatre permeate [*Nickleby*'s] form and characterisation' and further that 'performance is a principal manifestation of character', for example in characters like Ralph Nickleby, Wackford Squeers and Mr. Lillyvick, as well as the members of Crummles's troupe. To Schlicke, the lines between theatricality and reality are necessarily blurred, because for many of the characters 'acting constitutes reality, and the modes of the theatre underpin their vitality'.⁵⁸

Like Butwin's work, Schlicke's is particularly concerned with Dickens's portrayal of professional actors - those people in the *theatrum mundi* who everyone knows are acting and are expected to do so. He discusses the 'histrionic posturing' and 'stage patter' that Jingle uses outside the circumscribed playing space within the world of the novel, but his main focus of attention is the Crummles's troupe (p. 44). He feels that Dickens pokes a certain amount of gentle fun at the actors by satirising 'the individual foibles of theatrical types' and portraying 'the excesses of two major contemporary theories of acting'. He also notes that Nicholas's condescension towards the actors, his reticence about relating his theatrical adventures to others and the Crummles's eventual ejection to America make manifest the same class prejudices against the theatrical profession that Vlock

⁵⁷ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, ed. by A.J. Hoppé, 2 vols (London: Dent, 1966), II, p. 279. Further references are given as *Life*.

⁵⁸ Schlicke, p. 50, p. 51.

demonstrates. As Schlicke puts it, 'it is a disturbing limitation of this novel that a lack of polite airs should be held against the manager' (p. 83).

Nonetheless, Schlicke also accepts that Dickens invests these popular entertainers with the values he regards as most socially desirable, the 'values of family loyalty and respect', which they in fact share with Nicholas as the hero of the novel (p. 80). However, this tension produced by the discrepancy between the social value of the performers (particularly the clown) and their social status merits further attention.

Another manifestation of the *theatrum mundi* in Dickens is Mrs. Todgers's lodging house in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44). Todgers's is explored in Kincaid's study, where he describes it as 'the centre of the comic principle of accommodation' and 'the most important agent in stirring our more positive laughter'.⁵⁹ Mrs. Todgers and her young men provide a number of different types of 'turn' and demonstrate 'comic gluttony reminiscent of [...] Pickwick' (p. 150). Central to this comedic *theatrum mundi* is the figure of Young Bailey, who Kincaid regards as a development of two other Dickensian clowns – Sam Weller, with whom he shares the gift of parody but 'without Sam's cynicism', and the Artful Dodger, of which he is a 'freer, lighter version' with the same 'endlessly happy irony' (p. 160). Young Bailey is not mentioned in any of the other studies of theatricality, yet is arguably one of Dickens's fullest incarnations of the pantomime clown.

⁵⁹ Kincaid, p. 149.

VI. Entertainment as a social necessity

Paul Schlicke's study also provides a political reading of Dickens's relationship with the theatre and situates Dickens's interest in the theatre within the broader scope of Victorian popular entertainment. Schlicke explains that Dickens 'responded with unashamed pleasure to the circus and the pantomime, to sensational melodrama and the Punch and Judy show' as well as other non-theatrical forms such as the travelling fair or waxwork show.⁶⁰

He examines Dickens's life in relation to two pivotal moments in the history of popular entertainment claiming that firstly in his 'formative early years [...] English popular entertainment was in a process of radical transformation' and then secondly, as he began his life as a writer, 'the nadir of English popular culture was reached' (p. 5). Schlicke sees much of Dickens's work as a response to these two moments and explains how he responded to this 'cultural crisis', by taking 'the most direct step of which he was capable', which was to provide people's need for 'imaginative entertainment' (p. 247). He stresses the importance of popular cultural forms to Dickens, claiming that his 'convictions about popular entertainment are a function of his social conscience' and that his works present 'stalwart defence and stinging satire' against the 'pressures against leisure' (p. 12).

Juliet John also develops this theme by asserting that this satire, which Schlicke argues as 'basically conservative', was actually quite radical.⁶¹ She feels that he 'subverts the cultural *status quo*' by 'catering for a commonly disenfranchised section of the cultural market place and forcing its existence on the attention of the intelligentsia'.⁶² John suggests that 'one might go so far to say that a belief in 'popular' culture was Dickens's most firmly held political view', and along with Schlicke regards Dickens's two-part essay 'The Amusements

⁶⁰ Schlicke, p. 4.

⁶¹ Schlicke, p. 19.

⁶² John, p. 17.

of the People' (1850) as Dickens's manifesto for the social power of popular entertainment (p. 3). She calls it a 'lucid articulation of his vision of "dramatic entertainment" as the most effective instrument of cultural cohesion and somehow the natural imaginative outlet for the "common people"' (p. 4).

In similar terms, Schlicke argues that for Dickens, 'entertainment is [...] a socialising force' and 'a locus for the spontaneity, selflessness and fellow-feeling which lay at the heart of his moral convictions'.⁶³ According to both of these scholars, Dickens felt that such values and feelings were the enduring pillars of a decent society, that were especially important at such a time of great social change when the cohesion of a number of social groups was under threat. In his discussion of *Hard Times*, Schlicke claims that entertainers appear as 'the central repository of human value' and a bulwark against the 'baleful attitudes of utilitarianism' which are the two opposing attitudes to life juxtaposed in the opening sections of *Hard Times* and which shape the rest of the novel (p. 143; p. 144; p. 172). As Bounderby and Gradgrind represent fact, so the circus is 'Dickens's objective correlative for fancy' (p. 178).

VII. Pantomime and the grotesque

Several studies relate Dickens's theatrical sensibility to his preoccupation with the grotesque. Axton regards the grotesque as the keynote of pantomime, claiming that 'If this welter of forms may be said to have had any governing spirit [...] it was that of grotesquerie'.⁶⁴ Kincaid supports this claim, as he recognises that the savagery of much of Dickens's humour, which is also his most pantomimic, 'is often dark to the point of grotesquerie'.⁶⁵

⁶³ Schlicke, p. 202, p. 7.

⁶⁴ Axton, p. 28.

⁶⁵ Kincaid, p. 7.

To Axton, this grotesquerie is chiefly manifested in the blurring of boundaries between the animate and inanimate, for example when ‘pantomime clowns became animals, vegetables, and objects, and [...] machinery, inanimate things, and vegetable life turned into people or took on some extraordinary activity of their own’.⁶⁶ He identifies this ‘tendency to estrange reality without dispensing with it’ as a common trope of popular nineteenth-century theatre generally and notes that it was also a key device used by Dickens (p. 28). As Axton comments, ‘in the hands of a great artist like Dickens, whose ‘highly coloured’ imaginative vision was shot through with theatrical perspectives, a grotesque style like that found in the theater was readily adaptable to the modes of prose fiction’ (pp. 32-33). Accordingly, Dickens ‘borrowed from the playhouse many of the grotesque techniques of burlesque, pantomime, and farce to body forth his vision’ (p. 110).

Taking *Sketches by Boz* as a reference point, Axton locates the grotesque in the places where ‘incompatible realms mingle’, citing examples from the playhouse sketches (‘pit and boards, backstage and stage door, plate baskets and witches’ cauldrons’) as well as from the wider social sketches (‘pint pots and weird sisters, prisons and easy chairs, the histrionic subterfuges of genteel respectability’) (p. 44). One could add the memoirs of a pantomime clown, which dramatised the perpetual tension between those realms, to these examples.

Axton observes that in *Oliver Twist* the ‘antic, gestic style of the popular theater reappears in Bumble, Fagin, Noah Claypole and Mr Grimwig’ which is juxtaposed with ‘the terrible realities of workhouse and underworld’ to create a ‘grotesque incongruity’ (pp. 108-109). This thesis will explore further examples of grotesque incongruity, in particular relation to the clownish characters of Dickens’s narratives.

⁶⁶ Axton, p. 29.

Like Schlicke, Axton also attributes 'a serious social purpose' to Dickens's methods; through the repeated invocation of this 'grotesque incongruity', Dickens wanted to elicit a shift in how his readers saw their world (p. 139). Moreover, Axton demonstrates how Dickens's style was a direct correlative of the effects of pantomime, claiming that the 'antic, gestic modes of harlequinade, burlesque, and farce recur in the novelist's use of typicality, leitmotif, burlesquerie, parody, and incidental business' (p. 161). These modes are embodied in a shift from the visual of the theatre to the verbal of the novel. The 'burlesque voice' represents 'the technique of pantomime, burlesque, and farce carried over from visual terms into the grammar of comparisons' and 'the visual discontinuity of Grimaldi's hussar' (who wore a costume patched up from a variety of household items) had its correlative in the 'studied irreverence or disproportion between substance and surface' in Dickens's prose (p. 193; p. 194). Axton returns to this analogy later on, when describing the 'fanciful verbal transformation' of Reverend Chadband in *Bleak House* (1852-53), whereby his perceived oiliness links him to a vessel, a bear and a train. To Axton, this section is linked to Grimaldi's hussar in 'their common use of incongruous visual (for Dickens read linguistic) materials in ramified form' (p. 205).

Axton locates Dickens's employment of these modes in grotesque scenes (where like pantomime, scenes are 'permeated by an organic dynamism and associated human life and motive') and in burlesque people (whereby the Dickensian character is 'a mere mechanical contrivance, a puppet that ingeniously simulates life, and yet [...] a vivid impression of vitality') (p. 179; p. 190). He feels that they are also observable in melodramatic narrative, whereby the melodramatic voice is used in the narrative in the same role as the orchestra in the melodrama – 'to establish and reinforce mood, not only in individual scenes, but across the whole extent of the narrative' (pp. 220-221).

According to Axton, Dickens's medium is predominantly linguistic play, just as Grimaldi's was predominantly visual play. However, he recognises that Dickens was also a very visual writer and while he indirectly represented some of these pantomimic elements in his descriptions, he represented them more directly through the carefully prescribed illustrations that accompanied his text.

With this aspect of Dickens's work in mind, both Vlock and Eigner consider Martin Meisel's work *Realizations* (1983), which discusses the porous nature of the boundaries between various forms of artistic impression during the Victorian period. To Meisel, the visual jokes of the harlequinade 'link the powerful graphic tradition that passed into nineteenth-century visual art [...] with the curious imagination of Dickens' – an area of discourse that would certainly reward closer scrutiny.⁶⁷

VIII. Dickens the director

Robert Garis's study *The Dickens Theatre* (1965) approaches the *theatrum mundi* from a different angle, considering the effect of the theatre on Dickens's style and form. Garis meditates on the role of the author as the director who makes his own presence felt within the text. According to Garis, Dickens directs the theatre of his novels in a style which 'is neither conventional nor functional, but an object of attention and pleasure in itself'.⁶⁸ This is echoed by Gillian Beer, who states that Dickens's 'style is spectacle'.⁶⁹

This offers Dickens's approach to the novel as an alternative to the subject-centred realist novel, in which the writers work towards an illusion of reality and a seemingly organic relationship of elements, with their own presence elided. Garis cites T.S. Eliot's ideas around the objective correlative and the way that meaning should arise out of the objects

⁶⁷ Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 123.

⁶⁸ Robert Garis, *The Dickens Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 193.

⁶⁹ Beer, p. 179.

themselves, 'as immediately as the odour of the rose', with no intervention or mediation by the author.⁷⁰

He argues that the subject-centred approach inherently contains an aesthetic value judgement, whereby 'successful' art is that which becomes a 'self-developing organism' and 'any explicit authorial commentary, analysis, or generalization' is seen as 'a sure signal that the work of art has failed' (p. 32; p. 35). Such an approach, Garis argues, 'is utterly unfamiliar to Dickens and utterly antithetical to his essential nature and genius' (p. 5).

Instead Dickens, in passages like the opening of *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), places himself constantly before us as 'a performer, as a maker and doer' and deliberately tries to shape the reader's response to characters and events (p. 9). In a novel like *Bleak House*, for example, the balance of interpretive power lies with the author; we are not 'primarily observing a scene and learning from what we see; we are following the skill and the concerns and the will of the artist himself' (p. 106). Garis describes Dickens's art as 'theatrical', which leads us to 'a continual awareness of the artificer responsible' without preventing his characters and objects coming into existence, 'though not in the mode of illusion to which we are accustomed' (p. 24).

According to Garis, our primary focus in the Dickens theatre, as in any theatre, is 'the artist himself, on the stage of his own theatre, performing his brilliant routines' and, in this way, Dickens's characters can be read as opportunities to demonstrate 'his brilliant gift for *mimicry*' (p. 54). Indeed, they can be regarded as actors themselves, performing their own personalities or the emotions characteristic of their 'roles'. Consequently, Dickens's ability to render the inner life of his characters has been put under scrutiny by both Garis and a number of other critics.

⁷⁰ Garis, p. 36.

Garis also makes a clear distinction between the conscious and the self-conscious performers and asserts that there are very few amiable self-conscious performers in literature – he only offers Skimpole and Boythorn from Dickens's work. This means that the majority of his performers are entirely unaware of an audience – be it other characters in the novel or the reader of that novel.

Garis also acknowledges Dickens's use of existing and well-known theatrical tropes and formulas and feels that 'the success of his whole theatrical enterprise [...] depended on his audience's familiarity with his methods' (p. 71). Garis suggests the concept of the reader of a Dickens novel stepping into a theatre and willingly accepting both the presence of the director and constructedness of the fictions that he presents. The reader is always made aware that the actors are speaking and acting in the way that they do because Dickens has written their parts in that way. Garis feels that the reader accepts all of this because Dickens is regarded as a humorist, and therefore part of a group of writers regarded as 'licensed exceptions to the rules of writing'. Consequently the reader is 'prepared to enter a 'theatre' and to co-operate with the 'theatrical mode' (p. 40).

This acceptance means that other, non-novelistic effects can be developed by the director. For example, the majority of Dickens's main performers (that is, those figures that hold the stage the longest) have little or no impact on the main plot. When describing the early novels, Garis notes that the 'action [...] is performed by the least interesting members of Dickens's theatrical company' (p. 87). This is because the novelist's conventional aim of developing a narrative is secondary in these novels, with Dickens more interested in creating theatrical set-pieces or 'new and different occasions for thrilling or affecting performances' (p. 92).

But while this 'theatrical art' has a positive tone throughout the early novels, Garis observes that it alters during Dickens's later work. Dickens's model of the *theatrum mundi* became outmoded in the face of the developing social strictures of Victorianism and a widening discrepancy grew between his 'images of true vitality' and his contact with the real 'living' world. Garis uses this sense of Dickens's growing disillusionment to explain his shift from 'light' to 'dark' novels, as he situates *Bleak House* as the start of Dickens's 'great campaign of indignant criticism of the world for failing to embody his own images of living and loving' (p. 95). Dickens's performers were now no longer opportunities for *virtuoso* wit and improvisation and instead became dull, lifeless figures or inhuman automata. They now performed a function within what Dickens regarded as an all-encompassing social conspiracy that has the primary aim to 'thwart and stifle human freedom and the free contact between free spirits' (p. 97). The previously teasing satire on middle-class manners and affectations became critical and condemnatory of something far larger and pervasive and in Garis's opinion it denies us 'the copiousness of Dickens invention' (p. 134).

IX. The reader as audience member

Many critics have examined Dickens's relationship with the theatre from his perspective as the author/director of his work. However, Deborah Vlock and Juliet John also propose a more reader-centred approach to understand how his novels were received by audiences within the wider arena of popular entertainment.

Contrary to theories such as those of Foucault and D.A. Miller, that construct the Victorian reader as the internalised isolated figure who read silently and in private, Vlock instead describes the act of reading novels as occurring in 'public spaces', based on 'a popular agreement, a framework of consensual cultural ideas and the signs assumed to represent

those ideas'.⁷¹ Juliet John shares this view, believing that Dickens in fact consciously opposed the subject-centred approach of the realist novel and used his own 'theatrical novels' 'to counter this tendency'.⁷² She calls the theatre a 'crucial site of communal imaginative experience', and Vlock presents the theatre as one such source of these cultural ideas and signs.⁷³ Vlock develops the term 'imaginary text' to describe 'a reading space' outside the confines of the novel, and within the scope of the 'sociodramatic possibilities' offered by the 'idioms and gestures and a whole range of signifiers' provided by popular entertainment.⁷⁴ Accordingly, we are able to read the Victorian novel in three dimensions, rather than a single one, 'visually and vocally as well as narratively' (p. 9).

Moving from Victorian literature in general to Dickens in particular, Vlock claims that Dickens's own imaginary text, which influenced his writing as well as his reading, was a strongly theatrical one, as one would expect from an author with such an intense personal interest in the theatre. Thus a symbiotic relationship between the novel and the theatre exists, whereby the boundaries between the two almost collapse. According to Vlock, Dickens 'regularly borrowed characters, dramatic idioms, even stories from the melodrama, and the popular theatre borrowed equally from him', and thus "'drama' was not supplanted by the novel in the nineteenth century but merged with it, enabling the novel to exist' (p. 3). Indeed, she calls novelistic fiction 'theatre with complications – with the richness and slipperiness, and [...] the sheer beauty, of metaphoric language' (p. 28).

Vlock further explains that the temporal conditions of serial publication and lack of adequate copyright protection meant that 'novelists, like Dickens, whose serial fiction was regularly plagiarised, were forced to dance with hack playwrights as they wrote' (p. 4).

⁷¹ Vlock, p. 1.

⁷² John, p. 18.

⁷³ John, p. 4.

⁷⁴ Vlock, p. 6.

Therefore the two genres should be seen as ‘intimately conversant with each other’ rather than having a chronological relationship, particularly given that ‘many of his readers received [these] multiple versions simultaneously’ (p. 10). She explores the possibilities of this idea in relation to *Nicholas Nickleby* and just a handful of its many melodramatic adaptations such as Edward Stirling’s 1838 burletta and Moncrieff’s rival production of the same year. However, she confines this discussion to Dickens’s use of melodramatic elements and while she does recognise that theatrical influences on the novel were not all contemporary ones, she does not include pantomime in her exploration.

As Schlicke’s work has demonstrated, the entertainments of Dickens’s childhood - including pantomime - were a seminal influence on his later imaginative expressions. Similarly Eigner has shown how Dickens also borrowed characters, dramatic idioms, and even stories from pantomime. Vlock also identifies certain elements that Dickens borrowed from melodrama - the idealistic hero, the physically threatened heroine and wicked patriarch, ‘all part and parcel of the standard melodramatic plot’ - yet these were also key elements of pantomime as well (p. 28). Dickens’s imaginary text is thus much more detailed and can be extended to cover a number of earlier experiences and readings. By referencing past theatrical characters and performances, Dickens was also able to contribute to contemporary debates about theatre.

X. The physical versus the vocal

Another area of discussion in several studies is the different forms of expression available to the theatrical performer, and the interrelationship between them. Vlock discusses the types of sign that were part of Dickens’s ‘imaginary text’, predominantly the ‘very explicit non-narrative signs’ of voice and gesture.⁷⁵ In particular, she concentrates on the stage voice, especially patter, in order to demonstrate the interplay between theatre and

⁷⁵ Vlock, p. 5.

novelistic prose. The pervasiveness of the pattered voice indicates that, according to Vlock, 'the period's collective imagination was essentially theatrical' and that 'people observed their world through a theatrical frame' (p. 39). She then demonstrates some uses of patter, for example to publicise and politicise social differences, and (like Schlicke) points to the influence of the comic actor Charles Mathews on Dickens's characterisation.

Vlock chooses to focus on voice rather than gesture because the vocal became increasingly privileged over the physical from the early nineteenth century onwards. Gesture and physicality had been the predominant markers of the previous century, as 'patterns of physical gesture and feature were deeply integrated into popular conceptions of social place in the eighteenth century' (p. 80). However, as wealth (and the concomitant external signifiers of nobility) could be acquired through industry rather than through birth, voice and accent became a more accurate index of social status. As a result 'the Victorian social, literary, and theatrical establishments actively engaged in a semiotics of the voice, locating the signifiers of social place in speech' (p. 81).

Vlock does not entirely discount the importance of the physical side of theatre in the nineteenth century and acknowledges that 'Victorian dramaturgy [as well as fiction] played on collective social assumptions about bodily signs' (p. 82). However, she also recognises that the voice 'increasingly exceeded the physical gesture in semiotic value' during the period and allocates her critical attention accordingly (p. 83). Indeed, she feels that she is against the critical tide in this respect, claiming that while most studies of nineteenth-century theatre 'stress the semiotic dominance of the body in performance', the reality of Victorian theatre-going indicates that 'dramatic experience was thought to be seated primarily in the voice, which was perceived as more important than other theatrical signifiers, like physical gesture and costume' (pp. 131-132).

Despite Vlock's emphasis, however, the spectator was sometimes forced to read physical gestures or costumes. Grimaldi's Clown role was an almost entirely silent figure and his routines relied heavily on dumb show as Findlater recognises: 'Scripted dialogue did not play an important part in the clowning of such a confirmed ad-libber, who relied to a great extent on business and allowed his own personality to be the cause of laughter – in silence'.⁷⁶

Other critics have explained how this was more than just a matter of personal style. Axton notes that pantomime (alongside farce and burlesque) was a form that relied heavily on action rather than dialogue due to the strictures of the Licensing Act of 1737, which forbade the use of dialogue in the non-licensed theatres where pantomimes were performed. As Axton points out, the mimed nature of pantomime meant that appearance, gesture, dress and physical props had to carry the burden of conveying motive and meaning: 'An extravagant exploitation of surfaces was the order of the day in the theater Dickens knew, if only as a means of overcoming the difficulties posed by huge, disorderly playhouses'.⁷⁷ Axton thus acknowledges the excessive 'caricatural, gestic modes' employed by pantomime characters (p. 29).

Schlicke also assigns great importance to the non-verbal aspects of theatrical performance, claiming that 'acting practice of the age was based on the audience's acceptance of gesture as a true expression of inner disposition' and that 'acting was considered natural because it was an imitation of agreed exterior signs of feelings'.⁷⁸ Similarly, Juliet John discusses the primacy of gesture and physiognomy over voice in melodrama, whereby they 'combine to form an accessible, bodily semiotics, more valuable in melodramatic aesthetics than the

⁷⁶ *Grimaldi*, p. 150.

⁷⁷ Axton, p. 191.

⁷⁸ Schlicke, p. 77.

spoken word'.⁷⁹ To John, these non-verbal signs demonstrated an externalisation absent in the 'private' individual of the realist novel, and the villain's principal crime was his resistance to this externalisation and his deliberate manipulation of bodily semiotics through social role-playing to deceive other members of society.

Stage-actors are also involved in this deliberate manipulation, but Dickens perceives their motives as different. As identified earlier, his novels examine different types of actors outside the playhouse and suggest a wider spectrum of performing spaces. Some (for example, Jingle and Tigg) clearly continue to play a role and they are suitably condemned, but others (for example, the Crummles) can also demonstrate genuine feelings. It is also possible to add Dickens's depiction of Grimaldi to these discussions of the dichotomy between appearance and reality.

As John explains, 'Theatrical art provides Dickens with a tool for interrogating and, to an extent, deconstructing the inner life', but this is not only confined to the Dickensian villain.⁸⁰ The pervasiveness of the stereotype of the tears of the clown, taken alongside Dickens's admission to having 'an intense anxiety to know what [Clowns] did with themselves out of pantomime time, and off the stage' at the start of the *Memoirs*, suggest that it extends to these theatrical figures as well.⁸¹

XI. Conclusion

As this review has demonstrated, there is an established and well-developed body of critical thought on Dickens and his relation to the theatrical. However, as with many critical fields, the richness of the source material has inevitably meant that selectiveness and personal interest have shaped all of the studies, and there are a number of intervention

⁷⁹ John, p. 29.

⁸⁰ John, p. 121.

⁸¹ *Memoirs*, I, p. xi.

points available for new studies. Throughout this discussion, a number of these entry points have been identified but a brief recap will serve as a cue for the rest of this thesis.

When critics have considered the theatrical forms important to Dickens's work, the pantomime has received far less attention than melodrama. When pantomime has been discussed it has largely been in terms of the more formal aspects, most closely associated with the main fairytale narrative, rather than the more energetic and ostensibly less circumscribed harlequinade. This mirrors the critical treatment of the pantomime clown. His function to the main story, and its relation to Dickens's work, have been well documented but little has been written on the richer comic potentialities that the harlequinade offered. This has been attributed to the perceived spontaneity and lack of fixity inherent in the harlequinade but this can be refuted somewhat by a closer examination of the kind of recurrent patterns present in the work of its key exponent, Joseph Grimaldi. By identifying these familiar tropes, which would have been part of Dickens's (and his audience's) 'imaginary text', it is possible to make fresh appraisals of some of his characters such as Quilp and Young Bailey.

Grimaldi's fame and popularity meant that, to Dickens and his contemporaries, he *was* the pantomime. The fact that Dickens edited his memoirs indicates a close acquaintance with the man and his methods. Yet this fact has rarely been considered, to the extent that the Introduction to the *Memoirs*, which offers as comprehensive a manifesto of Dickens's view on pantomime as any of his other published work, has been largely left out of critical accounts.

One of the few studies to consider the *Memoirs* (that of Butwin) fails to integrate it into Dickens's wider corpus of work but, by reading the *Memoirs* in relation to Dickens's other works of the time, a large number of similarities and echoes become apparent, suggesting

some continuity. One of the most important of these similarities is its relation to Dickens's meditations on the *theatrum mundi*. Written during the same period as 'The Pantomime of Life', Dickens's use of the biographical form to examine some of the questions about role-playing in life and art has not been fully considered.

Indeed, looking at Grimaldi's development of the role, it can be argued that the spontaneous foolery of the pantomime is an equally essential and inseparable part of Clown's role alongside any plot function he may have, and is an integral component of the value that Dickens attributed to him. By giving up part of the stage to the clown Dickens was able to create his own verbal and sometimes visual equivalent of the harlequinade. Dickens's adoption of elements from the pantomime was also often very funny and, by looking at the interplay between those theories of laughter discussed by Kincaid (who references humour theorists like Bergson and Meredith), the depth and complexity of that humour can be further appreciated.

Acknowledging its debt to Martin Meisel, some attention has been given to Dickens's illustrations in relation to their theatrical appearance – the striking of poses, the formulations of tableaux and so on. However, the pantomime and the figure of the clown in particular were some of the richest visual locales in Victorian theatre as designers and producers developed more and more imaginative ways to circumvent the embargo on the spoken word. These images were circulated through popular prints and were an important part of any 'imaginary text' that included the pantomime. Therefore this study will attempt to redress this relative neglect, and discuss some examples of pantomime images being realised in Dickens's illustrations.

Finally, theatre and cultural historians have acknowledged the pantomime as a politicised form – for example, David Mayer describes it as 'the only effective means of satire to hold

the stage in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century'.⁸² Therefore any consideration of Dickens's politicisation of popular entertainment must account for this fact. Based on Schlicke's wide-ranging political reading of other forms of Victorian entertainment, this thesis will conduct a similar assessment of Dickens's treatment of the pantomime, through the means of its principal figure, the clown.

⁸² *Harlequin*, p. 6.

**CHAPTER 3 - The *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* – A
Reassessment**

I. Introduction

Since its publication in February 1838 Charles Dickens's *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* has received little critical attention and has been dogged by uncertainty and a reluctance to include it within the Dickens canon. This can be demonstrated by a brief survey of the limited corpus of opinion.

Early reviews of the *Memoirs*

The peak of critical interest in the *Memoirs* came at the time of its publication. Dickens's earlier successes ensured that it was reviewed in a number of journals but readers were divided on its literary worth and even its claim to be the work of Dickens.

The Literary Gazette praised the work, claiming that the episodes were not just entertaining in themselves but 'doubly pointed by the talent of the narrator', and finding, for example, the romantic sections 'very tenderly and pleasingly told'.⁸³ Similarly *The Monthly Magazine* regarded the *Memoirs* as 'replete with amusement and interest' and the *Athenaeum* generally felt that 'the work is written in an amicable spirit, and shows a true-hearted, excellent man, and great actor, in many pleasing lights.'⁸⁴ W.H. Thoms predictably offered the highest praise in the pro-'Boz' *Bentley's Miscellany* and placed Dickens in the pantheon of great biographers – 'What Boswell did for Johnson', he declared, 'has *Boz* well done for Grimaldi'.⁸⁵

However, *The Gentleman's Magazine* called the *Memoirs* a pair of 'dull and dreary volumes', without 'matter for a smile, or a paragraph worthy quotation' in either of them.

⁸³ [Anon.], 'Review of New Books: *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi, the Clown* [sic]', *The Literary Gazette*, 17 February 1838, p. 97; p. 99.

⁸⁴ [Anon.], 'Monthly Review of Literature – Biography', *The Monthly Magazine, or British Register*, April 1838, p. 435; [Anon.], Review of the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* – 2nd Notice, *Athenaeum*, 3 March 1838, p. 165.

⁸⁵ W.H. Thoms, 'A Chapter on Clowns', *Bentley's Miscellany*, June 1838, p. 623.

The romantic scenes so lauded by *The Literary Gazette* were decried as ‘painfully lugubrious and trite’.⁸⁶

Beyond these general impressions, there were also several areas of specific critical disagreement and sites of debate from which the *Memoirs* would emerge as a confused, peripheral and soon forgotten text. These discussions were focused around three elements: the extent of Dickens’s involvement in the work, the level of its accuracy and completeness, and the value of its illustrations.

In his ‘Introductory Chapter’, Dickens explains his ‘share’ in the *Memoirs*. Calling himself the ‘editor’, Dickens insists that ‘there has been no *book-making* in this case’ and that he ‘has not swelled the quantity of matter, but materially abridged it’.⁸⁷ Indeed, one reviewer believes him, claiming that ‘barring a few phrases of Pickwickian point, and the alteration of the narrative from the first to the third person, there is little of the expansive craft in these pages’.⁸⁸ The *Gentleman’s Magazine* takes this point further, believing that the ‘leaden nature of its contents, and the slip-slop quality of the author’s style’ demonstrate that it is not the work of Dickens at all, but instead that of ‘some hack of a scribbler [paid by Bentley] to fill a couple of volumes with melancholy common places and insufferable platitudes “long drawn out”’.⁸⁹

But Dickens’s Introduction suggests that he was more involved than this, as he describes how he thought that several incidents ‘might be related in a more attractive manner’.⁹⁰ Several reviewers followed this line instead and attempted to define the traces of Dickens’s own hand within the text. For example, *The Idler* identifies the humour as Dickens’s

⁸⁶ [Anon.], ‘Review of New Books’, *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, June 1838, p. 416.

⁸⁷ *Memoirs*, I, p. xviii.

⁸⁸ [Anon.], ‘New Books – *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, edited by Boz’, *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction*, 17 March 1838, p. 169.

⁸⁹ *Gentleman’s Magazine*, p. 416.

⁹⁰ *Memoirs*, I, p. xviii.

imprint, claiming that the author is 'as droll as the clown' and a 'wag of the first order'.⁹¹

Similarly *The Knickerbocker* felt that much 'of the felicity of thought and language, which is the characteristic of Mr. DICKENS' [sic] style, is apparent in parts of these volumes'.

Following the successful formula of *The Pickwick Papers*, every chapter 'has some interesting story or incident, without contingency as to what may precede or follow it', and is therefore 'especially calculated for a travelling companion'.⁹²

An *Athenaeum* review also drew attention to the editor's guiding hand, feeling that 'Mr Dickens has prefaced his work with an introductory chapter, which gives a Pickwick description of a boy's relish of pantomime, and not unpleasantly marshals us "the way that we are going"'. However, this 'very prominent' 'Pickwick style' is viewed as detrimental to the final work, for as well as casting 'an air of *invention*' around a number of the episodes, it also means that the reader does not get 'Grimaldi's own language undecorated' and is constantly distracted 'by intruding recollections of Mr Weller or Winkle'.⁹³

A final group of comments suggests a middle ground: *The Literary Gazette* describes Dickens as 'a biographer', who has created a 'narrative founded on data, preserved by Grimaldi himself'.⁹⁴ In a second notice the following week this balanced approach is emphasised: the *Memoirs* is 'imbued with both the comic humour and the fine natural feeling of its editor, Mr Dickens, whilst, at the same time, it is the accurate transcript of poor Grimaldi's own materials and own views'.⁹⁵ *The Athenaeum* also identifies the mixture of factual and creative when it refers to Grimaldi's own journal and concludes that 'the

⁹¹ [Anon.], 'Memoirs of Grimaldi, the Clown', *The Idler, and Breakfast-Table Companion*, 8 July 1837, p. 66; p. 74.

⁹² [Anon.], Review of *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi, The Knickerbocker, or New-York Monthly Magazine*, May 1838, p. 463.

⁹³ *Athenaeum*, 3 March 1838, p. 165.

⁹⁴ *Literary Gazette*, 17 February 1838, p. 97.

⁹⁵ [Anon.], 'Life of Grimaldi – 2nd notice', *The Literary Gazette*, 24 February 1838, p. 118.

anecdotes are doubtless grounded in fact, though rendered a little more effectively ornamental by the biographer'.⁹⁶

Whether this makes the *Memoirs* an accurate account of Grimaldi's life is another matter. *The Gentleman's Magazine* felt that 'the history of the death of his only son is purposely altered from the truth, without serving the purpose desired' and that 'the account given of the assumed madness of Bradbury, Grimaldi's rival, is incorrect in every particular'.⁹⁷ Contrary to this, Thoms felt that Dickens's account presents 'very vividly the hopes and disappointments, the histrionic glories and painful realities' of Grimaldi's life. He also stressed the straightforwardness of the account, in which 'there is no straining after effect' and 'no seeking to elevate the subject into a hero'.⁹⁸

Opinion was also divided on the longevity of the text, and its likely impact on Dickens's career. *The Globe* felt that the two volumes 'will of course be 'stock pieces' in every library' and *The Monthly Magazine* was adamant that it 'cannot do otherwise than materially increase the already extensive and justly earned reputation of the talented "Boz"'.⁹⁹ However, *The Gentleman's Magazine* concluded its negative review with a warning to Dickens, counselling him to 'confine himself to his own unrivalled novels and pictures of real life' if he wants 'to ensure a continuance of his well-earned fame'.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, *The Athenaeum* regarded Dickens as under-qualified as Grimaldi's biographer claiming that he lacked both 'the *passion* of the biographer' for his subject and any 'living sketch from the actual memory of the writer' which would have brought the necessary vividness to his account.¹⁰¹ The reviewer concluded that Dickens (unlike his illustrator George Cruikshank)

⁹⁶ [Anon.], Review of the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, *Athenaeum*, 17 February 1838, p. 115.

⁹⁷ *Gentleman's Magazine*, p.417.

⁹⁸ *Bentley's Miscellany*, June 1838, p. 623.

⁹⁹ Advertisement in *The History of the French Revolution*, by Adolphe Thiers and Frederic Shoberl, Vol. 4 (London: Bentley, 1838); *Monthly Magazine*, p. 435.

¹⁰⁰ *Gentleman's Magazine*, pp. 416-417.

¹⁰¹ *Athenaeum*, 3 March 1838, p. 165.

could not have seen Grimaldi perform himself and so lacked the first-hand experience required to write the man's life.

This assertion provoked Dickens into writing an angry (but unpublished) letter to the (fictitious) sub-editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*, in which Dickens asserted that he had seen Grimaldi perform in his youth, even though 'my recollections of his acting are – to my loss – shadowy and imperfect'. But he also noted the fallacy that 'to write a biography of a man (having genuine materials) or to edit his own notes it is essential that you should have known him' and supported this view with prominent examples such as Lord Braybrooke's memoirs of Pepys or Hazlitt's Bonaparte.¹⁰²

If reviewers were collectively unsure of their response to the *Memoirs* then public reaction was similarly lukewarm. Despite Dickens's initial optimism at the sales figures - '1700 *Grimaldis* have already been sold and the demand increases daily!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!', he told Forster in late March 1838 - its popularity quickly waned, and most of the remaining one thousand and three hundred copies of the first edition went unsold.¹⁰³ Subsequent editions have been produced, most notably Charles Whitehead's (1846) and Richard Findlater's (1968), but neither prompted any substantial revival in critical interest beyond several journal articles.

The first was Joseph Butwin's 'The Paradox of the Clown in Dickens', already described in Chapter 2 of this thesis. Here Grimaldi's life story is cited as the exemplary case of the sad comedian but Butwin has little praise for the *Memoirs* themselves. Although he feels that Dickens is 'the first English writer to absorb the image of the clown', the *Memoirs* 'betrays very little of the master's style, probably very little of clown's'.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Letter to Sub-editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*, March 1838, *Pilgrim* I, p. 382.

¹⁰³ Letter to John Forster, ?Late March 1838, *Pilgrim* I, p. 391.

¹⁰⁴ Butwin, pp. 116-117.

In another article Leigh Woods believes that the *Memoirs* carry interest as an autobiography based on the 'tendency of biographers to identify with their subjects'.¹⁰⁵ Woods explains how 'Dickens rendered Grimaldi's life as a cyclical and recurrent nightmare' as he projected his own anxieties about the painful and capricious nature of the performer's life into his narrative.¹⁰⁶ Observing that in some cases the biographer's life goes on to imitate that of his subject, Woods suggestively maps the pain of Grimaldi's performance onto the pains of Dickens's public readings.

Dickens's biographers

While reviewers and scholars alike have largely neglected the *Memoirs* since its publication biographers of both Dickens and Grimaldi have only recently given it much attention.

John Forster granted it two and a half pages and claimed that Dickens merely reworked certain sections, having 'a most indifferent opinion of the mass of material which in general composed it' and a 'modest estimate' of the final work. He further notes that a 'great many critical faults were found', and then quickly proceeds to the happier business of the celebratory dinner for the completed *Pickwick Papers*.¹⁰⁷

Peter Ackroyd's account is even shorter, dismissing the *Memoirs* as something 'to fill up the empty days' after completing *The Pickwick Papers* and before starting his next major work. The extent of his analysis is to comment that Dickens 'seemed to have warmed to [the] task' after he 'began it unwillingly' and like Woods observes that Grimaldi's 'character and temperament bear in many ways striking resemblances to Dickens's own'.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Leigh Woods, 'The curse of performance: inscribing the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* into the life of Charles Dickens', *Biography* 14.2 (1991), p. 138.

¹⁰⁶ Woods, p. 139.

¹⁰⁷ *Life*, I, p. 80.

¹⁰⁸ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Minerva, 1991), pp. 254-5.

Michael Slater's more recent analysis re-evaluates the extent of Dickens's creative input into the *Memoirs* and attributes a large proportion to him, observing that 'there are unmistakeable Dickens touches [...] Moreover, in certain places Dickens has completely changed the original Grimaldi/Wilks text, "telling some of the stories in my own way"'. Slater also positions the *Memoirs* within the context of Dickens's other work when he comments that Dickens 'sometimes ends up with something that could well be an episode from *Pickwick*', and feels that it demonstrates his early promise as an editor, 'improving, sharpening and "brightening" his contributors' offerings'.¹⁰⁹

Robert Douglas-Fairhurst also gives the *Memoirs* due prominence in his study of Dickens's formative years as a writer. He feels that the *Memoirs* are 'no less revealing of [Dickens's] state of mind' than any of his other works from the *Memoirs* period and believes Dickens has a strong informing presence, using it as 'a continuation of his diary by other means'.¹¹⁰ Despite the lack of a definitive original manuscript, he notes that 'it is not hard to find places where the events are given an unmistakably Dickensian character' and that 'his imagination imbues every page like a watermark'.¹¹¹ By 'telling Grimaldi's story in his own way' he feels that Dickens 'produced several overlaps with his other writings' – such as the Pentonville burglary episode which was reworked in *Oliver Twist* (discussed in Section III of this chapter).¹¹²

Douglas-Fairhurst reads this 'Dickensian character' in the broad narrative arc of Grimaldi's industrious progress and his accentuation of positive traits like Grimaldi's punctuality and dedication to his performance, particularly in the face of the misfortunes of his life.

Dickens's relationship with Grimaldi is here compared to that between Hamlet and Yorick,

¹⁰⁹ Charles Dickens, pp. 111-112.

¹¹⁰ Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist* (London and Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 299; p. 302.

¹¹¹ Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 300.

¹¹² Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 301.

whereby the ‘elegiac tone’ reflects the same loss of childhood joy, which for Dickens ‘could only be restored through writing’.¹¹³

Finally, Douglas-Fairhurst identifies the seeds of Dickens’s later desire for the public performances in his admiring tone in describing Grimaldi’s tours. To Dickens, they seem to offer ‘the blueprint for a get-rich-quick scheme’, and he thus betrays an ‘unmistakable glint in his calculations of the ‘immense sums’ Grimaldi earned’ and often ‘simply lists the raw numbers in a series of long, admiring whistles’.¹¹⁴ However, like Woods, Douglas-Fairhurst demonstrates how Dickens acknowledges the bodily toll of these performances and offers it as a warning to others – which he fails to heed himself by ending his own career in a similar way to Grimaldi’s.

The *Memoirs* as a biographical document

Most of Grimaldi’s biographers have been extremely critical of the *Memoirs* as a biographical document – showing less concern for the editor’s reputation than that of his subject.

H.D. Miles’s *Life of Joseph Grimaldi*, which appeared soon after the *Memoirs* in 1838, devotes a significant number of pages to criticising Dickens’s account. Miles’s attack was partly motivated by professional rivalry but his complaints are wide-ranging and often severe, highlighting the ‘egregious blundering [...] by the talented and eminent Mr. Dickens’ and warning that ‘all that is palmed upon the public in this book-making age is not to be implicitly relied on as authentic’.¹¹⁵

For example, Miles claims that ‘truth requires the avowal’ that Joe’s father was ‘a harsh, a cruel, and, if report do not belie him greatly, an immoral man’, supporting this claim with

¹¹³ Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 302.

¹¹⁴ Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 302.

¹¹⁵ Henry Downes Miles, *The Life of Joseph Grimaldi: With Anecdotes of His Contemporaries* (London: Harris, 1838), p. 102.

reference to Charles Dibdin's *Life* and a contemporary poem.¹¹⁶ He berates Dickens for 'a determination to blink the question' of Joe's violent upbringing by his father, as well as 'a scrupulous avoidance of all mention of [his] maternity'.¹¹⁷ Throughout the rest of his account Miles continually rebukes Dickens for his inaccuracy with dates and details of the theatrical repertoire.

However he is also keen to point out places where Dickens has included *too much* detail. For example, when narrating Grimaldi's courtship of his first wife, Miles remarks that Dickens's work devotes 'an alarming portion of a volume to an elaborate history of the hopes, fears, &c. which form the staple of these love-making affairs'. Dickens justified his lengthy account of this event by admitting that although he had performed a 'double and most comprehensive process of abridgement', it was nevertheless a subject on which the 'old man was garrulous' and so he did not have 'the heart to reduce it further'.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless Miles opts to 'dismiss the old story by stating the issue of [Grimaldi's] courtship' in a couple of lines.¹¹⁹

More recently, Andrew McConnell Stott cites 'a two volume "special copy"' of the *Memoirs* as one of the 'principal sources' of his own Grimaldi biography.¹²⁰ He repeats many of its episodes but devotes little critical attention to the text itself, other than to remark that Dickens used the sad demise of Grimaldi's son, J.S. Grimaldi, as his model for 'The Stroller's Tale'. This observation is echoed in the *Dickensian* review of Stott's book which claims that,

¹¹⁶ Miles, p. 16.

¹¹⁷ Miles, p. 17, p. 23.

¹¹⁸ *Memoirs*, I, pp. xviii-xix.

¹¹⁹ Miles, p. 59.

¹²⁰ Andrew McConnell Stott, *The Pantomime Life of Joseph Grimaldi* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2009), p. 349. Further references are given as *Pantomime Life*.

apart from the introduction, this episode is the 'one aspect of this book [the *Memoirs*] which undoubtedly will interest Dickensians'.¹²¹

The most extensive treatment of the *Memoirs* is provided by Richard Findlater, who edited his own edition in 1968 and wrote a biography of Grimaldi ten years later. He grudgingly concedes that the *Memoirs* 'claims its own small, secure niche in the development of a great writer' but also offers a lengthy justification for why it is 'commonly cold-shouldered by Dickensians'.¹²² Echoing many of the original reviews Findlater regards the *Memoirs* as 'among the most disappointing reminiscences in our theatrical literature'.¹²³ He further characterises them as 'not only inaccurate but dull' and the result of 'a literary misalliance' that is 'one of the more depressing examples of conspicuous waste in Victorian publishing'.¹²⁴ On the issue of attribution Findlater takes Forster's line, dismissing the *Memoirs* as 'a piece of bread-and-butter hackwork' which largely reproduced the 'dreary twaddle' of Wilks's manuscript.¹²⁵ However, he also concedes that Dickens's 'hand is evident in the retelling of many anecdotes'.¹²⁶

From his biographer's viewpoint Findlater's principal contention with the *Memoirs* is that they 'leave so many questions unanswered or wrongly answered'.¹²⁷ To address this in his own edition Findlater does his own tidying, for example pruning the text of 'snippets of fact about items in the [theatrical] repertoire' (which he describes as 'usually irrelevant, incomplete and almost always inaccurate') and correcting the dates used to organise the chapters. Findlater claims that these errors probably came from Wilks's manuscript, but

¹²¹ Stephen Jarvis, 'Review of *The Pantomime Life of Joseph Grimaldi*', *The Dickensian* 480 (Spring 2010), p. 65.

¹²² Richard Findlater, 'Introduction', in Charles Dickens, *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, ed. by Richard Findlater (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1968), pp. 15-16. Further references are given as *Memoirs* (1968).

¹²³ *Grimaldi*, p. 12.

¹²⁴ *Grimaldi*, pp. 246-247.

¹²⁵ *Grimaldi*, p. 245; Letter to Richard Bentley (5 December 1837), *Pilgrim*, I, p. 337.

¹²⁶ *Grimaldi*, p. 245.

¹²⁷ *Memoirs* (1968), p. 14.

blames Dickens for choosing to 'botch his way through [this] second-hand version' rather than Grimaldi's original.¹²⁸

Findlater also criticises Dickens for not presenting a complete picture of Grimaldi's life. Despite Dickens's claims of a life-long interest in the pantomime, Findlater feels that the *Memoirs* makes 'a merely perfunctory reference' to his onstage life and wholly fails to 'suggest his theatrical genius'. He regards H.D. Miles's *Life* more faithful to Grimaldi as it provides 'briefly, but vividly, a verbal impression of the clown at work, however indebted it may be to other authors'.¹²⁹

An alternative approach

Clearly then, the *Memoirs* has been held in relatively low regard since its publication.

However the remainder of this chapter will argue for a reassessment and re-appraise the *Memoirs* according to a more rewarding conceptual framework. This framework accounts for more recent theories which regard biography as 'a complex narrative as well as a record of an individual's life, a literary process as well as a historical product'.¹³⁰

Ira Bruce Nadel indicates that the traditional relationship between biographers and readers has meant that less factual biographies have been judged as inferior, because typically 'fact has validated the biographical enterprise for readers while imposing limitations on writers'.¹³¹ Yet conversely readers are not entertained by a dry Gradgrindian litany of facts; as one mid-Victorian reviewer of biography puts it, 'We want to see a portrait, not an inventory of the features possessed by the subject'.¹³² For many readers, the details become subordinate to what David Novarr calls 'our love of sharp incident, revealing

¹²⁸ *Grimaldi*, p. 246.

¹²⁹ *Grimaldi*, p. 247.

¹³⁰ Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 1.

¹³¹ Nadel, p. 4.

¹³² [Anon.], 'Contemporary Literature', *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*, October 1857, p. 581.

anecdote [and] suspenseful narrative'.¹³³ Thus A. J. Cockshut identifies the primary difficulty of biography as the 'tension between interpretation and evidence' and in the *Memoirs* it is clear that Dickens privileges the interpretive.¹³⁴

Nadel resolves this tension by claiming that biography is 'fundamentally a narrative which has as its primary task the enactment of character and place through language' and is therefore closely aligned to fiction.¹³⁵ This view is supported by a number of critics and biographers. For example, in her biography of Woolf, Phyllis Rose comments that 'A life is as much a work of fiction – of guiding narrative structures – as novels or poems'.¹³⁶ Consequently critics such as Donald Stauffer have urged that biographies should be appraised by the same standards as fiction and judged 'according to their success in conveying the sense of a life being lived, rather than according to the quantity or accuracy of the facts they contain'.¹³⁷ Oliver Goldsmith feels that the biographer himself is integral to this process. He begins his *Life of Nash* by emphasising the importance of the biographer in the estimation of a life being written. 'History owes its excellence more to the writer's manner than to the materials of which it is composed [...] whether the hero or the clown be the subject of the memoir, it is only man that appears with all his native minuteness about him; for nothing very great was ever yet formed from the little materials of humanity'.¹³⁸

Although no original manuscript is available, Dickens's own comments make it clear that he approached the *Memoirs* as a fiction writer and tried to marshal his material around a

¹³³ David Novarr, *The Making of Walton's Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), p. 495.

¹³⁴ A.J. Cockshut, *Truth to Life: The Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Collins, 1974), p. 11.

¹³⁵ Nadel, p. 8.

¹³⁶ Phyllis Rose, *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. viii.

¹³⁷ Donald A. Stauffer, *The Art of Biography in Eighteenth Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 4.

¹³⁸ Oliver Goldsmith, *The Life of Richard Nash, Esq.* (London: Newbery, 1762), p. 2.

guiding narrative structure. In a letter to Grimaldi's doctor, he contradicts his own claim that he had 'merely been editing another account' by admitting that he was 'telling some of the stories in [his] own way'. He describes his organising principle when he explains 'I was very much struck by the many traits of kindheartedness scattered through the book, and have given it that colouring throughout'.¹³⁹ Forster supports this by claiming that the manuscript 'contained one or two stories told so badly, and so well worth better telling, that the hope of enlivening their dullness at the cost of very little labour constituted a sort of attraction for [Dickens]'.¹⁴⁰ In another letter to Bentley, Dickens indicates that he was taking an analytic approach when he comments that 'I think I am bringing the points out as well as it is possible to do from Mr Wilks's dreary twaddle'.¹⁴¹

Dickens explains this further in his 'Introductory Chapter' to the *Memoirs*, expanding the list of the incidents he was 'much struck by' to include 'the burglary, the brother's return from sea under the extraordinary circumstances detailed, the adventure of the man with the two fingers on his left hand, the account of Mackintosh and his friends'.¹⁴² He reiterates his intention to tell things in his own way, 'altering its form throughout, and making such other alterations as he conceived would improve the narration of the facts, without any departure from the facts themselves'.¹⁴³ Significantly, to Dickens here, 'the facts' mean the details of Grimaldi's life as described in Wilks's manuscript, rather than any scholarly aspiration towards an absolute truth.

Hayden White describes this process when he explains that to make 'a comprehensible story' out of 'a set of events' 'the historian charges those events with the symbolic

¹³⁹ Letter to Dr J.A. Wilson, ?14 February 1838, *Pilgrim*, I, p. 373.

¹⁴⁰ *Life*, I, p. 80.

¹⁴¹ Letter to Richard Bentley, ?5 December 1837, *Pilgrim* I, p. 337.

¹⁴² *Memoirs*, I, pp. xvii-xviii.

¹⁴³ *Memoirs*, I, p. xviii.

significance of a comprehensible plot-structure'.¹⁴⁴ Others have recognised that this structure is largely determined by the personality of the biographer – as Clarence Tracey explains, 'in everything he will be guided by the formation of his judgements by his experience and his personal set of values' and Leon Edel describes the biographical project as 'a re-projection into words, into a literary or a kind of semi-scientific and historical form, of the inert materials, reassembled [...] through the mind of the [...] biographer. He becomes the informing mind'.¹⁴⁵ Georges May goes further in demonstrating this autobiographical quality of biography, drawing parallels between biography and the novel and concluding that 'in both cases the model which the writer has in mind is a reflection of himself'.¹⁴⁶

With these concepts in mind the rest of this chapter will trace one possible structure for the *Memoirs*. It will describe an overlaying framework wholly suitable for the life story of a theatrical figure, which also continues some of the key ideas from Dickens's other works of the period. The *Memoirs* are a complementary piece to his earlier essay 'The Pantomime of Life', with the biography of Grimaldi representing a practical examination of the theories of role-playing in life and art proposed in the essay. These are also preoccupations that Dickens demonstrates in his more popular works of the same period, *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*. If one follows Nadel's conception of Romantic biography as an 'allegiance to the image rather than the facts' then Dickens's overarching image in the *Memoirs*, superseding any striving for accuracy or minute detail, is that of Grimaldi as a performer in the theatre of life.¹⁴⁷ In this sense, the *Memoirs* is what Harold Nicholson would call a

¹⁴⁴ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1973), pp. 91-92.

¹⁴⁵ Clarence Tracey, 'Introduction', in *Biography in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by J.D. Browning (New York: Garland, 1980), pp. 1-7 (p. 6); Leon Edel, *Literary Biography* (London: Hart-Davis, 1957), p. 11.

¹⁴⁶ Georges May, 'Biography, Autobiography and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century France' in *Biography in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 147-164 (p. 154).

¹⁴⁷ Nadel, p. 76.

‘literary’ biography, destined to ‘wander off into the imaginative, leaving the strident streets of science for the open fields of fiction’ and not to be judged by the standards of ‘scientific’ biography and its primacy of the factual.¹⁴⁸

To some extent the *Memoirs* also fulfils the idea of the early Victorian biography as suggested by Cockshut, including the assumption that ‘the fundamental reason for writing a man’s life was that he was admirable’, and in the *Memoirs* Dickens directs us towards admiring Grimaldi as ‘a man of great feeling and sensibility’ aside from his flaws.¹⁴⁹ This appeal to sentiment which Dickens referred to in his letter to Dr Wilson also aligns the *Memoirs* with Romantic biography’s ‘insistence of looking into a man’s heart and motives’.¹⁵⁰

However, its main focus is to describe the theatricality of life; although Dickens claims that he first took up Grimaldi’s manuscript with an anxiety to understand Clown’s offstage life, he shapes his narrative in a way that makes it clear that there is no easy distinction between onstage and offstage. Cockshut claims that it is ‘possible to read a good biography as if it were a novel, paying attention to the author’s mastery of form’, but Dickens’s form here leads us closer to theatre than fiction.¹⁵¹

Donald Stauffer has demonstrated how the theatre informed the eighteenth-century biography in a variety of interesting ways. In some cases moral judgements and characterisation are based on selected quotations from plays and thus ‘a few lines from the Elizabethan dramatists are made touchstones by means of which an autobiographer or memorialist may evaluate the actions of a whole life’.¹⁵² The memoirs of James Lackington

¹⁴⁸ Harold Nicholson, *The Development of English Biography* ([S.l]: Hogarth, 1928), p. 155.

¹⁴⁹ Cockshut, p. 16; *Memoirs*, II, p. 262.

¹⁵⁰ James L. Clifford, cited in James Noxon, ‘Human Nature: General Theory and Individual Lives’, in *Biography in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 8-27 (p. 12).

¹⁵¹ Cockshut, p. 21.

¹⁵² Stauffer, p. 14.

(1791) and Mark Moore (1795) refer to a variety of theatrical sources in order to interpret their own lives.

Stauffer also traces a stylistic debt that biography owed to theatre, particularly in representing dialogue and idiomatic speech, as well as improving the depiction of backgrounds. Through a variety of examples he shows how biographers used a key problem of the dramatist – the requirement to ‘intensify certain traits in his characters and present those traits in concise, memorable utterance’ – to their advantage, in order to create engaging and memorable life stories.¹⁵³

Moreover Stauffer notes another trend in eighteenth century biography of greater relevance to the *Memoirs*, which was the increasing popularity of biographies and autobiographies of stage actors, or as he puts it the phenomenon whereby ‘eighteenth century actors acquire the ability to dramatize themselves’.¹⁵⁴ Philosophies espoused on the stage such as the comic nature of life were increasingly used to judge life outside the playhouse. Stauffer comments that, in the memoirs of stage figures such as James Spiller, Colley Cibber and Charles Macklin, their ‘perception of the ridiculous or the witty in life was no less keen offstage, and they imparted it to their biographers’.¹⁵⁵ In this way, the *Memoirs* can be seen as a continuation of this tradition as Dickens fuses the pathos of life with the comical in the telling of the clown’s history.

Tracing Dickens’s imaginative input into the *Memoirs* in this way also offers an argument against claims of Dickens’s unprofessionalism. Findlater claims that Dickens ‘went at it in a rush, to meet his deadline’ preferring to ‘botch his way through the second-hand version’ of Grimaldi’s life in an unscholarly manner without looking at Grimaldi’s original.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Stauffer, p. 25.

¹⁵⁴ Stauffer, p. 27.

¹⁵⁵ Stauffer, p. 28.

¹⁵⁶ *Memoirs* (1968), p. 300; *Grimaldi*, p. 246.

However it was not until writers such as Forster brought biography to greater prominence (through works like his life of Dickens) that life writing became seen as a profession at all.

As Nadel explains, many biographers from earlier in the period had other primary careers, and only later in the century would it become more than just 'another task for the busy man of letters, one of his innumerable writing assignments'.¹⁵⁷

Moreover (rather than acting as a time-filler as Ackroyd suggests) the *Memoirs* was composed during a very congested period of Dickens's writing career. His critics required a prompt - yet coherent - conclusion for *The Pickwick Papers*, as *Bell's New Weekly Messenger* disliked the inset tale of 'The Bagman's Uncle' in the seventeenth number, commenting that 'There is much straining at something new, but the subject is already exhausted, and if 'Boz' be regardful of his reputation, he will speedily wind the story up'.¹⁵⁸

Alongside this *Oliver Twist* was gathering favourable reviews, motivating Dickens to greater efforts with this project; *The Sun* predicted that it could become Dickens's 'master-piece', and *The Examiner* went even further, claiming that 'so far as it has yet proceeded, it is its author's masterpiece, and [...] promises to take its place among the higher prose fictions of the language'.¹⁵⁹ As if this were not enough, by the end of September 1837, around the time Dickens began his engagement with the *Memoirs*, he had been contracted by Richard Bentley to produce a three-volume novel by October 1838.

After a brief introduction to Cruikshank's accompanying illustrations the rest of this chapter will sequentially work through the key sections, themes and characters of 'The Pantomime of Life' and look at how its principles are realised, explored and interrogated in the *Memoirs* and beyond.

¹⁵⁷ Nadel, p. 68.

¹⁵⁸ [Anon.], Review of *The Pickwick Papers*, *Bell's New Weekly Messenger*, 3 September 1837, p.67.

¹⁵⁹ [William Deacon], [Review of *Oliver Twist*], *The Sun*, 1 September 1837, p. 3; [Anon.], 'The Literary Examiner', *The Examiner*, 10 September 1837, p. 581.

‘Admirable sketches with which he has illustrated Grimaldi’s life’ - Cruikshank’s drawings

In the *Memoirs* a number of Cruikshank’s drawings work to subtly underscore Dickens’s wider theme of the *theatrum mundi*. Yet critics are also divided on the quality of this pictorial contribution. *The Monthly Magazine* called the fourteen illustrations ‘some of the most felicitous in design and perfect in execution that have ever emanated from the pencil of that well-known artist’ and Thoms in *Bentley’s Miscellany* praised the ‘admirable sketches with which he has illustrated Grimaldi’s life’.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, the *Athenaeum* reviewer feels that the ‘sketches by George Cruikshank are capital, full of character, spirit and fun’.¹⁶¹ However, the less favourable *Gentleman’s Magazine* declared that ‘the inimitable Cruikshank [...] has not produced a single illustration worthy [*sic*] his abilities’ which it attributed to the poor quality of the source material.¹⁶²

Martin Meisel’s *Realizations*, a work on the interplay between word and image, considers the term ‘illustration’ and the idea of ‘illustrating’ a text. He distinguishes between an illustration and a realisation and defines an illustration as something that embellishes the text, adding further detail and extending the meaning, whereas a realisation is a less mediated presentation of the text in pictorial form in order to make the depiction of the idea seem more realistic and closer to the viewer. Meisel feels that the nineteenth century saw an ‘extraordinary dialogue of literary and pictorial forms’ moving between the two impulses of realisation (‘giving concrete perceptual form to a literary text’) and illustration (‘interpretive re-creation’).¹⁶³ Deborah Vlock supports this view and comments that this

¹⁶⁰ *Monthly Magazine*, p. 435; *Bentley’s Miscellany*, June 1838, p. 623.

¹⁶¹ *Athenaeum*, 3 March 1838, p. 165.

¹⁶² *Gentleman’s Magazine*, p. 416.

¹⁶³ Meisel, p. 32.

dialogue formed the 'cultural text upon which popular culture consumers drew in processing their aesthetic experiences'.¹⁶⁴

Meisel identifies both Dickens and Cruikshank as key figures within this dialogue, whereby the pictures accompanying the novelist's work were not merely 'decorative embellishment, but narrative enrichment, to tell the story in collaboration with the text'.¹⁶⁵ Historically, Dickens had actually started work on *Pickwick Papers* as the 'illustrator' in Meisel's sense of the term, adding textual support to Seymour's sporting plates, and Cruikshank collaborated in a similar way with Pierce Egan on *Life of London* (1821) which took Cruikshank's pictorial material as its starting point and added the text afterwards. Meisel thus argues that Cruikshank could be considered an 'author' of this work, something he later claimed himself in relation to W.H. Ainsworth's *Tower of London* (1840).

If we analyse the pictures in the *Memoirs* based on this conceptual framework they could be said to perform the role of illustration in a way that is entirely consistent with Dickens's concerns with theatricality. Here Cruikshank was continuing a method that he had used previously in *Sketches by Boz*, which Axton describes as a text inflected by 'the techniques of the early Victorian popular theater'.¹⁶⁶ In his discussion of the relationship between Dickens's text and Cruikshank's drawings Hillis Miller explains that the latter were 'based on complex conventions, which include not only modes of graphic representation, but also the stereotyped poses of melodrama and pantomime'.¹⁶⁷ Baudelaire similarly associates

¹⁶⁴ Vlock, p. 19.

¹⁶⁵ Meisel, p. 53.

¹⁶⁶ Axton, p. 37.

¹⁶⁷ J. Hillis Miller, 'The Fiction of Realism: *Sketches by Boz*, *Oliver Twist* and Cruikshank's Illustrations', in *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank: Papers read at a Clark Library Seminar on May 9 1970* by J. Hillis Miller and David Borowitz (Los Angeles: William Andrew Clark Memorial Library, University of California, 1971), pp. 1-69 (p. 52).

Cruikshank's drawings with the pantomime, asserting that each of his 'little creations mimes his part in a frenzy and ferment, like a pantomime-actor'.¹⁶⁸

Based on these multiple conventions at play within Cruikshank's drawings in *Sketches by Boz*, Hillis Miller identifies a tension between their theatricality ('the pantomime violence of gesture, expression, and movement' and its associated stylised poses) and the desire to portray reality. Often Cruikshank's figures are 'caught frozen in unstable gestures or poses', adopting 'a gesture or pose that could last only an instant and then would pass, never to return'.¹⁶⁹ Many of the characters in the *Sketches* are caught in *tableaux* at arrested moments of action or reaction – for example in 'The Tuggs's at Ramsgate' several of the ladies are caught mid-expression, with their mouths open in shock at the suspended tussle between Joseph Tuggs and Captain Waters. In 'Mr Minns and his Cousin', Cruikshank captures the moment when 'Minns leapt from his seat as though he had received the discharge from a galvanic battery' – but shows him mid-leap from his chair and his mouth wide open in surprise with his amused companion Budden mid-laugh.¹⁷⁰

If we consider the twelve main illustrations of the *Memoirs*, four of them directly realise actions on the stage ('Joe's unexpected visit to the Pit at Sadler's Wells', 'A startling effect', 'Live properties' and 'The last Song'), while another four illustrate scenes from the text by emphasising Dickens's themes of theatricality and performance through visual methods ('Master Joey going to visit his Godpapa', 'A bit of Pantomime off the Stage', 'Appearing in public' and 'The Barber's Shop'). Of the remaining four, three comfortably lend themselves to *tableaux* ('Mr Mackintosh's covey', 'Like Master, like Man' and 'Grimaldi's kindness to

¹⁶⁸ Charles Baudelaire, 'Some Foreign Caricaturists' in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1965), p. 189.

¹⁶⁹ 'Fiction of Realism', p. 57.

¹⁷⁰ Charles Dickens, 'Mr. Minns and his Cousin', in *Dickens's Journalism*, ed. by Michael Slater, pp. 306-315 (p. 309).

the Giants'), and only one – 'The Wager', which shows an episode with two moving carriages – falls outside of these categories.

The second group of drawings is perhaps the most interesting, occupying an intermediate position which is neither of the stage nor entirely apart from it. It could be argued that within these pictures Cruikshank provides a realisation of Dickens's text (a drawing of the scene closer to reality) *and* an illustration of his themes of the *theatrum mundi*. They also operate as *tableaux*, those key intersections between the pictorial and the theatrical, which Meisel describes as where 'the actors strike an expressive stance in a legible symbolic configuration that crystallizes a stage of the narrative as a situation, or summarises and punctuates it' for the audience.¹⁷¹

Therefore the rest of this chapter will refer to the drawings at appropriate points, within the context of the text around them, in order to demonstrate their illustrative qualities.

II. Pantomime characters and their audience

An introduction to 'The Pantomime of Life'

Dickens wrote 'The Pantomime of Life' for the March 1837 number of *Bentley's Miscellany* to supplement the page count, when that month's instalment of *Oliver Twist* fell short.

Although Michael Slater acknowledges that it was a 'hastily written', 'makeweight' piece he argues that it is 'fluently-written' and 'may be seen as a sort of artistic manifesto by Dickens, justifying the essential theatricality of his art'.¹⁷² Edwin Eigner also recognises its wider value when he comments that the 'association Dickens insists on between pantomime and our everyday lives [within it] is essential in terms of the carnivalesque in his work'.¹⁷³ Moreover, Axton draws parallels with *Sketches by Boz*, *The Pickwick Papers*

¹⁷¹ Meisel, p. 45.

¹⁷² *Charles Dickens*, pp. 95-96; 'Pantomime', p. 500.

¹⁷³ Eigner, p. 14.

and *Oliver Twist*, claiming that ‘“The Pantomime of Life’ appears to offer a summary of the ideas that occupied the novelist’s mind during the period of composition of these volumes’.¹⁷⁴

Axton and Eigner use this essay as a catalyst for considering the *theatrum mundi* in Dickens’s fiction but here it offers another framework by which to interrogate the *Memoirs* and consider how Dickens uses the life of Grimaldi as a case study for Eigner’s ‘association [...] between pantomime and our everyday lives’. Such a reading has been hinted at before. For example, David Mayer regards the *Memoirs* as ‘an account [...] intended to demonstrate that Grimaldi’s many personal misfortunes were balanced by moments as comic as any harlequinade’ and Douglas-Fairhurst calls Grimaldi’s life ‘an extended comedy of errors’ but no investigation has yet gone further.¹⁷⁵

Dickens begins ‘The Pantomime of Life’ with an explanation of his attraction to the pantomime as a form of entertainment. This genre appeals to Dickens because it is associated with times of celebration, full of ‘varied and many-coloured’ spectacles and evocative of childhood. But the deeper reason for his interest is that it is ‘a mirror of life [...] it is so to audiences generally, although they are not aware of it, and [...] this very circumstance is the secret cause of their amusement and delight’.¹⁷⁶ Here Dickens attributes a power that was traditionally confined to ‘serious’ theatre - ‘whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to Nature’ - to a popular form of entertainment.¹⁷⁷ Through the course of the essay he develops this idea by carefully interweaving depictions of pantomime scenes and characters with scenes of ‘real’

¹⁷⁴ Axton, p. 39.

¹⁷⁵ David Mayer, ‘Review of *The Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*’, in *Theatre Notebook* 24.1 (1970), p. 41; Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 301.

¹⁷⁶ ‘Pantomime’, p. 500.

¹⁷⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans and others, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edition (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), III: ii, 21-22, p. 1209.

life, without immediately telling us which is which, to show how the stock types of pantomime have identifiable real-life counterparts. The rest of this section will consider each pantomime figure in turn, but will first examine the other participants within the theatrical dynamic who are equally prominent within both 'The Pantomime of Life' and the *Memoirs* – the audience.

'Is this like life?' – The omnipresence of the audience-mob

Dickens begins 'The Pantomime of Life' by describing an 'elderly gentleman' who is initially 'comfortable in circumstances, and well-to-do in the world'. However, he 'suddenly loses his footing and stumbles', and is revealed to be a Pantaloon on the stage. At this point he is set upon by a 'noisy and officious crowd', much to the amusement of the audience who 'roar', become 'convulsed with merriment' and 'exhausted with laughter'.

Dickens then describes the same scene in the 'real world', where it can be observed in a variety of locations, such as the Stock Exchange, a City bank, or a tradesman's shop. But crucially in the 'real world' scene the audience transform from a merely passive group of spectators to become the mob itself; they raise 'a wild hallo' and 'whoop and yell as [the man] lies humbled beneath them'. Within the same sentence, they are simultaneously actors and observers: 'Mark how eagerly they set upon him when he is down; and how they mock and deride him as he slinks away'.¹⁷⁸

Dickens also describes this aggression in the *Memoirs*. For example, the mob-audience treat a very real and violent beating that young Joe receives onstage as part of his performance. They regard the thrashing of Joe, who cried and 'roared vociferously', as 'a

¹⁷⁸ 'Pantomime', p. 501.

most capital joke', laughing and applauding, while the reviewers comment that it was 'perfectly wonderful to see a mere child perform so naturally'.¹⁷⁹

This episode is entirely appropriate to the black humour of Regency life which was regularly reflected in the pantomime. Findlater describes it as 'an age of brutal entertainment' and quotes the horrified reaction of theatre-goer Robert Paulet, who despaired at the fact that public executions were 'accounted the next diversions to Sadler's Wells; and, by use, men can see a monkey dangling from a wire, or a fellow creature expiring at the gallows, with equal unconcern'.¹⁸⁰ Dickens himself would make a similar connection between a theatre audience and a mob at the execution on several occasions, for example in his descriptions of Fagin's last moments alive and of the execution of the murderer Courvoisier. Findlater also quotes Arthur Bryant, pointing out how during the period it 'was considered a joke to throw a drunk in a dunghill, drop a live coal on a sleeper's head, rob a blind man of his dog and swear in the presence of ladies and clergymen'.¹⁸¹

In the *Memoirs* Dickens again demonstrates that the persistent presence of a potentially malevolent audience is not confined to the playhouse. Young Joe pays a Sunday visit to his grandfather's in a scene which has interesting parallels with the episode where Oliver Twist is sent to the bookseller by Mr Brownlow. Joe's father 'was most anxious that [Joe] should support the credit of his family on these occasions', so he prepares the boy carefully for a public performance in which he will temporarily elevate his own social status by aping the manners of adults. Grimaldi Senior pays great attention to the boy's dress, arranging it 'after great deliberation, and much consultation with tailors' and Dickens expends half a page in describing the costume of 'the little clown'. From his 'green coat, embroidered with [...] artificial flowers', down to 'a little cane in his hand, which he switched to and fro as our

¹⁷⁹ *Memoirs*, I, p. 15.

¹⁸⁰ Joseph Cradock, *Village Memoirs* (Dublin: Wilson and Mills, 1775), p. 67.

¹⁸¹ *Grimaldi*, p. 139.

clowns may do now', along with accessories such as 'a small watch set with diamonds – theatrical, we suppose', Dickens foregrounds the theatricality of his appearance.¹⁸² In *Oliver Twist*, Brownlow provides for Oliver a similar set of stage props: a 'complete new suit, and a new cap, and a new pair of shoes'.¹⁸³

When Joe is 'taken in for his father's inspection' (just as Oliver is called in to see Brownlow in his new clothes), the old man is pleased. He gives his son a guinea to carry in his pocket and acknowledges that his son's theatrical transformation was now complete: 'Dere now, you are a gentleman, and something more – you have got a guinea in your pocket'.¹⁸⁴

Both narratives describe the boys' outings, which unexpectedly provoke hostile reactions from their respective audiences. Once outside Joe's new suit of clothes immediately 'excited considerable curiosity', but this turned to mockery rather than admiration as his performance was again misinterpreted. He is variously called a 'monkey', a 'bear dressed for a dance' and a 'cat going out for a party' and rather than growing in status through his performance he is diminished; the mob-audience 'could not help laughing heartily, and saying how ridiculous it was to trust such a child in the streets alone'.¹⁸⁵

Cruikshank's accompanying illustration 'Master Joey going to visit his Godpapa' displays and develops these themes further. It shows the small figure of Joe promenading along the pavement as the very model of deportment, with an upright head looking forward and solemnly aloof from the crowd gathering around him. He is very much in the role of 'the observed' and has attracted an audience of over a dozen people, the majority of which are carefully delineated in the illustration. For example, a woman clasps her hands together as

¹⁸² *Memoirs*, I, pp. 20-21.

¹⁸³ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. by Fred Kaplan (London and New York: Norton, 1993), p. 96.

¹⁸⁴ *Memoirs*, I, p. 21.

¹⁸⁵ *Memoirs*, I, p. 22.

if in anxious prayer for the boy's safety and two taller figures are in conversation, perhaps discussing the spectacle before them.

The group of figures immediately behind him include a ragged collection of boys that constitute a proletarian mob-audience, who menacingly dwarf 'Master Joey' and carry the tools of various trades. Joe's life as a boy-actor was hardly a comfortable or genteel one, but his father's insistence that his son is 'a gentleman' puts him into stark contrast with these boys. Finally, in the centre, is a larger figure whose jaunty hat, coloured nose and slightly irregular eyes suggest drunkenness. Joe is trapped on all sides by this motley collection, as well as by railings, a closed door and a brick wall in the background. He is forced to perform in the public space and is at the mercy of their interpretation.

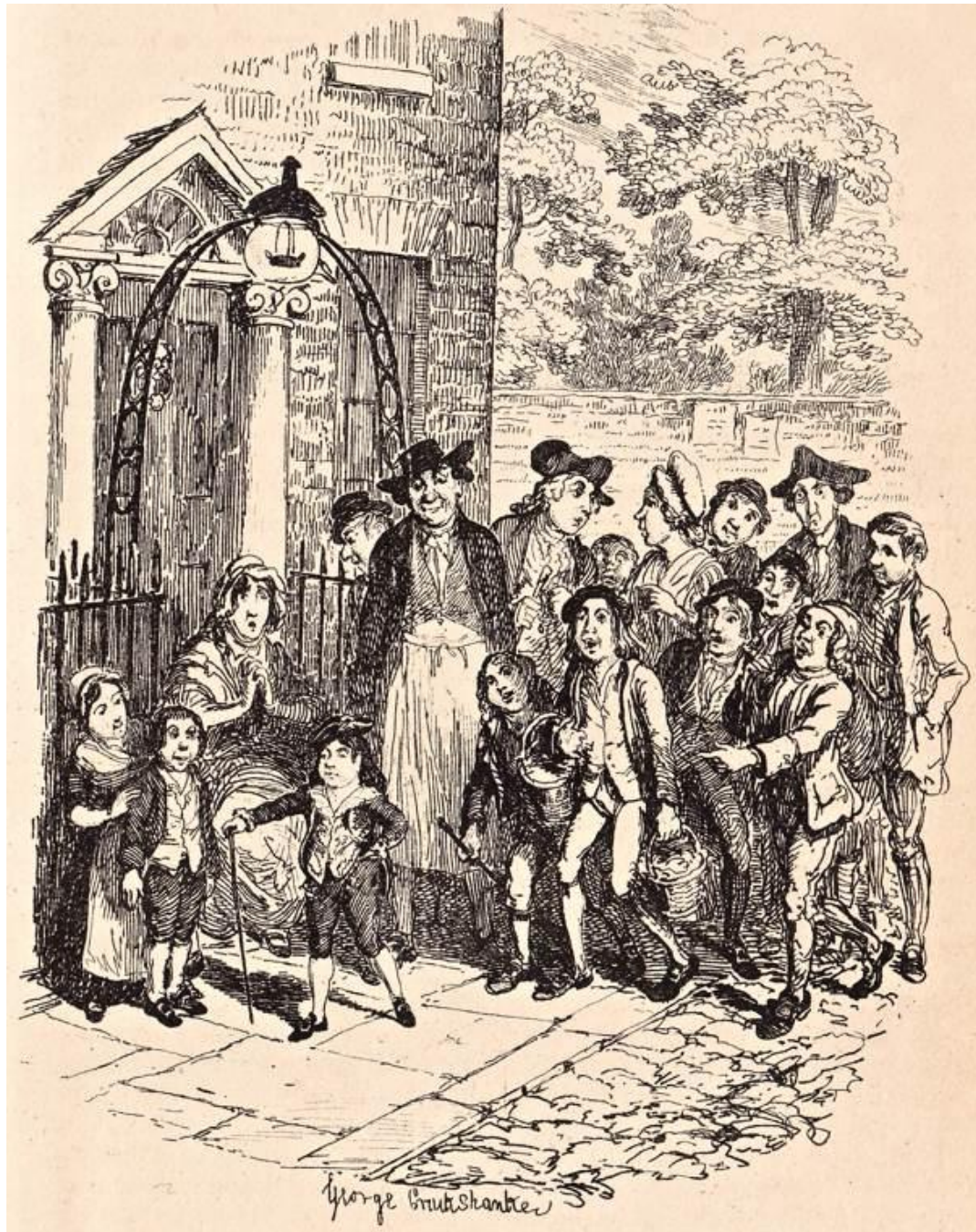


Figure 1: George Cruikshank, 'Master Joey going to visit his Godpapa' (1838), *Memoirs*

In Dickens's narrative the scene then turns dramatically when Joe gives his guinea to a poor woman in the street and 'a great number [of the crowd] collected around him, and began shouting and staring by turns most earnestly'. Eventually he is rescued by a family friend, who carries him to his grandfather's house; here, Joe's performance is curtailed and he is pulled 'offstage' to avoid the rage of the audience.

Oliver's similar performance is also a failure, as the crowd on the street ignore his new costume and are more inclined to believe the performances of his assailants Nancy and Bill. Oliver is designated as a 'young wretch' and 'little brute' by different members of the crowd and is finally 'overpowered by the conviction of the bystanders that he really was the hardened little wretch he was described to be'.¹⁸⁶ The malevolent reaction of the audience is no less significant than the brutality of Sikes and is what finally beats Oliver.

Hillis Miller interprets this scene in similar terms and recognises how the distance between player and audience has been collapsed. He explains that 'the labyrinth' of the city has 'turned into a hostile crowd which, no longer remaining at a distance, turns on the protagonist and hunts him down'. Here in *Oliver Twist*, the ill-intent that was prefigured in the *Memoirs* is fully realised; 'the aim of the mob is not simply to catch him, but to 'crowd' him to death. The crowd 'jostles' and 'struggles' towards Oliver, and will suffocate him or crush him if it can'.¹⁸⁷

Cruikshank's drawing of this scene in *Oliver Twist* reinforces these ideas and also echoes the *Memoirs* illustration. This time the figures are fewer but are more tightly closed around the boy, who is far from the aloof and steady 'Master Joe'; physically assailed on three sides by Nancy (left), Bill Sikes (right) and even Bullseye (centre), he looks upwards with visible anguish. The composed posture of young Grimaldi is replaced by Oliver desperately clutching on to the books that serve to represent his more genteel life with Mr Brownlow, as opposed to the 'soiled and thumbled' *Newgate Calendar* provided by Fagin.¹⁸⁸ The smarter setting of the *Memoirs* illustration is replaced by the more squalid doorway of a beer-shop. With its gaudy signage (inviting its customers to be 'drunk on the premisses' [*sic*]) the shop front and doorway frame the scene like a proscenium arch further

¹⁸⁶ *Twist*, pp. 107-108.

¹⁸⁷ J. Hillis Miller, 'Oliver Twist' in *Twist*, pp. 432-441 (p. 440).

¹⁸⁸ *Twist*, p. 140.

underscoring its theatrical nature. The crowd no longer keep their distance - two of them have grabbed the boy and one of them is the nightmarish distortion of the merry drunk at in the *Memoirs* illustration, as the benevolent smile is replaced by the grim features of the heavy-drinking Bill Sikes.



Figure 2: George Cruikshank, 'Oliver claimed by his affectionate friends' (1838), *Twist*

This picture was sufficiently theatrical to be re-created as a striking *tableau* in J. Stuart Blackton's silent film adaptation.¹⁸⁹



Figure 3: J. Stuart Blackton, *Oliver Twist* (1909)

Grimaldi is revealed to be dependent on this mob-audience and their variable judgements throughout his life. Even before he is born we hear how his father's house was under threat during the Gordon Riots and was only saved by a door sign declaring that the inhabitants had 'No Religion at all'. Whitehead's clarification in the 1846 edition (supported by Miles) turns this mob of rioters into a theatrical audience for whom Joe's father has to perform for his own survival: 'they were about to assail the house, when Grimaldi [...] put his head out of the window from the second floor, and making comical grimaces, called out, "Gentlemen, in dis dere house dere be no religion at all"'. The audience approve of

¹⁸⁹ *Oliver Twist*, dir. J. Stuart Blackton, Vitagraph, 1909.

this performance and 'Laughing at their mistake, the mob proceeded on, first giving him three huzzas'.¹⁹⁰

The mob-audience reappears in the episode in which the corrupt beadle Old Lucas tries to arrest Joe on trumped-up charges. Significantly, their altercation occurs at 'the stage-door' situating the event at the border between the theatre and the real world.¹⁹¹ Joe is accompanied by his fellow actors who resolve to support him against the false accusations and they initially form an audience, engaging Lucas in a question-answer exchange more suited to the stage. For example, Lucas 'looking at Grimaldi, demanded whether he was ready; in answer to which question the whole party shouted 'No!' with tremendous emphasis'. Dubois's dismissal of Lucas's claims is cast in dramatic terms and his speech is full of theatrical bravado: "'Look here, Lucas [...] you are an old scoundrel! [...] take yourself into custody and take yourself off under penalty of a ducking!'". We are reminded of the presence of an (ever-growing) audience at this point when we are told that Dubois's 'speech was received with a shout of applause, not only by the speaker's companions, but by several idlers who had gathered round'.¹⁹²

After a lengthy argument between Lucas and Joe, in which the audience are constantly encouraged to participate (much in the spirit of Regency theatre), we are told that 'the muster of people collected around had increased to a pretty large concourse' and had begun to press round the main protagonists. At the climax of the scene 'the orator' Dubois addresses the crowd in defence of Joe and puts his theatrical skills to practical use by reserving 'the loudest key of his voice for the concluding point'.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Charles Dickens, *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, ed. by Charles Whitehead, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1846), I, p. 10. Further references are given as *Memoirs (1846)*.

¹⁹¹ *Memoirs*, I, p. 138.

¹⁹² *Memoirs*, I, p. 140.

¹⁹³ *Memoirs*, I, p. 142.

Roused by his words the audience transform into 'the mob' and chases Lucas down the street in a manner reminiscent of Dickens's description of the mob-audience in 'The Pantomime of Life': soon the whole area 'rang with whoops and yells almost as loud as those which had assailed the ox in the morning; and Mr Lucas made the best of his way to his dwelling, amidst a shower of mud, rotten apples, and other such missiles'.¹⁹⁴

On another occasion, while hurrying to a performance, Joe has to run through the streets in his full costume and make-up. As soon as he is recognised as the famous Clown 'on came the mob, shouting, huzzaing, screaming out his name, throwing up their caps and hats, and exhibiting every manifestation of delight'. He is eventually cornered in a carriage and finally has to resort to the same strategy as his father to placate the mob by giving an impromptu performance: 'suddenly poking his head out of the window, he gave one of his famous and well-known laughs'. Because Joe had performed according to their expectations, they were satisfied and 'raised many roars of laughter and applause' before helping him reach his destination. To finally emphasise the inter-relation between the crowd outside and the audience inside, Dickens tells us that 'such of them as had money rushed round to the gallery-doors, and [made] their appearance in the front just as he came on stage, set[ting] up a boisterous shout of "Here he is again!"'.¹⁹⁵

The accompanying illustration 'Appearing in public' develops this theme, as the audience of a performance and the crowd in the street are conflated into a single group, occupying both positions simultaneously. Within his stage-coach Joe appears on another kind of stage as his head is framed by the window from which he leans out. This point is the focus of attention for every other figure in the picture from the 'groundings' running alongside the

¹⁹⁴ *Memoirs*, I, p. 143.

¹⁹⁵ *Memoirs*, II, pp. 88-89.

coach to the more privileged members of the audience seated on the coach at either side of him.

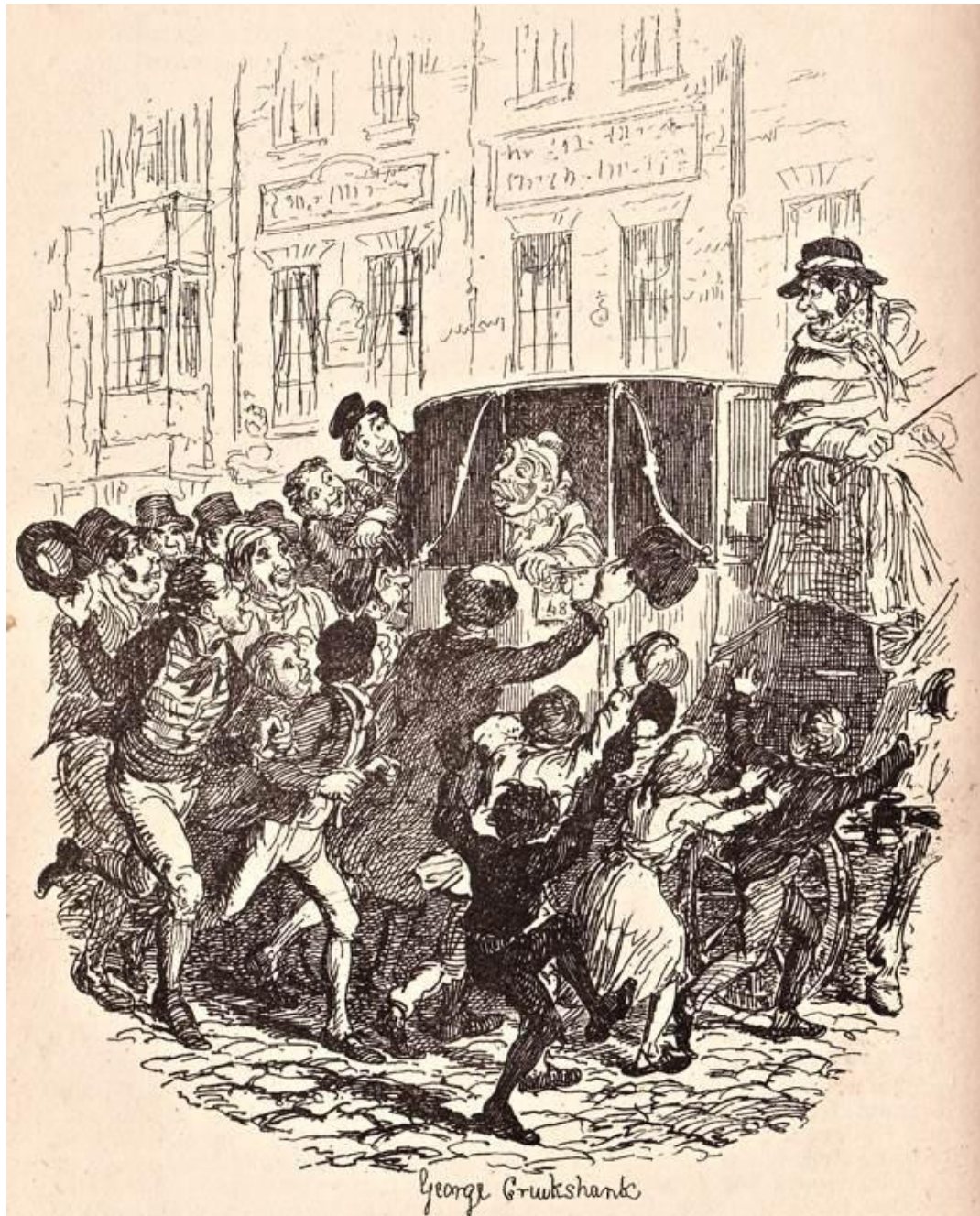


Figure 4: George Cruikshank, 'Appearing in Public' (1838), *Memoirs*

Dickens's conflation of the raucous mob of the street with the playhouse audience was not just an imaginative construct and, in fact, carried a strong historical precedent. During the 'Old Price' Riots of 1809 and 1810 the theatre audience *became* the mob and angrily

protested against price rises in a way that entirely shattered the boundary between stage and audience. In the *Memoirs* Dickens describes these events and shows how people in the audience used their own performances as an act of protest. Audience members assume new roles, such as the man who ‘regaled himself and the company with a watchman’s rattle’ and another who rang ‘a large dustman’s bell [...] with a perseverance and strength of arm quite astounding to all beholders’.¹⁹⁶ The observers had become the observed, and vice versa.

Hillis Miller notes that the ‘theatre returns so often [in *Sketches by Boz*] that London [...] comes to seem a place where everyone is in one way or another engaged not in productive work but in performing or witnessing scenic representations’ and this neatly summarises the worldview of the *Memoirs*.¹⁹⁷ As well as these larger mobs there are many examples of Joe being asked to ‘perform’ offstage for the benefit of smaller groups - from the Earl of Derby in the green room to a ‘reverend gentleman’ in Bath who only invites Joe to dinner in the expectation that he will perform at the table.

Another scene in which Joe seems trapped into performing outside of the theatre is the barber-shop scene. Indeed Dickens underlines its suitability to stage performance when he comments that Joe ‘intended to have it introduced in one of his pantomime scenes’.¹⁹⁸ This desire to take the performance off the street and onto the stage also represents an attempt to limit and contain it – but as we have seen such an attempt is futile. The episode is told in a narrative that often reads as a series of stage directions, with stylised dialogue.

¹⁹⁶ *Memoirs*, II, p. 80.

¹⁹⁷ ‘Fiction of Realism’, p. 21.

¹⁹⁸ *Memoirs*, II, p. 142.

For example when Joe returns to the shop for a third time to see if the barber had returned:

The girl was still sitting at work; but she laid it aside when the visitors entered, and said she really was very sorry, but her father had not come in yet.

‘That’s very provoking’, said Grimaldi, ‘considering that I have called here three times already’.

The girl agreed that it was, and, stepping to the door, looked anxiously up the street and down the street, but there was no barber in sight.

‘Do you want to see him on any particular business?’, inquired [Grimaldi’s friend] Howard.

‘Bless my heart! No, not I’, said Grimaldi: ‘I only want to be shaved’.

‘Shaved, sir!’, cried the girl. ‘Oh, dear me! What a pity it is that you did not say so before! For I do most of the shaving for father when he’s at home, and all when he’s out’.

This conversation is wholly unnatural for a real exchange but it is quite suitable for the dialogue of a play. While being shaved the comic nature of the scene appeals to Grimaldi’s compulsive desire to perform and we are told that he felt ‘an irresistible tendency to laugh at the oddity of the operation’.¹⁹⁹ Joe finally gives in to his performative side and when the real barber returns he discovers Joe ‘with a soapy face and a gigantic mouth making the most extravagant faces over a white towel’. This forces him to comment that ‘that

¹⁹⁹ *Memoirs*, II, pp. 143-144.

gentleman as was being shaved, was out of sight the funniest gentleman he had ever seen'.²⁰⁰

This scene is illustrated in 'The Barber's Shop', which reinforces these ideas of performativity and the presence of the audience. Joe is again the focus of his audience's attention and the whole scene is shown in a cut-away view resembling a stage set with a subtle proscenium arch across the top that foregrounds its theatricality further.

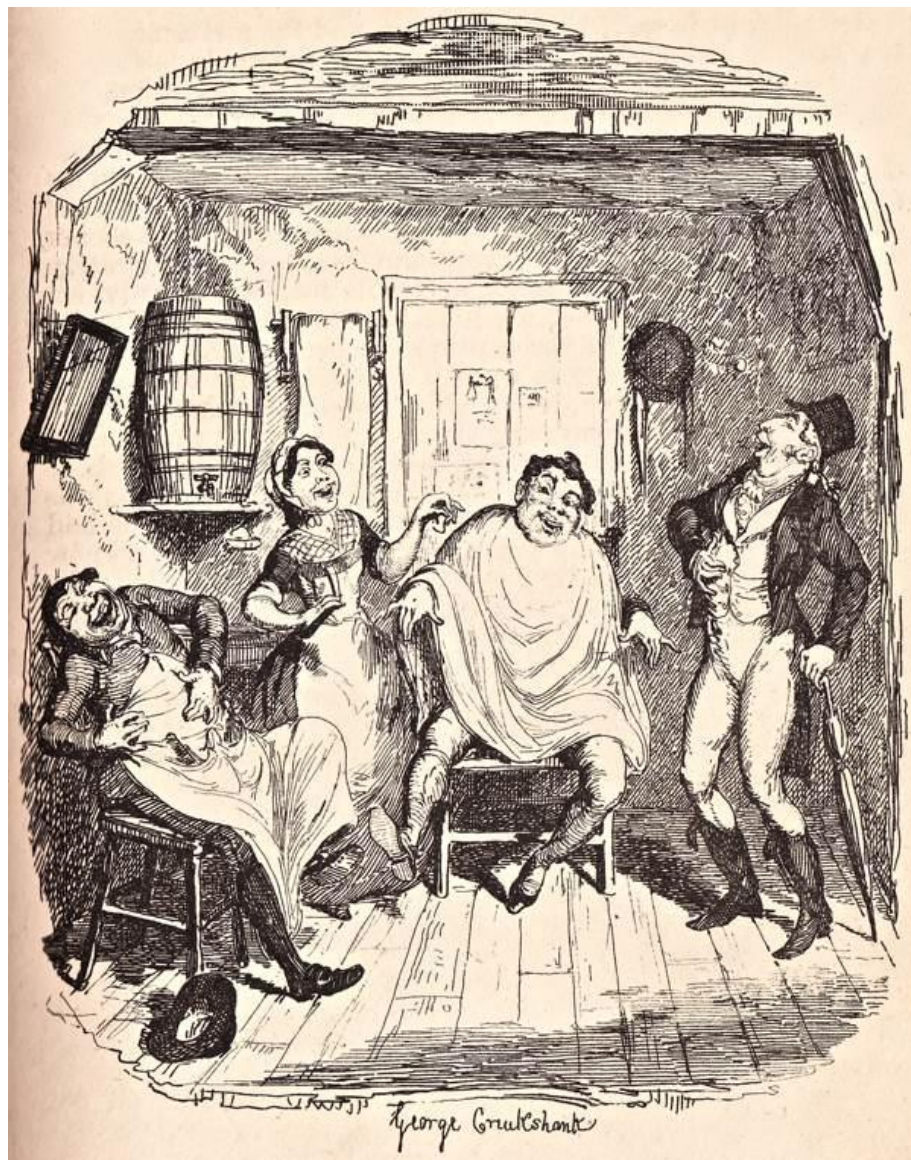


Figure 5: George Cruikshank, 'The Barber Shop' (1838), *Memoirs*

²⁰⁰ *Memoirs*, II, p. 144.

Moreover, with Joe seated in the centre surrounded by laughing onlookers it shares visual motifs with the final illustration of the *Memoirs*, 'The Last Song', in which Joe is seated on the real stage at Drury Lane. The way in which the amused members of the front row have their heads thrown back in laughter, the posture of Joe's legs and even the way he positions his right hand all carry associations with the earlier picture and underscore even further the theatricality of Joe's 'offstage' life.

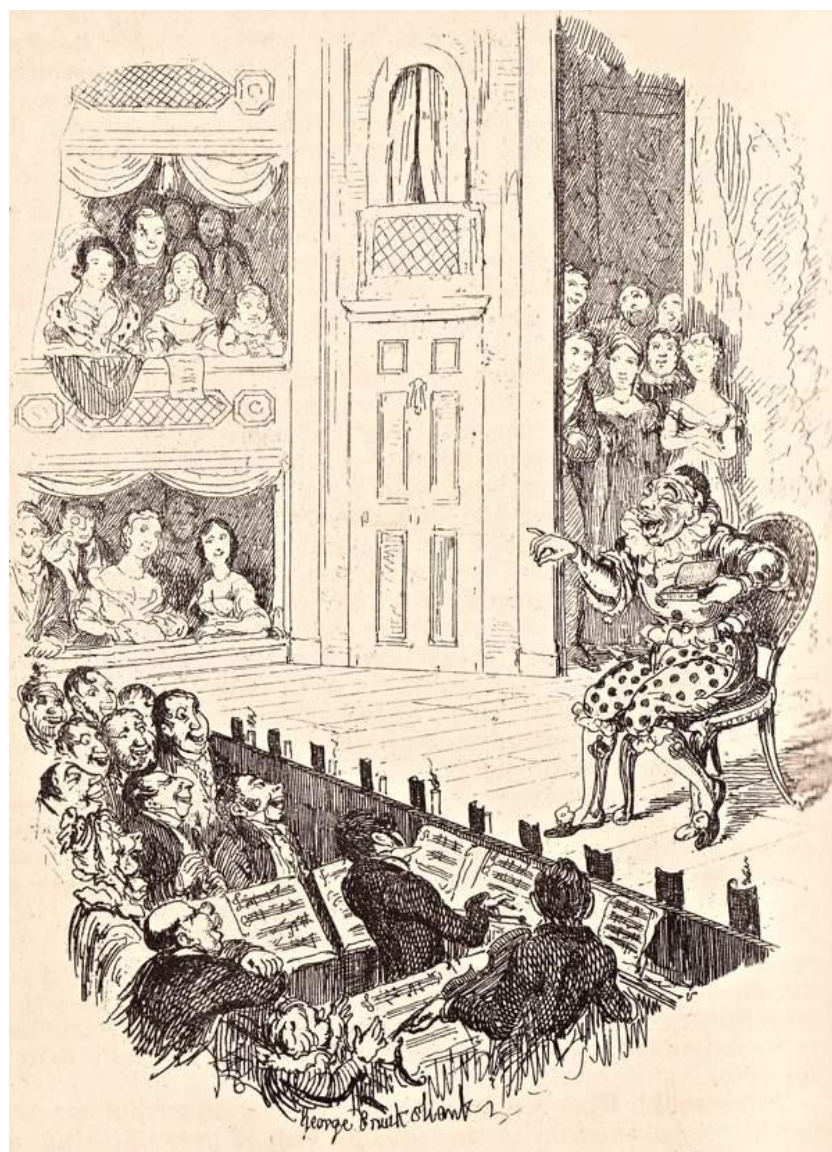


Figure 6: George Cruikshank, 'The Last Song' (1838), *Memoirs*

In this way, Dickens and Cruikshank refigure Meisel's assertion that the nineteenth century play 'is the evident meeting place of story and picture' by making Grimaldi's story the meeting place of theatre and picture in a two-fold manner, adapting the theatrical form to suit his narrative and re-telling parts of his story through 'theatrical' pictures.²⁰¹

The constant expectation of having to perform would follow him even in his final days. After his last farewell benefit at Drury Lane he was followed back to his home by a mob-audience who still made no distinction between inside and outside the theatre. He was cheered into his coach outside the theatre but the crowd pursued him all the way back to his house and could not 'be prevailed upon to disperse until he had appeared on the top of the steps, and made his farewell bow'.²⁰² Ultimately, the only time Joe would be without an audience was on his death-bed, unlike the starving clown in 'The Stroller's Tale' who performs for an audience until his dying breath.

'Clowns that beat Grimaldi all to nothing turn up every day' - Clowns

Pantaloon is the first pantomime character that Dickens considers in 'The Pantomime of Life', but he represents a minor figure within Dickens's argument, so will be discussed later in this chapter. This section will consider the real imaginative focus of the essay and the part that made Grimaldi so famous – Clown.

Dickens initially asserts that this figure is wholly modelled on the real world, claiming that 'the close resemblance which the clowns of the stage bear to those of everyday life is perfectly extraordinary'. Dickens's pantomime clown appears 'at the very height of his glory' in scenes where he interacts with the regular quotidian world in places like the 'Cheesemonger's shop' or 'Mrs Queertable's boarding house' rather than the fantastical realm of fairies and magic. Here, the clown creates 'the great fun of the thing' by 'taking

²⁰¹ Meisel, p. 3.

²⁰² *Memoirs*, II, p. 242.

lodgings which he has not the slightest intention of paying for, or obtaining goods under false pretences', 'swindling everybody he possibly can'. Significantly the audience are locked in a mutually gratifying relationship with this onstage performer: as Dickens asserts, 'the more extensive the swindling is, and the more barefaced the impudence of the swindler, the greater the rapture and ecstasy of the audience'.

As an offstage example of this character, Dickens presents the 'Honourable Captain Fitz-Whisker Fiercy'. He obtains goods from the local tradesmen based on his name and reputation, which he maintains solely through performance as he 'struts and swaggers about with that compound air of conscious superiority and general bloodthirstiness' expected of a soldier. However, he is soon exposed as an imposter and imprisoned. Dickens offers one 'Da Costa', whose 'latest piece of humour' consisted of 'fraudulently obtaining certain stamped acceptances from a young gentleman in the army', as the Captain's 'real life' counterpart.²⁰³

Most crucially, Dickens points to the complicity of the captain's 'audience' in the act. He observes that the member of the audience 'who is the loudest in his complaints against the person who defrauded him' outside of the theatre was very often 'the identical man who [...] laughed most boisterously at this very same thing' when in the theatre.²⁰⁴ Outside the playhouse the confusion of the onstage and the offstage and willingness to believe the captain's performance have left them vulnerable to his deception.

Many minor incidents of this kind of social play-acting for personal gain appear in the *Memoirs*, and to underline its pervasiveness Dickens shows Grimaldi as both the deceiver and the deceived throughout his life. Joe learns the power of offstage performance at a very early age when reacting to his father's feigned death (a trick performed, like Quilp's

²⁰³ 'Pantomime', pp. 503-504.

²⁰⁴ 'Pantomime', p. 504.

deception in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, to gauge the true feelings of those around him). Rather than offering a genuine reaction Joe quickly realises this is an act and begins his own performance in response. We are told that ‘the boy perceived what line of conduct he ought to adopt, and at once bursting into a roar of the most distracted grief [...] rolled about in a seeming transport of anguish’. His brother John, who ‘was not so cunning’ because he had not ‘seen so much of public life as his brother’, openly celebrates his father’s supposed demise with his own unaffected actions, skipping about the room, ‘indulging in various snatches of song, and snapping his fingers’. Of course when Grimaldi Senior can bear the pretence no longer John is ‘attacked [...] most unmercifully’ whereas Joe is ‘received with every demonstration of affection, as the son who truly and sincerely loved him’.²⁰⁵

The most sustained treatment of the social performer occurs in the descriptions of Grimaldi’s encounters with the villainous Mackintosh. Dickens claims this as one of the ‘several incidents’ he was ‘much struck by’ in the manuscript and there are clear parallels with his other works of the time.²⁰⁶ This kind of confidence trickster had already appeared in *Sketches by Boz* where figures like Horatio Sparkins (real name Samuel Smith) used their most effective skills of impersonation to dupe an audience who were so socially self-conscious – and were indeed performing themselves – that they were willing to believe this pretence of status. But the closest fictional prototype for Mackintosh is Alfred Jingle in *The Pickwick Papers*, the ‘strolling actor’ thoroughly familiar with theatricality in all of its forms.²⁰⁷ Indeed, it is not a great conceptual leap from one of Jingle’s assumed roles, ‘Mr Charles Fitz-Marshall’, to our real-life clown ‘Honorable Captain Fitz-Whisker Fiercy’. Phillip Collins claims that the ‘basically farcical tone’ of *The Pickwick Papers* ‘did not give Dickens

²⁰⁵ *Memoirs*, I, pp. 27-28.

²⁰⁶ *Memoirs*, I, p. xvii.

²⁰⁷ Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. by James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 51.

much occasion for [...] criminal deeds' but it is possible to argue that, through the clown-like figure of Jingle, Dickens was able to examine a very specific type of criminal – the society fraud.²⁰⁸ Moreover through the Jingle and Mackintosh episodes Dickens demonstrates that the relationship between the pantomime player and their audience is based on two types of assumption – the assumption of a role by the actor and the assumptions made by the audience about that actor.

Even before he enters Mackintosh's audience have formed preconceptions of him.

Grimaldi's friend Jack Bologna tells him that Mackintosh 'was understood to be [...] a large landed proprietor, [with] most splendid preserves' only to later find out that the 'Mackintosh' named above the door of the public house is actually his mother.²⁰⁹ The villain knowingly reveals this 'with a wink' and, while Bologna is 'evidently mortified', Joe laughs at this deception, which is our cue to read this incident like a pantomime scene – a comical dig at the socially precious Bologna.

Mackintosh explains his actions in terms that reveal his own awareness of this dual nature of assumption: "'I never let my London friends know who or what I am, except they're very particular friends, like you and Joe for instance. I just lead them to guess I'm a great man, and there I leave 'em. What does it matter what other idea strangers have about one?'"²¹⁰

In a similar fashion, Jingle prevents Tupman from announcing their names at the Rochester ball by explaining that "'Names won't do – not known – very good names in their way, but not great ones – capital names for a small party, but won't make an impression in public assemblies – *incog.* the thing – Gentlemen from London – distinguished foreigners – anything'"²¹¹.

²⁰⁸ Phillip Collins, *Dickens and Crime* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 25.

²⁰⁹ *Memoirs*, I, pp. 231-232.

²¹⁰ *Memoirs*, I, p. 234.

²¹¹ *Pickwick*, p. 24.

Both Mackintosh and Jingle continue this pattern of clown-like behaviour, adopting roles that artificially elevate their social standing. For example, Mackintosh takes his guests for a day's shooting on land that they mistakenly believe belongs to him. Dickens again treats this event ambivalently by indicating that Bologna's over-inflated expectations are as much to blame as any deception by their host. When Mackintosh shows them the field of pigeons that they will be shooting, Bologna and Grimaldi claim together that they 'expected to find pheasants and partridges'. Mackintosh 'was, or pretended to be, greatly surprised', and he tells them that "'I invited you down here to shoot birds – and pigeons are birds: and there are the pigeons; - shoot away, if you like. I have performed my part of the agreement'"'.²¹² Later on, after they have shot a number of the birds, Mackintosh reveals them to be the squire's pigeons rather than his, leaving Bologna and Grimaldi struck with 'stupid surprise'.²¹³

This theme of 'assumption' runs through the Pickwick Club's early encounters with Jingle. For example, he does not steal Winkle's jacket to wear to the ball but merely assumes the role of a touring gentleman whose luggage is carried by barge – "'confounded luggage – heavy smacks – nothing to go in – odd, an't it?'"'.²¹⁴ In turn they assume Jingle is the person he says he is, and therefore provide him with a jacket in which he can assume another role - that of Winkle.

Furthermore, as Jingle's impersonation of Winkle progresses Dickens continues to show how this performance relies heavily on audience participation – Jingle gives no name at the door, and does not verbally identify himself with Winkle in any way. In fact, the powers of 'assumption' on both sides are so great that Winkle believes he must have committed the crime himself: "'The fact is, I was very drunk; - I must have changed my coat – gone

²¹² *Memoirs*, I, p. 238.

²¹³ *Memoirs*, I, p. 240.

²¹⁴ *Pickwick*, p. 22.

somewhere – and insulted somebody – I have no doubt of it; and this message is the terrible consequence”’.²¹⁵

Even when Jingle has been exposed as a strolling actor it is Doctors Payne and Slammer that Pickwick is enraged with, and not Jingle. After mollifying Pickwick with a brandy and water, Jingle temporarily disappears from the narrative without censure. The whole episode ends on an amicable note, for despite Winkle’s ‘lingering irritability’ about his borrowed coat ‘their good humour was completely restored; and the evening concluded with the conviviality with which it had begun’.²¹⁶

The episode in the *Memoirs* also concludes amicably; the three protagonists ‘could not help laughing outright’ at the whole affair and any potentially serious repercussions back in London are defused when Bologna and Grimaldi pay for the shot birds and the gamekeeper’s rump-steak dinner.²¹⁷ Here it is unclear who is playing a role and who is not. The narrator of the *Memoirs* comments that the squire ‘might be not reasonably suspected of having been in league with the landlord to use the sportsmen for their joint amusement, and to extract a good dinner from them besides’.²¹⁸ The prank has been reversed here: the squire and landlord have assumed certain roles, and Joe and Jack have once again assumed them to be true.

The hunting episode is dismissed by Mackintosh as a ‘little trick [...] played in mere thoughtlessness’ and by Dickens as an ‘absurd scrape’.²¹⁹ However their second encounter takes on a more serious tone, as the player-audience dynamic of ‘The Pantomime of Life’ is strained yet further.

²¹⁵ *Pickwick*, p. 32.

²¹⁶ *Pickwick*, p. 52.

²¹⁷ *Memoirs*, I, p. 241.

²¹⁸ *Memoirs*, I, p. 247.

²¹⁹ *Memoirs*, I, p. 281.

This time, Mackintosh invites Joe into a new social circle in London, telling him that such wealthy friends would be “‘very useful and profitable acquaintances’”. Here again he relies on Joe’s social expectations to make assumptions about what use these people might actually be. Dickens indicates the facade of this act in terms that position Joe as the enraptured member of the audience entranced by the spectacle of Mackintosh’s performance. We are told that he had ‘cause for astonishment’ when he visited Mackintosh’s new house and that he ‘actually began to doubt the reality of what he saw’. When he returns home, his relation of these events to his wife ‘astonished [her] not a little; and he was quite as much amazed at recollecting what he had seen, as she at hearing of it’.²²⁰

Jingle’s gradual insinuation into Pickwick’s company occurs in a similar way as his audience shows an even greater willingness to believe the performance than Grimaldi. The clues are presented to the reader by the knowing narrator but are missed by Pickwick and his friends who, like the coal-merchant in ‘The Pantomime of Life’, are willing to be taken in. Acting as the audience to Jingle’s performance Pickwick takes time to ‘examine his costume and appearance’ and, despite his shabby appearance (such as the shiny patches on his trousers ‘which bespeak long service’ and his ‘patched and mended shoes’), Pickwick is not suspicious. As Jingle explains away his lack of luggage only the narrator notices that the brown paper parcel ‘presented most suspicious indications of containing one shirt and a handkerchief’.²²¹

Indeed, Dickens depicts the coach journey to Rochester as one of the audacious player entrancing his audience as each member of the Club takes his turn to demonstrate how far they are taken in by Jingle’s act. They each accept his wildly varying tales to the extent that they are willing to record them like another theatrical memoir; by the time they reached

²²⁰ *Memoirs*, I, pp. 282-284.

²²¹ *Pickwick*, p. 14.

the Rochester bridge, 'the note-books, both of Mr Pickwick and Mr Snodgrass, were completely filled with selections from [Jingle's] adventures'.²²² When Jingle leaves the group Dickens leaves us in no doubt that the Pickwick Club had been thoroughly deceived:

'Evidently a traveller in many countries, and a close observer of men and things,' said Mr Pickwick.

'I should like to see his poem,' said Mr Snodgrass.

'I should like to have seen that dog,' said Mr Winkle.

Mr Tupman said nothing; but he thought of Donna Christina, the stomach pump, and the fountain; and his eyes filled with tears.²²³

When their deceptions are finally uncovered both Mackintosh and Jingle display an amused contempt at the gullibility of their victims. When faced with Joe's willingness to believe in the act, even when he has been imprisoned, Mackintosh 'shook his head with great vehemence, and looked strongly disposed to laugh'. Eventually he confesses to the whole ruse 'with a slight tremor in his voice which, despite his serious situation, arose from an incipient tendency to laughter'.²²⁴

Jingle treats Pickwick and his associates in the same way. When Pickwick and Wardle's coach crashes in pursuit of Jingle's a 'shameless' Jingle shows mock concern for their welfare: "'any body damaged? – elderly gentlemen – no light weights – dangerous work – very'". Being called 'a rascal' by Wardle seems to amuse him further and, as his coach escapes, Jingle 'flutters a white handkerchief from the coach window 'in derision'.²²⁵

These careless attitudes provoke angry responses in their victims and, as discussed earlier in 'The Pantomime of Life', Dickens called this indignant reaction of the audience 'the best

²²² *Pickwick*, pp. 118-119.

²²³ *Pickwick*, p. 20.

²²⁴ *Memoirs*, II, pp. 6-7.

²²⁵ *Pickwick*, p. 135.

of the joke'.²²⁶ Both Joe and Pickwick express great indignation at figures who had previously amused them. Joe is described as 'waxing very angry', eventually 'starting up with uncontrollable fury' and seizing Mackintosh by the throat.²²⁷ Similarly, Pickwick becomes angry with Jingle; when Jingle leaves them by the roadside after the coach accident, Pickwick draws his breath hard, and colours 'up the very tips of his spectacles'.²²⁸ Later, when Jingle is bought off by Wardle, anyone watching Pickwick 'would have been almost induced to wonder that the indignant fire which flashed from his eyes, did not melt the glasses of his spectacles – so majestic was his wrath. His nostrils dilated, and his fists clenched involuntarily'. This supposed epitome of Dickensian benevolence finally explodes and, in 'the frenzy of his rage, he hurled the inkstand madly forward, and followed it up himself'.²²⁹

Ultimately, however, these clowns are forgiven. Through the sort of pantomime ending that forgot all misdemeanours, both Joe and Pickwick show benevolence towards those who offended against them. Joe testifies in court to acquit Mackintosh from the charges of burglary and then offers him further assistance to help him to reform his ways. Similarly Pickwick bails Jingle and Job Trotter out of the limbo of debtors' prison and offers them a new life in the West Indies on the condition that they give up their acting. All of these benevolent actions prove to be well-placed, as Jingle and Job Trotter 'became in time worthy members of society' and Mackintosh stays repentant.²³⁰

This focus on the criminal aspect of the clown and the idea of fraudulent performance is also directed towards those who should be upholding the law – the constable. Grimaldi himself lampooned the watchman on the Regency stage and Dickens invokes the same

²²⁶ 'Pantomime', p. 504.

²²⁷ *Memoirs*, II, p. 7, 9.

²²⁸ *Pickwick*, p. 135.

²²⁹ *Pickwick*, p. 151.

²³⁰ *Pickwick*, p. 876.

tradition here. Prior to Peel's establishment of the Metropolitan Police in 1829 the policing 'system' in England had changed little since Shakespeare's time and, as Phillip Collins points out, nor had the jokes: 'Dogberry and Verges, and Elbow, reappear in Messrs Grummer and Dubbley of unreformed Ipswich, in *Pickwick Papers*'.²³¹

In regard to the policing of his country, then, Dickens had no nostalgia for the past situation, as he made clear in 'A Detective Police Party' (1850):

We are not by any means devout believers in the Old Bow-Street Police. To say the truth, we think there was a vast amount of humbug about those worthies.

Here he delineates their faults as 'men of very indifferent character' who were 'far too much in the habit of consorting with thieves and the like' and never missed 'a public occasion of jobbing and trading in mystery and making the most of themselves'.²³² Through his portrayal of Old Lucas, the local constable in Grimaldi's parish, Dickens uses his 'Pantomime of Life' framework to demonstrate the clownish nature of these men.

As discussed earlier, one way in which Old Lucas was positioned within the pantomime of life was through his separation from (and relationship with) the mob-audience, particularly when he goes to arrest Joe at the theatre. However, he reveals himself to be the fraudulent clown in other ways, assuming the airs of authority in order to gain financially from those around him.

In 'The Pantomime of Life' the clown had been recognised by his 'swindling everybody he possibly can' and, on his first appearance, Dickens describes Lucas's own particular method. He is 'a desperate villain' who invents false accusations against people 'where no real [one] existed', and 'bolster[s] it up with the most unblushing perjury, and an ingenious

²³¹ Collins, p. 197.

²³² Charles Dickens, 'A Police Detective Party', *Household Words*, 27 July 1850, p. 409.

system of false evidence'.²³³ This reference to 'unblushing perjury' recalls Fitz-Whisker Fiercy's audacious maintenance of pretence. Lucas's act continues when he goes to arrest Grimaldi – for example, he puts on 'a gruff voice' to lend authority to his words.²³⁴

Lucas's final defeat also seems to borrow its methods from the pantomime. His attempts to extort money from Grimaldi are ended by the providential intervention of 'a stranger to the party' who shook 'a silver staff' at Lucas, ordering him to the Police Office. Lucas 'appeared to succumb before the vision of the silver staff' as if it were Harlequin's bat and follows this unknown figure, who later intervenes to give evidence that acquits Grimaldi.²³⁵ The magistrate apparently knows this person but he remains an enigma to Grimaldi, who comments 'with profound respect and an air of great mystery' that 'Who this gentleman was, I never could ascertain'.²³⁶

The final judgement of Lucas is also depicted in pantomimic terms reminiscent of a clown's onstage punishment. A joke is made of his discomfort at being punished as he 'foamed at the mouth in a manner not unlike the over-driven ox' and 'protested [...] with many disrespectful oaths and other ebullitions of anger'. He displays a very exaggerated and gestic style of anger wholly suited to a performing figure (explored further later in this chapter). He is then thrown into prison to the delight of not only the accused Grimaldi but 'the officers also, who [...] participated in the general dislike of Old Lucas'. Here the other characters gather as a retributive mob-audience who gladly participate in the punishment and relish its spectacle. His incarceration is also described as lasting six hours, 'the whole of which time he devoted to howls and imprecations', continuing his histrionics until he

²³³ *Memoirs*, I, p. 134.

²³⁴ *Memoirs*, I, p. 140.

²³⁵ *Memoirs*, I, p. 148.

²³⁶ *Memoirs*, I, p. 150.

eventually pays the fine and shows a level of penitence similar to that of Jingle and Mackintosh.²³⁷

However, in several other episodes in the *Memoirs* there is no such neat ending and the blurring of the boundaries between the stage and real life is shown to have grave consequences. On one occasion Joe visits a fellow clown Bradbury in 'a private madhouse in Hoxton' where he has feigned insanity as part of a rather convoluted intrigue involving a young gentleman and a stolen snuff-box.²³⁸ However, when Bradbury is released as a supposedly sane man, he is seized by 'some strange and sudden whim' to commit 'a disgusting piece of irreverence and impertinence' on stage.²³⁹ His madman persona appears to have escaped from its proper confines and his subsequent disgrace and ruin are a clear warning of the dangers of trying to manage one's offstage life through multiple layers of performance.

In another episode Dickens shows Grimaldi himself suffering from the trauma produced by this shuttling between the playhouse and the outside. When his close friend Richard Hughes dies we are told that Grimaldi had to endure 'the severe mental trials' of practising 'broadly humorous pantomime' during 'the time his friend was lying dead'. Even on the day of the funeral Grimaldi was 'compelled to rehearse part of his Clown's character on the stage' and then 'run to the funeral' before returning to the theatre to 'exert all his comic powers at night to set the audience in a roar'.²⁴⁰

But the most tragic example of this fatal conflation of life and art comes in the depiction of Grimaldi's son J.S. Grimaldi, who has been suggested as the model for 'The Stroller's Tale'.²⁴¹ The final moments of the life of this dissolute figure are described at an inquest

²³⁷ *Memoirs*, I, p. 151.

²³⁸ *Memoirs*, II, p. 27.

²³⁹ *Memoirs*, II, p. 32.

²⁴⁰ *Memoirs*, II, pp. 108-109.

²⁴¹ See Dickens's Letter to George B. Webb, 15 May 1844, *Pilgrim*, IV. p. 129 (and note).

and he is described as dying ‘in a state of wild and furious madness, rising from his bed and dressing himself in stage costume to act snatches of the parts to which he had become most accustomed’.²⁴² This madness is blamed on ‘a severe blow on the head from a staff’ received ‘in some skirmish with some constables’ after ‘some drunken freaks’.²⁴³ While these are precisely the sort of antics that the father and son practised on stage, it is clear that outside the playhouse they can carry more serious consequences for the actor. His theatrical ravings at the moment of his death are a final signal of his confusion of theatre and reality.

Pantaloon, supernumeraries, and other pantomime figures

In both ‘The Pantomime of Life’ and the *Memoirs* the relative dominance of Dickens’s ideas on the clown and the mob-audience clearly demonstrates that his imaginative investment lies with these aspects of the pantomime, rather than with the rest of the cast. Pantaloon, Harlequin and the others receive far less consideration in both works, but a brief examination of each of these will show how they are still part of Dickens’s conception of life as a pantomime.

‘A treacherous, worldly-minded old villain’ – Pantaloon

In ‘The Pantomime of Life’ Dickens had initially introduced the figure of the Pantaloon as a roughly-treated elderly gentleman, but was less sympathetic later when considering his character in more detail. To Dickens he is ‘the most worthless and debauched’ figure of the pantomime who defies the accepted rules of propriety by acting in a manner ‘highly unbecoming his gravity and time of life’. His main two offences consist of ‘enticing his younger companion, the clown, into acts of fraud or petty larceny’ and ‘improper’ ‘amorous propensities’ towards ladies much younger than himself.

²⁴² *Memoirs*, II, p. 253.

²⁴³ *Memoirs*, II, p. 205.

Returning to his *theatrum mundi* theme Dickens directly asks the reader 'Is there any man who cannot count a dozen pantaloons in his own social circle?' and correlates this with those people who perform in real-life society 'with as much liquorish energy, and as total an absence of reserve, as if they were on the very stage itself'. Despite their misdemeanours they are principally regarded as amusing acquaintances, who make 'such comical and ineffectual attempts to be young and dissolute' that anyone who sees them is reduced to laughter. Dickens rounds off his description with a sketch of a 'pantaloone to the life' who flirts with a young girl in the Haymarket and demonstrates the 'affected' manner and typical appearance of such men. He beckons the girl with 'fantastic grimaces' and 'trots after her with a toothless chuckle'.²⁴⁴

In the *Memoirs* the figure of 'Billy Coombes' represents a minor example of someone whose inappropriate behaviour make him a socially sanctioned butt of humour and even violence. This 'very indifferent actor' played the Pantaloone to Grimaldi's Clown, and in the *Memoirs* it becomes clear that these players remain in character in their offstage dealings.²⁴⁵

Coombes's villainy is kept vague as we are only told that he had 'given [...] Grimaldi mighty offence upon several occasions, possibly by making his appearance on the stage in a state of intoxication'. Indeed the narrative is largely reliant on our trust of the good-hearted Joe to judge their assessment of Coombes as correct: we are only told that 'Grimaldi forgot the precise cause of affront, but, whatever it was, they deemed it a very great one'.²⁴⁶

Their punishment of Coombes becomes incorporated in the pantomime act itself as Grimaldi locks him in a chest 'amidst the plaudits of the audience, who thought it was a

²⁴⁴ 'Pantomime', pp. 501-502.

²⁴⁵ *Memoirs*, II, p. 117.

²⁴⁶ *Memoirs*, II, p. 117.

capital trick', once again revealing the disturbing complicity of the pantomime audience in acts of violence.²⁴⁷ However, he forgets to let him out until the next morning when he finds him 'a truly pitiable object' and lucky to be alive (the chest was supposed to be airtight). Joe shows some remorse and gives Coombes every 'necessary assistance' to recover.²⁴⁸ But any further pity is curtailed by the revelation that Coombes 'had got into the chest that morning to turn the tables upon his assailants' and yet happily accepted the 'various little presents in the way of compensation for his imprisonment'.²⁴⁹ Like the hunting episode with Mackintosh it seems that Grimaldi has once again become the deceived.

The other aspects of the Pantaloon character that Dickens had described in 'A Pantomime of Life', for example, his amorous propensities, are absent from the *Memoirs*. However if one regards the Pantaloon's primary purpose within the pantomime plot as the attempted thwarting of the lovers' happiness, then this role is briefly adopted by Vincent De Cleve, treasurer of Sadler's Wells and enemy of Grimaldi.

De Cleve is placed in a theatrical role from the beginning. We are told that his nickname was 'Polly De Cleve' on account of 'his Marplot qualities, which ever prompted him to pry into every body's business, and create by his interference the most vexatious mischief'.²⁵⁰

The reference to Marplot alludes to a character from Susanna Centlivre's play *The Busybody* (1709), who disrupts the narrative's romance. Marplot's actions are usually well-intended but in the *Memoirs* it is clear that De Cleve is more of a dislikeable Pantaloon figure with only bad intentions.

He is described as a humourless man with 'no touch of comedy in his composition' and a 'cold heart' who 'hated Grimaldi most cordially' for his eclipsing of De Cleve's favourite

²⁴⁷ *Memoirs*, II, p. 118.

²⁴⁸ *Memoirs*, II, p. 119-120.

²⁴⁹ *Memoirs*, II, p. 121.

²⁵⁰ *Memoirs* (1846), I, 86n.

Hartland. He intervenes at an advanced stage of Grimaldi's wooing of Miss Hughes and if her father will not play the Pantaloon, then De Cleve certainly will: Joe feels that his presence would have 'the inevitable consequence' of 'great mischief-making and turmoil'. Joe encounters De Cleve on the boat from Gravesend after a day trip with Miss Hughes and believes that De Cleve had followed him 'with the amiable intention of playing the spy' and thwarting their romance.²⁵¹ However De Cleve is too late to catch the two lovers together and his interference is in vain.

But the Pantaloon was much more than the old lecher and, as Eigner demonstrates, Dickens presents this figure in a more complex and sometimes ambivalent way. The Pantaloon of the pantomime opening was also an archetypal faulty parent representing 'patriarchal authority and corrupt hierarchy', especially through his attempt to marry his daughter against her wishes.

In this respect, Joe's father represents a Pantaloon, and here Eigner feels that the *Memoirs* 'has more interesting things to say about good and bad parenting than about the theater'.²⁵² Joe describes his father as a 'severe, but excellent parent' and although he was reputed to be a very honest and charitable man who was 'never known to be inebriated' his cruel actions belie Joe's praise of him.²⁵³

Hillis Miller describes the characters of *Oliver Twist* as inhabiting 'a world in which they are from the first moment and at every moment in extreme danger' and Dickens evokes a similar world in the *Memoirs* through the descriptions of Grimaldi Senior's parenting and training of his son.²⁵⁴ While there is little direct censure of his actions, we are nonetheless shown how he gave Joe violent beatings and sometimes deferred the punishment for

²⁵¹ *Memoirs*, I, pp. 101-102.

²⁵² Eigner, p. 69.

²⁵³ *Memoirs*, I, p. 5; p. 12.

²⁵⁴ 'Oliver Twist', p. 433.

weeks. As discussed earlier in this chapter Grimaldi Senior once feigned his own death to gauge the reaction of his children and thrashed Joe's brother John because he showed insufficient grief. His vicious eccentricities are revealed in other ways; for example, he takes a dim view of Joe performing for others and 'whenever he did happen to observe any of the child's pranks, always administered the same punishment – a sound thrashing'.²⁵⁵ Eigner feels that Dickens's exclamation (in the 'Introductory Chapter') that 'How often have we wished that the Pantaloon were our god-father!' indicates ambivalence about his feelings for both stage and 'real-life' Pantaloons.²⁵⁶ But in the *Memoirs* there is little good in the character of Joe's father.

In fact, Joe's upbringing shares many of the same characteristics as *Oliver Twist*'s. The orphan Oliver is spared cruelty from a natural father but suffers bad parenting at the hands of his many surrogate fathers, whom Anny Sadrin points out are all 'people in authority and worthy representatives of social or moral order'.²⁵⁷ They are a whole cast of Pantaloons, from the doctor at his birth to the board of governors and even Mr Grimwig who resembles Grimaldi Senior in more than just his name. Grimwig plays the Pantaloon role of the cruel parent as a foil to Mr Brownlow's warmer theories of bringing up a child, and according to Sadrin 'plays a vital role' in Oliver's life as 'the spokesman of a whole class of men brought up to mistrust'.²⁵⁸

His view of children (particularly boys) is very pessimistic. He regards a close neighbour's boy as 'an assassin' for allegedly setting a 'man-trap' of orange-peel on the doorstep. If one considers Dickens's evocation of the theatre elsewhere this reference to the orange-peel is richly suggestive. In the *Household Words* article 'First Fruits' he describes the smell of

²⁵⁵ *Memoirs*, I, p. 11.

²⁵⁶ *Memoirs*, I, p. xii.

²⁵⁷ Anny Sadrin, *Parentage and Inheritance in the Novels of Charles Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 36.

²⁵⁸ Sadrin, p. 38.

‘aromatic perfume of orange-peel and lamp-oil’ and viewed alongside Grimwig’s reference to the ‘pantomime-light’ of the culprit’s house this suggests to the reader a mischievous young boy from the theatre - perhaps a young Joe Grimaldi?²⁵⁹

Moreover Grimwig’s early speeches are full of hostility towards boys. A friend’s son is “‘a horrid boy’” and a “‘wretch [...] with a body and limbs that appear to be swelling out of the seams of his blue clothes; with the voice of a pilot; and the appetite of a wolf’”. He even refuses to give Oliver the benefit of the doubt due to his illness, on the basis that “‘fevers are not peculiar to good people [...] Bad people have fevers sometimes [...] I knew a man who was hung in Jamaica for murdering his master. He had had a fever six times’”.²⁶⁰

It is in this general atmosphere of cruelty to boys, based on a pessimistic view of their nature and intentions, that we must judge an event, which appears in both narratives in strikingly similar forms. In both cases the young heroes are tested in the same way, sent out on their own in a set of new clothes to traverse the streets on a particular errand. Moreover, it is our two Pantaloon figures – Mr Grimwig and Joe’s father – that precipitate the event. The outcomes of both of these trials have already been described earlier, but episodes such as these bring Grimaldi senior and Grimwig closer to the Pantaloon figure depicted in the pantomime.

‘Cheated, or knocked down, or both’ - Supernumeraries

Dickens’s comprehensive vision of the pantomime of life embraces not only the principal protagonists but also the minor supernumeraries. These are the ‘odd, lazy, large-headed men’ who only come onto the stage ‘for the express purpose of being cheated, or knocked down, or both’. These stage supernumeraries correspond to the ‘supernumeraries in the pantomime of life’ who ‘have been thrust into it, with no other view than to be constantly

²⁵⁹ Charles Dickens and George Sala, ‘First Fruits’, *Household Words*, 15 May 1852, p. 191; *Twist*, p. 100.

²⁶⁰ *Twist*, pp. 100-101.

tumbling over each other, and running their heads against all sorts of strange things'. They are identified by their 'broad, stolid simper', 'dull leaden eye', 'unmeaning, vacant stare' and their awkward actions – 'com[ing] in at precisely wrong place, or jostl[ing] against something that he had not the slightest business with'.²⁶¹

In the *Memoirs* they appear as the peripheral figures who play the kind of brief comical cameos that appear throughout Dickens's fiction. Like the busy edges of a Hogarthian scene these figures are extraneous to the main narrative development but attract the eyes away from the central action by virtue of their complete realisation, often acting as a comic diversion and adding to the completeness of the canvas. These supernumeraries would include David Copperfield's 'friendly waiter' in the Yarmouth coffee-room, Mrs Nickleby's vegetable-throwing neighbour (*Nicholas Nickleby*) and 'Deputy' the stone-throwing boy in the Cloisterham churchyard (*The Mystery of Edwin Drood*).

One early example in the *Memoirs* occurs when the infant Joe is playing a monkey and is flung into the audience when his chain breaks. This incident is intended to underline the precariousness of life for child performers and so the precise detail of where he landed is perhaps superfluous. However, Dickens embellishes the description with comic detail by describing how Joe landed in 'the very arms of an old gentleman who was sitting gazing at the stage with intense interest'.²⁶² Similarly, when Joe is later involved in a coach accident, we are not just told he was slightly injured but that 'five stout men [...] fell on the top of him'.²⁶³

As well as using supernumeraries as background detail or comic embellishment Dickens also uses them in the *Memoirs* for more thoughtful purposes. His descriptions of the

²⁶¹ 'Pantomime', pp. 504-505.

²⁶² *Memoirs*, I, p. 17.

²⁶³ *Memoirs*, II, p. 48.

Pentonville burglaries represent an early incarnation of the satire on the old police system that he would develop in *Oliver Twist* and elsewhere. Dickens depicts the watchmen who attend to the burglary as buffoonish, interfering supernumeraries, and by pushing those figures who should be central to the scene into the periphery Dickens underscores his satirical point.

The first part of this episode occurs on a night when a rehearsal is cancelled. By describing the ensuing scene at the house in the style of one of Grimaldi's stage escapades it becomes the pantomime rehearsal that they never had. Dickens first describes the gang of burglars in terms reminiscent of the clown in 'The Pantomime of Life', whose stealing became more audacious in relation to the effect on the audience:

Several of the boldest had been hung, and others transported, but these punishments had no effect upon their more lucky companions, who committed their depredations with, if possible, increased hardihood and daring.²⁶⁴

Moreover, when Grimaldi and his family arrive at the scene of the crime, Dickens opts not to derive any suspense by creating a stealthy or cautious entrance into the building and instead gives them a chaotic knockabout entrance: 'In they rushed, the party augmented by the arrival of two watchmen [...] and began their inspection; the women screaming and crying, and the men all shouting together'.

The arrival of these watchmen provides another indication of how this scene should be read. Whilst Dickens cast Old Lucas in the image of the clown to represent the amoral aspects of the constable's character, here he casts the watchmen as supernumeraries. The blundering incompetence of the stage extras described in 'The Pantomime of Life' is

²⁶⁴ *Memoirs*, I, p. 65.

reflected in these Pentonville watchmen who, we are told, were chosen 'as the majority of that fine body of men invariably were with a specific view to their old age and infirmities'.²⁶⁵ Furthermore they set out on their search 'bearing large lanterns, to show the thieves they are coming [...] in the hopes of the taking the offenders alive or dead – they would have preferred the latter'. They also conduct their business 'by very slow degrees' and even when they find the stolen goods, the scene of triumph is re-cast as one of comedic misunderstanding when Joe initially mistakes them for the burglars.²⁶⁶

In this same episode the husband of Grimaldi's friend Mrs Lewis appears as another incompetent supernumerary, exhibiting comical cowardice in what should have been a tense situation. Although his wife appears regularly, Mr Lewis only appears briefly here to add comical colour to proceedings and has no narrative function at all. After the first visit by the burglars Joe asks Mr Lewis to check a knocking at the back door (suspecting the return of the burglars) but Lewis 'did not appear quite satisfied upon the point. He reflected for a short time, and looking with a very blank face at his wife, said he was much obliged to Mr Grimaldi, but he would rather not'. When Joe decides on an alternative course of action we return to Mr Lewis's thoughts again to discover that Joe's new, safer plan was one 'which Lewis thought much more feasible'.²⁶⁷

In *Oliver Twist* Dickens similarly depicts the local watchmen as supernumeraries, in scenes written around the same time as the *Memoirs*. After the failed burglary at the Maylie's house an investigating constable visits, and his physical appearance echoes that of the supernumeraries of 'The Pantomime of Life'. He is described as having 'a large staff, a large head, large features, and large half-boots' and 'looked as if he had been taking a proportionate allowance of ale, as indeed he had'. His neglect of his duty is made clear

²⁶⁵ *Memoirs*, I, p. 66.

²⁶⁶ *Memoirs*, I, p. 69.

²⁶⁷ *Memoirs*, I, p. 72.

when we are told that he ‘took up his staff of office; which had been reclining indolently in the chimney-corner’ – here, the man’s own dissolution has transformed and become invested in the props of his office.²⁶⁸

The two Bow Street officers Blathers and Duff are treated in similar fashion. Despite his ‘sharp eyes’ Blathers is ‘a stout personage’ with ‘a round face’ and his partner is ‘a red-headed, bony man [...] with a rather ill-favoured countenance’. Duff acts awkwardly and distracts from the main business, transforming even the simple act of sitting in a chair into a comic performance. We are told that he ‘seated himself, after undergoing several muscular affections of the limbs; and forced the head of his stick into his mouth, with some embarrassment’.²⁶⁹ Again, the props of their role are described in a comically incongruous fashion and all sense of their authority is erased. Here, Blathers plays ‘carelessly with the handcuffs, as if they were a pair of castanets’.²⁷⁰ They conduct much unnecessary business in the course of their enquiry and narrate the tale of another investigation in a long-winded and comical fashion. Finally, after following a false trail to Kingston, they conclude the case no wiser than when they started. Duff inclines ‘to the belief that the burglarious attempt had originated with the Family Pet’ and Blathers blames the redoubtable Conkey Chickweed, the culprit from another investigation that he had described.²⁷¹

‘The magic wand’ – Harlequin, Columbine and pantomime politics

During the Regency period Grimaldi’s brilliance and popularity had ensured that the heroic Harlequin had been eclipsed in importance by the clown and though the shape of the pantomime would change later in the Victorian period, little had changed by 1837. In

²⁶⁸ *Twist*, p. 200.

²⁶⁹ *Twist*, p. 202.

²⁷⁰ *Twist*, p. 203.

²⁷¹ *Twist*, p. 210.

consequence neither 'The Pantomime of Life' nor the *Memoirs* give much consideration to the harlequin.

In 'The Pantomime of Life' Harlequin is described as a problematic figure because of his apparent ubiquity; we 'see harlequins of so many kinds in the real living pantomime, that we hardly know which to select as the proper fellow of him of the theatres'. One possible real life counterpart that Dickens suggests is the youthful carefree romantic, 'a young man of family and independent property, who had run away with an opera-dancer, and was fooling his life and means away in light and trivial amusement'. However, this idea is soon dismissed because, unlike young men in real life, 'harlequins are occasionally guilty of witty and even clever acts'.

Finally Dickens is forced to conclude that 'the harlequins of life are just ordinary men, to be found in no particular walk or degree, on whom a certain station, or particular conjunction of circumstances, confers a magic wand'. This is an allusion to the 'fairy tale' component of the pantomime whereby the harlequin gains powers of transformation over the world around him via a magic wand, bat or slapstick, which he wields with impressive effect during the harlequinade. Here his real-life counterpart is the person who attains his own powers of transformation from his situation in life.

Dickens passes even more briefly over the character of harlequin's lover Columbine, using the pretext of propriety towards 'the virtuous and respectable ladies who peruse our lucubrations' to restrict her appearance to a couple of lines.²⁷² Instead, Dickens moves on to a more interesting concluding section which describes 'the pantomime of public and political life' and sketches a session of Parliament in pantomimic terms.

²⁷² 'Pantomime', p. 505.

In this section Harlequin's magic wand is used here for a number of purposes. When the party leader holds it he can use it to silence his own members or set them in motion, becoming 'all life and animation if required, pouring forth a torrent of words without sense or meaning' in a manner that recalls Old Lucas's stupefaction at sight of the silver staff. Later on, the wand is also used to perform 'strange tricks' on the members of the House, changing their views on a subject or even their political allegiance in an instant: 'one gentle tap on the back will alter the colour of a man's coat completely'.²⁷³ This kind of comparison, Dickens concludes, might be carried into 'the liberal professions', which 'each in itself [is] a little pantomime with scenes and characters of its own, complete'.²⁷⁴

Yet, despite being such an imaginative wellspring for Dickens within this essay, this kind of political satire is barely evident in the *Memoirs*. Besides the tilt at police authority already described there is no consideration of the political system within Grimaldi's life story and nothing equivalent to, for example, the Eatanswill episodes of *The Pickwick Papers*.

III. Beyond 'The Pantomime'

While the text of the *Memoirs* clearly reworks the central framework of 'The Pantomime of Life', Dickens goes beyond that essay to demonstrate how the pantomimic and theatrical are woven into the very nature of life. While 'The Pantomime of Life' bases its methods on the recognition of stock character types, in the *Memoirs* Dickens uses other theatrical tropes to show how the performance continues off the stage and in the 'real' world. This penultimate section will consider three further ways in which Dickens imbues the life of Grimaldi with the pantomime spirit: through the use of a loosely theatrical structure, through a pantomime tone and through the use of gesture and expression to convey internal emotions.

²⁷³ 'Pantomime', p. 506.

²⁷⁴ 'Pantomime', p. 507.

Dickens's overarching organisation of the whole piece and the structural underpinning of the *Memoirs* direct us towards such a theatrical reading. *The Athenaeum* astutely recognised that Grimaldi's life 'was a sort of pantomime in itself' and enumerated the elements that constitute a pantomime as 'love – thievery (not his own) – rapid changes of scene – sudden findings of riches, as sudden losses – great simplicity – pleasant archness – all blended to make an existence!'.²⁷⁵ This chapter has already considered 'thievery' and 'love', but the 'rapid changes of scene' and 'sudden findings of richness' merit further consideration here.

Dickens explains his use of sudden scene changes in another text, *Oliver Twist*, albeit in relation to another dramatic form, that of melodrama. At the start of Chapter 17 – also written at the same time as the *Memoirs* – he draws his prose work closer to the theatrical by justifying an abrupt scene change. He reminds his readers that

it is the custom on the stage: in all good, murderous melodramas: to present the tragic and the comic scenes, in as regular alteration, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky, well-cured bacon.

According to this 'custom' he feels that 'the great art of authorship' and 'an author's skill in his craft' is to enable these 'sudden shiftings of the scene'.²⁷⁶ As Eigner argues, Dickens would use this skill to bring the model of pantomimic scene-shifting to bear on his major fiction. But it is also possible to discern a similar model in the *Memoirs*. This pattern was already common practice in theatrical memoirs of the eighteenth century, which deliberately drew parallels between the unfolding episodes of life and those of a play; as

²⁷⁵ *Athenaeum*, 17 February 1838, p. 115.

²⁷⁶ *Twist*, p. 118.

Donald Stauffer points out biographers learnt the 'pattern for blending mirth and pathos' from the stage on which their subjects performed.²⁷⁷

Although *The Knickerbocker* reviewer had claimed that each episode of the *Memoirs* appears 'without contingency as to what may precede or follow it', Dickens alludes to his controlling pattern of alternating episodes on several occasions. For example, immediately after Joe has first gained the favour of his future wife he is injured while performing, and Dickens comments that Joe himself laid 'great stress' on the fact that there 'always seemed some connexion between his good and bad fortune'.²⁷⁸

Throughout the narrative, every time the fortunes of Grimaldi seem to be ascendant an unexpected setback deflates him again; at one point, we are told of his happiness in anticipation of becoming a father, only for this to be destroyed by the death of his wife. Similarly money is made or unexpectedly found on the street, only for it to be snatched away through misuse or theft – Joe himself repeats an 'often-urged remark' on this situation, commenting that 'he never had a sum of money but some unforeseen demand was made upon him, or some extraordinary exigency arose'.²⁷⁹ Indeed at one point this becomes an explicit narrative expectation: 'Of course some unforeseen circumstance was to happen, or some unexpected demand to be made on the money so easily earned'.²⁸⁰ Comical and seemingly whimsical anecdotes – such as the 'guinea wager' or 'the piece of tin' episodes - are swiftly followed by scenes of sadness or tribulation which carefully balance the tale between light and dark.

Moreover, beyond this general patterning of the episodes, some of the chapters are also shaped in a particular way to further enhance this overall feeling of theatricality. In his own

²⁷⁷ Stauffer, p. 28.

²⁷⁸ *Memoirs*, I, p. 60.

²⁷⁹ *Memoirs*, I, p. 269.

²⁸⁰ *Memoirs*, II, p. 46.

revised edition of 1968 Richard Findlater actually re-cut the chapter division, arguing that 'the original division was arbitrary and gimmicky' but on several occasions Dickens's original chapter endings deliberately employ the theatrical method of ending a scene on a moment of dramatic tension.²⁸¹

This method was a natural product of the serial method that he was using elsewhere. As Archibald Coolidge explains, serial publication enabled Dickens 'to pack instalments with lots of incidents, selected for variety, and to arrange these slightly to give each instalment a pattern of its own independent from the rest of the novel'.²⁸² All of Dickens's methods of serial planning, such as the use of stock characters and the inclusion of multiple and varied incidents in the same instalment, are the same methods of composition that he uses in the *Memoirs*.

One particularly important aspect of serial planning was the conclusion of each part. According to Coolidge Dickens 'often thought the problem of serial publication as one of dividing a rapidly moving story in the right places' and one criterion for determining these 'right places' would be whether the division will make the reader want to read the next instalment.²⁸³ One way that this could be achieved was by closing a serial part on a moment of great suspense, perhaps mid-action or before the full consequences of a particular action have been realised. Coolidge calls these endings 'curtains' as this method is clearly observable at the ends of scenes and acts of plays.²⁸⁴

Martin Meisel traces the use of this same method in painting. He calls nineteenth-century drama 'a serial pictorial form' and draws attention to a variety of rich parallels between

²⁸¹ *Memoirs* (1968), p. 15.

²⁸² Archibald C. Coolidge Jr, *Charles Dickens as Serial Novelist* (Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1967), p. 48.

²⁸³ Coolidge, p. 58.

²⁸⁴ Coolidge, p. 208.

painting, theatre and indeed fiction.²⁸⁵ He points to Edward Mayhew who defines these dramatically important moments, these 'strong point[s] in a play likely to command applause', as 'situations'. 'Situations' hold the action at a significant point and in their presentation of arrested movement they often resembled the *tableaux* of the art world. They were most prominently used at the ends of acts, which to Mayhew mean that they bear 'a strong resemblance to the conclusion of a chapter in a novel'.²⁸⁶

As Meisel and Axton demonstrate, Dickens creates a number of these highly detailed pictorial *tableau* 'situations' in his fiction but in the *Memoirs* he uses much simpler textual transitions; this method is less subtle but nonetheless creates a bridge from one chapter to the next. The action is carried across in nine of the chapter endings, with three ending on strong examples of verbal 'curtains' that forestall the climax of some of the most dramatic scenes in the narrative.

For example, at the end of Chapter 3, after the first attack by the Pentonville burglars, we are told that 'on the third night, after the girl's return, they made a fresh attack, for which we will reserve a fresh chapter'.²⁸⁷ At the close of Chapter 7, during a description of the latest phase in Joe's stage career, the narrator comments that Joe had great hopes for his latest part and for the pantomime as a whole, but 'how far his expectations were borne out by subsequent occurrences, the next chapter will show'.²⁸⁸ Finally, we are given a sense of foreboding about troubles to come when Chapter 10 ends with the statement that 'On the conclusion of the night's amusements, he had an interview with the acting manager [Wroughton, at Drury Lane], which, although at first both pleasing and profitable, led in less

²⁸⁵ Meisel, p. 24.

²⁸⁶ Edward Mayhew, *Stage Effect: or, The Principles which Command Dramatic Success in the Theatre* (London, 1840), p. 44.

²⁸⁷ *Memoirs*, I, p. 79.

²⁸⁸ *Memoirs*, I, p. 190.

than six weeks to his departure from the theatre'.²⁸⁹ Findlater's factual-biographical impulse forces him to omit the first two passages entirely and only include the final one at the start of the following chapter, thus entirely erasing these 'curtains' and their associated dramatic tension.

Another method which Dickens uses to enhance the pantomimic effect of the *Memoirs* is the careful management of tone. Perhaps the most sustained example of this occurs in the burglary episode in Chapter 3, which Dickens recasts in *Oliver Twist* as a Newgate nightmare. Generally, the overall tone of the *Memoirs* version is more detached and comical, whereas Dickens's more vivid prose in *Oliver Twist* draws us closer to the events. The humour is replaced by sensation, suspense and fear – pantomime gives way to melodrama. However these scenes are worth considering in full, especially as they were written during the same month (December 1837).

In the *Memoirs*, after the initial attempts at apprehending the burglars (which have been described earlier and firmly establish a theatrical feel to the whole episode), Joe continues his own performance. His gestures are exaggerated and the narrative reads like a series of stage directions; for example, 'Grimaldi beckoned [...] Mr. King [...] and suggested in a whisper that they should search the garden together'.²⁹⁰ Dickens counteracts the *intended* stealth of Grimaldi's actions by presenting them in an entirely incongruous and heightened style. This completely transforms the tone of the gesture and makes it into a 'stage whisper', invisible to those on his 'stage' but entirely visible to us as the audience.

The start of what would conventionally be a tense search for the felons is described as a blundering operation with great potential as comedy theatre: 'It was a dark night, and they

²⁸⁹ *Memoirs*, I, p. 249.

²⁹⁰ *Memoirs*, I, p. 67.

groped about the garden for some time, but found nobody'.²⁹¹ Indeed, it would not have been surprising if the pursuers bumped into each other once or twice for good measure. The search then takes another turn as Grimaldi actually discovers one of the burglars and 'dealt him a heavy blow with a broadsword', a weapon which the nineteenth-century stage tutor Leman Thomas Rede (who will be discussed later) calls 'essential' in 'all [stage] melodramas'.²⁹² This confrontation is clearly an opportunity for great drama and sensation, and similar scenes in the work of 'Newgate' writers such as Ainsworth develop into occasions for extensive bloodletting. For example, certain episodes of *Jack Sheppard* are drenched in the blood of both criminals and victims alike. When Mrs Wood discovers her house is being burgled by Jack and his accomplices her brutal murder is described in gruesome detail:

[...] seizing her by the hair, he pulled back her head, and drew the knife with all his force across her throat. There was a dreadful stifled groan, and she fell heavily upon the landing.²⁹³

The murder of Sir Rowland is even more violent; he is struck 'several quick and violent blows in the face with [a] bludgeon', so that the white cloth over his face 'was instantly dyed with crimson'. As if this were not enough, Ainsworth's description continues as relentlessly as Jonathan's assault on Sir Rowland; the victim pulls the cloth from his face in the struggle 'and disclosed a face horribly mutilated, and streaming with blood. So appalling was the sight, that even the murderers – familiar as they were with scenes of slaughter – looked aghast at it'.²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ *Memoirs*, I, p. 67.

²⁹² Leman Thomas Rede, *The Guide to the Stage* (New York: French, 1868), p. 22.

²⁹³ Harrison Ainsworth, *Jack Sheppard*, ed. by Juliet John (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 181.

²⁹⁴ *Jack Sheppard*, p. 248.

However Dickens avoids this kind of sensational depiction and defuses any tension that might exist. This is achieved firstly through the almost perfunctory departure of the burglar:

He yelled out loudly, and stopping for an instant, as if in extreme pain,
dropped to the ground, limped off a few paces, and was lost in the darkness.

Here Dickens provides more stage directions and details of the *performance* of the characters, as the burglar signals his pain for the benefit of the audience (note the suggestion of an act in '*as if* in extreme pain') and then exits stage left.

Finally any lingering excitement for the suspenseful chase is entirely confounded when we are told that Joe 'was stopped in the very outset of his [pursuit], by tumbling over a cow, which was lying on the ground'. Joe is instantly transported from the real scene back to the playhouse and it is only due to an 'involuntary pantomimic feat' and his own 'theatrical practice as a fencer' that he does not 'cut his own head off with the weapon he carried'.²⁹⁵

As if the references to pantomime and theatrical training are not enough to signal that this scene is not a serious one, the combined elements of tripping over the cow, Grimaldi's theatrical reaction and the black comedy of the potential self-decapitation move the scene yet closer to the theatre. To neatly encapsulate the pantomimic quality of this entire episode Cruikshank provides an illustration appropriately entitled 'A bit of pantomime off the stage'. The picture shows Joe upside-down in mid-somersault, flipping over the impassive looking cow with a sword in his right hand.²⁹⁶

This pantomimic tone intrudes elsewhere in the narrative as the realism of other scenes is undermined by re-casting Joe's actions in terms of theatrical performance. When he goes

²⁹⁵ *Memoirs*, I, p. 68.

²⁹⁶ Due to the dark colouring of the original, it has not been possible to get a quality reproduction.

to investigate an accidental stampede at Sadler's Wells he swims over from the opposite side of the river 'and finding the parlour window open [...] threw up the sash and jumped in *a la Harlequin*'. Joe's subsequent discovery of the crushed bodies is also couched in theatrical (here melodramatic) terms:

What was his horror, on looking round, to discover that there lay stretched in the apartment no fewer than nine dead bodies! Yes! There lay the remains of nine human beings, lifeless and scarcely yet cold, whom a few hours back he had been himself exciting to shouts of laughter.²⁹⁷

Furthermore there is another group of scenes that lend themselves naturally to pantomime. On one occasion Joe is invited to dinner at Berkeley Castle but overeats through mistaken politeness towards Lord Byron until 'he was quite gorged', finally giving up when he is asked to eat soy sauce with apple tart.²⁹⁸ This scene will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 of this thesis. In another example he is forced to stand in the corner as a small boy, only to leave when his father's back was turned, and 'recommence his pantomime' (here in the sense of a silent, gestured performance) with the amused bystanders.²⁹⁹

A final way in which Dickens's text is framed within the theatrical is through its overall use of external gesture and motion as a means of expressing internal emotion. The *Memoirs* closely follows the stage conventions of the time and presents outward and observable gesture as an index to inward and non-verbalised feeling. Meisel argues that during the nineteenth century an 'iconography of emotion' developed within the arts, whereby 'interior experience was conveyed through a conventionalised language of facial

²⁹⁷ *Memoirs*, II, p. 35.

²⁹⁸ *Memoirs*, II, p. 97.

²⁹⁹ *Memoirs*, I, p. 12.

expression, pose, and gesture'.³⁰⁰ This lexicon was catalogued in the work of such stage theorists as Leman Thomas Rede, who presented descriptions of emotions and their appropriate physical correlative.

The presence of this theatrical externalisation of feeling within Dickens's work has been noted by Barbara Hardy. She takes her cue from Wopsle's invocation of Collins's 'Ode on the Passions' in *Great Expectations* (1860-61) and observes that 'From *Pickwick* to *Edwin Drood* the Collins method is conspicuous. It is the theatrical and behaviouristic rendering'. She does go on to demonstrate that Dickens provides more 'subtle insights and subtle renderings' elsewhere in his work but this less subtle method is prevalent in his early works and is used most aptly to depict the life of a theatrical performer.³⁰¹

Many of the episodes in the *Memoirs* are cast in this broad and expansive gestic mode, which pushes the emotions of its characters to the surface through their actions and appearance rather than their words. In such episodes Dickens uses stage language in the manner of a theatrical writer directing his actors.

For example Rede describes the actor's proper expression of fear as follows:

Violent and sudden, [it] opens the eyes and mouth very wide, [...] gives the countenance an air of wildness [...] one foot is drawn back behind the other, so that the body seems shrinking from danger and putting itself in a posture for flight; the heart beats violently, the breath is fetched quick and short, and the whole body is thrown into a general tremor. Fear is also displayed, frequently, by a sudden start [...].³⁰²

³⁰⁰ Meisel, p. 5.

³⁰¹ Barbara Hardy, 'Dickens and the Passions', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 24.4 (March 1970), p. 452.

³⁰² Rede, p. 33.

Fear is expressed in the *Memoirs* using strikingly similar terms. When Joe finds a purse of money in the street he is worried that he will be accused of theft and in this 'state of turmoil and agitation' 'his legs trembled beneath him so that he could scarcely walk, his heart beat violently, and the perspiration started on his face'.³⁰³ When Joe is later afraid of arrest by Old Lucas he 'was quite petrified, and stood rooted to the spot, looking from one to another [of his companions] with a face in which dismay and fear were visibly depicted'.³⁰⁴

Other characters also demonstrate this visible manifestation of fear. When Jack Bologna fears that they will be apprehended for their poaching on 'Mackintosh's preserves' he took on 'a ghastly paleness' and 'trembled so much, that in an attempt to convey some wine to his lips, he deposited it upon his knees and left it there, staring all the while at the gamekeeper with a most crest-fallen visage'.³⁰⁵ One of the victims of 'the guinea wager' has a pistol pointed at him and his 'face grew instantly blanched; he put his hands to his head, made a step, or rather a stagger back, and instantly disappeared, having either fallen or thrown himself upon the floor'.³⁰⁶ Later on, the highwayman Hamilton suddenly realises he has been recognised and switches from one mode of externalisation to another: 'All his assumed fortitude forsook him', we are told, 'his face became ashy pale, and his whole frame trembled with inward agitation'.³⁰⁷ Even without the use of dialogue the emotional state of the characters is clearly communicated to the reader.

Similarly Rede feels that anger is best represented on stage 'with rapidity, interruption, rant, harshness, and trepidation'. The head shakes 'in a menacing manner against the object of the passion' with 'the breast heaving, and the breath fetched hard; the mouth

³⁰³ *Memoirs*, I, p. 108.

³⁰⁴ *Memoirs*, I, p. 138.

³⁰⁵ *Memoirs*, I, p. 245.

³⁰⁶ *Memoirs*, I, p. 164.

³⁰⁷ *Memoirs*, II, p. 73.

open, and [...] showing the teeth in a gnashing posture; the feet often stamping; the right arm frequently thrown out and menacing, with the clenched fist shaken, and a general and violent agitation of the whole body.³⁰⁸

Once again in the *Memoirs*, this vocabulary is echoed in those scenes in which characters express their anger. When Lucas the beadle is defeated by the magistrate he ‘foamed at the mouth’ and protested ‘with many disrespectful oaths and other ebullitions of anger’. When he is locked up he devotes his time in the cell ‘to howls and imprecations’.³⁰⁹ When Mackintosh later confesses all Joe starts up ‘with uncontrollable fury’ and seizes the man by the throat.³¹⁰ Joe’s friend, who instigates ‘the guinea wager’, clearly understands the importance of external expression, as he uses entirely non-verbal means to convey feeling and frighten his victims. On one occasion he assumes ‘a ferocious countenance and menacing air’ and then later he adopts ‘a most savage and unearthly expression of countenance, which gave him all the appearance of an infuriated maniac’.³¹¹

As discussed earlier the infant Joe demonstrates how to enact grief when faced with the feigned death of his father. Here the shrewd boy adopts a fitting mode of external expression that closely echoes Rede’s description of grief as ‘sudden and violent’, expressing itself by ‘beating the head or forehead, tearing the hair, and catching the breath, as if choking; also by screaming, weeping, stamping, lifting the eyes from time to time to heaven, and hurrying backwards and forwards’.³¹²

Thus when Joe realised his father was only pretending to be dead, he ‘perceived what line of conduct he ought to adopt, and at once bursting into a roar of the most distracted grief

³⁰⁸ Rede, p. 34.

³⁰⁹ *Memoirs*, I, p. 151.

³¹⁰ *Memoirs*, II, p. 9.

³¹¹ *Memoirs*, I, p. 157; p. 163.

³¹² Rede, p. 32.

[he] rolled about in a seeming transport of anguish'.³¹³ Rede emphasises the inherent theatricality of this emotion when he comments that grief is 'a passion, which admits, like many others, of a great deal of Stage trick', and this is precisely what Joe is employing here.³¹⁴ By contrast his brother John expresses joy and elation through his actions of dancing and singing and is punished when the whole ruse is revealed.

Moreover, as Joe and his mischievous friend have demonstrated in episodes discussed previously, a number of characters reveal an awareness of what their emotions *should* look like according to convention and adjust their actions accordingly. The presentation of courage is particularly related to this; for example the narrative explains how Joe is afraid of the mysterious late night visitors who appear after the burglary (actually just the watchmen) but is determined to put on a performance of bravado. He significantly uses his stage voice to call to them from the window, displays 'the brace of pistols and the broadsword to the best advantage' and 'coughed very fiercely'.³¹⁵ Similarly when Hamilton faced his accusers he 'behaved himself with great coolness and self-possession [...] without the least appearance of agitation'. But Joe realises that Hamilton's demeanour was just a performance like his father's supposed death; 'The practised eye of an old actor was not so easily deceived' and it is clear to Joe that Hamilton was making 'a desperate effort to assume an easy confidence of manner' to escape the gallows.³¹⁶ Here again the expression of emotion has been moved to the context of the playhouse.

Throughout the narrative Joe reads these external expressions and interprets their meaning like a member of the audience at the theatre. For example, in his description of Byron (which is one of the few occasions when Grimaldi appears to speak to us directly) he

³¹³ *Memoirs*, I, p. 27.

³¹⁴ Rede, p. 34.

³¹⁵ *Memoirs*, I, p. 73.

³¹⁶ *Memoirs*, II, p. 72.

describes two different states of mind entirely through Byron's gesture and action. When he 'appeared lost in deep melancholy' Byron 'really looked the picture of despair, for his face was highly capable of expressing profound grief' whereas at other times he was 'a complete fop', a characterisation which Joe interprets from the poet 'exhibiting his white hands and teeth with an almost ludicrous degree of affectation'.³¹⁷ Joe also reads Hamilton in a similar way, believing that he has a 'mind somewhat disordered' demonstrated by – amongst other things – 'a nervous restlessness of manner, an occasional incoherence of speech' and 'a wildness of look'.³¹⁸

Through presenting emotions in the approved methods of the stage, and by foregrounding the theatricality of many of these examples, Dickens reinforces the pantomime of life motif even further. Whilst a number of the characters do not fall easily into definite theatrical 'types' they can still be incorporated into this model of performative identity through their exaggerated and often explicitly affected actions. They present their emotional states through external means and are read by others in this way too.

IV. Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, the *Memoirs* represents an extended treatment of Dickens's theme of the *theatrum mundi* that he had first explored in *Sketches by Boz* and also theorised in 'The Pantomime of Life'. Axton summarises this worldview as one where everyone participates in 'an immense puppet show or pantomime in mufti, a grand compound of actors furiously and all unconsciously running through the parts assigned to them', parts which have been assigned according to 'humor, place in life, environment, or any one of a thousand other causes'.³¹⁹

³¹⁷ *Memoirs*, II, p. 127.

³¹⁸ *Memoirs*, II, p. 54.

³¹⁹ Axton, p. 30.

However, while the *Memoirs* are an extended treatment, they are not an exhaustive one.

Like 'The Pantomime of Life' it is 'particularly strong in clowns' and also considers the Pantaloon, the supernumeraries and the player-audience relationship at some length.³²⁰

Yet the *Memoirs* barely acknowledges the key figures of Harlequin and Columbine. The prominent political satire which rounds off Dickens's argument is almost entirely absent, only vaguely emerging as mere traces in the depiction of authority figures. Nevertheless, through the use of several other techniques - a theatrical structure, a pantomime tone, and the use of gesture and expression – Dickens is able to round out his model of the *theatrum mundi* to a fuller extent.

This imbalance in characterisation is significant in a number of ways. Not least of all, it is a clear signal to where Dickens's imaginative sympathies lie. Historically Grimaldi's skill and success had ensured that Clown, rather than Harlequin, was the real artistic core of the pantomime during the Regency period. But his retirement left a void that was never adequately filled and by the late 1830s the emphasis in pantomime was changing again. Over time the clown role would gradually diminish into one of limited expertise rather than all-round ability, including acrobatics, comic dancers or specialists who solely provided jokes and comic monologues. This fall in the clown's stock is noted by Dickens in 'The Pantomime of Life' and is one of the key morals of the essay; people may be lamenting Grimaldi's loss but they must also recognise that his legacy lives on in the people around them. Real-life clowns were taking up the mantle of the stage clown to provide us with amusement (and occasionally edification) in our real lives.

After the *Memoirs* Grimaldi reappears in name twice in Dickens's work. In *Martin Chuzzlewit* he is invoked as an example of wildness and indecorum to prick the pretensions of American society. Mrs Hominy wears 'a highly aristocratic and classical cap', which is 'so

³²⁰ 'Pantomime', p. 505.

admirably adapted to her countenance, that if the late Mr. Grimaldi had appeared in the lappets of Mrs. Siddons, a more complete effect could not have been produced'.³²¹ In *The Old Curiosity Shop* he becomes one of Mrs Jarley's waxworks, alongside George III and Mary Queen of Scots. But rather than solely appearing as himself he is reconfigured as the grammarian Mr Lindley Murray in order to conciliate 'a great many young ladies' boarding-schools' visiting her show.³²² Thus he is transformed from a frozen historical relic to become a figure more relevant to his audience of the time. This is not just another one of Mrs Jarley's quirks either; in 1842 the Surrey Theatre produced a pantomime entitled *Lindley Murray's Grammar; or, Harlequin A.E.I.O.U. and Y.* in which the Vowels defeat King Ignorance. In this example, an old form of entertainment is put to a new purpose.

This reconfiguration of the clown into a new character stands as an apt symbol for Dickens's wider treatment of this figure. For, while he never returns to such a sustained treatment of life as a pantomime, the Grimaldian clown transcends his place in the *Memoirs* to become a regular presence in Dickens's fiction. Yet rather than appearing in the street in full costume and makeup like Joe, Dickens recasts him as a 'clownish' character, which can be defined as a comical character who shares certain characteristics with Grimaldi's pantomime clown and is often deployed in the narrative to serve a similar function.

The second half of this thesis will now consider a number of these figures and their roles within Dickens's work.

³²¹ Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, ed. by Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 368.

³²² Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. by Elizabeth M. Brennan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 225.

CHAPTER 4 - The Gluttonous Clown

I. Introduction

Among the more unusual anecdotes that make up the *Memoirs* lies one of the unlikeliest friendships of the Romantic period, between Joseph Grimaldi, a man of mild domesticity, and the dissolute and tempestuous Lord Byron. According to the *Memoirs* Grimaldi ‘repeatedly met with Lord Byron’, who was an avid spectator of his performances and once presented him with ‘a valuable silver snuff-box’ as a token of his esteem.³²³

However, on one occasion Joe was the victim of a food-related practical joke orchestrated by Byron. Grimaldi had been invited to dine at the poet’s house and was discreetly advised by another guest that ‘if [the host] asks you to take anything [...] no matter whether it be to eat or drink, not to refuse’. In his desperation to avoid any offence or awkwardness, Grimaldi reluctantly complied with this and so unwittingly became part of the evening’s entertainment.

His host began by deliberately overfeeding him; we are told that ‘Lord Byron asked him to partake of so many things, none of which he liked to decline, that at last he was quite gorged’, to the extent that he worried about being able to perform later that night. Then Byron presented him with a wholly unpalatable dessert of apple pie with fish sauce. After ‘one or two vain attempts to swallow a mouthful of the vile mess’ Grimaldi politely declined to eat it, to the amusement of the assembled dinner party, who laughed ‘most heartily’.³²⁴

On one level this story could be read as a simple piece of Byronic social comedy. Jane Stabler describes Byron as a ‘famously greedy’ man, who was ‘fascinated by the ways in which eating involves the consumer in complex negotiations of social manners and mores’

³²³ *Memoirs*, II, p. 126; p. 128.

³²⁴ *Memoirs*, II. pp. 97-98.

and here it could be argued that he has manipulated Grimaldi the man into performing as Joey the clown, in something halfway between pantomime and a comedy of manners.³²⁵

However this episode has wider cultural resonances. Grimaldi's 'offstage' dining experience parallels one of the key tropes of his pantomime act, whereby he becomes engaged in excessive and unusual consumption in a display of the bodily grotesque. Indeed this performance perfectly encapsulates the central elements of the grotesque described by Philip Thomson as 'a clash between incompatible reactions – laughter on the one hand, horror or disgust on the other'.³²⁶ The required ambivalence is certainly present, as this scene can amuse and disgust in equal measure. On the one hand there is the comic incongruity of the sweet apple pie and the sour soy sauce and the image of Grimaldi gamely trying to eat his way through Byron's endless dinner. However, the idea of a bloated stomach and the taste of the pie and sauce (as well as sympathy with the simple-minded Grimaldi being manipulated by his smarter host) make the scene repellent and even cruel. This focus on consumption directs us specifically towards the category of the *bodily* grotesque. Mikhail Bakhtin notes that 'eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body' and Thomson calls eating and drinking a positive celebration of 'the body and bodily excesses [...] in an uninhibited, outrageous but essentially joyous fashion'.³²⁷

Bakhtin also describes the cultural shift that led to the 'formalization of carnival-grotesque images', as manifestations of the grotesque body moved from the street spectacles of folk culture into a variety of different forms including theatre and literature.³²⁸ This chapter will

³²⁵ Jane Stabler, 'Byron's World of Zest', in *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism*, by Timothy Morton, ed., (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 141-160 (p. 141).

³²⁶ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 2.

³²⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968), p. 281; Thomson, p. 56.

³²⁸ Bakhtin, p. 34.

examine this 'formalization' through the performances of Grimaldi and the works of Dickens. The comedy derived from excessive consumption was one of the most celebrated mainstays of Grimaldi's act and was initially presented through the predictable rhythms of harlequinade set-pieces before being projected into mass circulation through a number of popular prints by artists including Cruikshank. This grotesque body is also a presence within Dickens's work as he used strikingly similar images and routines in his own 'clownish' characters and comic situations.

Bakhtin conceives the bodily grotesque as a primarily positive and celebratory form, but when Grimaldi and Dickens use it, it is far more ambivalent – the reader is far closer to deriving Dickens's 'attraction of repulsion' than enjoyment from the grotesque body.³²⁹ In fact both sometimes use the bodily grotesque in a quasi-satirical way to demonstrate the economic consequences of unpaid consumption and provoke our derisive laughter from a position of superiority. Arthur Clayborough describes how Swift had used the grotesque in this way by drawing on 'the absurd, the preposterous, the ridiculous, pejoratively, as a symbol of stupidity and vice' and also notes that 'it is peculiarly characteristic of Dickens's humour that the reader is flattered into feeling an effortless sense of superiority' as we view his imperfect figures from our 'Olympian height'.³³⁰ Clayborough characterises Dickens's humorous depiction of the grotesque as 'a symptom of detachment', and Bergson regards this detachment as crucial to our laughter, noting that laughter has 'no greater foe than emotion' and that to laugh at something we 'must, for the moment, put

³²⁹ *Life*, I, p. 19.

³³⁰ Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 233; p. 221.

our affection out of court and impose silence on our pity'.³³¹ This will be considered further in Chapter 6.

Grimaldi's Clown was a primary participant in what Leigh Hunt regarded as 'the best medium of dramatic satire'.³³² At a time when 'Statesmen, judges, merchants, poets, all engaged in the national vice of stuffing', Grimaldi used the licence of the pantomime performance to push this to extreme limits, exposing it to ridicule as he 'gulped down a tray of tarts, or made a Gargantuan meal of pies, or crammed more food into his capacious pockets'.³³³

Their employment of the grotesque would thus seem to conform to Henri Bergson's view of comedy as a corrective instrument, whereby laughter is 'a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events' and the means by which 'society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it'.³³⁴ Bakhtin and Wylie Sypher have noted the limits of Bergson's analysis (for example Bakhtin feels that in Bergsonian narratives 'laughter was completely distorted' to fit 'within the framework of bourgeois modern culture and aesthetics') but Bergson nonetheless suggests another way to interpret the grotesque comedy of both Grimaldi and Dickens.³³⁵

This double movement has been noted by others; to Jane Moody Grimaldi is 'the whimsical, practical satirist' while David Mayer identifies two types of laughter in the pantomime audience, the normative and the retributive (these will also be discussed

³³¹ Clayborough, p. 232; Henri Bergson, 'Laughter', in *Comedy*, ed. by Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1956), pp. 59-190 (p. 63).

³³² [Leigh Hunt], 'Theatrical Examiner', *The Examiner*, 26 January 1817, p. 56.

³³³ *Grimaldi*, pp. 158-159.

³³⁴ Sypher, p. 117; p. 187.

³³⁵ Bakhtin, p. 4.

further in Chapter 6).³³⁶ Findlater similarly feels that we laugh with both 'gratitude and contempt' at Grimaldi.³³⁷

In summary, both Dickens and Grimaldi reflect the complex and often ambivalent meaning of grotesque humour from a split position; they occupy the 'Olympian height' of superiority when they want to expose a particular social ill or vice but also operate from the very depths. In the comedy of Rabelais the 'unquenchable vitality of man gushes up from the lower strata' and Grimaldi's and Dickens's presentation of food and those who consume to excess cause us to laugh in a more democratic and inclusive way as we embrace their comic figures in all their gustatory glory.³³⁸

Dickens explicitly warns us of a wholly Bergsonian view in 'The Pantomime of Life' when he notes that the very people who laugh the loudest at the gullible dupes before them on the stage are those who show the most indignation when they are fooled in real life. We are none of us perfect and here Dickens and Grimaldi provoke Bakhtin's 'carnival laughter' which is 'universal in scope; [...] directed to all and everyone, including the carnival's participants', both 'triumphant' and 'deriding'.³³⁹

The following sections will examine a number of different perspectives and discourses through which both Grimaldi and Dickens examined issues of food and the bodily grotesque. The inherently ambivalent nature of the grotesque means that no firm or unitary conclusion on 'final' attitudes can be made and while a wide variety of studies have introduced biographical criticism into the argument, in order to attempt to 'clarify' matters this chapter will offer *a* reading to be considered alongside the many others, focusing

³³⁶ Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 14.

³³⁷ *Grimaldi*, p. 159.

³³⁸ Sypher, p. 208.

³³⁹ Bakhtin, pp. 11-12.

instead on the correspondences between the two creative artists and their contribution to the wider debate.³⁴⁰

Section II will demonstrate the centrality of excessive consumption within Grimaldi's act and indicate the significance this has, for both the popular conception of him and for the wider meaning of his act as a cultural commentary. This will form one possible framework through which Dickens's assessment of the clown can be established.

Section III discusses the exaggerated and fantastical feats of eating and drinking performed by Grimaldi's Clown and Dickens's clownish characters. This section will suggest how characters like Daniel Quilp push their bodies beyond their normal limits in perhaps the fullest depictions of the bodily grotesque. It will also briefly outline how this pushing of boundaries and celebrations of the bodily can slip towards a sexualisation of the act of eating as a different kind of flesh becomes desirable.

Section IV focuses on the excesses of Christmas, as one of the central confluences of the ideas of gluttony, pantomime and Dickens. Bakhtin squarely associated the bodily grotesque with the festive and carnival tradition, which provided an opportunity for the body to be displayed and celebrated. Both Grimaldi and Dickens work within this tradition by using scenes in market places and other public spaces to similarly celebrate the grotesque.

Finally Section V will move from the celebratory to the admonitory and demonstrate the depth and versatility in the work of both men. It will show how the excessive consumption within Grimaldi's act reflects contemporary debates around the wasteful consumer, which were also manifested in other pictorial depictions of the grotesque. Dickens was aware of

³⁴⁰ See for example, *Pantomime Life* and Harry Stone, *The Night Side of Dickens: Cannibalism, Passion, Necessity* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994).

this theme within Grimaldi's performance and after the early experiment of Joe the Fat Boy he develops this into a fuller and more complex character in the form of Harold Skimpole.

II. The importance of clownish consumption

Before considering Dickens's use of the bodily grotesque it is worth examining precisely how crucial this kind of excessive consumption was to Grimaldi's art and perhaps more importantly how pervasive it was in the reception of his work.

In the catalogue of Grimaldi's repertoire enumerated by the critic of *The Drama*, around a third of his accomplishments are related to consumption of some kind: 'whether he have to rob a pieman or open an oyster, imitate a chimney-sweep or a dandy, grasp a red-hot poker or devour a pudding, take snuff, sneeze, make love, mimic a tragedian, cheat his master, pick a pocket, beat a watchman, or nurse a child, it is all performed in so admirably humorous and extravagantly natural a manner'.³⁴¹

The term 'extravagantly natural' perfectly epitomises the idea of the grotesque; to be considered grotesque it must contain the fantastic but also retain some sense of realism in order to merely disorient us and not entirely abandon us to fairytale. According to Clayborough this view of the grotesque was popularised in the latter half of the nineteenth century, in the work of Thomas Wright for example, who saw the grotesque as 'neither a rejection of reality nor an actual part of it', regarding it as 'fantasy with a practical aspect'.³⁴² However, as the *Drama* review suggests, members of Grimaldi's audience were identifying this effect at a much earlier point.

Grimaldi himself also draws attention to the importance of gluttony and drunkenness within his act in his farewell speeches. Announcing his retirement to the Drury Lane

³⁴¹ *The Drama*, January 1822, p. 59.

³⁴² Clayborough, p. 49.

audience he noted that 'It is four years since I jumped my last jump – filched my last oyster – boiled my last sausage – and set in for retirement'. Later on in the same speech, he makes another reference to food, contrasting his somewhat meagre retirement with 'the days of my clownship' when 'I used to have a fowl in one pocket and sauce for it in the other'.³⁴³

It is clear that Dickens was also aware of, and took pleasure in, the gluttonous side of Grimaldi's Clown. In his 'Introductory Chapter' to the *Memoirs* he notes that, as a child, he would 'pester [his] relations and friends' with questions related to clowns and the very first question he mentions is food based: as a boy he would wonder 'whether [Clown's] appetite for sausages and such like wares was always the same, and if so, at whose expense they were maintained'.³⁴⁴ Food is a constant theme of this opening section; Dickens reminisces about clowns past and describes how Clown uses the term 'gammon' (slang for trickery or deception) to describe another character's speech. Further on, when describing the somewhat diminished state of Clowns now he observes that one miserable example was 'eating a real saveloy'.³⁴⁵

As well as being an important part of Grimaldi's act, images of food and drink were key aspects of the entire pantomime *milieu* and were principally articulated through the harlequinade. Even a brief survey here will illustrate how the pantomime as a whole contained a wide variety of food-related actions, characters or settings. The harlequinade of *Harlequin and Fortunio* (Covent Garden, 1815) contains scenes called 'Strawberries and Saloop', 'a new Dish', 'the Pleasures of an Inn', 'the Joys of Bottle' and 'Nothing to eat'.³⁴⁶ Similarly in *The Astrologer or Harlequin and Moore's Almanack* (Sadler's Wells, 1810), the

³⁴³ *Memoirs*, II, p. 240.

³⁴⁴ *Memoirs*, I, p. xi.

³⁴⁵ *Memoirs*, I, p. xiv.

³⁴⁶ [Anon], *The new pantomime of Harlequin and Fortunio; or Shing-Moo and Thun-Ton, with a sketch of the story, etc.* (London, 1815), pp. 13-14.

harlequinade scene in 'A Pastry Cook's Shop' consists of set-pieces called 'Toad in a hole', 'Cherry Bounce' and 'Raspberry Brandy'. A later scene in Pantaloon's house involves 'Curds and Whey' and 'Rare Pippins'.³⁴⁷

As a final example the harlequinade of *Bang Up! or Harlequin Prime* (Sadler's Wells, 1810) is set in an 'English Kitchen' and Grimaldi's song 'Tippity Witchet' further underscores the comedy of Clown's excessive living. In this song, he describes a series of acts of consumption; for example, one verse runs 'This very morning, handy,/ My malady was such, / I in my tea took brandy, / And took a cup too much'.

³⁴⁷ Charles Dibdin, [*The Astrologer.*] *Songs, Duets, Trios, Glees, Chorusses, &c., with a description of the scenery and an outline of the plot, in the new comic pantomime, called the Astrologer: or Harlequin and Moore's Almanack, etc.* (London: Glendinning, 1810), pp. 15-16.

The verse concludes in a series of hiccups and facial contortions.³⁴⁸ Grimaldi's performance in this song was captured in what is regarded as one of the only contemporary paintings of Clown:



Figure 7: T. Turner, [Grimaldi singing 'Tippetywitchet'] (Date Unknown), *Grimaldi*

T. Turner's painting captures Grimaldi mid-sneeze and, although snuff is taken through the nose, the portrait accentuates his mouth, which is a part of the anatomy more closely associated with the bodily grotesque.

The gluttony of Grimaldi's Clown is also evoked in the language used to describe other aspects of his performance, as if these elements are there only to serve this central motif of consumption. For example in an account of Grimaldi's stage makeup the pantomime

³⁴⁸ Charles Dibdin, *Songs, Duets, Trios, Chorusses, &c. &c. with a description of the scenery in the new comic pantomime, called Bang up! or, Harlequin prime, etc* (London: Glendinning, 1810), p. 11, p. 8.

historian A.E. Wilson claims that 'he painted some red patches on his cheeks, so as to give the idea of a greedy boy who had smeared his face with jam in robbing his mother's pantry' and, as mentioned in Chapter 2 of this thesis, D.L. Murray develops the image further when describing Grimaldi's 'white face larded with red like a schoolboy's that has been dipped in a surreptitious jam-pot'.³⁴⁹

David Mayer calls pantomime the 'unofficial and informal chronicle of the age' and here pantomime serves a similar function to the satirical cartoon, by acting as a 'surveillance camera overlooking the major events of the century'.³⁵⁰ It becomes possible to read Grimaldi's gluttony and drunkenness in a much wider context, related to the material and cultural conditions of his time. Eating and drinking have always been a traditional part of the clown's act (consider *Macbeth's* Porter or Falstaff) but rather than remaining as a timeless diversion these elements of the performance also provide a commentary on the specific issues and concerns that were circulating through society during the period.

Consumer goods and *consumed* goods were very much part of this national debate during Grimaldi's performing life. As Timothy Morton outlines, food in the Romantic period was 'not simply an empirical reality [...] but a mixture of ideas, practices, figures, debates, and philosophical speculations'.³⁵¹ Therefore Grimaldi's antics no longer remained an abstract, universal part of the clowning repertoire but were absorbed into a much broader and more complex web of food-related motifs and associations.

Clown was one of the many participants and performers in what Morton describes as 'the theatre of consumption' whereby the emerging 'economic consumer' could situate himself

³⁴⁹ A.E. Wilson, *The Story of Pantomime* (London: Home and Van Thal, 1949), p. 27; Murray, p. 125.

³⁵⁰ *Theatre Notebook*, p. 7; Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. vii.

³⁵¹ Timothy Morton, 'Preface', in *Cultures of Taste*, p. xv.

in the rising consumer society by adopting 'various consumer and literary positions'.³⁵²

These positions are broadly drawn by Morton across a series of binaries such as excess and discipline, production and consumption. Penny Bradshaw reinforces this sense of a national debate related to food when she comments that, during the Romantic period, key 'political moments of the period relate to questions concerning food and consumption and in particular to the dichotomy between the absence of food and excessive consumption'.³⁵³

By considering his manifestations of the bodily grotesque it is possible to see how Grimaldi's character rehearses some of the debates around these binaries and how Dickens's early writing came out of this tradition and adapted this part of the clown's repertoire in his own comic characters.

III. Supersized appetites: Clown's amazing feats of digestion

In his study of Rabelais, Bakhtin characterises the 'fundamental attributes of the grotesque style' as 'exaggeration, hyperbolism [and] excessiveness'.³⁵⁴ Within the discourse of the bodily grotesque he feels that these attributes are primarily mediated through two concepts – the idea of 'the body as a whole' and the idea of 'the limits of this whole'.³⁵⁵ Because it is the largest interface between the body and the world and the means by which 'the world enters the body' (thus transgressing 'the limits of each in an interchange and an interorientation') the most important part of the body is the mouth. In fact, the mouth can stand in for the entire body; the 'grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth' and a 'wide-open bodily abyss'.³⁵⁶

³⁵² Timothy Morton, 'Introduction: "Consumption as Performance: The Emergence of the Consumer in the Romantic Period"', in *Cultures of Taste*, pp. 1- 17 (pp. 2-3).

³⁵³ Penny Bradshaw, 'The Politics of the Platter: Charlotte Smith and the "Science of Eating"', in *Cultures of Taste*, pp. 59-76 (p. 59).

³⁵⁴ Bakhtin, p. 303.

³⁵⁵ Bakhtin, p. 315.

³⁵⁶ Bakhtin, p. 317.

Grimaldi presented the orally-focused and hyperbolic bodily grotesque by placing an excessive desire for food and drink and a seemingly superhuman capacity for consumption at the core of his act. In *Peter Wilkins, or Harlequin and the Flying World* (Sadler's Wells, 1800), he played 'Guzzle, a Drinking Clown' alongside Dubois's complementary 'Gobble, an Eating Clown'. In this pantomime their excessive appetites became a battleground to see who could push the limits of their bodies the furthest. 'Dubois guzzled pies and sausages, while Grimaldi downed quarts of stage beer, competing for applause' as they became locked in 'a gluttonous duel to see who could consume the most beer and sausages'.³⁵⁷ Both clowns demonstrated the full comical effects of excessive consumption.

This scene articulates Bakhtin's concept of 'grotesque realism' whereby the 'bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable' and is associated with 'growth, and a brimming-over abundance'.³⁵⁸ Both Dubois and Grimaldi seem to move beyond the normal, measurable bounds of the human body as before the audience's very eyes 'Dubois grew fatter and more flatulent, Joe drunker and more incoherent'.³⁵⁹

Dickens presents a similar example of this type of superhuman consumption in *The Pickwick Papers*, at the 'festive occasion' of reading Mrs Weller's will.³⁶⁰ Everybody present did ample justice to the lunch of 'porter, cold beef, and oysters' but 'one individual evinced greater powers' than the rest; 'the coachman with the hoarse voice [...] took an imperial pint of vinegar with his oysters, without betraying the least emotion'.³⁶¹ While T.W. Hill notes that the vinegar would be a useful disinfectant against lurking typhoid germs, the

³⁵⁷ Grimaldi, pp. 79-80; *Pantomime Life*, p. 98.

³⁵⁸ Bakhtin, p. 19.

³⁵⁹ *Pantomime Life*, p. 98.

³⁶⁰ *Pickwick*, p. 849.

³⁶¹ *Pickwick*, p. 850.

exaggerated quantity of it and control of his facial expression make this moment a fantastical sideshow stunt.³⁶²

This sense of bodily exaggeration is articulated in many other pantomimes that present incidents of excessive eating and drinking as fantastical feats performed by the superhuman Clown. In *Harlequin and Fortunio; or, Shing-Too and Thun-Ton* Grimaldi's gluttony forms part of the opening, as he plays the comical Tartar 'Munchicow, a very gifted Eater [and] Drinker'. Munchicow 'possesses the faculties of eating, drinking, running etc. beyond any mortal being' and his great powers are challenged during the initial fairytale section of the pantomime. Among the Herculean tasks he must perform to save the kingdom from the villainous Tongluck he must 'eat all the bread of the city, [and] drink all the water of the Fountain of Seven Lions'. He duly succeeds in all of these 'wonders' 'to the astonishment of all', triumphantly bearing off the riches and restoring the line of royal succession. Munchicow devours the world and is rewarded with a happy resolution.³⁶³

Incidentally, although the exotic location and characters of some of these shows may suggest that motifs of overeating were part of a depiction of the Orient as a site of sensual indulgence set against the more regulated appetites of the English, it is important to recognise that pantomime borders were more protean than this. Locality and nationality were often just convenient tropes by which to showcase the latest fashions or demonstrate the ability of the theatre to recreate unusual locations. Mayer notes that these depictions of the Far East focused on creating a spectacle through exotic decor and rarely touched on Chinese life or customs, or British interest in these subjects.³⁶⁴ For example, *Harlequin and Fortunio* shifts seamlessly from 'The Tower of Forty Virgins' (Scenes II, III and IV) and a

³⁶² T.W. Hill, 'The Oyster: A Close-up', *The Dickensian* 36 (Spring 1940), p. 141.

³⁶³ *Fortunio*, pp. 3-5.

³⁶⁴ *Harlequin*, pp. 296-297.

‘Picturesque view in China’ (Scene VI) to ‘Hubbard’s Bathing House’ in Margate (Scene VII), ending at ‘Pidcock’s Menagerie’ (Scene XII).³⁶⁵

In *London, or Harlequin Time* (Sadler’s Wells, 1813) Clown’s song continues this theme of devouring the world and describes the consumption of the very fabric of the city. In an echo of Munchicow the ‘hero’ of this comical song steals the London Monument and then swallows it in ‘one gulp’ to escape detection.³⁶⁶ Jane Moody identifies this as a running theme of the pantomime, whereby ‘the city is represented as if it were a collection of goods which might be eaten, stolen and acquired just like food in a shop’.³⁶⁷ In this way, Clown’s appetite knows no boundaries. Defying any rational laws of measurable human capacity Clown would often fill himself with all manner of substances and stretch his physical shape beyond its regular limits. In *Harlequin and Friar Bacon* (Covent Garden, 1820) he swallows 10,000 cubic feet of gas at the Aldgate pump and in *Harlequin in His Element* (Covent Garden, 1808) he is so habituated to the consumption of things, the *taking in* of substances, that when he tries his hand at glass-blowing he sucks, instead of blowing, and so ‘has both his cheeks blown to an enormous size’.³⁶⁸

Clown survives these extreme forms of consumption, just as he survives the ordeals of slapstick humour (discussed further in Chapter 6), to return in the next scene unharmed. The wonder induced at the eater enduring such trials was also part of the attraction of sensational sideshow acts like the Signora Girardelli, who performed in rooms at Bond Street, London. Sga. Girardelli would drop a variety of molten substances (wax, oil and even lead) into her mouth and cook an egg in boiling oil held in her hands, in what Paul

³⁶⁵ *Fortunio*, pp. 13-16.

³⁶⁶ Charles Dibdin, [*London.*] *Songs, and other Vocal Compositions, in the pantomime called London; or, Harlequin & time, etc* (London: Glendinning, 1814), p. 5. Further references are given as *Harlequin Time*.

³⁶⁷ Moody, p. 220.

³⁶⁸ Thomas Dibdin, *Harlequin in his Element; or, Fire, water, earth, & air; a favourite pantomime, etc.* (London: Appleyards, 1808), p. 10. Further references are given as *Element*.

Youngquist describes as a 'public ordeal of female embodiment'.³⁶⁹ Although the audience were aware that such acts were as artificial and contrived as the elaborate stage trickery of the pantomime, these performances briefly offered the tantalising suggestion of superhuman powers and the transcendence of the limits of the body.

An early example of the superhuman eater in Dickens's work is Mr Grimwig in *Oliver Twist*. Grimwig regularly offers to make himself into a public spectacle of extreme consumption through his self-confident threats. If Oliver has not caused an accident with orange-peel on the step (a particularly clownish pratfall) Grimwig declares that he will 'be content to eat my own head, sir!'. Dickens attempts to consider this assertion from a scientific viewpoint, and concludes that it cannot be proven by rational laws:

it was the more singular in [Grimwig's] case, because, even admitting for the sake of argument, the possibility of scientific improvements being brought to that pass which will enable a gentleman to eat his own head in the event of his being so disposed, Mr. Grimwig's head was such a particularly large one, that the most sanguine man alive could hardly entertain a hope of being able to get through it at a sitting.³⁷⁰

This example of the bodily grotesque clearly demonstrates Bakhtin's transgression of the measurable limits of the human body and places it closer to the laws of pantomime and sideshow, whereby such feats were tantalisingly possible. Indeed, these alternative laws enable Grimwig to extend the assertion to include Oliver's head as well.³⁷¹

However Dickens's fullest exploration of extreme eating is through Daniel Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. During a command performance Quilp chain-smokes cigars through the night and 'performs so many horrifying and uncommon acts' to frighten his wife and her

³⁶⁹ Paul Youngquist, 'Romantic Dietetics! Or, Eating Your Way to a New You!', in *Cultures of Taste*, pp. 237-255 (p. 253).

³⁷⁰ *Twist*, p. 99.

³⁷¹ *Twist*, p. 100.

friends that they 'began to doubt if he were really a human creature'. Quilp's clowning encompasses a variety of gustatory feats:

[H]e ate hard eggs, shell and all, devoured gigantic prawns with the heads and tails on, chewed tobacco and water-cresses at the same time and with extraordinary greediness, drank boiling tea without winking, [and] bit his fork and spoon till they bent again.³⁷²

Through this vigorous exercising and testing of what Bakhtin calls the 'bodily lower stratum' and those parts of the body which act as a channel or interface with the world – the mouth for eating, the nose for smoking – Quilp goes beyond his immediate bodily limits and becomes something else entirely.³⁷³

He later performs similar antics for the benefit of Sampson Brass, in terms which clearly indicate their status as acts of bodily display. He begins by 'heating some rum in a little saucepan' and like a sideshow performer he soon draws his audience (the willing dupe Sampson) into the act.

Quilp pretends not to notice the temperature or neatness of the alcohol, forcing Sampson to interject:

'Why, sir', returned Brass, 'he - dear me, Mr Quilp sir - '

'What's the matter?', said the dwarf, stopping his hand in the act of carrying the saucepan to his mouth.

'You have forgotten the water, sir', said Brass, 'And - excuse me sir - but it's burning hot.'

Quilp then proceeds to drain the saucepan dry in another feat of extreme consumption:

³⁷² *Curiosity Shop*, p. 46.

³⁷³ Bakhtin, p. 20.

Mr Quilp raised the saucepan to his lips, and deliberately drank off all the spirit it contained; which might have been in quantity about half a pint, and had been but a moment before, when he took it off the fire, bubbling and hissing fiercely.³⁷⁴

Having demonstrated his own powers he mischievously offers Sampson a similar draught to prove that his abilities are unique and not to be emulated by normal people. It is more than Sampson's merely human constitution can bear and after 'just a few short sips of the liquor' Sampson weeps 'burning tears', which turn 'the colour of his face and eyelids to a deep red' and cause 'a violent fit of coughing'.³⁷⁵ Sampson is later forced to drink the same mixture again as a toast to his sister, when it has 'the novel effect of making the counting-house spin round and round with extreme velocity, and causing the floor and ceiling to heave in a very distressing manner'.³⁷⁶

Schlicke notes how Quilp is given 'special status' within the text through his ability to eat all manner of unusual foods as well as smoke and drink *in extremis* without any effects.

Schlicke feels that these physical and digestory excesses are 'wish-fulfillment of the most extravagant kind' and Kincaid similarly calls Quilp a 'safety-valve' for 'our mischievous impulses' and comments that 'in this demon is still the sense of physical freedom and self-gratification of the child'.³⁷⁷ This suggestion of Quilp as a demon can be linked to his grotesque all-devouring mouth in order to represent what Bakhtin calls 'the open gate leading downward into the bodily underworld'.³⁷⁸

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Grimaldi's clown is not among Schlicke's folk and fairytale sources for Quilp's character, but through this performance Quilp re-presents Clown's

³⁷⁴ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 480.

³⁷⁵ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 481.

³⁷⁶ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 483.

³⁷⁷ Schlicke, p. 127; Kincaid, pp. 95-96.

³⁷⁸ Bakhtin, p. 325.

fundamental corporeality. Jane Moody calls pantomime a 'spectacular, corporeal' form of theatre and Clown was the principal signifier within its 'corporeal semiotics' due to his focus on 'bodily excrescences and uncontrollable consumption'.³⁷⁹ Quilp's eating and drinking fits firmly into this same category; *The Old Curiosity Shop* contains several descriptions of his body, which anatomise him from his very first appearance. He is initially introduced in terms of his physique, 'so low in stature as to be quite a dwarf, though his head and face were large enough for the body of a giant'.³⁸⁰

As well as eating extreme types of food Grimaldi's Clown also ate his food in extreme locations, as his appetite overrode all concerns for his safety. In *Harlequin Mother Goose* (Covent Garden, 1806) Harlequin uses his magic wand to levitate Clown's table and chair up and down while he is eating dinner at an inn, raising him to a 'height of six or seven feet'.³⁸¹ Here eating becomes a gymnastic or acrobatic spectacle.

This sense of spectacle is also reflected in the antics of Bob Sawyer in *The Pickwick Papers*. On the coach trip to Birmingham, he quickly adopts the role of Clown; we are told that he 'threw off his green spectacles and his gravity together, and performed a great variety of practical jokes, which were rather calculated perhaps to attract the attention of passers-by, and to render the carriage and those it contained, objects of more than ordinary curiosity'.

As outlined in Chapter 2 of this thesis, Dickens described Grimaldi's public performances from his coach window and here Bob Sawyer achieves a similar effect with his own feat of extreme eating, which transforms the vehicle into a fast-moving mobile theatre.

Wondering "'what all the people we pass, can see in us to make them stare so'", Pickwick looks out of the carriage to find Bob adopting a grandiose posture, 'seated not in the

³⁷⁹ Moody, p. 24.

³⁸⁰ *Curiosity Shop*, pp. 26-27.

³⁸¹ Thomas Dibdin, *Harlequin and Mother Goose, or, The Golden Egg!*, reprinted in *Pantomime Life*, pp. 325-343 (p. 335).

dickey, but on the roof of the chaise, with his legs as far asunder as they would conveniently go'. Bob wears Sam Weller's hat and enjoys a mobile picnic of exaggerated proportions, holding 'a most enormous sandwich' in one hand and 'a goodly-sized case-bottle' in the other.³⁸²

Phiz's illustration of this scene neatly frames Bob as the stage-performer with a gallery of passengers on another coach viewing from an elevated position, while below 'in the pit' a ragged-looking Irish family make up the groundlings:



Figure 8: Hablot K. Browne ('Phiz'), 'Mr Bob Sawyer's Mode of Travelling' (1837), *Pickwick*

³⁸² *Pickwick*, pp. 769-770.

Bob later describes himself as ‘a compound of all sorts of colours’, echoing the clown’s motley, and all of the assembled visual components of this performance – Bob’s unusual posture, large sandwich and bottle of drink – closely resemble the composition of a popular print of Grimaldi.³⁸³



Figure 9: Dyer, 'Mr Grimaldi as Clown' (ca. 1820), Victoria and Albert Museum

³⁸³ Pickwick, p. 790.

In this print Clown entirely fills the frame, appearing as an all-consuming giant who bestrides the stage and dwarves all of the scenery around him. His wide stance and open arms spread his body to the fullest extent in an embodiment of the grotesque.

This image of exaggeration and abundance is underscored by other details, as Grimaldi is fully armed with a number of supersized props of alimentary indulgence. Not satisfied with a single glass of wine, he clutches one large bottle in his hand and another one pokes out of his back pocket. He also has food in the form of a dead goose, whose head suggestively pokes out of his breeches.

When S.J. Newman calls Quilp's eating and drinking 'hugely carnal' and a situation where love is 'solidified into appetite' he suggests another aspect of the bodily grotesque that should be considered here - although it will not be dealt with extensively within this discussion.³⁸⁴ This robust celebration of the body and its appetites also connotes a sexualisation of food and the act of eating. The dangling goose-head in the image of Grimaldi above shows one way in which eating and sex were combined within his clowning persona, but this is perhaps better expressed in Cruikshank's print from *Harlequin and Friar Bacon*.

³⁸⁴ S.J. Newman, *Dickens at Play* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), p. 79.

In this illustration a more comically sexual imagery is developed around the act of Grimaldi eating oysters:



Figure 10: George Cruikshank, 'Harlequin and Friar Bacon' (1820), Victoria and Albert Museum

The phallic overtones of this image are clear; rather than the wide, expansive stance of the all-consuming clown here we have a more stiffly upright figure. Much of the activity is focused on Bakhtin's 'lower bodily strata' as Grimaldi holds a large knife and a partially opened oyster (with its tantalising contents only partially visible through the orifice), both parallel with the lower half of his body.

Oysters are a food regularly associated with Grimaldi in other ways. *The Drama's* list of accomplishments included opening an oyster, one of his popular routines involved singing to 'an oyster crossed in love' and in his farewell speech he announced that he had 'filched [his] last oyster'.

This is perhaps unsurprising when one considers the fact that oysters were far less of a delicacy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century than they are now. For example, T.W. Hill puts their price in Dickens's time at 'only about eight pence a dozen' and cites Sam Weller's observation that in Whitechapel there is 'a oyster stall to every half-dozen houses' to illustrate their ubiquity in the urban diet.³⁸⁵

However oysters held a further significance. As Rebecca Stott points out, oysters carried a figurative meaning which explicitly associates them with the conflation of eating and sex that the bodily grotesque suggests. According to Stott

throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the woman oyster seller was used in erotic poetry as a figure of erotic play, something like the oyster to be consumed, part of the sensuous fruit of the London street for the male urban voyeur.³⁸⁶

Even when the female seller is absent her wares still represent 'a nudge-nudge euphemism for sexually available female flesh' made all the more pointed in pantomime scenes like the one depicted in Cruikshank's print.³⁸⁷

Moreover Dickens's repeated references to oysters are no mere journalistic concession to chronicling gastronomic trends. T.W. Hill explains how Dickens's work considers the oyster in all of 'its gustatory, figurative, social, sociological, and decorative aspects'.³⁸⁸ In several meals in *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* they have a dual purpose; firstly, their introduction into the narrative has the power of pantomime transformation to make the ensuing scenes comical and their consumers clown-like. But secondly they also suggest a more eroticised reading of the bodily grotesque through their sexualised connotations.

³⁸⁵ Hill, p. 142; *Pickwick*, p. 330.

³⁸⁶ Rebecca Stott, *Oyster* (London: Reaktion Books 2004), p. 157.

³⁸⁷ Rebecca Stott, p. 163.

³⁸⁸ Hill, p. 139.

In *The Pickwick Papers* Sam Weller's neat comical description of the Christmas morning breakfast associates oysters with vigorous physical activity, exaggerated consumption and the bodily lower stratum. According to Sam, Bob or Ben 'has got a barrel o' oysters atween his knees, vich he's a openin' like steam, and as fast as he eats 'em, he takes a aim with the shells at young dropsy, who's a settin' down fast asleep, in the chimbley corner'.³⁸⁹

These elements are also present in Dickens's description of the footman's 'swarry', where oysters are again on the menu. Combined with 'three quarters of a bowl of punch' Mr Tuckle finds them 'so extremely exhilarating' that he transforms into a clown who 'dressed out with the cocked hat and stick, danced the frog hornpipe among the shells on the table'.³⁹⁰ This 'comic solo dance with bended knees' was in fact one of Grimaldi's own routines, which further forces Mr Tuckle into the role of Clown.³⁹¹ This is underlined by his urban gymnastics at the end of the party when 'Mr Tuckle no sooner got into the open air, than he was seized with a sudden desire to lie on the curb-stone'.³⁹² The clownish excesses have taken their toll on poor Tuckle who concludes his part in the narrative with a slapstick *denouement*.

Noah Claypole in *Oliver Twist* also performs a comic routine with oysters, which draws extensively on this sexualised strand of the bodily grotesque. From the opening of the scene Noah's digestive centrality resembles that of Clown; he is described as 'not being at any time disposed to take upon himself a greater amount of physical exertion than is necessary to a convenient performance of the two functions of eating and drinking'. Dickens further frames this feasting scene as an observed performance as Mr Bumble watches it 'through the glass-window of the little parlour at the back of the shop'.

³⁸⁹ *Pickwick*, p. 446.

³⁹⁰ *Pickwick*, p. 581.

³⁹¹ Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. by Mark Wormald (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), p. 794n.

³⁹² *Pickwick*, p. 581.

Dickens lays out Bumble's observations as if describing a theatrical set-piece through stage directions. Noah is striking a languid pose, like an actor's attitude from Rede's manual, with exaggerated bodily gestures and appropriate props – he 'loll[ed] negligently in an easy-chair, with his legs thrown over one of the arms; an open clasp-knife in one hand, and a mass of buttered bread in the other'.³⁹³ The bodily grotesque elements are also present in the phallic knife and the exaggerated quantity of bread and butter.

These themes are underscored in Cruikshank's illustration for this scene:



Figure 11: George Cruikshank, 'Mr Claypole as he appeared when his master is out' (1838), *Twist*

³⁹³ *Twist*, p. 184.

Rather than seeing the scene from Bumble's point of view he is merely an observer in the background and instead the picture is framed like a stage set from the audience's point of view. Noah sits with his legs akimbo like Grimaldi and Bob Sawyer with the props of his gustatory performance in both hands.

Cruikshank offered a number of alternative titles for his original pencil sketch, which further emphasise these themes within the picture.³⁹⁴ 'Mr Claypole indulging ...' was one suggestion, which draws immediate attention to Noah's enjoyment and consumption without specifying the precise object of it - leaving the oysters and Charlotte as equally valid options. Another proposed title, 'Mr Claypole as he appeared when his master was out' suggests clown-like mischief and a brief moment of festive relief from authority.

Noah swallows the oysters provided by the doting Charlotte with 'remarkable avidity' and eats them with 'intense relish', and his appearance is associated with Clown in other ways. We are told that there was 'a more than ordinary redness in the region of [his] nose, and a kind of fixed wink in his right eye'. Noah's insatiable appetite for oysters is confirmed by his dismayed comment to Charlotte that it is a pity that he cannot gorge on them too much as 'a number of 'em should ever make you feel uncomfortable'.

The sexual politics of this scene are far richer than I have covered in this brief account.

What, for example, are we to make of Charlotte's assertion that 'I like to see you eat [oysters], Noah dear, better than eating them myself', to which Noah's response is 'Lor! ... how queer!'? However this overview has shown how Noah conflates two types of appetite in this scene and moves between them both. After giving up the food he offers to kiss Charlotte but at this point he is foiled by Grimaldi's usual authoritarian nemesis, the beadle. Bumble's sudden appearance reveals another aspect of Noah's clownishness which

³⁹⁴ For a copy of this sketch, see Michael Wynn Jones, *George Cruikshank: His Life and London* (London: Macmillan, 1978), Plate 63.

ensures that the scene will end in comedy. Noah displays his cowardice as he 'gazed at the beadle in drunken terror' and, in a 'blubbering' state, blames everything on Charlotte. He accuses her of making 'all manner of love' with him, and in this scene we have seen one example of their love-making which is predominantly food-based.³⁹⁵

This confusion of love and food also occurs in Joe the Fat Boy's feasting scene with Mary. Throughout this scene, Joe mentally and verbally confuses Mary with his food and alongside the latent cannibalism (which is discussed further in Section V of this chapter) it is also imbued with a certain level of grotesque eroticism. Mary takes Joe to the kitchen to feed him, in a dining scene of grotesque excess that could have come directly from one of Grimaldi's harlequinade. Here Joe becomes confused between two kinds of fleshy pleasures and so divides his time between eating and wooing. Joe is surrounded by eatables ('a jolly meat pie', 'a steak and a dish of potatoes, and a pot of porter') and consumes most of them as their discussion progresses, starting by helping 'himself to a great deal' of the pie and 'a long draught of the porter'.³⁹⁶ However Mary's presence proves a distraction to his feasting and he often confuses her with the food.

In his characterisation of the grotesque Thomson notes that 'the grotesque is extravagant' and 'has a marked element of exaggeration, of extremeness about it' and in this scene Joe's exaggerated appetite is pushed to extremes as he contemplates eating another person.³⁹⁷ Just as he is about to begin eating the pie he pauses to tell Mary how nice she looks while still clutching his knife and fork. This compliment is regarded as 'a doubtful one' because 'there was enough of the cannibal in the young gentleman's eyes' as he offers it.³⁹⁸ Joe's food fixation is further demonstrated when he cannot separate Mary from associations of food – he expresses his dismay that she is not staying, for 'how we should have enjoyed

³⁹⁵ *Twist*, p. 185.

³⁹⁶ *Pickwick*, pp. 833-834.

³⁹⁷ Thomson, pp. 22-23.

³⁹⁸ *Pickwick*, p. 834.

ourselves at mealtimes if you had been!’ and when she asks a favour of him he ‘looked from the pie-dish to the steak, as if he thought a favour must be in a manner connected to something to eat’. Joe attempts to woo her between mouthfuls, switching his attention between his plate and his dinner companion, so that when he speaks it is unclear to which he refers. Moreover the added inducement of Mary’s flirtatious comments and gestures (‘plaiting the tablecloth in assumed coyness’) ensure that food and love are entirely confused in his mind.

The balance of power in both the Noah-Charlotte and Joe-Mary pairings ensure that the tone remains comic in both. Claypole is left a frightened wreck who admits Charlotte’s power over him, and Mary makes her escape easily to leave Joe consoling himself with food as he eats ‘a pound or so of steak with a sentimental countenance’.³⁹⁹ However another example of the erotic consumer is a more threatening presence. Kincaid describes Quilp’s antics as ‘strongly sexual and always extraordinarily physical’, and on at least one occasion these elements are combined with his feats of consumption.⁴⁰⁰ During his all-night vigil to punish his wife he drinks and smokes throughout the night.

³⁹⁹ *Twist*, p. 719.

⁴⁰⁰ Kincaid, p. 96.

His 'deep fiery red' cigar-end is a threatening phallic presence in the dark room, an effect which is accentuated in the accompanying illustration as the cigar points suggestively upwards:



Figure 12: Hablot K. Browne ('Phiz'), 'Quilp in a smoking humour' (1840), *Curiosity Shop*

Here, Quilp adopts a similar pose as Noah, but instead of being enfolded within the image of her suitor, like Charlotte, Mrs Quilp is positioned to one side with Quilp thrusting aggressively towards her.⁴⁰¹

IV. The festive quality of clownish excess

Both Grimaldi's act and Dickens's writing firmly place clowning within a festive tradition, which again associates them with the ideas of Bakhtin. He saw the carnival as a crucial site of the grotesque and the marketplace in particular, as an important locus of his grotesque

⁴⁰¹ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 42.

humour - noting that the 'comic performers of the marketplace were an important source of the grotesque image of the body'.⁴⁰²

Although the formalisation of the carnivalesque adapted the comic performers of the marketplace into the form of the pantomime clown (who in turn informs Dickens's 'clownish' characters), a residue of the festive marketplace tradition persists in the work of both through their portrayals of Christmas excess. The seasonal scheduling and the locations that are depicted 'onstage' in his performances allowed Grimaldi to celebrate both the festive and the marketplace. Dickens adopts the same method in his own fiction as we are presented with scenes of Christmas feasting and marketplace revelling that could have come directly from the pantomime stage.

This accords closely with Bakhtin's definition of the carnival, which 'does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators'. Rather than recognising a distance between the audience and the performers, which is crucial for 'the anaesthesia of heart' that Bergson's theory of comedy required, the carnival dissolves the boundaries between offstage and onstage. In this way it is no longer an observed spectacle but instead the audience 'live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people'.⁴⁰³

Grimaldi's Christmas performances reflect this conversion of the theatre to a marketplace in a number of ways. A large number of the scenes from the harlequinade attempted to incorporate public spaces outside the theatre to create an almost seamless environment – scenes took place in locales such as 'A View in a Market Town', 'A View of Golden Square', 'Vauxhall Gardens' (*Harlequin and Mother Goose*), 'Billingsgate' (*Fashion's Fools, or The Aquatic Harlequin*), 'A Market Place in a Country Town' (*Mountain of Miseries, or Harlequin*

⁴⁰² Bakhtin, p. 352.

⁴⁰³ Bakhtin, p. 7.

Tormentor), 'Castle Square, Brighton' (*Harlequin and Fortunio*), 'Outside of the New Auction Mart', 'Exeter 'Change' (*Harlequin and Moore's Almanack*), 'Charing Cross', 'The Monument, Fish St Hill', 'Highgate Archway' (*Harlequin Time*).⁴⁰⁴ Moreover many of the people Grimaldi interacted with were the tradespeople of the marketplace, as he stole from the pieman and wooed the flower girl.

Members of the audience were also transformed into participants – in the eighteenth century, there was less of a natural boundary between player and audience as the whole playhouse and play-event became 'social theatre'.⁴⁰⁵ The audience 'not only drank, but ate on a large scale' and would also fight, gamble and conduct romantic liaisons in the playhouse, just as they might in the streets.⁴⁰⁶ They were active in other ways: as well as enjoying the pastime of observing their fellow theatre-goers they engaged in a dialogue with the performers - as the comic players on stage addressed them directly they would shout back to the players on stage in response.

Moreover during the O.P. riots (already described in Chapter 3 of this thesis) they actually became part of the performance themselves. Marc Baer notes this participative action of the theatre audience when he describes how, during the riots, the pit became 'the people's theatre' and the crowd was 'prepared to answer the stage with dramatics of their own'.⁴⁰⁷ On the 23rd October 1809, during a pantomime containing gladiatorial combat the audience staged mock fights of their own, thus completely collapsing the 'fourth wall' and making the entire auditorium a single carnivalesque playing space.

⁴⁰⁴ *Mother Goose*, pp. 336-340; British Library, Crach 1.Tab.464. Vol 3; *Fortunio*, p. 13; *Astrologer*, p. 17; *Harlequin Time*, p 4.

⁴⁰⁵ Marc Baer, *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 168.

⁴⁰⁶ *Grimaldi*, p. 19.

⁴⁰⁷ Baer, p. 63.

These images of the carnivalesque marketplace and Bakhtin's concept of the 'lower bodily stratum' combine in the festive eating scenes of Grimaldi and Dickens, which could be said to represent what Bakhtin calls 'symbolically broad kitchen and banquet scenes'.⁴⁰⁸

Pantomimes were performed at Easter and Christmas, the two significant feasting-points in the Christian calendar, and this is reflected in the use of eating and drinking within the clown's repertoire. *Peter Wilkins, or Harlequin and the Flying World* was an Easter spectacle and for Andrew Stott the gladiatorial gluttony of Guzzle and Gobble leaves them emerging 'fully victorious over abstemious Lent'.⁴⁰⁹ William Ross Clark also emphasises the significance of food in Dickens's Christmas stories and notes that 'it is a season of feasting'.⁴¹⁰

In terms of how they portray Christmas revels, both Grimaldi and Dickens represent important cultural touchstones. During the Regency period and early part of the nineteenth century Christmas was principally a time of riotous feasting and excess akin to Grimaldi's harlequinade. However the key themes of Christmas would change as the century moved on and Dickens was one of the principal agents of this change. Food still remained a constant element throughout but took on a different meaning and significance as, according to Tara Moore, 'the Victorians changed Christmas from an excuse for raucous revels into a celebration of the family'.⁴¹¹

Christmas celebrations were reformulated into more private, family-oriented occasions with a corresponding reduction in the scale of the feast. The 'sober, domestic Christmas table' now had a place-setting for the 'obligatory social consciousness' of the mid-Victorian.

⁴⁰⁸ Bakhtin, p. 184.

⁴⁰⁹ *Pantomime Life*, p. 98.

⁴¹⁰ William Ross Clark, 'The Hungry Mr Dickens', in *Dalhousie Review* 36.3 (1956), p. 254.

⁴¹¹ Tara Moore, 'National Identity and Victorian Christmas Foods' in *Consuming Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century: Narratives of Consumption 1700-1900*, ed. by Tamara S. Wagner and Narin Hassan (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), pp. 141-154 (p. 142).

However a residue of past traditions remained and thus Victorians were presented with ‘an ideological feasting paradox’ through which the more secluded and more responsible modern version of Christmas competed with the ‘unattainable nostalgia’ of past excesses. These excesses were endlessly revived through the ‘descriptions and illustrations of inter-class feasts in a baronial hall’ and ‘the scopophilic joy of feasting in the baronial hall’.⁴¹² As Michael Slater points out this encompassed literary works such as Scott’s *Marmion* (1808) and pictures like Maclise’s *Merry Christmas in the Baron’s Hall* (1838), shadows of which can be seen in Leech’s illustrations for *A Christmas Carol* (1843) – particularly ‘Mr Fezziwig’s Ball’ and ‘Scrooge’s Third Visitor’.⁴¹³

Dickens explicitly associates the pantomime with Christmas, which means that at the very moment he is formulating the image of a modern Christmas the pull of his nostalgic childhood memories draw him back to the older depictions of the inclusive social gatherings and the festive marketplaces that characterise Grimaldi’s Christmas entertainments.

These divergent versions of Christmas are presented in *A Christmas Carol*. Christmas Past is embodied in Fezziwig’s clownish whirl of a Christmas party. After the dances

There were more dances, and there were forfeits, and more dances, and there was cake, and there was negus, and there was a great piece of Cold Roast, and there was a great piece of Cold Boiled, and there were mince-pies, and plenty of beer.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹² Moore, pp. 142-143.

⁴¹³ Michael Slater, ‘Introduction’, in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Writings*, ed. by Michael Slater (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), pp. xiii and xiv.

⁴¹⁴ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, in *Christmas Books*, ed. by Arthur Waugh and others (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch Press, 1937), p. 31.

Bakhtin explains that ‘one of the oldest forms of hyperbolic grotesque was the exaggerated size of foodstuffs’ as these parallel the more explicit ‘ancient hyperboles’ of belly, mouth and phallus, and this is reflected here through the sheer accumulation and scale of this relentless catalogue of food and festive activity.⁴¹⁵

The dizzying spectacle of this huge gathering is set against the images of Christmas Present, such as Fred’s modest parlour games with friends and family and the Cratchit feast, where all of the ‘bustle’ is directed into the family’s co-operative, productive industry rather than endless reels of the ‘Sir Roger de Coverley’:

Mrs Cratchit made the gravy (ready beforehand in a little saucepan) hissing hot; Master Peter mashed the potatoes with incredible vigour; Miss Belinda sweetened up the apple-sauce; Martha dusted the hot plates; Bob took Tiny Tim beside him in a tiny corner at the table; the two young Cratchits set chairs for everybody [...].⁴¹⁶

According to Dickens, modesty has become the keynote. There was ‘nothing of high mark’ in this sort of celebration and the Ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge family homes and ‘preparations for a cosy dinner’ rather than lavish public gatherings.⁴¹⁷ Yet this breathless description of the family has its own sense of hyperbole (the ‘hissing hot’ gravy, the ‘incredible vigour’ of the mashing, the chairs set for ‘everybody’) and thus retains its own sense of the festive grotesque with its complete lack of restraint.

Moore’s ‘feasting paradox’ is present elsewhere in both Grimaldi and Dickens. In her discussion of the Regency treatment of food Penny Bradshaw points out ‘the versatility of dietary metaphors at the time’ and shows how depictions of excess often switched

⁴¹⁵ Bakhtin, p. 184.

⁴¹⁶ *Christmas Carol*, pp. 45-46.

⁴¹⁷ *Christmas Carol*, p. 49.

between two competing consumer attitudes.⁴¹⁸ For example in Gillray's cartoons the corpulence of the Prince Regent could stand for gross and selfish excess but John Bull's ample frame could be used as a defiant symbol of the healthy well-fed citizen.

Gillray could even play with both meanings in a single image – for example, in *French Liberty British Slavery* (1792) the poorly-fed French revolutionary is contrasted with the plump Briton, but in a way that depicts the former as ungrateful and the latter as delusional:



Figure 13: James Gillray, 'French Liberty British Slavery' (1792), The British Museum

Both figures are presented as grotesques here. The emaciated and ragged French revolutionary appears to be barely human with his toenails like talons, pointed teeth, a handful of roots and his revolutionary dogma as his only nourishment. By contrast the corpulent Briton is the epitome of over-consumption. The roundness and texture of his fat head shares visual echoes with the joint from which he carves (and evokes another image

⁴¹⁸ Bradshaw, p. 68.

of cannibalism like Mr Grimwig eating his head). In the act of tucking the tablecloth under his chin as a napkin he greedily draws the entire table towards his mouth.

Michael Wynn Jones notes that the ambivalence of artists such as Gillray and Cruikshank was a commercial decision as much as an ideological one, when he comments that 'as a freelance print-maker George [Cruikshank] could scarcely afford to take sides in a royal scandal that afforded him such an abundance of material'.⁴¹⁹ Yet despite any calculated authorial intention, when viewed through the lens of the grotesque both meanings can still be held simultaneously and the effect is still the same.

In this way images of eating and food became an important bridge between competing conceptions of Christmas and the complex figure of the pantomime clown lay at this intersection. From Bakhtin's view of the grotesque it could be argued that Grimaldi's festive overeating and drinking is a celebratory affair and a demonstration of a 'healthy appetite' and abundance. However, following Gail Turley Houston's reading of Dickensian dietetics, such scenes represent an act of displacement. The guilt of those who over-consume at the expense of those that did not consume nearly enough is projected into scapegoat figures like the pantomime clown and Joe the Fat Boy. Houston feels that Dickens's first two novels are locked in a symbiotic relationship and comments that 'the starvation of *Oliver Twist* retroactively implicates the aggressive satiation that is the undercurrent of jovial Pickwickian gusto' in another configuration of the feasting paradox.⁴²⁰ She regards Joe the Fat Boy as 'a mythic embodiment of the Pickwickians' unlimited appetite and leisure' and 'a carnivalesque imitation of the general Pickwickian credo of unlimited leisure and consumption'.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁹ Wynn Jones, p. 36.

⁴²⁰ Gail Turley Houston, *Consuming Fictions: Gender, Class and Hunger in Dickens's Novels* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), p. 15.

⁴²¹ Houston, p. 22.

Dickens's sense of Christmas and its relationship to food is neatly encapsulated in his introduction to the *Memoirs* when he explains his childhood enjoyment of pantomime.

He describes a group of young boys reading the Boxing Day pantomime playbill in terms that evoke the enjoyment of a luxurious Christmas meal:

{W]e still gloat as formerly upon the bills which set forth tempting descriptions of the scenery [...] and still fall down upon our knees, with other men and boys, upon the pavement by shop-doors to read them down to the very last line.⁴²²

Just as Joe the Fat Boy seems to be able to consume things just by looking at them, so the boys devour the pantomime scenery with their eyes.

This link between clownish eating and Christmas is most fully realised in *The Pickwick Papers*, a novel which Steven Marcus calls a 'robust celebration of food and drink'.⁴²³

Written very much in the Regency spirit, through its clownish characters and picaresque adventures, it nonetheless shows the early traces of what would later develop more fully into Moore's 'feasting paradox'.

Bob Sawyer has already been described as a principal consumer within the narrative and, as part of a comical double act with his fellow medical student Ben Allen, his festive eating and drinking further associate him with the pantomime clown. Despite Mr Pickwick's belief that such 'fine fellows' had their 'tastes refined by reading and study' Dickens carefully prepares us for their gluttonous performance at the Christmas Day breakfast. Here they prove themselves to be indiscriminate consumers and enjoy a wide variety of food and drink. After an appetiser of brandy, cigars and oysters they 'applied themselves most

⁴²² *Memoirs*, I, p. xv.

⁴²³ Steven Marcus, *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 71.

assiduously to the eatables before them'. This occupies them to such an extent that Pickwick is able to observe their performance intently and describe their comical appearance. Ben 'presented altogether rather a mildewy appearance' and carries the smell of consumption with him, as he 'emitted a fragrant odour of full-flavoured Cubas'.⁴²⁴

All of their energies become directed towards eating; Pickwick's first comment at the table receives just a slight nod, and when the pair do talk to him, they talk principally of their appetites. They describe their previous evening in terms of the brandy, cigars, and pork chops that they enjoyed and then turn their attention to their current meal. Even when they try to discuss their profession it becomes entangled with their discussions about eating:

"Nothing like dissecting, to give one an appetite," said Mr. Bob Sawyer, looking round the table.

Mr. Pickwick slightly shuddered.

"By the bye, Bob," said Mr. Allen, "have you finished that leg yet?"

"Nearly," replied Sawyer, helping himself to half a fowl as he spoke. "It's a very muscular one for a child's."

"Is it?" inquired Mr. Allen, carelessly.

"Very," said Bob Sawyer, with his mouth full.

"I've put my name down for an arm, at our place," said Mr. Allen. "We're clubbing for a subject, and the list is nearly full, only we can't get hold of any fellow that wants a head. I wish you'd take it."

⁴²⁴ *Pickwick*, pp. 445-446.

"No," replied Bob Sawyer; "can't afford expensive luxuries."

"Nonsense!" said Allen.

"Can't indeed," rejoined Bob Sawyer. "I wouldn't mind a brain, but I couldn't stand a whole head."⁴²⁵

The confusion between the dinner table and dissecting table recalls the British 'Slave' of Gillray's prints so that by the final line the reader could easily confuse the two subjects and assume that Bob is talking about his appetite rather than his surgical prowess.

Gail Turley Huston regards the inclusion of this episode in the Christmas section of the novel as 'extraordinary' due to its 'conflation of alimentation and dissection [which] magnifies the work of eating as cannibalism' and its associated 'violence'. But this scene is perfectly suited to the presentation of the bodily grotesque, which included this conflation in what Bakhtin calls a "'carnival and culinary" anatomy'.⁴²⁶ Bakhtin notes how Rabelais closely associated battle and eating, for example in feast scenes following a slaughter of livestock or enemies. Images of the dismembered body are placed alongside the elaborate descriptions of food as if one had metamorphosed into the other. Here Dickens employs a similar method, though the body in question has been anatomised for medical purposes rather than martial or farming reasons.

While Huston correctly identifies this section as 'central to any understanding of Dickens's view of Christmas' she limits its significance by merely associating it with Dickens's articulation of 'the importance of the communal feast as a secular form of agape'.⁴²⁷ A possible depiction of cannibalism would certainly be at odds with a view of Christmas as the recreation of the early Christian meal but at the same time would be perfectly

⁴²⁵ *Pickwick*, pp. 447-448.

⁴²⁶ Bakhtin, p. 196.

⁴²⁷ Houston, p. 18.

compatible with the Regency-based humour of the pantomime tradition, which had its own roots in the earlier traditions of the carnivalesque festival.

Clowning and eating also combine in *A Christmas Carol*, 'an extremely food-oriented text' in which the 'feasting paradox' is more fully realised.⁴²⁸ Dickens once again demonstrates the versatility of the food metaphor, for rather than emphasising the wasteful or negative aspects of excess he positions it in a positive light to be set against its polar opposite, a socially damaging meanness.

This distinctly un-festive meanness is established very early on in *A Christmas Carol*, where it becomes the standard by which all other discussions of food within the novel are to be judged. Scrooge firstly declines his nephew's offer to dine with him on Christmas Day and then declines to provide a charitable donation for 'some meat and drink' for the poor. The benevolent caller's comment that Christmas 'is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt, and Abundance rejoices' is central here – in opposition to privation and lack, abundance and excess are to be celebrated and enjoyed *a la* Bakhtin rather than castigated.⁴²⁹ Abstinent and parsimonious meals are not encouraged; Scrooge takes 'his melancholy dinner in his usual melancholy tavern' (in direct contravention of Bakhtin's rule that 'No meal can be sad') and a 'little saucepan of gruel' at home, but after this, food is both described in elaborate detail with the relish of the pantomime Clown.⁴³⁰

Most importantly festive foodstuffs are granted the enchanted properties that readers would recognise from Clown's meals in the harlequinade, whereby glasses of wine would dance around Grimaldi's head and his dining table would levitate as he sat enjoying its wares. Andrew Halliday describes a macabre scene in which the food comes to life; Clown

⁴²⁸ Moore, p. 145.

⁴²⁹ *Christmas Carol*, p. 10.

⁴³⁰ *Christmas Carol*, p. 12; Bakhtin, p. 283; *Christmas Carol*, p. 14.

and Pantaloon purchase a 'New American Anticipating Machine', into which they drop a stolen dog and then turn the handle. Clown 'pulls out [a] long row of sausages' but before he can eat them the dog's owner whistles, at which point the 'sausages commence wagging, *a la* dog's tail'. Soon after, Clown is given 'a dish and cover', which contains 'a sheep's head and potatoes'. However, just when he is about to steal one of the potatoes 'the sheep's eyes become illuminated and work'.⁴³¹

All of these represent what Bergson calls 'something mechanical encrusted on the living' (or as Wylie Sypher has it, 'movement without life'), a key component of the comic and also Bakhtin's grotesque.⁴³² To Bakhtin such animated yet naturally inanimate objects represented the state of indeterminacy between death and life with neither possibility entirely ruled out.

In *A Christmas Carol* Dickens positions his scenes of the Christmas marketplace within this festive pantomimic tradition when he comments that 'Poulterers' and grocers' trades became a splendid joke' and 'a glorious pageant'.⁴³³ Here food again becomes animated in a similar manner; as the Ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge the busy streets of the city, Dickens personifies and adds life to the food they see:

There were great, round, pot-bellied baskets of chestnuts, shaped like the waistcoats of jolly old gentlemen, lolling at the doors, and tumbling out into the street in their apoplectic opulence. There were ruddy, brown-faced, broad-girthed Spanish Onions, shining in the fatness of their growth like Spanish

⁴³¹ Andrew Halliday, *Comical Fellows; or, The History and Mystery of the Pantomime* (London: Thomson, 1863), p. 95.

⁴³² Sypher, p. 84; p. viii.

⁴³³ *Christmas Carol*, p. 11.

Friars, and winking from their shelves in wanton slyness at the girls as they went by, and glanced demurely at the hung-up mistletoe.⁴³⁴

In the same description we are told that the Norfolk Biffin apples ‘in the great compactness of their juicy persons’ were ‘urgently entreating and beseeching to be carried home in paper bags and eaten after dinner’.⁴³⁵ The Cratchit’s family dinner also carries the magic of pantomimic animation as Peter Cratchit’s potatoes ‘knocked loudly at the saucepan-lid to be let out and peeled’, while the pudding was ‘singing in the copper’.⁴³⁶

As Tara Moore notes this element is most fully captured in Jim Henson’s playful adaptation for his fantastical puppet troupe The Muppets.⁴³⁷ This version contains food and animals that actually speak and sing as well as a good measure of slapstick violence and thus fully captures both the pantomime spirit and – according to Moore – ‘Dickens’s original food-centered narrative’.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁴ *Christmas Carol*, p. 41.

⁴³⁵ *Christmas Carol*, p. 41.

⁴³⁶ *Christmas Carol*, p. 44; p. 45.

⁴³⁷ *The Muppets Christmas Carol*, dir. by Brian Henson, Walt Disney Pictures, 1992.

⁴³⁸ Moore, p. 153.



Figure 14: Brian Henson, *A Muppet Christmas Carol* (1992)

V. The unpaid cost of consumption (consumption as waste)

For Bakhtin part of the triumph of the grotesque human body came from its association with work, for as he explains food ‘concluded work and struggle and was their crown of glory. Work triumphed in food’.⁴³⁹ Just as people worked together they came together as a group to celebrate the temporary victory against the world through eating, during which the body ‘grows at the world’s expense’.⁴⁴⁰

Set against this productive and industrious figure is what Bakhtin calls ‘the private, limited, greedy body’, which is incompatible with the ‘soul of the people’⁴⁴¹. Culture often treats such figures satirically or mockingly and this is certainly an element of their representation by Grimaldi and Dickens. However it could also be argued that they become more fully

⁴³⁹ Bakhtin, p. 281.

⁴⁴⁰ Bakhtin, p. 283.

⁴⁴¹ Bakhtin, p. 292.

grotesque by virtue of a certain ambivalence at the heart of their depiction. They participate in the same actions as the 'positive' eaters and as Bakhtin puts it, 'Bread stolen from the people does not cease to be bread, wine is always wine, even when the Pope drinks it'.⁴⁴² While the residue of the triumphant and comical remains in these portrayals, the audience response encompasses both the sympathy and the derision.

A straightforward example of this double-edged clownish wastefulness occurs in *Harlequin and Friar Bacon*. In a typically topical hit at the latest technology Harlequin exploits Clown's excessive appetite at the Aldgate Pump by transforming it into a 'gazometer'. When the greedy Clown puts his lips to the pump to gulp down the local water supply he is instead inflated with gas and has to be deflated through a tube in his mouth, after which he is presented with a bill for £100 for 'having gorged 10,000 cubic feet of their vapour'.⁴⁴³ While the economic consequences of Clown's gluttony have a tangible form (and he further demonstrates his complete lack of financial responsibility by absconding without paying) we cannot entirely condemn him because we are forced to laugh at the more comic consequences of his consumption as he puffs up like a giant balloon. His body triumphantly transcends its regular human limits as it does in his drinking duels.

This attitude towards gluttony and theft was a recurrent, expected and indeed popular element of Grimaldi's repertoire. Clown never pays for the food and drink that he consumes and rarely provides any service in return, preferring instead to enjoy the fruits of others' labours. A.E. Wilson notes that he 'would steal all sorts of articles from the shops' but was particularly fond of food stuffs: 'geese, legs of mutton and strings of sausages'.⁴⁴⁴ David Mayer similarly captures the Clownish ethos when he notes of Clown that 'if there was food he would eat it gluttonously; if the food were someone else's he would first steal

⁴⁴² Bakhtin, p. 291.

⁴⁴³ [Anon.], 'Covent-Garden', *European Magazine and London Review*, January 1821, p. 68.

⁴⁴⁴ *Story of Pantomime*, p. 35.

it' and comments that 'few pantomimes are without a capital crime committed in the course of the harlequinade'.⁴⁴⁵

Harlequin and Mother Goose provides several further examples of this. No sooner has the selfless Harlequin relieved the poverty of a woodcutter and his wife with 'golden favours' from Fortune's 'cornucopia' when Clown 'enters and as usual plunders from the Woodcutter's WIFE'.⁴⁴⁶ In a later scene outside St. Dunstan's Church he robs a pieman and joins Pantaloon in the 'Grocer's Parlour', where 'they drink wine with the magic bottle' with no regard for cost of the goods that they consume.⁴⁴⁷ Similarly, in *Jan Ben Jan, or Harlequin and the Forty Virgins* (Sadler's Wells, 1806) he audaciously steals drink from two porters while hiding in a box that lies between them. Each thinks the other is drinking more than his share, and so a fight ensues, leaving Clown to take the bottle and declare 'I fancy I shall drink the rest'.⁴⁴⁸ In all of these examples he refuses to conform to Bakhtin's socialist model of work leading to food and actually disrupts that system by stealing the food of people who are explicitly workers themselves – woodcutters, piemen, grocers and porters.

In his description of the Clown's antics in 'The Pantomime of Life' Dickens acknowledges this dual aspect of Clown's consuming nature. In scenes in the 'Cheesemonger's shop' or 'Mrs Queertable's boarding-house' he describes Clown's 'obtaining goods under false pretences, or abstracting the stock-in-trade of the respectable shopkeeper next door', as the 'great fun' of the performance, despite (or perhaps because of) its criminal and irresponsible connotations.⁴⁴⁹ Jane Moody situates this historically and suggests a greater significance than mere abstract fooling. She views this kind of wasteful over-stuffing by

⁴⁴⁵ *Harlequin*, p. 262; pp. 44-47.

⁴⁴⁶ *Mother Goose*, p. 337.

⁴⁴⁷ *Mother Goose*, p. 341.

⁴⁴⁸ Charles Dibdin, *Songs and other vocal compositions in the pantomime called ... Jan Ben Jan, or, Harlequin and the forty virgins. Performing at the Aquatic Theatre, Sadler's Wells* (London: Glendinning, 1807), pp. 9-10.

⁴⁴⁹ 'Pantomime', p. 503.

Grimaldi's Clown as a reflection of Georgian habits: Clown's gluttony 'seems to mirror the city's greed in its consumptive, competitive excess. Here, Clown's irresistible fondness for food and drink offers a physical corollary for oversupply, mimicking the uncontrolled character of purchase and desire in the modern city'.⁴⁵⁰

As well as mirroring the greed of regular citizens, this part of Grimaldi's repertoire held a particular attraction for the King. According to two separate observers George III was an especial fan of Grimaldi's eating routines; the comedian J.S. Munden describes how the King 'laughed almost to suffocation' at Grimaldi's 'mimic exhibition of swallowing a quantity of long puddings', while Thackeray comments that the King laughed 'outrageously' 'when clown swallowed a carrot or a string of sausages'.⁴⁵¹

Findlater merely sees this as representative of Grimaldi's universal appeal, observing that 'this was the kind of acting which Farmer George understood and enjoyed'.⁴⁵² But, while the bodily grotesque does appeal to humanity at its most basic level, it is also possible to suggest a further reason for the King's attraction. In fact if one considers the not insubstantial figure of George's own son it could be argued that Grimaldi's greedy Clown offered the King and his subjects another satirical outlet for a wholly national concern.

This concern is entirely based on the consuming excesses of George III's son the Prince Regent. He is described by Timothy Morton as 'the consumer of the 1790s' and the nation's disapproval of this consumption was depicted in cartoons and prints of the period.⁴⁵³ One notable example is James Gillray's *A VOLUPTUARY under the horrors of Digestion* (1792),

⁴⁵⁰ Moody, p. 219.

⁴⁵¹ Thomas Shepherd Munden, *The Memoirs of Joseph Shepherd Munden, Comedian* (London: Bentley, 1846), p. 77; William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Four Georges* (London: Murray, 1869), p. 82.

⁴⁵² *Grimaldi*, p. 89.

⁴⁵³ Morton, p. xvi.

which is the pictorial equivalent of Grimaldi's living and moving form of the bodily grotesque.



Figure 15: James Gillray, 'A Voluptuary under the horrors of Digestion' (1792), The British Museum

Beyond the bloated and hulking figure of George himself, a grotesque incongruity is suggested and underscored throughout. The very *credo* of consumption is embedded in the Prince's ensign of a knife, fork and plate. He is surrounded by waste - including the bottles on the floor, half-chewed meat and bones on the golden plates and the overflowing

chamber-pot behind his chair. Like Grimaldi's Clown he is clearly unwilling to pay for his consumption as the unpaid bills are symbolically tucked under the chamber-pot.

There is also a more grotesque link between the Prince's own body and what he is eating. Gillray's depiction of the Prince's legs puts them on display for us like joints of meat or two giant chicken drumsticks, with his white stockings giving his lower legs the appearance of bones and the beige portion the cooked skin at the top. This visual correspondence is emphasised by the food debris, which shares the same colouring as his legs and face.

Cruikshank also produced a similar print to Gillray's, and by briefly contrasting the two it is possible to recognise the subtler effects at work in Gillray's imagery and to emphasise his affinity with the grotesque:.



Figure 16: George Cruikshank, 'King George IV as the Prince of Wales' (1820), *The Queen's Matrimonial Ladder*, by William Hone

This picture is strewn with similar symbols of the prince's dissipation (dice, playing cards and empty wine bottles) and even underscores the point with some interesting additions (the demonic mask on the floor suggests debauched revelry and the lady's bonnet slung over the screen possibly indicates the presence of a hidden mistress).

Perhaps the key difference lies in their facial expression; in Cruikshank's image the Prince's face is wholly malignant and scowls aggressively at the viewer. However the Prince's face in Gillray's print strikes quite a different tone. Morton draws particular attention to the careless attitude the Prince exhibits here as he looks more like a 'Romantic poet' than a 'tyrannical gourmand', appearing to be in 'contemplation' rather than suffering from 'dyspepsia'. There is, in fact, no horror on his face – his look is rather one of contentment and the horror is entirely in 'the eyes of the middle-class consumer' who views the print.⁴⁵⁴

This imagery perfectly encapsulates Bakhtin's 'private, limited, greedy body' who contributes no effort to the labour struggle and is not located within the marketplace but instead removes himself from other people, retreating to 'the house and private chamber'. What one sees in his expression is not 'the triumph of the people as a whole' but instead 'the contentment and satiety of the self individual'.⁴⁵⁵

Another way in which Grimaldi's Clown symbolises this wasteful and unproductive consumption is through the use of food and drink to distract Clown from whatever work he is engaged in, such as the pursuit of Harlequin and Columbine. In *Harlequin and Mother Goose* Clown is diverted into an inn, and immediately 'sits down at the table and drinks wine'. To Clown's 'gratification' a live duck flies out of the pie on the table, which he greedily chases, apparently unfussy about whether his dinner is alive or dead. The sense of the Clown putting his stomach before his task is made apparent when he locks the door

⁴⁵⁴ Morton, p. xvi.

⁴⁵⁵ Bakhtin, pp. 302-303.

after Pantaloon has left so that he can sit down ‘to regale’ uninterrupted rather than getting on with his work.⁴⁵⁶

A similar distraction occurs in *Harlequin in His Element* when Harlequin attempts to rescue Columbine. Clown offers his captive a meagre repast of bread and cheese which she refuses, at which point Harlequin transforms it into a roast fowl. Columbine declines this too, but ‘Clown intimates that he will [eat it]’ and while he is ‘enjoying the luxuries of the table’ the path is clear for Harlequin to save Columbine. Harlequin then uses his transformative powers to divert Clown’s attention again as he transports ‘the roast fowl to another table, and when Clown goes to fill wine, one glass disappears, and the other throws wine back in his face’.⁴⁵⁷ Later on Harlequin turns Clown’s greed against him again by turning a stolen orange into a large wasp while he is in the act of sucking it.

An early example of Dickens using food as a comical distraction occurs in *The Pickwick Papers*. Like Clown, Joe has the potential to disrupt the *amours* of Snodgrass and Emily by running to inform the symbolic Pantaloon Mr Wardle and Emily’s father. However his grotesque appetite becomes his overriding concern and the lovers exploit this to negate his threat. After ineffectually bribing him with a few shillings Mary tries to relate to him on his terms, remarking that ‘he had better have something to eat immediately’.⁴⁵⁸ He is taken to the kitchen and fed, as described in Section III of this chapter.

Here Joe’s wasteful consumption, which distracts him from his productive work, has moved into the realms of the bodily grotesque and towards the ultimate symbol of the selfish and ‘private’ consumer, the cannibal. Food is no longer a shared celebration of society but one where the very constituents of society are in danger; as in Gillray’s print the boundaries

⁴⁵⁶ *Mother Goose*, pp. 334-335.

⁴⁵⁷ *Element*, p. 6.

⁴⁵⁸ *Pickwick*, p. 833.

between what eats and what is to be eaten have been dissolved. Thus Bakhtin's conception of the celebratory body of triumphant man devouring the world is inverted to become the body threatened by the world, as humanity shows the potential to devour itself.

Dickens further develops this image of the careless consumer through the character of Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House*. Skimpole extends the symbolic threat offered by Joe to become a real parasitical drain on the economy and is also inflected with some of the more ambivalent elements of the Regency consumer manifested in depictions of Prince George. According to Dickens, Skimpole was modelled on Leigh Hunt (who on a tangential note was a fan of Grimaldi). Dickens explained that 'I have been careful to keep the outward figure away from the fact; but in all else it is the life itself' and in the character of Skimpole he draws together these elements of Clownish gluttony and the Regent's more Romance-inflected sense of excess.⁴⁵⁹

Skimpole is closely identified with ideas of Romanticism when John Jarndyce describes him as being composed of "'sentiment, and – and susceptibility, and – and sensibility, and – and imagination' but these traits are problematic because they 'are not regulated' or 'balanced and adjusted'".⁴⁶⁰ Skimpole is further identified with the voluptuary when he explains how his actions are entirely directed towards his personal gratification; "'When I go anywhere, I go for pleasure. I don't go anywhere for pain, because I was made for pleasure. Pain comes to ME when it wants me'".⁴⁶¹

Other people react to Skimpole in a much more simple fashion and in terms similar to those associated with the Clown. For example Esther Summerson notes his 'helpless kind of candour', 'the light-hearted manner [in which] he was amused by his innocence' and 'the

⁴⁵⁹ Letter to Mrs Richard Watson, 25 September, 1853, *Pilgrim*, VII, p. 154.

⁴⁶⁰ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York and London: Norton, 1977), p. 522.

⁴⁶¹ *Bleak House*, p. 726.

delightful ease of everything he said'.⁴⁶² Richard Carstone is also drawn towards this side of Skimpole when he describes him as "such a cheery fellow", "fresh and green-hearted" with "No worldliness about him".⁴⁶³

This combination of Romantic and clownish innocence culminate in Skimpole's irresponsible consumption. Throughout the narrative he is an eloquent spokesman for his own dissolute nature and makes numerous pronouncements on his careless attitude to life. In one of his early speeches Skimpole proclaims that "I covet nothing [...] Possession is nothing to me".⁴⁶⁴ Another of his mottos is "Let us live upon you!", and he is honest in his admission that "I don't intend to be responsible. I never could do it. Responsibility is a thing that has always been above me - or below me".⁴⁶⁵ He also professes an ignorance of the basic economic workings of society, claiming that "I know nothing of the value of money" and "[i]f I did have any money, I don't know anything about it".⁴⁶⁶ In this way, like Grimaldi's Clown who had no intention of paying for anything he took, Skimpole attempts to entirely remove himself from the process of economic circulation – yet of course remains part of it through his acts of consumption.

On another occasion he describes an incident that reads just like a clownish prank from a pantomime. Having borrowed a couple of armchairs from his baker neighbour ("a rough kind of fellow – a sort of human hedgehog rolled up") the Skimpole family carelessly wear them out. Therefore when Skimpole returns them, rather than being "contented [the baker] objected to their being worn". Here the angry neighbour is refigured in Skimpole's mind as "the absurd figure of an angry baker", one of Grimaldi's perennial targets whom Skimpole describes to us as "ridiculous" while wearing a typically Grimaldian expression,

⁴⁶² *Bleak House*, p. 526.

⁴⁶³ *Bleak House*, p. 459.

⁴⁶⁴ *Bleak House*, p. 66.

⁴⁶⁵ *Bleak House*, p. 527; p. 727.

⁴⁶⁶ *Bleak House*, p. 184; p. 525.

‘raising his laughing eyes in playful astonishment’. Dickens makes it clear that such an event is a regular occurrence like the predictable routine of the pantomime clown – to his family, ‘it was so old a story to all of them that it had become a matter of course’.⁴⁶⁷

Skimpole’s regular visits to Bleak House follow a similar pattern and closely resemble Dickens’s description of Clown in ‘The Pantomime of Life’. Esther notes that all of his visits consist of arriving ‘without notice, and never bringing any clothes with him, but always borrowing everything he wanted’.⁴⁶⁸ As a result Jarndyce can never consider Skimpole as “‘an accountable being’”, which later Skimpole echoes: “‘I am a child among you worldly grumblers, and not called upon to account to you or myself for anything’”.⁴⁶⁹

As the narrative progresses, and in keeping with the grotesque, Dickens makes the figure of Skimpole more complicated by presenting his more repugnant side alongside his more light-hearted one. Skimpole develops into a more caricatured, satirical figure of the careless consumer: for example, when Esther later confronts him and politely suggests he faces his obligations he admits that he is quite willing to “‘owe as much as good-natured people will let me owe’”, justifying this by asking “‘If they don’t stop, why should I?’”.⁴⁷⁰ As time passes, the carelessness of Skimpole in the early part of the narrative becomes subject to the law of economics, whereby someone must bear the cost of what Skimpole takes even if it is not Skimpole himself. *Bleak House* contains a number of people who must ‘pay’ for Skimpole’s consumption – Richard, Jo and even Jarndyce himself.

This analogy with the pantomime clown is further underscored by the views of the practical Mr Bucket, who provides a commentary on Skimpole’s actions and suggests that they are part of a calculated performance. Bucket is a police inspector - familiar with many forms of

⁴⁶⁷ *Bleak House*, p. 528.

⁴⁶⁸ *Bleak House*, p. 384.

⁴⁶⁹ *Bleak House*, p. 386; p. 460.

⁴⁷⁰ *Bleak House*, p. 467.

deception - and so is not taken in by the “‘bounds of [Skimpole’s] childish innocence’”. He warns Esther that people like Skimpole “‘who claim to be innocent as can be concerning all money [...] are dead certain to collar [your money] if they can’”. He also recognises Skimpole’s attempt to remove himself from the economic system as being disingenuous, noting that those that claim to be a ‘child’ in ‘worldly matters’ are only “‘a crying-off from being held accountable’”.⁴⁷¹ Esther comes to recognise this element of performance in Skimpole’s nature herself when she comments that ‘I could not satisfy myself that [Skimpole’s behaviour] was as artless as it seemed’.⁴⁷²

Ultimately while Skimpole does not suffer in any dramatic scene of unmasking, Dickens has used him to fully explore the position of the private consumer and demonstrated that alongside its more charming aspects such a position has damaging consequences for society as a whole. Moreover Dickens reveals to both his readers and a number of his main protagonists that this is a rehearsed role like any other.

VI. Leftovers

Since Dickens first promised to show his readers ‘the romantic side of familiar things’, the association of Dickens with the grotesque and in particular grotesque realism has become a critical commonplace.⁴⁷³ Michael Hollington has devoted an entire study to the subject and much of Axton’s discussion is informed by his contention that the ‘grotesque style is marked by a host of techniques identical with those of the nineteenth-century theater and of Charles Dickens’ works’.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷¹ *Bleak House*, p. 682.

⁴⁷² *Bleak House*, p. 460.

⁴⁷³ *Bleak House*, p. 4.

⁴⁷⁴ Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque* (London and Sydney: Croon Helm, 1984); Axton, p. 28.

However, these prevailing views have mainly concentrated on the more negative 'shock effect' of the grotesque, whereby the conflicting feelings engender a sense of alienation and force the reader to re-examine their world afresh. While Axton in particular has acknowledged the debt Dickens owes to the pantomime for this, insufficient consideration has been given to the centrality of Clown in the pantomime's influence on Dickens in this respect. As a consequence of this oversight the negative effects of the grotesque have been privileged rather than the more positive effects of the bodily grotesque.

However, as this chapter has demonstrated, manifestations of the bodily grotesque were brought into sharp focus through the Grimaldian clown's feats of eating and drinking and were further fixed in the popular consciousness through contemporary prints. Dickens himself was aware of this aspect of Grimaldi's act and through much of his early writing he adapts its methods in the depiction of a number of his comic characters. Through examining both Grimaldi's and Dickens's work, in light of Bakhtin's view of the methods and purpose of the bodily grotesque, it is possible to see how both use the grotesque for overwhelmingly positive reasons in a celebration of humanity.

In his discussion of the grotesque in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) John Ruskin divides the grotesque into the 'pure' or 'noble' and the 'false' or 'ignoble'. To Ruskin the true grotesque is 'the expression of the *repose* or play of a *serious* mind' while the false grotesque is 'the result of the *full exertion* of a *frivolous* one'.⁴⁷⁵ Dickens's association with satirical writing leads Ruskin to place him in the latter category, yet both Grimaldi and Dickens invest a great deal in their portrayals of grotesque consumption and it is far from merely frivolous purposes. Through their celebration of the body and its appetites they offer a direct rebuke to what Ruskin calls the 'pure' grotesque, through which the artist

⁴⁷⁵ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, New Universal Library edition, 3 vols (London: Routledge, 1907), III, p. 158.

demonstrates 'man's tragic and imperfect nature' and instead offers a positive meditation on what it is to be fully human.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁶ Thomson, p. 15.

CHAPTER 5 - The Clothed Clown

I. Introduction

This chapter will examine how Grimaldi and Dickens use the clothing of their clownish characters to explore related ideas about the materiality of the world and the transformative power of garments. Two clothes-related experiences of Grimaldi and Dickens will offer a brief illustration of their treatment.

In the first episode from the *Memoirs* (already discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis) Joe runs through the streets in full costume in order to get to a performance on time. Initially he manages to avoid any unwanted attention, but on reaching Clerkenwell, 'the lights of the shops showed him in his Clown's dress running along at full speed, [and] people began to grow rather astonished'.⁴⁷⁷ An excited mob soon surrounds him and he can only get away by offering a brief impromptu performance.

The second episode is a 'characteristic' anecdote related by Dickens's daughter 'Mamie', which describes one of her father's visits to the Hogarth household during his courtship of Catherine:

The Hogarths were living a little way out of London, in a residence which had a drawing-room opening with French windows on to a lawn. In this room my mother and her family were seated quietly after dinner on this particular evening, when suddenly a young sailor jumped through one of the open windows into the apartment, whistled and danced a hornpipe, and before they could recover from their amazement jumped out again. A few minutes later my father walked in at the door as sedately as though quite innocent of the prank and shook hands with everyone; but the sight of their amazed faces

⁴⁷⁷ *Memoirs*, II, p. 88.

proving too much for his attempted sobriety, his hearty laugh was the signal for the rest of the party to join his merriment.⁴⁷⁸

What is one to make of this extraordinary episode from these few tantalising details? No further details of what Dickens actually wore are given but the description of the figure as 'a young sailor' suggests that Dickens donned a disguise for his own impromptu performance.

From these two stories it is clear that clothes perform different functions for both men. Throughout the *Memoirs* Joe's appearance on the streets in his 'offstage' clothes does not draw any significant attention, but in this episode his 'onstage' costume publicly incriminates him as the performing clown who must act according to the expectations of others - and perform for the crowd - before he is allowed to continue on his way. By contrast the borrowed sailor's costume provides the anxious young suitor Charles Dickens an outlet for his theatrical sensibility and a release from conventionality.

The Grimaldi episode is also significant in another sense, because the slap and motley marking Grimaldi as the clown was in fact just one outfit from many in his extensive wardrobe. As an integral figure within the constantly metamorphic world of the harlequinade the Grimaldian clown was not merely confined to the distinctive costume that Grimaldi had invented for him. His transformation into other characters, such as the society dandy, swaggering soldier or drunken watchman, was primarily achieved through the agency of clothing and was a celebrated, and indeed expected, part of his harlequinade routine. It was through precisely these transformations that Grimaldi was able to attain his own release from the conventional appearance and role of the clown.

⁴⁷⁸ 'Mamie' (Mary) Dickens, *My Father As I Recall Him* (Westminster: The Roxburghe Press, [1897]), pp. 30-31.

Dickens's sartorial adventures and experiments (including episodes like the dancing sailor) are an integral component of what the dandy historian Ellen Moers calls 'a release for those superabundant energies which made him increasingly restless and dissatisfied' and 'an essential escape from the confining pattern of existence the Victorians insisted was proper for their great men'.⁴⁷⁹ Branwen Bailey Pratt further supports this sense of a playful Dickens by recognising that 'All his adult life, Dickens used play as an escape from his hard-worn place in the respectable Victorian world'. Pratt feels that as an actor (both onstage and offstage) Dickens 'could legitimately abandon his self-imposed identity as pillar of society, compulsive worker, and zealous reformer' and therefore 'elude his obsession with moral righteousness by taking on the liberating persona of the clown'.⁴⁸⁰

Critics have regularly noticed that Dickens makes the same sort of sartorial investment in the people of his novels. Natalie McKnight has considered how he combines the holy fool and jester traditions by dressing certain characters in a new form of motley, noting that 'Dickens transforms [the clothing] aspect of [that] tradition by mixing the rags of the mendicant with the elaborate motley of the court fool'.⁴⁸¹ While such a reading contributes to the debate around Dickens's use of clothing it only accounts for the traditional, fixed costume of the older style folk clown and does not consider the transformative aspect of the clown's sartorial repertoire. It was this aspect which made Grimaldi's Clown such a rich and complex figure and made him such a compelling model for Dickens. With such critical readings in mind this chapter will contextualise Dickens's sartorial choices (for both himself and his characters) within the hitherto underexplored model of the metamorphic power of clothing provided by Grimaldi's Clown.

⁴⁷⁹ Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), pp. 227-8.

⁴⁸⁰ Branwen Bailey Pratt, 'Dickens and Freedom: Young Bailey in *Martin Chuzzlewit*', in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30.2 (September 1975), p. 191.

⁴⁸¹ Natalie McKnight, *Idiots, Madmen, and Other Prisoners in Dickens* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993), p. 45.

By reading the works of both Grimaldi and Dickens in this way this chapter will inevitably draw upon a number of ideas from fashion theory, and in particular Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34) which Clair Hughes describes as 'the *fons et origo* of all dress theory'.⁴⁸²

Sartor Resartus, a 'Satirical Extravaganza on Things in general', was serialised in *Fraser's Magazine* from 1833 to 1834 and published in book form in 1838.⁴⁸³ William Oddie feels that the relative failure of the serial publication meant that Dickens may not have read *Sartor* until the full book form (which postdates *Pickwick*, *Oliver* and the *Memoirs*) was published. However F.S. Schwarzbach draws close comparisons between sections of *Sartor* and one of Dickens's early Sketches, 'Meditations in Monmouth-Street to suggest that Dickens may have been aware of the text much earlier (in 1835).⁴⁸⁴

Although Catherine Spooner confidently asserts that 'Dickens was enormously influenced by Carlyle' and that 'a similar sense of fabricated identities [...] occurs in his writing', other scholars (for example William Oddie and Mildred G. Christian) find the question of attribution more complex.⁴⁸⁵ Therefore this chapter will not make any definitive statements about direct influence but instead consider those principal ideas from *Sartor* that can be instructive when reading the works of Grimaldi and Dickens in the context of fashion.

Sartor Resartus is a particularly kaleidoscopic text that opens itself to a variety of interpretations to the patient reader. When submitting it to *Fraser's* Carlyle felt that this work 'contains more of my opinions on Art, Politics, Religion, Heaven Earth and Air, than all

⁴⁸² Clair Hughes, *Dressed in Fiction* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), p. 90.

⁴⁸³ Thomas Carlyle, Letter to James Fraser, 27 May 1833, in *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. by Charles Richard Sanders and others, 32 vols (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1970-2005), VI, pp. 395-398 (p. 396). All subsequent references to this edition of the letters are referenced as *Collected Letters*, followed by the volume and page numbers.

⁴⁸⁴ F.S. Schwarzbach, 'Dickens and Carlyle Again: A Note on an Early Influence', *The Dickensian* 53 (Summer 1978).

⁴⁸⁵ Catherine Spooner, *Fashioning Gothic Bodies* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 50; William Oddie, *Dickens and Carlyle: The Question of Influence* (London: Centenary Press, 1972), p. 4; Mildred G. Christian, 'Carlyle's Influence Upon the Social Theory of Dickens. Part Two: Their Literary Relationship' in *Trollopian* 2.1 (June 1947), p. 14.

the things I have yet written' and due to such comments (and the famously intractable nature of the text itself) it is sometimes easy to forget that it is also an often amusing book that talks quite a lot about clothes.⁴⁸⁶

The tone of certain sections of the work certainly belies those conceptions of Carlyle as the epitome of Victorian earnestness. As McSweeney and Sabor point out, 'when he wrote *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle had not yet become Carlylean', and was still producing 'imaginative fiction' rather than 'biography, history, and social prophecy'.⁴⁸⁷ Beneath the image of Carlyle as 'the most intractable and cantankerous of Victorian sages' there existed a more humorous and playful character.⁴⁸⁸ Carlyle acknowledged this himself when he commented that 'I have under all my gloom a genuine feeling of the ludicrous; and could have been the merriest of men, *had I not* been the sickest and saddest', a statement that invites a suggestive parallel with one of the dynamics that informs Grimaldi's life and art.⁴⁸⁹

Carlyle noted in his journal in September 1830 that 'I am going to write – Nonsense. It is on 'Clothes'', and this ludic sensibility is emphatically registered in the resultant work in a number of ways.⁴⁹⁰ One of the most obvious of these is in the form of the text itself, which contains both the fictional Professor Teufelsdröckh's 'original' work and an accompanying paratext including an Editor's commentary. This commentary draws out and underlines a sense of the pantomimic grotesque within Teufelsdröckh's text, as the Editor notes 'the more and more discernible humouristico-satirical tendency of Teufelsdröckh'.⁴⁹¹ He variously describes Teufelsdröckh's work as an 'enormous, amorphous Plumpudding, more

⁴⁸⁶ Letter to James Fraser, 27 May 1833, *Collected Letters*, VI, pp. 395-398 (p. 396).

⁴⁸⁷ Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor, 'Introduction', Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. xxxiii.

⁴⁸⁸ William H. Pritchard, 'What to Do with Carlyle?' in *The Hudson Review* 50.2 (Summer 1997), p. 245.

⁴⁸⁹ Letter to J.S. Mill, 24 September 1833, *Collected Letters*, VI, pp. 444-450 (p. 449).

⁴⁹⁰ Thomas Carlyle, *Two Note Books of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. by Charles Eliot Norton (New York: The Grolier Club, 1898), p. 176.

⁴⁹¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. by Mark Engel and Rodger L. Tarr (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 150. All subsequent references are to this edition.

like a Scottish Haggis, which Herr Teufelsdröckh [has] kneaded for his fellow mortals' and an all-inclusive Grimaldian feast:

[...] some mad banquet, wherein all courses had been confounded, and fish and flesh, soup and solid, oyster-sauce, lettuces, Rhine-wine and French mustard, were hurled into one huge tureen or trough, and the hungry Public invited to help itself. To bring what order we can out of this Chaos shall be part of our endeavour.⁴⁹²

Similarly the review notices placed at the end of the 1869 edition of *Sartor* (Volume 1 of the collected Library Edition of Carlyle's works) repeat and amplify this sense of play: the 'Taster' remarks to the 'Bookseller' that it 'reminds one of the German Baron who took to leaping on tables, and answered that he was learning to be lively', the 'North American Reviewer' notes its 'half serious, half comic style' and the 'New-England Editors' remark upon 'the gay costume in which the Author delights to dress his thoughts', the 'quaint and burlesque style', and Carlyle's 'masquerade'.⁴⁹³

As well as these paratextual cues, the early reminiscences of Teufelsdröckh suggest the centrality of play in an arresting image that draws us directly towards Grimaldi. In Chapter 2 of Book II ('Idyllic') the Professor notes the importance of his childhood experiences and sees one event as having particular formative weight. The occasion is 'the annual Cattle-fair' at which the young Teufelsdröckh enjoyed 'the elements of an unspeakable hurly-burly' including 'high over all, vaulted, in ground-and-lofty tumbling, a parti-coloured Merry-Andrew, like the genius of the place and of Life itself'.⁴⁹⁴ Merry Andrew was an early folk-clown figure and, as one of 'the fools of the fair, the merry andrews and Jack

⁴⁹² *Sartor*, p. 214; p. 26.

⁴⁹³ *Sartor*, p. 221; p. 224; p. 226.

⁴⁹⁴ *Sartor*, pp. 74-75.

puddings', he is cited by Findlater as an influence on Grimaldi's own unique interpretation of the clown's persona.⁴⁹⁵

In addition to this conjunction of the carnivalesque and the pantomimic, *Sartor Resartus* also contains a number of comic-grotesque images which often incorporate the important element of clothing. In his early 'Miscellaneous-Historical' chapter Teufelsdröckh surveys the history of European costume between the Middle Ages and seventeenth century, a period characterised by the Editor as 'the true era of extravagance in Costume', when 'Fantastic garbs [...] succeed each other, like monster devouring monster in a Dream'.⁴⁹⁶ This monstrous nature is evoked through Teufelsdröckh's depiction of the fashions of this period which consistently conforms to Bakhtin's sense of the grotesque.

He explains how rich men wear little bells in their girdle 'so that when a man walks it is with continual jingling', and likens male dress to grand architectural structures such as 'peaks and Gothic-arch intersections'. Men wear:

peaked caps, an ell-long, which hang bobbing over the side (*schief*): their shoes are peaked in front, also to the length of an ell (and laced on the side with tags); even the wooden shoes have their ell-long noses: some also clap bells on the peak.

These phallic images recall the grotesque bodily protuberances so beloved of Grimaldi. The image continues to grow in its grotesque hyperbole as men compete with the women in the outlandishness of their costumes and don such ridiculous garments as 'doublets of

⁴⁹⁵ Grimaldi, p. 154.

⁴⁹⁶ Sartor, p. 36.

fustian, under which lie multiple ruffs of cloth, pasted together with batter [...], which create protuberance enough'.⁴⁹⁷

Finally if one was in any doubt as to the comical and thoroughly impractical nature of these 'enormous habiliments, that were not only slashed and galooned, but artificially swollen out on the broader parts of the body, by introduction of Bran' Teufelsdröckh describes an episode that is worthy of the harlequinade. He relates the tale of a 'luckless Courtier' who, when rising on the entrance of the queen, tears his breeches on a nail protruding from a chair and 'instantaneously emitted several pecks of dry wheat-dust; and stood there diminished to a spindle, his galoons and slashes dangling sorrowful and flabby around him'.⁴⁹⁸ This comic double movement of the inflation and deflation of the courtier's pride (and his rear-end) is entirely in the spirit of the physical, clothes-related comedy that so fascinated Grimaldi.

A final element which draws *Sartor* into the realms of the clownic is Carlyle's verbal inventiveness, which has close parallels with Grimaldi's physical inventiveness. Julian Symons asserts that Carlyle's unique style was 'informed with a humour at once extravagant and clownish, obscure yet overflowing with vigour' and Pritchard similarly notes that Carlyle had a distinctly inventive attitude to the use of language in his work. In a direct defence of his linguistic improvisation in *Sartor*, Carlyle argued that 'if one has thoughts not hitherto uttered in English Books, I see nothing for it but that you must use words not found there, must *make* words'.⁴⁹⁹ Carlyle often makes new words out of combinations of old ones, akin to the compound noun formations with which he would have been familiar from his reading of German literature. Thus in *Sartor* we have 'time-vesture', 'humano-anecdotal', 'gaseous-chaotic', 'deadly-grappling' and 'diabolico-

⁴⁹⁷ *Sartor*, pp. 37-38.

⁴⁹⁸ *Sartor*, p. 38.

⁴⁹⁹ Letter to John Sterling, 4 June 1835, *Collected Letters*, VIII, (pp. 134-138), p. 135.

angelical' - to select just a handful of examples - and by creating such rich and innovative images in this way he mimicks in verbal terms precisely what Grimaldi sought to do in sartorial terms.⁵⁰⁰ Part of Grimaldi's repertoire of dressing up was centred on a reconfiguration and reanimation of often incongruous, inanimate materials and here Carlyle uses the same improvisational quality to shape his language.

But this polyvalent work does not only present clothing as something merely frivolous or inconsequential beyond its comic potentialities. Leonard W. Deen notes that Teufelsdröckh's self-styled *Esprit de Costumes* (*Spirit of Clothes*) can be translated in two ways; it can be read as both 'costume-wit' and 'the spirit of costumes' and thus clothing is used in *Sartor Resartus* as a both a vehicle for comedy and as a metaphor for Carlyle's political and spiritual discourse.⁵⁰¹ As Walter L. Reed outlines, not only is clothing 'a neutral fact and figure', but it is 'the controlling metaphor of the book', 'used for the purposes of satire and apocalypse'.⁵⁰²

Sartor Resartus is therefore a central text when considering the comedy of clothes and by placing some of its central tenets within the context of fashion theory this chapter will demonstrate the richness and importance of Carlyle's ideas on the subject. These tenets can be used as a series of looking-glasses (or hall of mirrors, to continue the carnivalesque theme) through which to view the clothing that Grimaldi adorned his clown and Dickens adorned both himself and his characters. The following discussion will focus on three key themes: clothing as a symbol of individual liberty against the oppressive mechanisms of conservative society; clothing as a means to both de-humanise and re-humanise the body; and the clothing of two related cultural archetypes – the dandy and the swell.

⁵⁰⁰ *Sartor*, p. 56; p. 58; p. 60; p. 159; p. 174.

⁵⁰¹ Leonard W. Deen, 'Irrational Form in *Sartor Resartus*', in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 5.3 (Autumn 1963), p. 443.

⁵⁰² Walter L. Reed, 'The Pattern of Conversion in *Sartor Resartus*', in *ELH* 38.3 (September 1971), p. 418; p. 419.

All of these themes are underpinned by some further principles of fashion theory, which will form a framework for this chapter. The first (commonplace) principle is that clothing represents a form of discourse and communication within a given culture or society.

Catherine Spooner asserts that 'Clothing is above all a means of inserting the self into social discourse, literary or otherwise', and this chapter will consider how clothing intervenes in theatrical discourse (through Grimaldi's use of clothing in his performance), social discourse (through Dickens's own sartorial strategies) and literary discourse (through Dickens's work).⁵⁰³ When considering clothing as a means of communication, its non-verbal nature is also significant. As part of Grimaldi's predominantly mute performances, bodily syntax, clothing choice and clothing-based activities worked in conjunction as another important means of expression.

The peculiarly liminal status of clothes is another fundamental idea of fashion theory which will inform this discussion. As Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallero suggest, clothes have an ambiguous relationship with the body; considering notions of the 'boundary' and the 'margin' they feel that clothing performs two functions simultaneously, functions that can often be at odds with each other; clothing both '*frames* the body and insulates private fantasies from the Other' but also 'connects the individual self to the collective Other and fashions those fantasies on the model of a public spectacle'.⁵⁰⁴ This chapter will thus explore how both Grimaldi and Dickens play with this liminality by using the clothing of their characters to interrogate this often uneasy duality between the individual and society.

Fashion theorists have also recognised that the physical act of wearing clothes is not merely a functional one and is often inflected with theatricality. In Calefato's view fashion 'always constructs a 'world theatre', a time and place which do not exist in reality, yet

⁵⁰³ Spooner, p. 3.

⁵⁰⁴ Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallero, *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress and the Body* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), p. xvi.

which are made to exist through the signs decreed by fashion'.⁵⁰⁵ She also comments that 'in the great sense-making machine of cinema, costume represents yet another signifying system' and it is certainly possible to see theatre in the same way.⁵⁰⁶

Such an argument also links to the previous discussions of the pantomime of life and the blurring of the divisions between onstage and offstage. As has been demonstrated, a number of commentators have noted that in eighteenth- and early nineteenth- century theatre external elements formed a central part of its signifying system. Genres such as melodrama placed a primacy on external appearance as a means of forming the index of the character, using elements such as facial expression, gesture and clothing. Thus, rather than concealing the character, clothing is a mechanism for its revelation.

The work of both Juliet John and Deborah Vlock offer considerable illumination in this regard. John usefully applies the term 'ostension' to this sense of how 'Dickens keeps [the] underside [of his characters] clearly and flagrantly on display'.⁵⁰⁷ Rather than adopting a simple binary surface/depth model of appearance (in which the surface protects and conceals the true character beneath) here the surface is the character. The external can thus be read as a means to gain access to the internal rather than acting as an obstacle to it.

Similarly Deborah Vlock's study of early Victorian reading and theatre-going practices indicates that this method of reading character was fully entrenched within the culture. She explains that while the voice would later become the key signifier of semiotic value within theatre, 'the stage was from the beginning a forum from the semiotic display of

⁵⁰⁵ Patrizia Calefato, *The Clothed Body* (Oxford: Berg, 2004). p. 86.

⁵⁰⁶ Calefato, p. 91.

⁵⁰⁷ John, p. 3.

bodies, and certainly Victorian dramaturgy played on collective social assumptions about bodily signs'.⁵⁰⁸

Vlock's study is principally concerned with bodily gesture, but as Patrizia Calefato has examined clothes were also an essential part of this non-verbal presentation of character. Emphasising the role of clothes as phrases within the body-text she tellingly adopts the same language as John when she explains that 'Fashion exhibits its productive mechanisms in its physiognomy: in this 'ostensive' sense, it is text *and* body, text *as* body, a body where every single sign tells a story'.⁵⁰⁹ Both Grimaldi and Dickens were advocates of the essential theatricality of life and so would regard these signifying systems as equally valid offstage as onstage. This view is supported by a number of fashion theorists who recognise the theatricality inherent in adopting different modes of dress. Clair Hughes, writing against the 'modern popular prejudice' of the whiskered Victorian male in his top hat, feels that clothing held a variety of significances for the nineteenth-century man, as dress was regarded as 'a form of consumption, a badge of class, a possible mark of originality and a form of self-creation'.⁵¹⁰

Because clothes operated in this way they carried great potential to theatre and fiction (as well as other art forms) to delineate character beyond such simple binaries such as good versus bad. Clothes were signifiers of a great deal more and the liberties for 'dressing-up' afforded the stage a great licence to explore some of these signifiers in a very physical and material way. As Munns and Richards's collection of studies on 'dressing and transgressing in eighteenth-century culture' demonstrate, the theatrical space represented what they call 'a site for varieties and nuances of costuming and performance, which negotiate social,

⁵⁰⁸ Vlock, p. 82.

⁵⁰⁹ Calefato, p. 123.

⁵¹⁰ Hughes, p. 47.

national, generic, and gender boundaries'.⁵¹¹ This chapter will explore the boundaries that the Grimaldian and Dickensian clowns negotiate, through the three main themes suggested earlier, beginning with the symbolic power of clothing to express individual autonomy.

II. Clothing as a symbol of individual liberty

In what the 'Editor' of *Sartor* calls his 'interminable disquisitions of a mythological, metaphorical, cabalístico-sartorial and quite antediluvian cast', Teufelsdröckh unequivocally asserts the symbolic power of clothes, which provide us with our 'individuality, distinctions, social polity'.⁵¹² Clothes thus act on a symbolic level within culture and society and Teufelsdröckh claims the primacy of the symbolic level above all others, for 'it is in and through *Symbols* that man, consciously or unconsciously, lives, works, and has his being'.⁵¹³ He feels that 'generally all national or other sectarian Costumes and Customs' operate on this level, from a flag ('a piece of glazed cotton [...] which, had you sold it at any market-cross, would not have brought above three groschen') to a crown ('an implement [...] in size and commercial value, little differing from a horse-shoe') and sceptre ('a piece of gilt wood').⁵¹⁴

A number of contemporary fashion theorists have developed these ideas further to fully draw out the implications of Carlyle's comedy. Warwick and Cavallero define the symbolic level of clothing as the state when 'dress is symptomatic of our introjections of sartorial and vestimentary codes and conventions'. This is explicitly contrasted with the imaginary level whereby 'dress represents a projection of the ideal egos which we seek to embody and with which we wish to identify'.⁵¹⁵ Roland Barthes regards clothing as an 'articulate

⁵¹¹ Jessica Munns and Penny Richards, 'Introduction: The Clothes that Wear Us', in *The Clothes That Wear Us: Essays on Dressing and Transgressing in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, ed. by Munns and Richards (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), pp. 9-32 (p. 10).

⁵¹² *Sartor*, p. 28; p. 31.

⁵¹³ *Sartor*, p. 164.

⁵¹⁴ *Sartor*, p. 164; p. 168.

⁵¹⁵ Warwick and Cavallero, p. xvi.

language through which it is possible to analyse a culture as system and process, institution and individual act' and divides clothing into two distinct categories.⁵¹⁶ 'Costume' is the symbolic level of clothing which includes those regular, static and repeated uniforms that accord with the predominant codes and convention, while 'Dress' is the imaginary level, which is unique, personal, ever-evolving and based on the individual ego rather than socially imposed codes. Maria K. Bachman neatly sums up this ambivalent position of fashion caused by these divergent categories when she comments that 'the spectacle of fashion produces both a desiring and a disciplinary subject'.⁵¹⁷

In *Sartor* Teufelsdröckh feels that society 'is founded upon Cloth' and that 'the solemnities and paraphernalia of civilized Life' are 'nothing but so many Cloth-rags' because clothing serves to differentiate between individuals and determine the power relations between them.⁵¹⁸

He asks us to consider two men, 'one dressed in fine Red, the other in coarse threadbare Blue' before revealing that the symbolic power of clothing designates the former as the judge passing sentence on the latter, the prisoner in the dock.⁵¹⁹

Yet Teufelsdröckh's 'nothing but' is a significant qualification, because the power relations are only determined by 'the outward shows' and not by anything intrinsic to the wearer.⁵²⁰

Yoon Sun Lee reads this comment as an echo of Thomas Paine, by which 'Carlyle confirms Paine's suspicion [proposed in *The Rights of Man*] that there exists only an arbitrary signifier of authority and the existence of virtue'.⁵²¹ Clothing as an empty signifier

⁵¹⁶ See Calefato, p. 7.

⁵¹⁷ Maria K. Bachman, 'Bulwer-Lytton's *Pelham*: The Disciplinary Dandy and the Art of Government' in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 47.2 (Summer 2005), p. 172.

⁵¹⁸ *Sartor*, p. 48; p. 49.

⁵¹⁹ *Sartor*, p. 46.

⁵²⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, III.ii.73, p. 303.

⁵²¹ Yoon Sun Lee, 'Making What Will Suffice: Carlyle's Fetishism', in *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29.1 (2001), p. 181.

resembles language itself and Teufelsdröckh notes that language is 'the Garment of Thought'. Calefato similarly develops Wittgenstein's views on language as a disguise for thought in the same way, stating that 'clothing is explicitly considered as a kind of bodily disguise'.⁵²² Dickens also conflates language and clothing through an arresting image in 'Somebody Else's Luggage'. The consignment of luggage left in the unnamed hotel is full of writing paper because the mysterious owner had:

crumpled up this writing of his, everywhere, in every part and parcel of his luggage. There was writing in his dressing-case, writing in his boots, writing among his shaving-tackle, writing in his hat-box, writing folded away down the very whalebones of his umbrella.⁵²³

Language is inscribed everywhere and the page of text has escaped from its secure leather-bound moorings to be inscribed on a variety of everyday objects and articles of clothing. The treatment of clothing in the work of both Grimaldi and Dickens exemplifies what Valentine Cunningham views as the interplay between the word and the world, or 'the wor(l)d'.⁵²⁴ The analogy with language is significant because clothes are both immaterial symbols and material garments, signifier and signified, and sit on the border between Valentine's 'textual stuff' and 'worldly stuff'.⁵²⁵ Both Grimaldi and Dickens use textiles as a way of showing how meaning lies in 'the busy overlap, interaction [and] clash' between 'aesthetic, textual stuff – which is to say rhetoricity' and 'the historico-worldly Other beyond the text, out there in the extra-linguistic, heterologic zones of that which is not merely verbal'.⁵²⁶

⁵²² Calefato, p. 5.

⁵²³ Charles Dickens, 'Somebody Else's Luggage', *All the Year Round*, 4 December 1862, p. 577.

⁵²⁴ Valentine Cunningham, *in the Reading Gaol: postmodernity, texts, and history* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 11.

⁵²⁵ Cunningham, p. 80.

⁵²⁶ Cunningham, p. 61.

Cunningham rejects Stephen Greenblatt's strong preference for the rhetorical and immaterial power of garments over their 'realism' and actual physical presence, suggesting that both are held up and valued simultaneously. Their materiality cannot be denied even if it is put to symbolic and fictional purposes. This has profound implications for both the actual clothes that Grimaldi wore and their fictional analogue in Dickens's novels, for both men grounded their work (their texts) in the 'real' world (context) - as Chapter 2 of this thesis has examined they both regarded the dividing line as almost invisible, if there at all.

In *Sartor* Carlyle stresses the importance of clothes as a symbol but also recognises the insubstantiality of that symbol. By doing this he joined a chorus of anxiety that began in the previous century and was symptomatic of the ongoing consumer revolution. For much of the eighteenth century cultural commentators lamented this very same schism between the signifier and signified, that had been enabled by the increased commercialisation of clothing and the associated erosion of the power structures (which had been partially upheld by more uniform and predictable patterns of dress).

Clothing here forms part of what Jennifer Craik calls 'a technique of acculturation' whereby it 'relates to particular codes of behaviour and rules of ceremony and place' and 'denotes and embodies conventions of conduct that contribute to the etiquette and manners of social encounters'.⁵²⁷ This idea of the co-option of the symbolic power of clothing in order to impose social order also features in Foucault's concept of the 'docile body'. As Spooner notes, one of the principal state mechanisms for the 'discipline and surveillance' of the 'Foucauldian body' was 'the management and observation of the surface', in which clothes play an important role.⁵²⁸

⁵²⁷ Jennifer Craik, *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 10.

⁵²⁸ Spooner, p. 12.

Warwick and Cavallero support this view and explain how the body can be made docile, submissive and conformist through the imposition of appropriate clothing. Dress 'renders [the body] analysable, either forcibly through required clothing, or voluntarily through self-selected garments; it becomes manipulable through the effects of being dressed'.⁵²⁹

Calefato also recognises this coercion of the symbolic as a means of control and argues that clothes can 'cage' the body and reduce it to 'the forced task of representing a [particular] social role, position or hierarchy'. Therefore rather than representing an opening of possibility, uniforms and specific costumes 'can be a controlling device for the body, sanctioning a closed system of correspondences between external appearance and social order'.⁵³⁰

Inevitably the figure of the clown, as an embodiment of anarchic, anti-establishment values, inherently operates against this and through his own strategies of clothing attempts to subvert and disrupt such controlling mechanisms. The clowns of both Dickens and Grimaldi privilege Barthes's 'imaginary' level of clothing in their sartorial discourses and are able to carefully manipulate and subvert the 'symbolic' level into the 'imaginary' level.

As celebrity artists, both Grimaldi and Dickens were subject to numerous attempts to fix their identity through their appearance. While neither were forced to adopt the more extreme costumes of state control (such as the prisoner's uniform or the soldier's tunic) both men were expected to dress according to the particular social expectations of their class and profession and act in a manner 'appropriate' to that dress.

This chapter opened with a chilling example of the sartorial prison-house built around Grimaldi and Dickens's sartorial choice fell under similar scrutiny based on expectations of how this particular nineteenth-century novelist should dress. One of the people to

⁵²⁹ Warwick and Cavallero, p. 75.

⁵³⁰ Calefato, p. 2.

articulate his disappointment at the confounding of these expectations was Carlyle himself who, upon meeting Dickens in 1840, commented that he 'dressed *a la* D'Orsay rather than well'.⁵³¹ Dickens thus resembled one of London's celebrity dandies rather than a respectable literary figure.

In her study of the dandies that Dickens constructed (including himself) Ellen Moers draws on other accounts of how Dickens resisted being categorised by his appearance. Adolphus Trollope recounted how 'We were at first disappointed, and disposed to imagine there must be some mistake! No! That is not the man who wrote 'Pickwick'! What we saw was a dandified, pretty-boy-looking sort of figure [...] with a slight flavour of the whipper-snapper genus of humanity'.⁵³² He similarly confounded the expectations of readers in America as disappointed fans found that 'His dress was foppish; in fact, he was overdressed' in waistcoats that were 'somewhat on the flash order' and 'vivid tints [that] were very conspicuous'.⁵³³

Beyond these individual testimonies a comparison between the prevailing fashions of the times and Dickens's choice of garments shows how he was deliberately at odds with his times. Clair Hughes neatly plots the divergent movement of male and female fashion from the 1840s onwards, summarising the trend as 'macho musculature and sombre austerity' that 'offset and formed a background to an exaggerated and colourful femininity'.⁵³⁴

Hughes notes that while the early part of the century had seen some correspondence between male and female garments with slimmer clothes fitted closer to the frame, Victoria's accession and the resultant shift towards female 'docility and secluded

⁵³¹ Quoted in J.A. Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, 1884), I, p. 152.

⁵³² Thomas Augustus Trollope, *What I Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 110.

⁵³³ Edward F. Payne, *Dickens Days in Boston* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), pp. 9, 49, 60.

⁵³⁴ Hughes, p. 62.

domesticity' caused a significant schism.⁵³⁵ While women's clothes ballooned out and took on a broader range of colours, male fashions moved in the opposite direction. Figures like Beau Brummell 'popularised a "natural", classical, masculine look – monochrome, with visible seams, and a cut which clarified the silhouette' in a rejection of the 'pear-shaped eighteenth-century male silhouette, in an often ill-fitting velvet or silk ensemble'.⁵³⁶

Following this model, Hughes demonstrates how male costume became 'increasingly angular, severely vertical and monochrome', with heavier garments and darker colours.⁵³⁷ Here she draws on John Harvey's *Men in Black* (1995), in which he asserts that 'colour died in menswear in the nineteenth century' and the 'stark formula of black men and bright women' became 'another of that century's sharpened severities'.⁵³⁸ Talia Schaffer draws a similar comparison between the 'colourful garb' of the eighteenth-century (whereby male 'shoulders looked small and sloping, the stomach protruded, [and] legs and arms were slender stalks from which the rich mass of waistcoat and coat grew') and the nineteenth-century, which winnowed and 'refined' the image of the male body into 'a tall black pillar, with broad shoulders narrowing to a flat stomach and hips'.⁵³⁹

Moers reads Dickens's resistance to this as either juvenile indulgence ('a naive, almost childlike pleasure in dressing up') or as a more calculated attempt to follow Disraeli's example and 'further ambition with the drama of dress'.⁵⁴⁰ However it is also possible to argue that Dickens was challenging the symbolic determinism of clothing and defining a unique identity for himself. One of his primary models for this would have been Grimaldi, for when reading and reworking the *Memoirs* Dickens would have learned about Grimaldi's

⁵³⁵ Hughes, p. 61.

⁵³⁶ Hughes, p. 48.

⁵³⁷ Hughes, p. 62.

⁵³⁸ Ian Harvey, *Men in Black* (London: Reaktion, 1995), p. 195; p. 196.

⁵³⁹ Talia Schaffer, 'Fashioning Aestheticism by Aestheticizing Fashion: Wilde, Beerbohm, and the Male Aesthetes' Sartorial Codes', in *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28.1 (2000), p. 45.

⁵⁴⁰ Moers, p. 222.

own struggles to preserve the imaginary while all around him privileged the symbolic. The episode which opens this chapter is perhaps the most emblematic example of this troubling phenomenon, but there are others. As a boy Grimaldi is beaten by his father onstage, but his clown's dress and makeup deny him the sympathy of the crowd, who feel that it is part of the act. Dickens's narrative makes it clear that throughout his stage life many of his audiences only read the surface of Grimaldi's appearance according to the culturally accepted role of the clown, and failed to see the feeling and suffering human beneath.

Even when he is not wearing his slap and motley people obstruct his attempts to set aside his clownish persona. As discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis, Byron forces him into a grimly comic routine with the food at a dinner party and on other occasions he is invited to houses in order to sing or entertain the other guests rather than demonstrate any other dimension of his personality or even be entertained by others.

One strategy which Grimaldi used to take greater control over his identity was by refashioning Clown's traditional image in order to make it his own. In one sense he succeeded, because he was not forgotten and became both a celebrity in his lifetime and a key figure in pantomime history. Grimaldi managed every aspect of his Clown persona from choreographing his own knockabout routines to designing his own complex stage contraptions. Findlater describes how, after his mentor Dubois retired in 1801, he 'dared to experiment more radically in the dress and make-up of his own English Clown'.⁵⁴¹

His innovative dress was also noted by his contemporaries. His close collaborator Charles Dibdin claimed that 'the present mode for dressing Clowns and painting their faces' was based on Grimaldi's design, to the extent that he had 'in every respect, founded a *New School* for Clowns'. According to Dibdin, earlier clowns like Dubois could be easily

⁵⁴¹ *Grimaldi*, pp. 55-56.

categorised due to their adoption of conventional costume and adherence to existing forms. Dubois 'never dressed himself otherwise than as a rustic booby, with red hair, and painted his face merely in imitation of florid nature', and many other clowns 'seldom wore anything but old-fashioned, outre, liveries'. Yet in pantomimes like *Peter Wilkins* Grimaldi designed clown costumes 'more extravagant than it had been the custom for such characters to wear'.⁵⁴²

The existing verbal descriptions of Grimaldi's costumes can never properly match the dazzling and colourful masterpieces of the printmakers but they provide a palpable awareness that Grimaldi was taking existing models and transforming them into something unique. In Bartsian terms, he took a costume and made it into dress. A.E. Wilson opens his description of Grimaldi's costume by calling it 'really an exaggeration of the ordinary dress worn in his day, or just a little before his time'. He then catalogues Grimaldi's costume from head to foot, indicating at each level how this was an idiosyncratic variation of the social codes of the time:

In burlesquing [the conventional style] Grimaldi turned up the wig at the back, wore a large ruffle instead of a lace collar and pulled the breeches above the knees so as to make them baggy and provide them room for pockets big enough to hold the legs of mutton, geese and other stolen goods. He exaggerated the 'clocks' on the stockings and the rosettes on the shoes and covered the costume with bright-coloured spots and patches.⁵⁴³

At each stage of this description, Wilson provides both the standard and Grimaldi's variation on it. Findlater initially recognises that 'Joey was, in some degree, a collective creation' and traces the influence of such figures as the 'rustic booby' of English comedy,

⁵⁴² *Professional Memoirs*, pp. 47-48.

⁵⁴³ *Story of Pantomime*, p. 47.

‘fools of the fair’ like Merry Andrew and Jack Pudding and the zanni of the *commedia dell’arte*. However he concludes that ‘in the last resort it was Grimaldi’s comic genius which inspired this novel character with immortal life’.⁵⁴⁴

As William Crosby Bennett notes, projecting character through clothes was also an important technique for Dickens: ‘a matter of clothes was generally an index to characterisation, and, like oddity of face or feature, eccentricity of motion or physique, he makes what was worn play an important part in arousing our pity, our laughter, or our disgust’.⁵⁴⁵ Similarly, Christine Huguet comments that Dickens was ‘an expert on clothing as an index of moral essence, a skill superbly used in the creation of characters’.⁵⁴⁶

In the transformative possibilities of Grimaldi’s onstage act Dickens would have seen a way to resist reductive categorisation based on appearance. He would incessantly explore this through his own characters, who, rather than adopting the sober and well-cut clothes of the respectable male gentleman, broke through the symbolic mode to express their own individuality through a variety of sartorial distinctions. The use of colour, the lack of fit, the move towards a shapelessness and the presence of various protuberances all break down the masculine expectation of the hermetically sealed and textureless male figure. Roland Barthes regards these elements as the differentiators between dress and costume. To Barthes, the essential markers of difference are such things as ‘how untidy a garment is, what it lacks, how it fits and how it is worn (crooked buttons, sleeves too long etc), improvised clothing, colour (except in special circumstances, like mourning), and the

⁵⁴⁴ Grimaldi, p. 154.

⁵⁴⁵ William Crosby Bennett, ‘Clothes as an Index to Character’, *The Dickensian* 35 (June 1939), p. 184.

⁵⁴⁶ Christine Huguet, ‘“There’s Not a Doubt of the Dress”: Changing Clothes in Dickens’s Fiction’, *The Dickensian* 132 (Spring 2006), p.24.

characteristic gestures of the wearer'.⁵⁴⁷ Dickens is attuned to the importance of these distinctions and repeatedly integrates them into his characterisation.

For example, the 'Cheap Jack' Doctor Marigold immediately introduces himself in terms of his clothing, describing himself as 'a middle-aged man of broadish build, in cords, leggings, and a sleeved waistcoat the strings of which is always gone behind'. He also notes that 'I am partial to a white hat, and I like a shawl around my neck wore loose and easy [and] if I have a taste in point of personal jewellery, it is mother-of-pearl buttons'. Alongside a brief explanation of his unusual first name Marigold feels that this provides an adequate summary of his character, as he rounds off the description with 'There you have me [...], as large as life'.⁵⁴⁸

Therefore rather than being what Bennett describes as 'clever finishing touches to individual characterisation' and Clair Hughes calls 'the reality effect', Dickens's dressing of his characters is shorthand for their personality or integral to one of the themes of the novel.⁵⁴⁹ For example, a number of Dickens's comic characters parody or burlesque the prevailing sartorial codes to express their deliberate resistance to conformity.

One such character is Young Bailey in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The first time we meet him is when the Misses Pecksniff visit Todgers's for Sunday tea, and here he is already resisting the standard codes of dress. He burlesques Sunday best and 'courting' attire by appearing in 'a complete suit of cast-off clothes several sizes too large for him' and 'a clean shirt of such extraordinary magnitude, that one of the gentlemen (remarkable for his ready wit) called him 'collars' on the spot'.⁵⁵⁰ Pratt describes Bailey as 'Dickens's unarticulated, and perhaps only partially realized, belief in the possibility of individual freedom', and clothing

⁵⁴⁷ Calefato, p. 8.

⁵⁴⁸ Charles Dickens, 'Doctor Marigold's Prescriptions: To Be Taken Immediately', *All the Year Round*, 7 December 1865, p. 573.

⁵⁴⁹ Bennett, p. 184; Hughes, p. 2.

⁵⁵⁰ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 145.

is one of the central manifestations of this.⁵⁵¹ Dickens explores the transformative power of clothing through Bailey's shape-changing later in the novel (which will be explored further in Section III of this chapter) but even before this he has already derived clownish humour from his dress.

In the same novel, we also have the tight suit of Tom Pinch; Pinch is 'dressed in a snuff-coloured suit, of an uncouth make at the best, which, being shrunken with long wear, was twisted and tortured into all kinds of odd shapes'.⁵⁵² This description seems to suggest that Tom is forced into that shape by his master Pecksniff, but as the narrative progresses it becomes a mark of Tom's individual integrity amidst so many figures artificially shaping themselves in the most acceptable way that they could. In the hypocritical Pecksniff household, the resolutely idiosyncratic Pinch joins Bailey in what Pratt calls a demonstration of 'the author's discontents with civilisation'.⁵⁵³

As noted earlier, Natalie McKnight also notes that such aberrant clothing choices are used by Dickens, claiming that he 'symbolically uses physical details of dress and mannerisms from the holy idiot tradition to develop a philosophy of the fool'.⁵⁵⁴ She identifies Barnaby Rudge's ragged clothing, with its multicoloured patches and paraphernalia of feathers and beads, as representative of his alignment with the holy or 'natural' fool. This archetypal figure is characterised by Sandra Billington as the witless man whose lack of artifice or human knowledge brings him closer to God. It is also possible to argue that Tom Pinch (who is regularly associated with the church through his organ-playing) has affinities with this type of character, moving as the holy innocent amidst so many false characters.

⁵⁵¹ Pratt, p. 185.

⁵⁵² *Chuzzlewit*, p. 16.

⁵⁵³ Pratt, p. 185.

⁵⁵⁴ McKnight, p. 5.

However a number of Dickens's other characters wear similar apparel in a way that also separates them from the mainstream but projects them into discourse as a different type of fool - the more knowing 'artificial' fool. In contrast to the 'natural' fool, this figure (typically personified as the court jester) was entirely self-aware. Sandra Billington notes that 'Kings and the nobility frequently kept simpleton Fools to remind themselves of their own mortality and imperfections', and King Lear's 'all-licens'd Fool' is perhaps the fictional apotheosis of this figure.⁵⁵⁵ Dickens's clownish characters also often adopt this jester/fool role and offer a critique of the activities and habits of those around them. One of the primary signifiers of this role is their choice of clothing.

At the simplest level the grotesque, tumbling and grimacing Bob Sawyer dresses like a clown, and on at least one occasion he fulfills the role of a jester. At the Saracen's Head, he becomes embroiled in a political discussion with Mr Pott, who sounds out anyone he meets on their preferred candidate for the Eatanswill election – either his favourite Samuel Slumkey of the Blue Party or Horatio Fizkin of the despised Buff Party.

When he meets Bob and Ben for the first time he interrogates them on the matter in his usual self-aggrandising fashion, asking '[A]re both [of you] imbued with those blue principles, which so long as I live, I have pledged myself to the peoples of these kingdoms to support and maintain?'. Bob hesitates, stating 'I don't exactly know about that ...', prompting Pott's worst fears: 'Not buff, Mr Pickwick ... your friend is not buff, sir?'. Bob's answer is disarmingly straightforward: 'No, no, ... I'm a kind of plaid at present; a compound of all sorts of colours'. Pott interprets this statement according to his own narrow conceptions, concluding that Bob is 'a waverer' but here Bob's uncomplicated

⁵⁵⁵ Billington, p. 12; William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, l.iv. 201, p. 1311.

attitude to life has punctured the pretensions of another character and exposed his lofty (yet flawed) ideas.⁵⁵⁶

Eigner similarly notes that Newman Noggs in *Nicholas Nickleby* 'looks and acts like a pantomime clown'.⁵⁵⁷ He recognises Noggs's clownish credentials in his attempt to deliver the lovers from the clutches of the Pantaloon (Ralph Nickleby) and the inappropriate suitor (Arthur Gride) and in his tremendous range of expressive gestures used to articulate his repressed emotions. Yet Eigner's analysis does not perhaps give sufficient weight to the role of Noggs's clothing in his characterisation. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, we are given a number of accounts of this dress which go beyond the mere descriptive and wholly reflect Barthes's sense of dress as a form of individual rebellion.

The language used to describe Noggs's attire the first time we meet him is strikingly similar to that used to describe Tom Pinch; Noggs wears 'a suit of clothes (if the term be allowable when they suited him not at all) much the worse for wear, very much too small, and placed upon such a short allowance of buttons that it was marvellous how he contrived to keep them on'.⁵⁵⁸ As well as the Pinch-like smallness we are immediately given the sense that this dress does not belong within the accepted bounds for one of Noggs's perceived position, and in the final clause we are also introduced to the magical possibilities of his appearance. His clothes do not conform to ordinary laws of tailoring and are more in keeping with the kind of sartorial laws that prevail in the pantomime.

Later on, we are introduced to another detail of Noggs's clothing that underscores these themes of non-conformity: the deliberate use of items of clothing in an inappropriate manner that approaches pantomime magic. Noggs removes a house key from his hat, 'in

⁵⁵⁶ *Pickwick*, p. 790.

⁵⁵⁷ Eigner, p. 156.

⁵⁵⁸ Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, ed. by Arthur Waugh and others (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch Press, 1938), pp. 8-9.

which, by-the-bye, in consequence of the dilapidated state of his pockets, he deposited everything'.⁵⁵⁹

Noggs here uses his hat in the same way that Grimaldi used his pockets as fantastically bottomless hold-alls for all manner of miscellaneous items. A number of commentators have noted the centrality of Grimaldi's pockets to his performance. For example, Gerald Frow notes how 'away [went] the monstrous booty into that leviathan pocket of his, that receptacle of all sorts of edibles and occasionally of kettles of boiling water and even of lighted candles'. His innovative costume as Guzzle the Drinking Clown was a 'new deep-pocketed, baggy and multi-coloured costume inspired by Dubois, that immediately made him stand out to the audiences' and in a number of popular prints he carries live animals or seemingly endless strings of sausages in his pockets.⁵⁶⁰

Another character whose clothing choice is evocative of that worn by Grimaldi is the comical servant Clemency Newcombe in *The Battle of Life* (1846). She initially appears to be wearing the motley of the clown, in this case 'a printed gown of many colours, and the most hideous pattern procurable for money'. This is accompanied by some enchanted footwear with a life of its own, like one of Grimaldi's re-animated objects: 'a prodigious pair of self-willed shoes, that never wanted to go where her feet went'.⁵⁶¹

The clownish nature of her clothing is underscored later in the narrative, in a series of episodes of comic business entirely peripheral to the main plot, but important for the pantomime character of this marginal figure. At one point she searches for a thimble in her pocket, which occasions this comic interlude:

⁵⁵⁹ *Nickleby*, p. 132.

⁵⁶⁰ Gerald Frow, *Oh Yes It Is!: A History of Pantomime* (London: BBC, 1985), p. 74; Norman Robbins, *Slapstick and Sausages* (Devon: Trapdoor Publications, 2002), pp. 72-73.

⁵⁶¹ *The Battle of Life*, in *Christmas Books*, p. 296.

How Clemency [...] held one pocket open, and looked down into its yawning depths for the thimble which wasn't there, - and how she then held an opposite pocket open, and seeming to descry it, like a pearl of great price, at the bottom, cleared away such intervening obstacles as a handkerchief, an end of wax candle, a flushed apple, an orange, a lucky penny, a cramp bone, a padlock, a pair of scissors in a sheath, more expressively describable as promising young shears, a handful or so of loose beads, several balls of cotton, a needle-case, a cabinet collection of curl-papers, and a biscuit, all of which articles she entrusted individually and separately to Britain to hold, - is of no consequence.⁵⁶²

The grotesque size of her pockets and the sheer accumulation of these objects (a mixture of the useful and ephemeral) build up the humour of the scene, which is rounded off with the comic revelation that she has coerced an unwilling accomplice to hold them as well. Dickens's final comment that it is 'of no consequence' inevitably draws attention to the incident, even though it propels the narrative no further forward, and in fact – much like parts of the harlequinade –diverts the reader away from it.

These pockets are also given the same freedom of movement as Grimaldi's clothing as they force Clemency into another feat of clownish gymnastics:

in her determination to grasp this pocket by the throat and keep it prisoner (for it had a tendency to swing, and twist itself round the nearest corner), she assumed, and calmly maintained, an attitude apparently inconsistent with the human anatomy and laws of gravity.⁵⁶³

⁵⁶² *Battle of Life*, p. 307.

⁵⁶³ *Battle of Life*, p. 307.

This comic business with her pockets is repeated later on: when asked to produce a letter delivered to Dr. Jeddler she searched for it, 'having had recourse to both her pockets – beginning with the right one, going away to the wrong one, and afterwards coming back to the right one again – produced a letter from the Post-office'.⁵⁶⁴

On a number of other occasions Clemency continues this battle with her clothing in order to keep it under control. Soon after her introduction we are told that she managed to maintain 'a kind of dislocated tidiness' by 'grasp[ing] herself sometimes by a sort of wooden handle (part of her clothing, and familiarly called a busk), and wrestle as it were with her garments, until they fell into a symmetrical arrangement'.⁵⁶⁵

Montague Tigg in *Martin Chuzzlewit* is a final character who deliberately plays on this idea of clothing as a reflection of personality. He is initially given the label of 'shabby-genteel' but his clothing constantly defies labelling and its idiosyncrasies are made apparent. We are told that 'his fingers were a long way out of his gloves', 'the soles of his feet were at an inconvenient distance from the upper leather of his boots' and that his nether garments were 'violent in its colours once' but are 'sobered now with age and dinginess'. Moreover these nether garments seem to have a life outside of Tigg's control as they 'were so stretched and strained in a tough conflict between his braces and his straps, that they appeared every moment in danger of flying asunder at the knees'. He also wears a coat 'in colour blue and a military cut' which is 'buttoned and frogged, up to his chin', and here Tigg has transformed a piece of costume into dress through the way he wears it as part of a heterogeneous ensemble.⁵⁶⁶ In this way Tigg resembles the clown-as-social performer, first presented in Alfred Jingle, with his shabby clothing (see Chapter 3 of this thesis). Tigg also suggests parallels with the dandy lover figure of pantomime as he ogles the three Miss

⁵⁶⁴ *Battle of Life*, p. 327.

⁵⁶⁵ *Battle of Life*, p. 296.

⁵⁶⁶ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 44.

Chuzzlewits, since 'notwithstanding his extreme shabbiness, [he] was still understood to be in some sort a lady's-man'.⁵⁶⁷

When he appears in his later incarnation of Tigg Montague, in a chapter tellingly entitled 'Showing that Old Friends may not only appear with New Faces, but in False Colours', he dresses quite differently. Now 'his clothes, symmetrically made, were of the newest fashion and the costliest kind. Flowers of gold and blue, and green and blushing red, were on his waistcoat; precious chains and jewels sparkled on his breast; his fingers, clogged with brilliant rings, were as unwieldy as summer flies but newly rescued from a honey-pot'. Dickens makes it clear that this man is already familiar to us; even if he had 'changed his name, and changed his outward surface', it was still 'the same Satanic, gallant, military Tigg', and although 'the brass was burnished, lacquered, newly stamped' it 'was the same true Tigg metal notwithstanding'.⁵⁶⁸ The distanced author here steps in and warns his readers and such an intervention, stated in such emphatic and over-wrought terms, suggests an anxious desire that the reader clearly recognises this figure for who he is. After all, the power of Tigg's transformation, primarily signalled through this change from dress into something closer to a symmetrical and fashionable costume is compelling. In contrast to his first appearance, when he could barely scrape together 'the ridiculously small amount of eighteenpence', he is now able to swindle major investors out of huge sums of money.⁵⁶⁹ Given this transformative power of cloth, it is perhaps no coincidence that a branch of the Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Life Insurance Company exists 'in a first-floor over a tailor's'.⁵⁷⁰ Dickens would explore this anxiety more thoroughly through the figure of Pip in *Great Expectations*, who also tries to transform himself and those around him through dress. This is discussed further in Section IV of this chapter.

⁵⁶⁷ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 59.

⁵⁶⁸ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 427.

⁵⁶⁹ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 51.

⁵⁷⁰ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 430.

III. Dressing to transform

As well as adapting costume to create dress, both Grimaldi and Dickens also explored the truly transformative possibilities of costume. This topic was a matter of wider debate throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century and was symptomatic of a social discomfort that arose as the class structure became less certain. Previously English society had relied upon clothing as a sound indicator of the class of its wearer – tailors only made clothes for those who could afford them and sumptuary laws acted as a check to keep the best garments within the confined elite. This meant that at the start of the eighteenth century Steele could confidently assert that ‘each by some particular in their dress shows to what class they belong’.⁵⁷¹ However as markets changed and manufacturers could produce more garments for an ever-growing group of people who could now afford them, clothing became a site of increasing social competition.

Thus if the relation between the garment and the wearer was as arbitrary as observers like Carlyle suggested, then the availability of a range of costume to the middle-classes meant that clothing could no longer be taken as a reliable index of class. As Neil McKendrick explains, ‘there was constant restless striving to clamber from one rank to the next’ and possessions ‘especially clothes, both symbolized and signalled each step in the social promotion’.⁵⁷² Improved social conditions meant that ‘where in the sixteenth century men longed to be able to follow fashion and ape the nobility and gentry, in the eighteenth century they were able to do so’.⁵⁷³

McKendrick notes a number of contemporary commentators who were concerned that this increased interest in fashion disturbed the strata of society. For example, in 1772 *The London Magazine* lamented that ‘the lower orders of the people (if there are any, for

⁵⁷¹ Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa Publications, 1982), p. 55.

⁵⁷² McKendrick, pp. 20-21.

⁵⁷³ McKendrick, p. 38.

distinctions are now confounded) are equally immersed in their fashionable vices' and three years later noted that 'whenever a thing becomes the mode it is universally and absurdly adopted from the garret to the kitchen, when it is only intended for some very few Belles in the first floor'.⁵⁷⁴ This disturbance did not pass quickly - in 1791 F.A.

Wendeborn felt that 'Dress is carried to the very utmost, and the changes it undergoes are more frequent than those of the moon [...] This rage for finery and fashion spreads from the highest to the lowest; and in public places [...] it is very difficult to guess at [people's] rank in society, or at the heaviness of their purse'. In 1817 William Davis noted that 'a fondness for Dress may be said to be the folly of the age, and it is to be lamented that it has nearly destroyed those becoming marks whereby the several classes of society were formerly distinguished'.⁵⁷⁵

Living in London, Grimaldi and Dickens were at the epicentre of these developments. As McKendrick explains London's population grew rapidly between 1600 and 1800 to become the largest European city and 'with 16 per cent of the total adult population being exposed to the influence of London's shops, London's lifestyle and the prevailing London fashions, its potential for influencing consumer behaviour was enormous'.⁵⁷⁶ He later describes London as 'the radiant centre of the fashion world and conspicuous consumption', a centre which used a variety of channels of circulation, including shops, exhibitions, turnpike roads and canals.⁵⁷⁷

Literature and theatre were also important channels of circulation. McKendrick comments that 'Rarely, if ever, has the fashionable imitation of so much of the rest of society been so

⁵⁷⁴ Letter to the Editor, *London Magazine or Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer*, July 1772, p. 321; [Anon.], 'Harlequin, No. XXVI', *London Magazine*, October 1775, p. 495.

⁵⁷⁵ F.A. Wendeborn, *A View of England Towards the Close of the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols (London: Robinson, 1791), I, p. 439; William Davis, *Friendly Advice to Industrious and Frugal Persons* (London: Bensley, 1817), p. 23.

⁵⁷⁶ McKendrick, p. 21.

⁵⁷⁷ McKendrick, p. 41.

frequently mocked, so accurately recorded and so pointedly revealed in so many different art forms' than during this period.⁵⁷⁸ Munns and Richards indicate that 'the masquerade and the stage, both sites of popular and elite social activities, provided ambiguous locales for the enactment of variable roles, genders, and nationalities', and Grimaldi's Clown also exploited the discursive opportunities that were created.⁵⁷⁹

Grimaldi's pantomimes were significant in this circulation of fashion, both through their commentary on the tastes of the times and their inclusion of the material objects that made up this world. Mayer comments that 'Commerce constitutes one of the firmest foundations of the nineteenth-century London harlequinade', and clothing was just one of the consumer products that formed this foundation, as real shop-signs and advertising bills were used as onstage props.⁵⁸⁰

Noting that the 'ability of the 'lower orders' to pass as their 'betters' through the mere purchase of fine clothing' was seen as 'both socially and economically detrimental', Munns and Richards explore the literature that was generated as a consequence of this concern for the prevailing social order.⁵⁸¹ One early example is *Moll Flanders* (1721), in which Moll and her husband (an 'amphibious Creature, this *Land-water thing*, call'd, a *Gentleman-Tradesman*') demonstrate how the lower orders can artificially elevate themselves by merely choosing the correct clothing.⁵⁸²

However such metamorphoses risked failure as clothes were, like language, often unstable signifiers and open to variable interpretations. Dickens himself was the victim of such an interpretation as a young apprentice. Ackroyd relates how he arrived for his first day at Ellis

⁵⁷⁸ McKendrick, p. 57.

⁵⁷⁹ Munns and Richards, p. 26.

⁵⁸⁰ *Harlequin*, p. 206.

⁵⁸¹ Munns and Richards, pp. 22-23.

⁵⁸² Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*, ed. by Liz Bellamy (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), p. 66.

and Blackmore 'in what was undoubtedly a brand-new uniform – a blue jacket and a 'military-looking cap which had a strap under the chin''. Here, as a lowly 'writing clerk', Dickens is already trying to transform himself into a more masculine and heroic figure through his costume. To add another personal flourish he carried his cap 'rather jauntily on one side of his head'. However this transformation soon backfired, as he returned from his first errand on Chancery Lane 'bearing a black eye'. As Ackroyd describes, 'Dickens explained to a fellow clerk that "a big blackguard fellow knocked my cap off as I was crossing over Chancery Lane [...] He said 'Halloa, sojer' which I could not stand, so I at once struck him and he then hit me in the eye"''.⁵⁸³

Dickens regularly inscribed scenes of such misinterpretation in his fiction, particularly in his early work. One such misreading occurs in the *Memoirs*, when Grimaldi was a young boy (described in Chapter 2 of this thesis). Grimaldi's father had dressed him as a 'gentleman' with a variety of theatrical props, yet the public reaction when he appeared on the streets reconfigured him as something more ridiculous – 'a 'monkey', a 'bear dressed for a dance' and a 'cat going out for a party'.⁵⁸⁴

In a parallel episode in *Oliver Twist*, the young protagonist suffers the same fate. Dressed in his new suit of clothes by Mr Brownlow to signal his change of status, Oliver is accosted on the street while running an errand and is designated as a 'young wretch' and 'little brute' by different members of the crowd.

He fares no better when arriving at Fagin's den as Charley Bates's mockery focuses on Oliver's new clothes:

⁵⁸³ Ackroyd, pp. 123-124.

⁵⁸⁴ *Memoirs*, I, p. 22.

‘Look at his togs, Fagin!’ said Charley, putting the light so close to his new jacket as nearly to set him on fire. ‘Look at his togs! – superfine cloth, and the heavy-swell cut!’⁵⁸⁵

Charley’s reference to the figure of the ‘heavy-swell’ further nuances this attack on Oliver as a sartorial one, for the heavy swell was a vulgarised version of the figure of dandy. This figure will be considered further in Section IV of this chapter.

However the Grimaldian Clown offered Dickens a successful model of sartorial metamorphosis through his endless inventions and re-inventions during the harlequinade. Juliet John has recognised that ‘selfhood [for the Clown] is not circumscribed but protean’ and part of this protean nature relates to Clown’s ability and propensity to put on and take off a variety of different costumes in order to become different people.⁵⁸⁶ The surreal and improvisational essence of the harlequinade and Grimaldi’s interpretation of it mean that Clown adopts more costumes and more identities than any other figure within the pantomime form. As a number of Dickens’s comic characters adopted the same sorts of costumes to make similar points.

In *Harlequin in His Element* Grimaldi gets a watchman drunk and then ‘determines on a frolic, which commences by stripping the watchman and clothing himself in the greatcoat and hat’.⁵⁸⁷ After stealing his other accoutrements of authority (his lantern and rattle) Grimaldi parades the stage in such a convincing performance that Harlequin requests a wake-up call for the following morning. Here Grimaldi suggests that anyone can become a watchman merely by donning the appropriate clothing.

⁵⁸⁵ *Twist*, p. 111.

⁵⁸⁶ John, p. 12.

⁵⁸⁷ *Element*, p. 16.

On several occasions Dickens's criticism of authority figures adopts a similar form as he makes it clear that these figures carry no intrinsic or 'natural' bearing of authority, and derive it solely from their costume and accompanying props. William Bennett notes that Dickens was 'usually inclined to regard the relationship of dress to dignity rather dubiously' and parish beadies are particularly targeted for scorn.⁵⁸⁸ For example, Mr Grummer in *The Pickwick Papers* is originally described as 'an elderly individual in top-boots' whose 'mode of proceeding was professional, but peculiar' and involves an elaborate ritual of removing his hat and wiping his head with a handkerchief. He only makes his office clear to Pickwick when he produces 'from the breast-pocket of his coat, a short truncheon surmounted with a brazen crown, with which he beckoned to Mr Pickwick with a grave and ghost-like air'.⁵⁸⁹

However, Mr Bumble is Dickens's most sustained study of the beadie. Bumble is a naturally weak man and so constantly draws attention to his clothing in order to reassert his perceived authority and reassure himself of it. When he goes to collect Oliver from the baby-farming nurse Mrs Mann, he attempts to assert his authority over her through reference to his clothing. As he sits down in the parlour he:

officially deposited his cocked hat and cane on the table before him. Mr Bumble wiped from his forehead the perspiration which his walk had engendered; glanced complacently at the cocked hat; and smiled. Yes, he smiled. Beadies are but men; and Mr Bumble smiled.⁵⁹⁰

Bumble's symbolic investment of power into his clothes is such that when Oliver appears in the room, the 'green' and unworldly boy is unsure where the real authority lies. When he is

⁵⁸⁸ Bennett, p. 184.

⁵⁸⁹ *Pickwick*, p. 362.

⁵⁹⁰ *Twist*, p. 22.

asked to bow to Bumble, he makes a bow 'which was divided between the beadle on the chair, and the cocked-hat on the table'.⁵⁹¹

When Bumble is made master of the workhouse Dickens further underscores how his previous office of beadle was entirely dependent on his clothing. Dickens signals Bumble's change in station through a change in costume, noting that his appearance 'announced that a great change had taken place in the position of his affairs'. His new costume is contrasted with his old as Dickens illustrates how 'the coat' and 'the breeches' have been replaced with different ones and the 'mighty cocked-hat was replaced by a modest round one'.

Dickens then includes a passage which closely echoes Carlyle's discussion of the men in red and blue:

There are some promotions in life, which, independent of the more substantial rewards they offer, acquire peculiar value and dignity from the coats and waistcoats connected with them. A field-marshal has his uniform; a bishop his silk apron; a counsellor his silk gown; a beadle his cocked-hat. Strip the bishop of his apron, or the beadle of his hat and lace; what are they? Men. Mere men. Dignity, and even holiness, too, sometimes, are more questions of coat and waistcoat than some people imagine.

Thus another 'beadle had come into power; and on him the cocked-hat, gold-laced coat, and staff, had all three descended'.⁵⁹² Bumble's weakness and ineptitude throughout the narrative make it apparent that he is wholly unsuitable for any position of authority. Thus while Grimaldi punctures authority by dressing his clown in the robes of authority, Dickens does the reverse, stripping off those robes to reveal the clown beneath.

⁵⁹¹ *Twist*, p. 23.

⁵⁹² *Twist*, pp. 239-240.

The French wars with Napoleon provided a wide range of material for Grimaldi's ever-topical harlequinades. In *Harlequin and the Swans; or, The Bath of Beauty* (Covent Garden, 1813) he assembles an 'awkward squad' from everyday items – ale barrels, broomsticks, funnels and so on –and also creating for himself 'a rattling, shiny uniform of saucepan lids and dish-covers'.⁵⁹³ In *Harlequin and the Red Dwarf*, he combined this with another of his stage tricks of construction and once again converted a costume (the soldier's uniform) into a dress, a unique and idiosyncratic projection of the ego, by using a variety of everyday objects to create it.

According to one *Times* review this feat was prompted by the passing of 'A Hussar officer, in all the extravagant and foolish finery of the corps'; 'Clown [was] determined to be a hero and a Hussar in his own person' and so built his own version of the military uniform. He created a pair of boots from 'two black varnished coal-scuttles', heeled with 'two real horseshoes' and spurred with candlesticks. Moreover, he

equipped his legs in an [*sic*] uniform almost as clattering, unwieldy, and absurd, as the most irresistible of our whiskered *propugnatores*. A white bear-skin formed his pelisse, a muff his cap, and a black tippet finished his toilet, by giving him a beard, whiskers and pendant mustaches [*sic*].⁵⁹⁴

Here Grimaldi creates something akin to Dick Hebdige's concept of 'bricolage', which Hebdige uses to explain how subcultural styles (like those of the teddy boys or punks) are constructed. According to Hebdige, such groups created a new and anarchic style 'when they appropriated another range of commodities by placing them in a symbolic ensemble which served to erase or subvert their original straight meanings'.⁵⁹⁵ As part of his act, the

⁵⁹³ Frow, p. 78.

⁵⁹⁴ *Times*, 5 January 1813, p. 3.

⁵⁹⁵ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), p. 103; p. 104.

'random' items would have been carefully selected, assembled and disassembled beforehand, but they nonetheless have a disparate range of original uses and collect together on his body to create the recognisable 'sign' of a military hussar.

This elaborate turn became a popular subject for prints such as this one:



Figure 17: William Heath, 'Grimaldi's Bold Dragoon in the Popular Pantomime of Red Dwarf' (1812), Victoria and Albert Museum

The *Times* reviewer also noted that the audience laughed uproariously 'in the spirit of general contempt of these miserable imitations of foreign foppery', as they saw Clown 'turn the favourite invention of the mighty, and the wise, and the warlike, into merited ridicule'.⁵⁹⁶

In her analysis of Major Pendennis's elaborate male military uniform in Thackeray's *Pendennis* (1848-50), Clair Hughes feels that such highly colourful and intricate (yet thoroughly impractical) costumes are representative of a situation whereby 'traditional

⁵⁹⁶ *Times*, 5 January 1813, p. 3.

masculine aggression has become ritualized, sentimentalized and confused with colourful dressing up'.⁵⁹⁷ Grimaldi's hussar seems to support this idea, because his uniform combines the overtly masculine and the feminine, from the blacksmith's wares of coal-scuttles and horseshoes to the tippet (associated with the clergy or later female dress) and muff.

Grimaldi's hussar also underscores and develops the theme of the grotesque based on Bakhtin's "'carnival and culinary" anatomy' (discussed in Chapter 4).⁵⁹⁸ Here the everyday objects of life are given prominence in the carnival procession, during which oversized foodstuffs such as giant sausages and buns are attended by a convoy of guards wielding oven forks, poker, roasting spits, cooking pots and pans as weapons. In this way usage, as well as meaning, becomes inverted in the carnivalesque as objects are 'turned inside out [and] utilized in the wrong way, contrary to their common use'.⁵⁹⁹ In his hussar routine Grimaldi reflects this through using objects 'in the wrong way', and by inverting the soldier's costume into a collection of miscellaneous and quotidian objects. In *Harlequin Gulliver; or, The Flying Island* (Covent Garden, 1817) he created a dress from a plum pudding, a coal scuttle and an iron stovepipe.⁶⁰⁰

As well as designing his own fashions, Grimaldi also clothed other people through his tricks of reanimation. In *Harlequin in His Element*, he stole a variety of commercial goods from shops and passing tradespeople to compose his own hybrid creation:

They cross the stage – the Clown comes behind the Beadle and steals his large hat, clapping a bunch of turnips in the stead, on the bushy wig of this important personage.

⁵⁹⁷ Hughes, p. 52.

⁵⁹⁸ Bakhtin, p. 196.

⁵⁹⁹ Bakhtin, p. 411.

⁶⁰⁰ Moody, p. 224.

The Clown then places the boots erect, puts the box he has taken from the Milliner, on the top of them, attaches a long glove on each side for arms, the piece of Salmon for the head, and the whole is surmounted by the Beadle's hat – thus forming a curious figure.

Harlequin enters, and strikes it with his wand, the salmon is transformed into a perfect face, and the figure nods at the Clown, who is struck with terror on perceiving this sign of animation in the puppet of his own manufacture.⁶⁰¹

Miles also describes how Grimaldi's sartorial improvisation was often combined with his other favourite activity of stealing:

a dandy passes - he abstracts his coat tails: a miller - he steals a sack: he has stolen yonder chimney pot, and made a hat; taken that dandizette's shawl and converted it into a waistcoat; the sack becomes white ducks; the tails render the jacket coat; a cellar-door iron ring forms an eye-glass; and he moves, an admirable caricature of the prevailing fashion of the day.⁶⁰²

Although Shelley's *Frankenstein* was still eleven years away Grimaldi obliquely pre-empted her narrative of reanimation with a slightly fantastical array of components. A later *Times* review of Grimaldi's career recognises this, when it notes how Grimaldi 'was a sort of Shakspeare [*sic*] in his way, - he exhausted natural monsters, and then 'imagined new'. *Frankenstein* was nothing to him'.⁶⁰³

⁶⁰¹ *Element*, p. 21.

⁶⁰² Miles, pp. 6-7.

⁶⁰³ 'Drury Lane', *The Times*, 27 December 1828, p. 3.

He performs a similar routine in *Harlequin and Asmodeus, or Cupid on Crutches* (Covent Garden, 1810), in which he creates a 'grotesque figure' from vegetables at Covent Garden market:



Figure 18: Rudolph Ackermann, 'Mr Grimaldi as Clown in the Popular Pantomime of Harlequin and Asmodeus' (1811), Victoria and Albert Museum

The reanimation of the inanimate is developed within the context of clothing in both *Sartor Resartus* and one of Dickens's early *Sketches*, 'Meditations in Monmouth Street' (1836). In *Sartor Teufelsdröckh* treats the idea of empty, or 'cast', clothes with a holy reverence:

With awe-struck heart I walk through that Monmouth Street, with its empty
Suits, as through a Sanhedrim of stainless Ghosts. Silent are they, but
expressive in their silence: the past witnesses and instruments of Woe and Joy,

of Passions, Virtues, Crimes, and all the fathomless tumult of Good and Evil in
 'the Prison men call Life'.⁶⁰⁴

He believes that empty clothes are simultaneously imaginary and symbolic, reflecting the past of the individual life but now representing something more universal in their own 'afterlife'. To Teufelsdröckh they are 'those Shells and outer Husks of the Body, wherein no devilish passion any longer lodges, but only the pure emblem and effigies of Man'.⁶⁰⁵

Catherine Spooner suggests that Dickens's sketch follows a similar argument. When she comments that the empty clothes that Dickens describes 'have more substance than their wearers, real or imaginary: they are able to button up 'of their own accord' and 'put themselves on'', she is referring to their historical and metaphorical substance, as well as the physical.⁶⁰⁶ The clothes displayed in this 'burial-place of the fashions' or the 'extensive groves of the illustrious dead' represent the life story-texts of their owners to be read by the musing sketch-writer on the street-corner.⁶⁰⁷ For example, one set of clothes displayed together prompts him to comment that 'There was the man's whole life written as legibly on those clothes, as if we had his autobiography engrossed on parchment before us'.⁶⁰⁸

Here Dickens performs an act of necromancy and reanimation by merely observing a set of clothes and fitting 'a deceased coat, then a dead pair of trousers, and anon the mortal remains of a gaudy waistcoat, upon some being of our own conjuring up, and endeavouring, from the shape and fashion of the garment itself, to bring its former owner before our mind's eye'.⁶⁰⁹ The rest of the sketch narrates the lives, interests, circumstances

⁶⁰⁴ *Sartor*, p. 178.

⁶⁰⁵ *Sartor*, p. 177.

⁶⁰⁶ Spooner, pp. 50-51.

⁶⁰⁷ Charles Dickens, 'Meditations in Monmouth Street', in *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 76-82 (p. 76).

⁶⁰⁸ 'Meditations', p. 78.

⁶⁰⁹ 'Meditations', p. 78.

and even eventual fate of long-departed people, all surmised from the clothes that they may have worn.

Cruikshank's print underscores and develops these themes from Dickens's text:



Figure 19: George Cruikshank, 'Monmouth Street' (1836), 'Mediations on Monmouth Street'

In this picture the conflation between the actual human figures and the sets of clothes arranged for display makes it difficult for the viewer to differentiate between them, a problem exacerbated by the wreaths of smoke enveloping at least one of the filled sets of clothes and several of the 'empty' sets. Moreover, the insubstantiality of the children's clothing at the front of the picture can be contrasted with the more detailed rendering of the boy's 'skeleton suit' in the top left-hand corner of the picture.

F.S. Schwarzbach feels that a comparison between these two works 'raises some interesting speculations about the overall character of their relationship'.⁶¹⁰ He asserts that Dickens's response to the same street of second-hand clothes shops is 'more intuitive [than Carlyle's], but no less effective', and constructs a case based on the similarity between the episode from *Sartor* and 'Meditations' to suggest that Dickens had read Carlyle much earlier than previously thought.⁶¹¹

But what is most significant here is Schwarzbach's suggestion of how Dickens adapted Carlyle's ideas to his own purpose. He believes that 'Carlyle's abstract generalisations, and prophetic invocations, become concrete in Dickens's sketch: the suggestions are dramatised into an actual story, with characters and incidents whose impact is very nearly identical'. Thus Dickens 'translates an image, perhaps even a phrase, of the sage into an incident with all the richness and variety of life'.⁶¹² However Dickens did not confine this idea to a brief sketch at the start of his career, and returned to it again and again in his work, as he reanimated inanimate clothes and other objects - like Grimaldi in the harlequinade.

For example, a character who may have frequented the second-hand clothes shops of Monmouth Street is Mrs Gamp from *Martin Chuzzlewit*. We are told that

She wore a very rusty black gown, rather the worse for snuff, and a shawl and bonnet to correspond. In these dilapidated articles of dress she had, on principle, arrayed herself, time out of mind, on such occasions as the present; for they at once expressed a decent amount of veneration for the deceased, and invited the next of kin to present her with a fresher suit of weeds: an

⁶¹⁰ Schwarzbach, 'Dickens and Carlyle Again: A Note on an Early Influence', *The Dickensian* 53 (Summer 1978).

⁶¹¹ Schwarzbach, p. 152.

⁶¹² Schwarzbach, p. 153.

appeal so frequently successful, that the very fetch and ghost of Mrs. Gamp, bonnet and all, might be seen hanging up, any hour in the day, in at least a dozen of the second-hand clothes shops about Holborn.⁶¹³

In a city populated by hypocrites and actors of all kinds, Mrs Gamp assumes respectability and professionalism in her ministrations as a private nurse and can perform ‘swoons of different sorts’ depending on the circumstances.⁶¹⁴ Her clothing choice is deliberately calculated for her own personal gain, as she recognises the symbolic power of clothing (particularly mourning costumes) and yet also manages to impose the imaginary upon them (through details like the snuff stains).

Suits of animated empty clothes regularly recur in Dickens’s work. Fagin meditates in the condemned cell like ‘Boz’ had meditated on Monmouth Street, imagining the hanging of murderers: ‘With what a rattling noise they went down; and how suddenly they changed, from strong and vigorous men to dangling heaps of clothes’.⁶¹⁵ Dickens would return to this image when describing the hanging of George Manning and his wife, describing them as ‘a limp, loose suit of clothes as if the man had gone out of them; the woman’s, a fine shape, so elaborately corseted and artfully dressed, that it was quite unchanged in its trim appearance as it slowly swung from side to side’.⁶¹⁶

Dickens’s characters remain associated with their clothes after they have died or temporarily vacated them, giving them an independent existence like the enchanted clothes of Monmouth Street. John Carey feels that ‘Dickens’ imagination is mostly engaged’ in ‘the border country between people and things’ and clothes are an important trope in

⁶¹³ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 315.

⁶¹⁴ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 787.

⁶¹⁵ *Twist*, pp. 352-353.

⁶¹⁶ Charles Dickens, ‘Lying Awake’, *Household Words*, 30 October 1852, p. 146.

this regard.⁶¹⁷ According to Carey ‘the novels spend more time describing clothes than describing people’ because to Dickens ‘people are, largely, their clothes’.⁶¹⁸

In his novels Dickens plays the invisible Clown himself, reanimating the inanimate in a variety of ways and operating on that borderline between the living person and the object. To do this, he often draws on what John Carey calls ‘the enchantment’ and ‘rich humanity of improvised junk’ in a manner reminiscent of tricks of construction.⁶¹⁹ As Carey outlines, depictions of miscellaneous household material are often ambivalent images within Dickens’s work and represent both the squalid disorder that Dickens abhorred in his own life and the possibility to improvise and gratify ‘the amiable human impulse to fabricate comfort and order out of junk’.⁶²⁰

It sometimes seems like his characters are not wholly human but mere approximations, or *bricolages* of objects assembled into a coherent whole like Grimaldi’s vegetable men. The description of the clothing that Mrs Gamp wears for ‘night-watching’ her sick patient is a typical act of clownish improvisation. Her yellow nightcap is ‘of prodigious size’ and ‘in shape resembling a cabbage’ and she wears this to replace another piece of artificial semi-animate headwear, ‘a row of bald old curls that could scarcely be called false, they were so very innocent of anything approaching to deception’. She completes this ensemble with a watchman’s coat (one of Grimaldi’s favourite articles of costume/dress), which enables both a transformation and an act of reanimation:

⁶¹⁷ John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens’s Imagination* (London: Faber, 1991), p. 101.

⁶¹⁸ Carey, p. 89.

⁶¹⁹ Carey, p. 49.

⁶²⁰ Carey, p. 50.

Finally, she produced a watchman's coat, which she tied round her neck by the sleeves, so that she became two people; and looked, behind, as if she were in the act of being embraced by one of the old patrol.⁶²¹

Like the science-defying laws of the harlequinade, Dickens's imagination enables Mrs Gamp to become two people at once, revert to be just herself again, and finally perform a comic *pas a deux* with a watchman's ghost. In an interface between the material and the symbolic (which Cunningham calls the 'curiously mixed existence' of dress), her coat and embrace associate her with the watch as an institution and so offers an ironic commentary on her own incompetence in 'watching' the sick.⁶²²

Dickens does not always present pure *bricolage*, for sometimes the assembled objects have a running theme within them in order to enhance their overall symbolic power. In *Dombey and Son* the description of Mr Bunsby, Captain Cuttle's nautical acquaintance, is framed in a way that simultaneously composes and decomposes him, as Dickens draws attention to his constructed nature:

Immediately there appeared, coming slowly up above the bulk-head of the cabin, another bulk-head – human, and very large – with one stationary eye in the mahogany face, and one revolving one, on the principle of some light-houses. This head was decorated with shaggy hair, like oakum [...] The head was followed by a perfect desert of chin, and by a shirt-collar and neckerchief, and by a dreadnought pilot coat, and by a pair of dreadnought pilot trousers, whereof the waistband was so very broad and high, that it became a

⁶²¹ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 412.

⁶²² Cunningham, p. 82.

succedaneum for a waistcoat: being ornamented near the wearer's breast-bone with some massive wooden buttons, like backgammon men.⁶²³

Here Dickens collects a variety of seafaring objects – a bulk-head, oakum, a sailor's costume, the lamp of a light-house and so on - to create an appropriately nautical character, just as Grimaldi had used appropriate items from the vegetable market to create a companion.

A more ghastly example of the inanimate reanimated is Mrs Skewton in the same novel.

Every day she has to be composed and decomposed by her maid, who uses false teeth, false hair and numerous other appendages to transform her mistress from 'a slovenly bundle, in a greasy flannel gown' into a presentable 'painted object' and vice versa.⁶²⁴

When she finally dies of a stroke, she reverts to being a collection of inanimate objects again: 'arrayed in full dress, with the diamonds, short-sleeves, rouge, curls, teeth, and other juvenility all complete [...] like a horrible doll which had tumbled down'.⁶²⁵

Sometimes Dickens uses his exploration of this borderline between inanimate and animate in order to underscore the moral inhumanity of his villains with a corresponding physical inhumanity. In *Hard Times* the unfeeling natures of Bounderby and Gradgrind are supported by metaphors and similes which indicate that these characters are less than entirely organic compositions. For example Gradgrind's hair is 'a plantation of firs to keep the wind from the shining surface' of his head, which was 'like the crust of a plum pie'.⁶²⁶ In response to the question 'who was Mr Bounderby?', Dickens dehumanises the pompous industrialist and tells the reader what Mr Bounderby is literally made from: he is a 'man made out of a coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of

⁶²³ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Alan Horsman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 325.

⁶²⁴ *Dombey*, p. 381.

⁶²⁵ *Dombey*, p. 507.

⁶²⁶ *Hard Times*, p. 5.

him' and has 'a pervading appearance on him of being inflated like a balloon, and ready to start'.⁶²⁷ This idea of Bounderby as a balloon develops through the narrative as his bombast continues to inflate him to yet greater limits. On the verge of another of his outbursts he 'swelled to such an extent' and when 'Mrs Pegler' reveals herself to be his mother he 'had every moment swelled larger and larger'.⁶²⁸ Dickens opts for another hair-related simile when, during another angry spell, Bounderby's hair becomes 'like a hayfield wherein his windy anger was boisterous'.⁶²⁹

Schlicke notes that this allusion to pantomime transformation is a hint towards the pervasive nature of the powers of fancy and the imagination, and the uncontainable nature of the circus spirit.⁶³⁰ At one point these powers of transformation seem to have worked on Bounderby's hat, for on discovering that the bank has been robbed he discusses the matter with Harthouse and 'with his hat in his hand, gave a beat upon the crown at every little division of his sentences, as if were a tambourine' before he finally puts it on his head 'like an oriental dancer'.⁶³¹ Dickens has transformed Bounderby into a circus entertainer, without Bounderby himself being aware of it, and while he tries to oppose everything that the circus stands for ('art and fiction and the whole tradition of story and metaphor' as Cunningham puts it), he nonetheless becomes part of those things himself and becomes 'a gargantuan mess of fictions'.⁶³²

While many of these characters are unconsciously transformed into clowns by their creator, Young Bailey in *Martin Chuzzlewit* is wholly aware of the transformative possibilities of clothing. After leaving Todgers, Bailey becomes employed as a footman by

⁶²⁷ *Hard Times*, p. 15.

⁶²⁸ *Hard Times*, p. 181; p. 196.

⁶²⁹ *Hard Times*, p. 181.

⁶³⁰ Schlicke, p. 179.

⁶³¹ *Hard Times*, pp. 140-141.

⁶³² Cunningham, p. 134; p. 138.

Montague Tigg and adopts a uniform appropriate to his elevation from boot-boy at a cheap boarding-house to footman of one of London's leading businessmen. However, his clownish impulses cannot be restrained, and he performs a comic routine to demonstrate the inherently hollow and ridiculous nature of costume. When he first becomes a 'young gentleman in livery', he keenly points out his new garb to his friend Poll Sweedlepipe, going 'round and round in circles, for the better exhibition of his figure'.⁶³³

Pratt describes how Bailey 'is beyond both occupational categories and expected norms of behaviour' and here he turns his costume into dress through the way in which he wears it.⁶³⁴ Unlike the inscrutable 'Mercury in powder' of *Bleak House* and the disdainful Chief Butler of *Little Dorrit*, Bailey constantly draws attention to his new clothes. Like the clown promenading the stage he puts 'his hands into the pockets of his white cord breeches, swaggering along at [his friend's] side' and engages his awestruck audience in some boastful repartee:

'D'ye know a pair of top-boots when you see 'em, Polly? – look here!'

'Beau-ti-ful!' cried Mr Sweedlepipe.

'D'ye know a slap-up sort of button, when you see it?' said the youth. 'Don't look at mine, if you ain't a judge, because these lions' heads was made for men of taste: not snobs'.

"Beau-ti-ful!" cried the barber again. 'A grass-green frock-coat, too, bound with gold! and a cockade in your hat'.

⁶³³ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 417.

⁶³⁴ Pratt, p. 186.

'I should hope so,' replied the youth. 'Blow the cockade, though; for, except that it don't turn round, it's like the wentilator that used to be in the kitchen winder at Todgers's'.⁶³⁵

These clothes palpably elevate Bailey in Paul's estimation (despite Bailey's encouragement) and through a pantomimic transformation Bailey switches between the imaginary and symbolic modes of appearance. We are told that Paul 'was so perfectly confounded by [Bailey's] precocious self-possession, and his patronising manner, as well as by his boots, cockade, and livery, that a mist swam before his eyes', and he saw not the old boot-boy Bailey from Todgers, but 'a highly-condensed embodiment of all the sporting grooms in London'. At this point Bailey transcends to a more abstract, symbolic level and becomes 'an inexplicable creature' and 'a breeched and booted Sphinx'.⁶³⁶ Pratt feels that Dickens's narrative in *Martin Chuzzlewit* often suggests that Bailey is 'the wise man and [it is] the world that is acting the part of the fool', and here his actions offer an oblique commentary on the actions of his master Tigg Montague.⁶³⁷ Montague in turn has been entirely transformed, by his clothing and gestures, from the scrounging chancer that we first meet into a respected man of business. The laughter directed towards Bailey can be classified as Bergson's corrective laughter because Bailey is pointing out the folly of his supposed betters, and by doing so he traces a direct line to another of Dickens's young clown apprentices, Trabb's boy in *Great Expectations* (who will be discussed in Section IV).

The description of Young Bailey as 'a highly-condensed embodiment of all the sporting grooms in London' brings us close to Grimaldi's representations of the sporting dandies (also discussed in Section IV). He further reinforces this impression with a variety of comic gymnastics: while talking to Paul, he performs 'a straddling action of the white cords, a

⁶³⁵ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 418.

⁶³⁶ *Chuzzlewit*, pp. 419-420.

⁶³⁷ Pratt, p. 190.

bend of the knees, and a jerking-forth of the top-boots'.⁶³⁸ He later impudently repeats this in front of Jonas Chuzzlewit when he comes to visit Bailey's master, performing his 'favourite action of the knees and boots'.⁶³⁹ His return from the dead at the end of the novel, after seemingly being killed in Tigg's coaching 'accident', is equally comical and draws attention to his appearance once again: 'a something in top-boots, with his head bandaged up, staggered into the room, and began going round and round and round, apparently under the impression that it was walking straight forward'.⁶⁴⁰ Without even knowing his name, the 'top-boots' are such an integral part of Bailey's identity that he can become a nameless 'something' and still be recognisable.

IV. The dandy as clown

Critics have often read *Sartor Resartus* as thoroughly opposed to dandyism; for example, James Laver places Carlyle firmly in the camp of 'anti-dandiacals' at *Fraser's Magazine* and Moers describes *Sartor* as 'the Victorian epitaph for Regency dandyism'.⁶⁴¹ Moers traces its role within the magazine's wider manifesto to put down 'Lytton-Bulwerism, Colburn-and-Bentleyism, Pelhamites and Exclusivites' and all purveyors of 'cant and humbug, - of fraud, folly, and foppery'.⁶⁴²

However it can be argued that its often ambiguous tone reflects a more nuanced and ambivalent attitude towards the figure of the dandy. Clair Hughes cites Moers discussion of this confusion and comments that 'while frivolity of dress was clearly 'wrong'', Victorian men found 'something attractive, even nostalgic' in the way that the dandy 'made a success (however despicable and trivial) of *absolute selfishness*'.⁶⁴³

⁶³⁸ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 419.

⁶³⁹ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 448.

⁶⁴⁰ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 809.

⁶⁴¹ James Laver, *Dandies* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), p. 85; Moers, p. 178.

⁶⁴² Moers, p. 170.

⁶⁴³ Hughes, p. 51.

This ambivalence has been explored further by Sima Godfrey, who describes ‘the essential paradox of the Dandy’ as his position as ‘a man who is at once ridiculous and yet dictates fashion’, and *Sartor* certainly encompasses both of these attitudes.⁶⁴⁴ Both Grimaldi and Dickens are attracted to this figure for precisely the same reason – while he could be easily presented as a comic figure, whose grotesqueness was easily lampooned, his perceived carelessness to the dictates of society also made him a possible outlet for imaginative release.

However, Moers limits Dickens’s dandy figures to two types, based on a conventional chronological reading and division of Dickens’s novels. The first type encompasses his theatrical dandy-villain stereotypes like Mulberry Hawk and Sir John Chester, who Moers describes as ‘aliens from stage melodrama and stage farce’, and are given scant consideration due to their perceived lack of depth.⁶⁴⁵

The second group contains Dickens’s ‘grey men’, who Moers finds more interesting as the product of the author’s misgivings about his own social position and his consequent attempts to define himself through dress. She asserts that ‘Dickens, disappointed in his success, expressed the tragedy of failure in the form of the dandy – the man who had failed to find a function, but was important nonetheless by the shape of his existence’.⁶⁴⁶ These ambiguous figures are neither heroes nor villains (and have been read as ‘Byronic’ heroes) and include James Harthouse, Eugene Wrayburn and Henry Gowan.⁶⁴⁷ These later figures would certainly seem to follow the historical arc of the dandy, who developed from Carlyle’s ‘clothes-wearing man’ to become Baudelaire’s intellectual and artistic stance.

⁶⁴⁴ Sima Godfrey, ‘The Dandy as Ironic Figure’, *SubStance*, 11.36 (1982), p. 24.

⁶⁴⁵ Moers, p. 229.

⁶⁴⁶ Moers, p. 16.

⁶⁴⁷ See for example William R. Harvey, ‘Charles Dickens and the Byronic Figure’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 24.3 (December 1969).

Yet this reading discounts a whole troupe of dandy-esque clowns from across Dickens's work who represent success rather than failure in their efforts to liberate themselves from the mores of society. A number of critics have noted the 'protean' nature of dandies and the importance they place on 'presentation as a spectacle', and so the final section of this chapter will explore the close affinity between Dickens's dandies and the shape-shifting figure of the pantomime clown.⁶⁴⁸

As well as using costume as a means of individual liberation and transformation, Grimaldi often included a few topical hits in his routines. A.E. Wilson notes that his trademark costume 'burlesqued the style of the day' and Findlater supports this by claiming that he was 'burlesquing the latest fashions' in the spirit of fun, rather than offering a more sustained and thoughtful 'parody of fashionable dress'.⁶⁴⁹ Mayer also echoes this view, for while he feels that pantomime's treatment of fashion produced some of its 'most persistent and effective satire', he also recognises that this satire was 'good-natured in tone', and offered 'amused antagonism rather than the nervous aggression which characterized other pantomime satire'.⁶⁵⁰

Moreover Grimaldi's treatment of dandies develops the clownish grotesque in another direction. As Jane Moody explains, 'fashion is cleverly represented both as a form of excessive physical consumption, and also as an activity entailing grotesque bodily contortion'.⁶⁵¹ This was the alternative side of dandyism that Dickens explored, for besides the social malaise of young dilettantes, he also saw the comical potential of such over-dressed and over-refined men.

⁶⁴⁸ Reginia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace* (Stanford, CA : Stanford University Press, 1986), p. 68; Susan Fillin-Yeh, 'Introduction', *Dandies: Fashion and Finesse in Art and Culture*, ed. by Susan Fillin-Yeh (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), pp. 1-34 (p. 2).

⁶⁴⁹ *Christmas Pantomime*, p. 111; *Grimaldi*, p. 141.

⁶⁵⁰ *Harlequin*, p. 165.

⁶⁵¹ Moody, p. 224.

Mayer explains how Grimaldi incorporated dandyism into his routines in three ways: through the character of Dandy Lover, through a burlesque of dandy fashions and finally through ridiculing dandy fads and manias.⁶⁵² This discussion will focus on the first two of these elements, as they pay the closest attention to clothing and also have the most affinity with Dickens's work.

Mayer describes Dandy Lover as 'the foolish, vain, and insipid young man personifying the deservedly spurred suitor', and this role was performed by both Grimaldi and his son 'JS' (for example in *Harlequin and Cinderella* and *Harlequin and Friar Bacon* (both Covent Garden, 1820)).⁶⁵³ Eigner notes that 'The two characters, Dandy Lover and Clown, were both played by Grimaldi and were never very far apart in Dickens' imagination' and also traces the role of the Dandy Lover in Dickens's novels.⁶⁵⁴ Eigner confines himself to workings of plot and traces a number of inappropriate suitor-heroes in Dickens's work such as Dick Swiveller, Mr Toots and Eugene Wrayburn. Yet Grimaldi's improvisational and anarchic spirit meant that he was never confined by the dictates of plot, and nor was Dickens's prodigious imagination.

For example, Eigner characterises John Chivery as 'the sad Clown of *Little Dorrit*' and briefly considers his purpose in the plot development, as he renounces his love for Amy and leaves the way clear for the more acceptable choice of Arthur Clennam.⁶⁵⁵ However Chivery's clownishness also demonstrates close affinities with Dandy Lover, and continues Dickens's presentation of the comic sartorial business of earnest young men from the lower classes, who attempt to elevate their status through dress. Catherine Spooner recognises that 'dandyism emerged through a variety of social configurations', from the genuine

⁶⁵² *Harlequin*, p. 165.

⁶⁵³ *Harlequin*, p. 169.

⁶⁵⁴ Eigner, p. 175.

⁶⁵⁵ Eigner, p. 30.

aristocratic figures like Bulwer-Lytton to the cheaper and gaudier ‘Swells’ or ‘Gents’, a group made up of the lower-class but aspiring middle-class clerks and shop assistants ‘who briefly counted Dickens among their number’ and who Dickens characterised with amusement here.⁶⁵⁶ Richard Altick calls these figures ‘the dandy’s leisured middle-class imitator’ who sought to emulate the style of the dandy, but merely ‘vulgarized it with loud colours and fancy, eccentric cuts’.⁶⁵⁷

Spooner notes that these figures are often ignored in studies of dandyism due to their vulgar and diluted nature, but also recognises that they still inform discourses on dandyism, and in fact are a key vehicle for Dickens’s sartorial clowning. For if true dandyism is ‘the *repudiation* of gorgeous and conspicuous attire’ in favour of modest but immaculately tailored dress, as Laver claims, then these clownish figures, in their deliberately ostentatious and garish outfits tailored to the point of absurdity, are closer to the Swell.⁶⁵⁸

Dickens describes John’s Sunday attire for visiting his would-be father-in-law in terms that echo the Grimaldian dandy-swell figure:

He was neatly attired in a plum-colored coat, with as large a collar of black velvet as his figure could carry; a silken waistcoat, bedecked with golden sprigs; a chaste neck-kerchief much in vogue at that day, representing a preserve of lilac pheasants on a buff ground; pantaloons so highly decorated with side-stripes, that each leg was a three-stringed lute; and a hat of state, very high and hard [...] the prudent Mrs. Chivery perceived that in addition to these adornments her John carried a pair of white kid gloves, and a cane like a

⁶⁵⁶ Spooner, p. 91.

⁶⁵⁷ Richard Altick, *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel*, (Columbus: OH: Ohio State University Press, 1991), p. 244; p. 287.

⁶⁵⁸ Laver, p. 28.

little finger-post, surmounted by an ivory hand marshalling him the way that
he should go[.]⁶⁵⁹

In Dickens's fulsome description we are presented with a dazzling array of sartorial details encompassing colours (plum, black, gold, lilac, buff and white), materials (velvet, silk, kid, ivory and cane), designs (sprigs, pheasants and side-stripes) and accessories (hat, cane, gloves and cigars). Although the cigars are not for him, their inclusion in a later ensemble when he is seen 'in his best clothes, with his tall hat under his arm, his ivory-handled cane genteelly embarrassing his deportment, and a bundle of cigars in his hand', immediately implicate him in the Swell class.⁶⁶⁰

Clown also burlesqued dandy styles and mannerisms. For example in *Furibond, or Harlequin Negro* (Drury Lane, 1807), Grimaldi visits a tailor and dons the garb of the dandy in the form of a 'fashionable green coat, with a large Belcher handkerchief hanging out of each breast pocket'. He quickly adopts dandy attitudes and dismisses the tailor's demands for payment in the 'tone of a Bond Street Lounger' suggesting that "'Oh, my dear fellow, never trouble yourself'".⁶⁶¹ Here he matches Dickens's description of the clown in 'The Pantomime of Life', who takes a variety of goods without paying for them.

Clothes were integral to the dandy and became a focused target in Grimaldi's performances. In *Harlequin and Red Dwarf* Grimaldi's Clown introduces a dandy theme when he plays an auctioneer selling off a variety of clothes appropriate for various types of the dandy figure: "'And here's a famous lot of Man Millinery – A pair of Stays for a Beau – a Frill to wear without a shirt for a Buck, pair of ruffles for a Blood, and a cravat for a Bang-up'". To further exaggerate the comedy of this routine, Mayer asserts that, rather than

⁶⁵⁹ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. by Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 208.

⁶⁶⁰ *Dorrit*, p. 609.

⁶⁶¹ *Harlequin*, pp. 176-177.

using real articles of clothing, Grimaldi would have held up ‘either ridiculously enlarged versions of dandy apparel, or everyday objects that [he] combined to burlesque dandy haberdashery’ for the amused contemplation of the audience.⁶⁶²

Walter Benjamin’s views on fashion are instructive here. To Benjamin, fashion is also a celebration of fetishism, as, in the words of Calefato, it ‘transforms the human body [...] into the sum of its parts, each of which is considered a cult object in itself; [...] it is [also] the form in which merchandise, the inorganic object, reveals an unexpected fascination’.⁶⁶³

Moody makes a similar comment in relation to Grimaldi’s Clown, asserting that he ‘subverted the boundaries separating nature and culture, destroying spectators’ assumptions about the distinction between that which is alive, and that which has been manufactured’.⁶⁶⁴ Both Grimaldi and Dickens draw attention to the components with which they create the constructed whole by carefully assembling and de-assembling their creations in front of the viewer and reader.

Although a bankrupt Beau Brummell would not flee to Paris until May 1816, a year earlier Grimaldi performed a song that wryly observed the habits of the fashionable set, called ‘All the World’s in Paris’, in *Harlequin Whittington, Lord Mayor of London* (Covent Garden, 1815).

⁶⁶² *Harlequin*, p. 177.

⁶⁶³ Calefato, p. 112.

⁶⁶⁴ Moody, p. 224.

He performed this in an oversized hat and a coat with enlarged fur cuffs and collars which was also drawn by Cruikshank:



Figure 20: George Cruikshank, 'J Grimaldi, Sung in Character - "All the world's in Paris"' (1815), Museum of London

The lyrics draw attention to this ridiculous dress and align it with the inflated pretensions of its wearers: 'Lawk! Who's that, with monstrous hat,/Her parasol who handles?/'Tis Miss Flame, the Borough dame,/Who deals in tallow-candles'.⁶⁶⁵

Grimaldi's teasing of the dandy figure was thus ably supported and circulated through a number of popular prints, particularly by Cruikshank and Richard Dighton, who Moers calls 'the unofficial portraitist of the dandy world'. According to Moers both artists caricatured the dandy through their 'persistent sense of the relation between anatomy and dress' and

⁶⁶⁵ W. Ware, *London now is out of town, a comic song, sung by Mr Grimaldi, in the pantomime of Harlequin Whittington, or Lord Mayor of London composed by W H Ware* (London: Power, 1811)

it could be argued that they thus channelled the same sense of the bodily grotesque as Grimaldi.⁶⁶⁶

For example, in *Lacing a Dandy*, Dighton depicts a figure that looks barely human:



Figure 21: Richard Dighton, 'Lacing a Dandy' (1819), Museum of London

The dandy here is grossly disproportioned with a miniscule head dwarfed by a ridiculously high collar and two large clumps of *bouffant* hair. His limbs and torso alternate between the stick-thin and the puffed which makes him seem as malleable and subject to bodily extremes as Clown. Cunningham notes the etymological relationship between the comedic genre of farce and *farce*, the Old French derivation of the Latin '*farcire*' (to stuff), and this

⁶⁶⁶ Moers, pp. 61-62.

print depicts the farcical squeezing in and forcing of the dandy body to fit into his misshapen and ill-conceived costume.⁶⁶⁷

Cruikshank's series of annual prints 'Monstrosities, or London Dandies' draw similar attention to the grotesque and exaggerated fashions that transformed their wearers into something other than human. For example, in the 1816 print the wide range of colours and unusual shapes of the figures - such as puffed sausage legs, angular spindles, swollen breasts (of both sexes), absurdly high collars and tiny hats and shoes – make their wearers seem to be other than human.

Moreover, the collar and cuffs of the figure to the far right closely resemble those of Grimaldi in Cruikshank's earlier print:



Figure 22: George Cruikshank, 'Monstrosities of 1816, or London Dandies' (1816), Brooklyn Museum, New York

⁶⁶⁷ Cunningham, p. 220.

The dandy-esque Mr Toots in *Dombey and Son* cuts a similar, though subtler, figure when attempting to kiss Susan Nipper in this illustration:



Figure 23: Hablot K. Browne ('Phiz'), 'Mr Toots becomes particular - Diogenes also' (1848), *Dombey*

The stiff angular shapes formed by his pantaloons and long jacket move him towards an inanimate figure, such as a shop window mannequin. This sense of the inanimate is subtly supported by the similarly-shaped furniture gathered around him – such as the table, the umbrella stand and the banister. His remarkable thinness (a consequence of his tailoring) is cast into relief by the wider shape of Susan Nipper, which supports Hughes's comments on the divergent shapes of men and women in the mid-nineteenth century, and even the wild

shapelessness of Diogenes the dog. This illustration also hints at some of the more grotesque elements of Dighton's print through Toots's spindly legs and his fluffy curls of hair bunched either side of his head. Finally the angle of his cane leaning against the table and close proximity to the hat on the table offer a visual echo of Toots's torso and legs, which further reduces him to a mere collection of clothes.

Mr Toots indulges in a variety of comic sartorial business, as he goes through private agonies to keep up with the ever-changing fashions of the time:

But notwithstanding this modest confidence in himself, Mr. Toots appeared to be involved in a good deal of uncertainty whether, on the whole, it was judicious to button the bottom button of his waistcoat, and whether, on a calm revision of all the circumstances, it was best to wear his wristbands turned up or turned down. Observing that Mr. Feeder's were turned up, Mr. Toots turned his up; but the wristbands of the next arrival being turned down, Mr. Toots turned his down. The differences in point of waistcoat-buttoning, not only at the bottom, but at the top too, became so numerous and complicated as the arrivals thickened, that Mr. Toots was continually fingering that article of dress, as if he were performing on some instrument; and appeared to find the incessant execution it demanded, quite bewildering.⁶⁶⁸

Toots can also be contrasted with his polar opposite in the novel, the sober businessman Dombey. Walter Benjamin observed that the dandy had 'very definite historical stamp' and was 'a creation of the English who were leaders in world trade'.⁶⁶⁹ The unpredictable nature of the trading world (as reflected in a fluctuating stock market) could not be

⁶⁶⁸ *Dombey*, p. 195.

⁶⁶⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1985), p. 96.

observed in its closest operators (the Dombey and Merdles) for fear of damaging commercial confidence, and therefore they had to put on their own performances, suppressing any probable anxieties and strain while in public. Here, Benjamin feels that 'the dandies took charge of the conflicts thus created' by combining 'an extremely quick reaction with a relaxed, even slack demeanour and facial expression'.⁶⁷⁰ This dandy figure seems much closer to the chaotic, free energy of the Clown and thus offers a direct contrast with the contained, controlled measure of the businessman.

One way that this is expressed in *Dombey and Son* is through clothing, as Toots's 'blaze of jewellery and buttons' is contrasted with the more conventional colours and clothes of Mr Dombey.⁶⁷¹ Even when Dombey breaks away from his usual black (thus offering a glimpse of levity), he remains firmly within the rules of propriety. As Schaffer notes, 'blues and purples' were 'acceptable colours for men's outfits on especially celebratory occasions', which would permit the 'blue coat and lilac waistcoat' that 'the ultra-respectable Mr Dombey' dons for his wedding to Edith Granger.⁶⁷²

In *Little Dorrit*, one could trace a similar relationship between Edmund Sparkler and his father-in-law Merdle. Sparkler is certainly a foppish buffoon, but Merdle's performance as the implacable businessman is a much weaker one than Dombey's, as his clownish and uninhibited side often causes the mask to slip. John Carey feels that for 'most of the novel Merdle is just funny', getting bitten by the parrot and having paranoid thoughts about his Chief Butler.⁶⁷³ One way in which this slippage is registered is through Merdle's clothing, which becomes an enchanted suit of clothes with a will of its own; his coat cuffs, for

⁶⁷⁰ Benjamin, p. 96.

⁶⁷¹ *Dombey*, p. 195.

⁶⁷² Schaffer, p. 46.

⁶⁷³ Carey, p. 197.

example, have an 'uneasy expression [...] as if they were in his confidence, and had reasons for being anxious to hide his hands'.⁶⁷⁴

Unlike Grimaldi's clown, the dandy did not create his own garments and was reliant on the key figure of his tailor. Neil McKendrick finds much evidence to suggest that as clothing became an important commodity within the consumer revolution, the profession of tailoring was described in increasingly laudatory and powerful terms.

For example, Robert Campbell in *The London Tradesman* (1747) notes that 'to some [the tailor] not only makes their Dress, but [...] may be said to make themselves' and consequently there are 'Numbers of Beings in and about this Metropolis who have no other identical Existence than what the Taylor [*sic*], Milliner, and Perriwig-Maker bestow upon them'.⁶⁷⁵ He further acknowledges the metamorphic power of these 'Shape Merchant[s]' when recognising that without their ministrations, Londoners about town 'are as insignificant in Society as Punch, deprived of his moving Wires, and hung up upon a Peg'.⁶⁷⁶ In this image the tailors truly are the animators of the inanimate.

In *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle notes the same phenomenon; Teufelsdröckh describes the tailor as 'not only a Man, but something of a Creator or Divinity', who enacts a variety of transformations on ordinary men:

Man is by the Tailor new-created into a Nobleman, and clothed not only with Wool but with Dignity and a Mystic Dominion, – is not the fair fabric of Society itself, with all its royal mantles and pontifical stoles, whereby, from nakedness and dismemberment, we are organised into Politics, into Nations, and a whole

⁶⁷⁴ Dorrit, p. 241.

⁶⁷⁵ Robert Campbell, *The London Tradesman* (London: Gardner, 1747), p. 191.

⁶⁷⁶ Campbell, p. 194; p. 191.

co-operating Mankind, the creation, as has here been often irrefragably evinced, of the Tailor alone?⁶⁷⁷

William Maginn, the editor of *Fraser's*, had pre-empted this description in his own leader of June 1830 entitled 'Mr Edward Lytton Bulwer's Novels: and Remarks on Novel Writing'.

Moers describes how Maginn asserts that crucially 'the true gentleman is known first *by his differences from the false*', and he thus claims that society contains '*gentlemen of two sorts; the natural and the tailor-made*'.⁶⁷⁸

To dandies like Beau Brummell, the tailor was a central character in their self-fashioning. Laver notes that as the aristocracy waned 'there were to be no more peers wearing their Orders proudly on their embroidered coats, but only gentlemen in plain clothes and immaculate linen', as attention now focused on the cut of the cloth and its neat sculpting of the human body, all of which relied on the tailor to formulate.⁶⁷⁹

Dickens recognised the value of his own tailor, calling him 'my artist' in a letter to Macready in October 1845. In this letter Dickens, signing himself as 'The Unwaistcoated One', asks to borrow one of his friend's wondrous waistcoats for a wedding – specifically, the one 'wherein certain broad stripes of purple disported themselves by a combination of extraordinary circumstances'. By wearing it, Dickens plans to 'ha, ha, ha, ha! – eclipse the bridegroom!', a jesting comment that nonetheless acknowledges the power of clothing within fundamental social rituals.⁶⁸⁰

Mr Toots, who places a similar reliance on the ubiquitous tailors of Burgess and Company, later expresses the same sentiment. When dressing for the wedding of Edith Granger and

⁶⁷⁷ *Sartor*, p. 212.

⁶⁷⁸ Moers, p. 174; William Maginn, 'Mr Edward Lytton Bulwer's Novels: and Remarks on Novel Writing', *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, June 1830, p. 516.

⁶⁷⁹ Laver, p. 34.

⁶⁸⁰ Letter to William Charles Macready, 17 October 1845, *Pilgrim*, IV, pp. 406-407.

Mr Dombey, we are told that 'Mr. Toots attires himself as if he were at least the Bridegroom'.⁶⁸¹ Throughout the text we are constantly reminded of Toots's reliance on his tailors for not only his dress, but his very mode of existence, as Dickens here (perhaps not unselfconsciously) wields the power of the tailor.

Toots's engagement with Burgess and Co. begins at a very young age. Soon after meeting young Paul Dombey at Dr Blimber's school, Toots turns the conversation to sartorial matters:

'Who's your tailor?' inquired Toots, after looking at him for some moments.

'It's a woman that has made my clothes as yet', said Paul. 'My sister's dress-maker'

'My tailor's Burgess and Co.', said Toots. 'Fash'nable. But very dear'.⁶⁸²

Whilst we may laugh at the precocious boy's comment, in contrast to the more homely and childlike response by Paul, the presence of these 'very dear' tailors in Toots's life soon becomes a running motif. In fact they become one of the principal means by which this somewhat shy young man articulates his thoughts, as clothes (through language) become the garment of thought. For example, Toots later articulates his sadness at Paul's premature death in terms of clothes; "'Poor Dombey! I'm sure I never thought that Burgess & Co. – fash'nable tailors (but very dear), that we used to talk about – would make this suit of clothes for such a purpose'".⁶⁸³ In the same scene Diogenes begins to chase Toots, who quickly withdraws to protect his clothes: 'Not exactly seeing his way to the end of these

⁶⁸¹ *Dombey*, p. 422.

⁶⁸² *Dombey*, p. 153.

⁶⁸³ *Dombey*, p. 246.

demonstrations, and sensible that they placed the pantaloons constructed by the art of Burgess & Co. in jeopardy, Mr. Toots, with chuckles, lapsed out at the door'.⁶⁸⁴

We are reminded of Toots's attire on nearly every occasion that he appears in the narrative. When he calls on Miss Dombey, we are immediately told that he was 'richly dressed for the purpose' and on a subsequent visit he returns to the Dombey's 'putting into requisition some of the greatest marvels that Burgess and Co. had ever turned out'.⁶⁸⁵ In a slapstick denouement to the scene, Diogenes leaps at Toots again and 'the bold Toots tumbled staggering out into the street, with Diogenes holding on to one leg of pantaloons, as if Burgess and Co. were his cooks, and had provided that dainty morsel for his holiday entertainment'.⁶⁸⁶

Clothes are at the forefront of his mind in all emotional matters, including love. When Florence takes his arm on a walk to Dr Blimber's, Toots's infatuation with Florence causes him to become nervous and 'though he is splendidly dressed, he feels misfits, and sees wrinkles, in the masterpieces of Burgess and Co., and wishes he had put on that brightest pair of boots'.⁶⁸⁷

Toots thus views himself through his clothes, Dickens shows him to the reader through his clothes, and other characters see him through his clothes. At one point, Toots acknowledges his 'wasting away' at a time of emotional distress (caused by his love for Florence) by stating that "'Burgess and Co. have altered my measure, I'm in that state of thinness'".⁶⁸⁸ As part of this love sickness, Toots later lets his appearance become 'wild and savage', admits that he is in such a "'rash state'" that "'I haven't had my clothes brushed'" and even warns his boxing companion, The Game Chicken, away from polishing his

⁶⁸⁴ *Dombey*, p. 249.

⁶⁸⁵ *Dombey*, p. 309.

⁶⁸⁶ *Dombey*, p. 309.

⁶⁸⁷ *Dombey*, p. 555.

⁶⁸⁸ *Dombey*, p. 644.

boots.⁶⁸⁹ At the resolution of this love-episode, when Toots steps aside for Walter Gills, he not only pledges to be Florence's friend but also "to make the best of myself, and to – to have my boots as brightly polished, as – as circumstances will admit of".⁶⁹⁰

The final evidence that Toots's mind centres on his tailor is his method of using tailoring as a metaphor whereby clothing becomes the language of thought. Before the end of the novel he insists to Captain Cuttle that he always means well by people, even if he cannot always adequately express himself: "You know", said Mr Toots, "it's exactly as if Burgess and Co. wished to oblige a customer with a most extraordinary pair of trousers, and *could not* cut out what they had in their minds".⁶⁹¹

Toots, in this amusing dependence on his tailor, resembles one of Grimaldi's constructed figures waiting to be animated. During the progress of the *bildungsroman Great Expectations* the central protagonist Pip is presented with two quite different models of sartorial metamorphosis. The first model is offered by Joe Gargery and Magwitch, who represent resistance to metamorphosis, and the second model is that offered by 'Trabb's boy', who shows Pip an exaggerated style of metamorphosis in order to show the folly of Pip's own attempts at transformation.

Within the harlequinade, Grimaldi's inventions repeatedly rose up and battled against their creator, just as Frankenstein's creation resisted the Doctor's attempts to control him. In a similar fashion the people who Pip tries to transform into docile, 'respectable' bodies through clothing (like Joe Gargery) seem to resist his attempts. Early on, Pip observes that 'In his working clothes, Joe was a well-knit characteristic-looking blacksmith; in his holiday

⁶⁸⁹ *Dombey*, p. 671.

⁶⁹⁰ *Dombey*, p. 747.

⁶⁹¹ *Dombey*, p. 749.

clothes, he was more like a scarecrow in good circumstances, than anything else'.⁶⁹² Thus Joe's holiday clothes do not animate him, and in fact transform him into an inanimate figure, or one on the borders between the two conditions of animate and inanimate. In a novel in which Pip's clothes are part of his passport through the social strata, Joe's awkward clothes embody his inability to follow Pip.

Elsewhere we are shown how Joe's smarter attire is worn in a way that draws out his simple clownishness rather than the dignity and bearing that the pompous Pip hopes for. In an early appearance in his 'court-suit', Joe 'pulled up his shirt-collar so very high behind, that it made the hair on the crown of his head stand up like a tuft of feathers', in an echo of Dighton's parodic prints.⁶⁹³ The later scene at Pip's chambers underscores this fact, as Joe's resistance is registered through his comic interaction with his thoroughly alien clothing, which again transforms costume into dress. Pip knows that Joe has arrived even before he sees him, as he recognises 'his clumsy manner of coming upstairs' sounded by 'his state-boots' which were 'always too big for him'.⁶⁹⁴ Here we have more ill-fitting and excessively sized clothing in opposition to carefully tailored and perfectly neat clothes of the kind in which Pip invested.

This entrance is the precursor to a fuller clownish performance by Joe, especially some comic business with his hat. He initially spends an unnecessary amount of time looking for a suitable place to put it ('as if it were only on some very few rare substances in nature that it could find a resting-place') until finally placing it on the corner of the chimney piece 'from which it ever afterwards fell off at intervals'.⁶⁹⁵ This falling hat soon consumes Joe's entire

⁶⁹² Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Edgar Rosenberg (London and New York: Norton, 1999), p. 23.

⁶⁹³ *Great Expectations*, p. 80.

⁶⁹⁴ *Great Expectations*, p. 169.

⁶⁹⁵ *Great Expectations*, p. 171.

attention, and he devotes to it ‘a quickness of eye and hand, very like that exacted by wicket-keeping’. Pip describes this performance as a matter of some fascination:

He made the most extraordinary play with it, and showed the greatest skill; now, rushing at it and catching it as neatly as it dropped; now merely stopping it midway, beating it up, and humouring it in various parts of the room and against a good deal of the pattern of the paper on the wall, before he felt safe to close with it; finally splashing it into the slop-basin, where I took the liberty of laying hands upon it.⁶⁹⁶

Joe finally leaves, admitting how he feels “‘wrong in these clothes’” and Pip retrospectively acknowledges how Joe retains his ‘simple dignity’ despite the ‘the fashion of his dress’ which he felt compelled to wear in view of Pip’s elevated circumstances.⁶⁹⁷

Pip’s other attempts to transform those around him through dress have more serious consequences. For example, the ‘boy in boots’ is quickly ‘created’ according to Pip’s design for an errand-boy, but soon quashes Pip’s grander plans for him:

For, after I had made this monster (out of the refuse of my washerwoman’s family) and had clothed him with a blue coat, canary waistcoat, white cravat, creamy breeches, and the boots already mentioned, I had to find him a little to do and a great deal to eat; and with both of those horrible requirements he haunted my existence.⁶⁹⁸

This idle, all-devouring descendent of Sam Weller and Young Bailey parodies both the consumer revolution and the dandy ideal, and also draws attention to his unnatural state: he is a ‘monster’ created out of ‘refuse’.

⁶⁹⁶ *Great Expectations*, p. 172.

⁶⁹⁷ *Great Expectations*, pp. 173-174.

⁶⁹⁸ *Great Expectations*, p. 169.

Pip's relationship to Magwitch is also interesting in this regard. Magwitch's attempts to forge his own existence, and resistance to Pip's efforts to recreate him, lead Pip towards another analogy with Frankenstein and his monster and a further echo of the Covent Garden vegetable man: 'The imaginary student pursued by the misshapen creature he had impiously made were not more wretched than I, pursued by the creature who had made me'.⁶⁹⁹ The disguise that Pip devises for Magwitch as he flees London wholly fails to transform its wearer and before he has even set out, he seems doomed to be discovered: 'The more I dressed him and the better I dressed him, the more he looked like the slouching fugitive on the marshes'.⁷⁰⁰

While Joe Gargery, the errand-boy and Magwitch all resist Pip's attempts to play the tailor, the tailor's boy goes further in his own comic routine to point out Pip's mistakes. Trabb's boy is clearly positioned as a clown when Pip comments that he 'had too much vivacity to spare' and 'it was in his constitution to want variety and excitement at anybody's expense'.⁷⁰¹ He gives a remarkable performance, which entirely disconcerts Pip, putting him into a state of 'inexpressible terror, amazement, and indignation' and leaving him 'utterly confounded'. It climaxes in his sartorial imitation of Pip, through a masterstroke of improvisation:

This time he was entirely changed. He wore the blue bag in the manner of my great-coat, and was strutting along the pavement towards me on the opposite side of the street ... Words cannot state the amount of aggravation and injury wreaked upon me by Trabb's boy, when, passing abreast of me, he pulled up his shirt-collar, twined his side-hair, stuck an arm akimbo, and smirked

⁶⁹⁹ *Great Expectations*, pp. 253-254.

⁷⁰⁰ *Great Expectations*, p. 252.

⁷⁰¹ *Great Expectations*, p. 321.

extravagantly by, wriggling his elbows and body, and drawling to his attendants, 'Don't know yah, don't know yah, pon my soul don't know yah!'.⁷⁰²

Trabb's boy mimics Pip's new suit of clothes with whatever he has to hand and as part of his clown's prerogative, he also offers an oblique commentary on Pip's own folly and shortcomings. As Catherine Spooner points out, 'the Boy's comical masquerade of Pip's pretensions reveals the disjunction between manner and manners, sophisticated costume and low-class origins', and thus should be read alongside the scenes with Joe Gargery's awkwardness.⁷⁰³ Joe's manners are to be lauded compared to those of priggish Pip even though his most comfortable natural dress is entirely at variance with Pip's social norms of gentility. Spooner also notes that 'Trabb's Boy draws attention to the performative nature of Pip's new-found identity: Pip has become, in Carlyle's terms, a 'Clothes-screen', a being fabricated through clothes'.⁷⁰⁴ Here Trabb's boy accentuates the theatricality of the dandy yet further, with a grotesquely exaggerated (and amusing) performance wholly worthy of Grimaldi.

V. Conclusion

Clearly, then, both Grimaldi and Dickens recognised the value of clothing as a versatile, material symbol that could be put to a variety of purposes.

While changes in clothing were not necessarily new to theatre, this chapter has demonstrated how Grimaldi's clown pushed the concept much further than his pantomimic predecessors, both developing a new clown dress from the conventional costume, as well as seeking to create new garments from whatever objects he had available to him. In this way, he was able to use his clothing to mark out his own autonomous clowning space

⁷⁰² *Great Expectations*, p. 188.

⁷⁰³ Spooner, p. 81.

⁷⁰⁴ *Sartor*, p. 31.

outside convention, transcend boundaries of class and station, and playfully lampoon the pretensions of his time.

All of these ideas had a direct appeal to Dickens, who adopted such a use of clothing in his own life, and to a greater extent, projected it into his art. Carlyle seemed to anticipate this pantomimic use of clothing in prose when he examined the subject in *Sartor Resartus*, but it was in the work of Dickens, the theatrical novelist, that it received its fullest expression.

Like Grimaldi, Dickens recognised the multi-faceted power of clothing and tried to harness it at appropriate moments during his fiction. In his non-conforming rebels clothing becomes not just a convenient shorthand for their functionality, but a fully realised element of it, and a refusal to bow to social expectations. Elsewhere, Dickens explores its transformative powers, sometimes just as an imaginative flight of fancy, but also to puncture the hollow pretensions of authority figures as well as dandyesque social climbers, whose power and self-worth seems to entirely exist in their garments.

‘Mamie’ Dickens gives little commentary on her father’s extraordinary performance for his prospective parents-in-law, but this tale nonetheless demonstrates her father’s undoubted faith in the power of garments to provide what words alone cannot. This was clearly the power they held for the mute performer Grimaldi, but for Dickens they offered yet another layer of richness for his characters, and another chance to explore the very fabric of their identity.

CHAPTER 6 - The Slapstick Clown

I. Introduction

The final trope of Grimaldi's pantomime performance which will be considered in this thesis is violence - the darkest trope of the pantomime sensibility, compared to the lighter tropes of consumption and clothing. Nonetheless, Baudelaire regarded violence as the very essence of the English pantomime:

I shall long remember the first English pantomime I saw performed. [...] It seemed to me that the distinguishing mark of this type of the comic was violence. [...] everything in this singular piece was played with [...] excess; it was a giddy round of hyperbole.⁷⁰⁵

T.A. Nelson also makes a similar link between comedy and hyperbolic violence, noting that 'the most hilarious laughter is that which comes closest to the point where the joke is indeed taken too far. The prospect, at least momentary, of mutilation or death [...] arouses the wildest hilarity'.⁷⁰⁶ This 'hyperbolic' aspect continues the theme of the grotesque excess that has run through this thesis.

Nelson's suggestion that the cruellest deeds provoke the strongest laughter is borne out by the many adulatory notices that this aspect of Grimaldi's performances received. In his summary of Grimaldi's character, H.D. Miles asserts that 'Grimaldi was a household word; it was short for fun, whim, trick, and atrocity, - that is to say, clown atrocity, crimes that

⁷⁰⁵ Charles Baudelaire, 'Of the Essence of Laughter, and generally of the Comic in the Plastic Arts', in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P.E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 140-161 (pp. 155-156).

⁷⁰⁶ T.A. Nelson, *Comedy: An Introduction to Comedy in Literature, Drama, and Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 109.

delight us'.⁷⁰⁷ Similarly in an 1877 review of *Little Goody Two-Shoes* the harlequinade is described as 'a very silly and stupid piece of brutal buffoonery'.⁷⁰⁸

This final chapter will interrogate these seemingly contradictory terms 'clown atrocity' and 'brutal buffoonery', consider how they characterise certain aspects of the work of both Grimaldi and Dickens and demonstrate how Dickens's own style of 'clown atrocity' can be aligned with the pantomime form. This argument will also be developed further to suggest how such violence is regularly at odds with Dickens's more sentimental side and his agenda for social reform. Dickens often creates a morally fractured text which, in another manifestation of the disruptive chaos caused by the Grimaldian clown, invites us to both laugh at and pity the beaten child simultaneously.

This dissonance in Dickens's comic writing is symptomatic of a broader generic conundrum which lies at the heart of the comedic form. As a number of critics have previously recognised, the narrative drive of a comedy may be towards resolution and harmony, but one of its central components – laughter – can move us in the opposite direction towards chaos and disorder.⁷⁰⁹ Kincaid notes this phenomenon at work within Dickens's comedy; while comedy attempts 'the restoration of order or equilibrium', its conflicting 'desire to cleanse the existing order of absurdity and rigidity' means that laughter always brings it 'dangerously close to anarchy'.⁷¹⁰ Moreover, this phenomenon is particularly true of slapstick comedy. As Tom Gunning comments in relation to silent cinema, the 'macro-level' of comedy may be aimed at construction, but at the 'micro-level' 'the devices of comedy'

⁷⁰⁷ Miles, p. 192.

⁷⁰⁸ *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 6 January 1877, p. 365.

⁷⁰⁹ See for example Nelson, pp. 1-2; Tom Gunning, 'Mechanisms of Laughter: The Devices of Slapstick', in *Slapstick Comedy*, ed. by Tom Paulus and Rob King (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 137-151 (p. 138).

⁷¹⁰ Kincaid, p. 14.

(such as gags, jokes, pratfalls, grimaces and sight gags) operate based on ‘the logic of destruction’.⁷¹¹

Beyond these broader areas, the following sections will consider the theme of pantomimic violence by examining a number of specific themes.

Section II considers a number of related theories of slapstick and physical comedy and builds a theoretical framework upon which to place both Grimaldi’s harlequinade violence and the comic violence of Dickens’s work.

Sections III and IV consider how the recognisable tropes of slapstick violence operate in these works. Section III discusses three other characteristics of slapstick violence observable in Dickens’s ‘clownish’ characters and their slapstick set-pieces: the effect on the reader, the relentless and repetitive nature which creates a cycle of violence, and the indestructible nature of its protagonists. This section will also demonstrate how Dickens regularly suspends his moral concerns at certain points in order to indulge in the violent fun of the harlequinade and thus grant himself ‘holiday’ periods within his own narrative.

Section IV focuses on three groups who could be said to represent some of the most vulnerable figures within society yet were also the most common and popular targets for Clown’s violence – women, the elderly and the young. The choice of these targets complicates Dickens’s wider narrative concerns and turns the reader’s moral compass, like that of Grimaldi’s Regency audience, round ‘topsy-turvy’.

However, this chapter does not set out to argue that Dickens is incapable of treating violence seriously. For example, in their studies of marital violence in Victorian literature both Lisa Surridge and Marlene Tromp view Sikes’s murder of Nancy as a landmark depiction of domestic violence against working-class women. Tromp stresses the

⁷¹¹ Gunning, p. 138.

corporeality of the murder, in which 'not only is [Nancy's] body his focal point, but [...] a narrative obsession. We are offered gruesome details of the crime, and for Bill, nothing besides Nancy's body seems to exist'.⁷¹² Indeed, Sikes's final attack on Nancy is written in a style closer to the blood-soaked melodramatic events of the Newgate novel considered in Chapter 3 of this thesis:

The house-breaker [...] beat [his pistol] twice with all the force he could summon, upon the upturned face that almost touched his own.

She staggered and fell: nearly blinded with the blood that rained down from a deep gash in her forehead [...].

It was a ghastly figure to look upon. The murderer staggering backward to the wall, and shutting out the sight with his hand, seized a heavy club and struck her down.⁷¹³

Similarly, the 'tremendous blow' that strikes down Mrs Joe in *Great Expectations* leaves lasting and permanent damage: her 'sight was disturbed, [...] her hearing was greatly impaired; her memory also; and her speech was unintelligible'. Leaving aside the politics of this incident (Pip feels that it resolves her shrewishness, observing that she was 'destined never to be on the Rampage again' and that 'her temper was greatly improved, and she was patient' after this attack) there is a clear physical impact and the effects of the blow are felt long after it.⁷¹⁴

Even in a novel replete with slapstick violence like *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the reader is exposed to real pain throughout the narrative. For example, Dickens describes the terrors

⁷¹² Marlene Tromp, *The Private Rod: Marital Violence, Sensation, and the Law in Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 35.

⁷¹³ *Twist*, p. 317.

⁷¹⁴ *Great Expectations*, p. 96; p. 98.

of night-time in the Midlands, 'when carts came rumbling by, filled with rude coffins (for contagious disease and death had been busy with the living crops); when orphans cried, and distracted women shrieked and followed in their wake'.⁷¹⁵ Moreover, the Brasses' final punishment is one of the cruellest Dickensian fates; they are not merely dropped in the night-soil cart or knocked onto their backsides, but suffer a long, lingering agony as scavenging night-time wraiths, who 'crawl at dusk from the inmost recesses of St. Giles's', 'looking into the roads and kennels [...] in search of refuse food or disregarded offal'. They have become 'the embodied spirits of Disease, and Vice and Famine'.⁷¹⁶

II. Slapstick violence: a theoretical framework

At this point it is important to characterise the nature of this 'clown atrocity' or 'brutal buffoonery' and identify the sort of comedy that Grimaldi produced. This section will explore the term 'slapstick' and offer it as a theoretical model for examining the type of violence perpetrated by the Grimaldian clown.

The 'slapstick' comes directly from the world of the pantomime and was the wooden bat carried by Harlequin, with hinged wooden slats capable of producing a loud noise. Norman Robbins explains how the slapstick created 'a maximum amount of noise whilst causing the minimum amount of pain' while Tom Gunning provides a wider reading of this item, describing it as 'a trick device':

The hinged slats allow energy to be displaced from the apparent purpose of striking a victim to the creation of a sound effect; the loud noise produced seems to indicate the force (and probably the painful effect) of the blow. The slapstick [...] makes a lot of noise, but actually works less efficiently as a pain-inflicting weapon. Part of the amusement the slapstick offers lies in the

⁷¹⁵ *Curiosity Shop*. p. 349.

⁷¹⁶ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 568.

exaggerated noise it generates, making the viewer aware that the slaps are not really painful, but are nonetheless intense in their sensual effects.⁷¹⁷

Millie Taylor also considers this method of using a loud noise to nullify the audience's sense of any physical pain when she explains that 'Slapstick humour is accompanied by bumps and thumps played by the percussion to accentuate comics getting hit or falling over'. She describes how the power of this technique lies in the fact that 'the framing of an effect with a percussive sound removes it from realism and renders it painless, or heightened, or comic.'⁷¹⁸

Grimaldi would both strike and be struck by such instruments, and the slapstick also operates as a 'trick device' in some of the violent scenes in Dickens's novels. Dickens often uses the occasion of the violence for a great effect, typically a comical flourish of language to demonstrate his powers of imagination, but as a consequence, it is this 'noise' that the reader absorbs from the incident rather than the pain being felt by his characters.

Dickens's description of the Game Chicken's boxing match with 'the Larkey Boy' is a sublime piece of slapstick that perfectly encapsulates this effect. Initially, the physical appearance of the Game Chicken seems to preclude humour; he 'awakened in Miss Nipper some considerable astonishment', with 'his visage in a state of such great dilapidation, as to be hardly presentable in society with comfort to the beholders'. But through his description of the fight Dickens immediately defuses any concern we might have for the battered Chicken, as the noise of the slap is provided by the virtuosity of Dickens's language:

The Chicken himself attributed this punishment to his having had the misfortune to get into Chancery early in the proceedings, when he was

⁷¹⁷ Robbins, p. 36; Gunning, p. 141.

⁷¹⁸ Millie Taylor, *British Pantomime Performance* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007), p. 44.

severely fibbed by the Larkey one, and heavily grassed. But it appeared from the published records of that great contest that the Larkey Boy had had it all his own way from the beginning, and that the Chicken had been tapped, and bunged, and had received pepper, and had been made groggy, and had come up piping, and had endured a complication of similar strange inconveniences, until he had been gone into and finished.⁷¹⁹

Even the 'published records' are no refuge from the amusing slang of the boxing world and this sheer accumulation of comical jargon moves the reader away from the bloody spectacle of early nineteenth-century prize-fighting and towards the hyperbolic grotesque of the pantomime.

The violence of such a scene can pass the casual reader by, due to the inventive verbal tricks from which it is presented, as the reader laughs at the joke and misses the meaning. Kincaid notes that 'Dickens is a master at controlling our distance from the matter at hand in order to evoke laughter', and alludes to this effect of the language, calling it a 'witty disguise for the hidden aggression' of Gamfield's cruelty to children and animals and 'camouflage' for the ill-treatment of the workhouse boys.⁷²⁰

Another way in which Dickens's violence conforms to this slapstick model is through the mechanics of the blow itself. Because all of the energy is contained within the actual blow, either through the slats of the wooden slapstick or through Dickens's clever description of it, none of it is transferred to the victim. Grimaldi may have given a brief howl to indicate some element of humanity to him, but in Dickens's slapstick scenes the actual registering of pain is either absent or quickly dispersed by the foregoing description of the blow.

⁷¹⁹ *Dombey*, p. 597.

⁷²⁰ Kincaid, p. 5, pp. 58-59.

It is also possible to read the trope of slapstick violence through another related figure from popular culture, Mr Punch. There are a number of clear associations between Grimaldi's pantomime clown and Mr Punch which make them to some extent synonymous and interchangeable with each other.

Dickens makes a number of casual references to the Punch figure throughout his work and presents a more sustained treatment of Punch and Judy men through Codlin and Short in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. As Robert Leach notes, in a section omitted from Dickens's finished version of this novel, Dick Swiveller comments that Punch is about the best thing, in the way of a national stage "to hold the mirror up to Nature, show virtue her own image, vice her own deformity and all that".⁷²¹ This comment echoes Dickens's earlier 'Pantomime of Life' essay, in which he asserted that a 'pantomime is to us a mirror of life'.⁷²²

There are a number of more concrete associations between Grimaldi and Punch of which Dickens would have been aware. Grimaldi actually played Punch as a 'live' figure within the pantomime and in the *Memoirs*, Dickens describes how in *Harlequin Amulet, or the Magic of Mona* (Drury Lane, 1800) Grimaldi 'had to perform Punch, and to change afterwards to Clown'. Findlater similarly notes that Grimaldi 'scored so great a success as Punch – notably in his comic rivalry with Harlequin for Columbine's love' and quotes Sheridan's observation to Grimaldi that "Your Punch was so good that I have lost all taste for the spirit of pantomime", suggesting that Grimaldi was a better Punch than Clown.⁷²³

Even after Grimaldi's retirement Punch and Clown often shared the stage at other shows, such as Richardson's.

⁷²¹ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. A Easson, (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 702; Cited in Robert Leach, *The Punch and Judy Show: History, Tradition and Meaning* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1985), p. 68.

⁷²² 'Pantomime', p. 501.

⁷²³ *Grimaldi*, p. 88.

In this print Grimaldi (on the left) and Punch (on the right) book-end the rest of the miscellaneous performers of the show and thus symbolise the two reliable pillars on which the show was built:



Figure 24: [Unknown artist], [Punch played by a live actor in a popular fairground theatre] (ca. 1835), *The Punch and Judy Show*

Dickens notes ‘the pantomime which came lumbering down in Richardson’s waggons [*sic*] at fair-time’ in his introduction to the *Memoirs*, and so could have seen such a ‘double-header’ performance himself.⁷²⁴

Grimaldi and Punch had a two-way relationship and the porous division between different forms of popular entertainment meant that the Grimaldian clown also became a popular figure within the *Punch and Judy* show. In Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (1848), a Punchman gives a detailed description of the role of Joey ‘the merry clown’ puppet.

⁷²⁴ *Memoirs*, I, p. xii.

Initially he enters and dodges and dances around Punch until he is knocked down, but then later he reappears:

Punch being silly and out of his mind, the Clown persuades Punch that he wants something to eat. The Clown gets into the public-house to try what he can steal. He pokes his head out of the window and says, 'Here you are, here you are;' and then asks Punch to give him a helping hand, and so makes Punch steal the sausages.

'This here's the poker, about which the Clown says, 'Would you like something hot?' Punch says 'Yes', and then the Clown burns Punch's nose, and sits down on it himself and burns his breeches'.⁷²⁵

This description of Joey's performance with the sausages and poker, as well as the act of stealing, indicate a seamless transition from stage character to puppet, and Leach regards the introduction of the Joey character to the original *Punch and Judy* show as an innovation: 'Joey gives the middle section, which in [earlier shows] had been rather flaccid, a cutting edge'.⁷²⁶ He describes how Joey adds 'a dimension of fast-moving comedy which highlights without diminishing the violence, and checks the monotony of the crescendoing series of murders committed by Punch'.⁷²⁷ Here, Clown's introduction into the show is explicitly associated with the combination of comedy and violence. Leach also suggests that Dickens may have been aware of this development of the Joey figure of the Punch and Judy show, citing a section of *The Pickwick Papers* in which Dickens describes 'the swiftness

⁷²⁵ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols (New York: Dover Publications, 1968), III, p. 51.

⁷²⁶ Leach, p. 74.

⁷²⁷ Leach, p. 75.

displayed by that admirable melodramatic performer, Punch, when he lies in wait for the flat-headed comedian with the tin box of music'.⁷²⁸

This picture of the Joey puppet clearly demonstrates his affiliation with Grimaldi's live, onstage version:



Figure 25: [Unknown artist], 'Mr Merryman, alias Joey the Clown, from Aunt Mavor's Everlasting Toy Books' (ca. 1880), *The Punch and Judy Show*

Punch's primary relevance to this discussion is related to his excessive use of slapstick violence. In one script discussed by Leach, for Hendry's *Merry Mr Punch*, we see 'the cruelty of the action, as when Punch hits the baby's head against the side of the stage', as well as further by-play between Punch and the vulnerable child:

'There! THERE! *THERE!*'

The baby is now quite still.

⁷²⁸ *Pickwick*, p. 242.

‘That’s all right,’ cries Mr Punch with a laugh. ‘I thought that little dose of medicine would stop you squalling. Off with you! I’ll have nothing more to do with such a naughty child.

He tosses the baby over the front of the stage among the crowd.⁷²⁹

In ‘Professor Mowbray’s show (also cited by Leach) we are told that both Judy and the baby were tossed ‘about six feet out of the show’, while in another show described by John Payne Collier, Punch murders them both ‘in a fit of horrid and demoniac jealousy’.⁷³⁰ It is therefore unsurprising that Marlene Tromp opens her study of Victorian attitudes to marital violence with a scene from a *Punch and Judy* show.⁷³¹

While Jacky Bratton has demonstrated how the taste for these pantomimic routines had begun to recede by the 1850s, observing how the ‘rational adult’ chose to ‘repudiate an entertainment which is violent, immoral and altogether vulgar’, Dickens clearly refuses to temper his childhood enthusiasm in this way, and gleefully continues to populate his fiction with these violent clowns.⁷³²

III. Slapstick violence in Grimaldi and Dickens

This section will draw out a number of more general characteristics of slapstick violence observable in the work of both Grimaldi and Dickens. The first two, its effect on the audience and the cycle of violence that it engenders, are linked by the third - the seemingly indestructible nature of the clown, which guarantees his continued participation in that cycle and has some bearing on how the audience interpret the violence.

⁷²⁹ Hamish Hendry, *Merry Mr. Punch* (London: Richards, 1902), p. 35.

⁷³⁰ Leach, p. 101; John Payne Collier, *Punch and Judy*, 2nd edn (London: Prowett, 1828), p. 67.

⁷³¹ Tromp, p. 1.

⁷³² Jacky Bratton, ‘Pantomime and the Experienced Young Fellow’ in *Victorian Pantomime*, ed. by Jim Davis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 87-99 (p. 96).

Slapstick violence and the audience

In her study of modern pantomime, Millie Taylor recognises the effect that the 'interruption' of slapstick violence has on the audience:

The interruption [...] changes the pace, changes the relationship of audience to performance, and entertains. It is a moment of disruption, but it is the moment we love to groan at, and, in the case of slosh scenes and chases, it is the moment of danger and involvement of the liveness of each individual performance.⁷³³

She explains that slapstick violence draws the audience closer into the show and forces the audience to identify with the main protagonist, rather than alienating or shocking them.

For Taylor, slapstick violence has a variety of other complementary effects as well:

that status between the performers or between performers and authority figures is challenged in competitive routines and sequences; that the pantomime world is a dangerous place and everything comedians touch will, in some way, cause mayhem; and that the audience is involved in the comedy by a complicitous look [...] or the physical presence of performers within the auditorium.⁷³⁴

Such observations could also be applied to Regency pantomime. Indeed, the reviews and commentaries on Grimaldi's work often demonstrate how pantomime suspends the normal laws of society, legitimising a variety of crimes, and also acknowledge how Grimaldi's audiences were entirely complicit in this temporary amorality. H.D. Miles notes that Clown was 'cruel, treacherous, unmanly, ungenerous, greedy', but recognised that 'we were quite blind to the moral delinquency of Mons. Clown's habits' and that 'for all this,

⁷³³ Taylor, p. 35.

⁷³⁴ Taylor, pp. 48-49.

multiplied up to murder, [...] we loved him, and rejoiced in his successes'.⁷³⁵ A *Times* reviewer excuses Grimaldi's crimes in similarly hyperbolic terms: 'If he took up a red-hot poker to anybody, we could never interfere – though it had been to save our own father – and when he stole apples, we really doubted whether common honesty was not a kind of prejudice'.⁷³⁶ It is *our* moral values that are at fault here, and not Clown's.

Similarly the later reminiscences of Walter Freewood in the *Theatrical Journal* (1865) explicitly link the hilarity and enjoyment of the audience with Grimaldi's misdemeanours:

You might have heard the laughter miles off when Clown stole the sausages and tried to put the baby in his pocket, and wasn't it capital fun when the policeman tumbled over the butter-slide Clown had just made before the doorstep, and then got pelted with flour bags conveniently pilfered from an adjoining baker's? But best fun of all was when on getting up to pursue the culprit the policeman's hat was stolen by Pantaloon and a rabbit pie produced from the interior, to the great mortification and disgrace of the owner [...].⁷³⁷

We are again presented with an entire charge-sheet of offences which are regarded as 'capital fun' and even 'the best fun of all', and regarded by the pantomime historian A.E. Wilson as mere 'boisterous pranks and practical jokes'.⁷³⁸ All of these describe the effects of pantomime violence and accept it as a standard and unquestioned part of the genre.

Grimaldi's popular counterpart Punch was also regarded in the same way. For example, von Pückler-Muskau describes Punch as 'the most absolute egotist (who) conquers everything

⁷³⁵ Miles, pp. 6-7.

⁷³⁶ 'Covent Garden', *The Times*, 27 December 1823, p. 3.

⁷³⁷ *Story of Pantomime*, p. 35.

⁷³⁸ A.E. Wilson, *Pantomime Pageant* (London: Stanley Paul, 1946), p. 28.

by his invincible merriment and laughs at laws, at men, at the devil himself'.⁷³⁹ Another reviewer talks in similar terms of admiration to excuse Punch's crimes:

It may be that his mood is hasty, that he is too violent and pugnacious, and that he has a Turkish disregard of mortality; but then – his buoyancy of spirit, his boldness, and his wit, are not these redeeming points [...]? Punch is certainly not a very moral personage; but then was there ever one more free from hypocrisy?⁷⁴⁰

Here Punch's violence seems to provoke the same guilty reactions in his audience as Grimaldi did in his performances. Another anonymous study considers Punch's crimes in similar terms:

He goes to the battle, makes love, commits murder and robbery, drinks, lies, cheats and fights, with as much coolness and self-satisfaction as a puritan; and does all this in a way as shows there can be nothing wrong in these things, which the world have very absurdly agreed to call crimes.

He feels that it is hard to find anyone 'who does not laugh till his sides ache' when Punch 'beats out the brains' of his many opponents, and further asks 'who even thinks that beating out brains is, *per se*, wrong?'.⁷⁴¹

Similarly, Thomas Frost regards Punch as 'a droll, diverting vagabond, that even those who have witnessed his crimes are irresistibly seduced into laughter by his grotesque antics and his cynical bursts of merriment'. Moreover, Frost explicitly associates Punch's antics with those of the Grimaldian clown when he notes that the 'crowd laughs at all this in the same

⁷³⁹ Hermann Pückler-Muskau, *Tour in Germany, Holland and England*, 4 vols (London: Wilson, 1832), III, p. 131.

⁷⁴⁰ [Anon.], 'Review of Collier's *Punch and Judy*', *The London Literary Gazette*, 9 February 1828, p. 83.

⁷⁴¹ [Anon.], 'Punch', *The Pocket Magazine Robin's Series*, February 1827, p. 91.

spirit as the audience at a theatre applauds furiously while a policeman is bonneted and otherwise maltreated in a pantomime or burlesque'.⁷⁴²

Thus cruelty is regarded by the audience as a central part of Clown's constitution, and also of pantomime's constitution. Wilson asserts that 'All clowns are supposed to be cruel by nature' and that 'Cruelty is the essence of their humour' and similarly Gerald Frow notes that Clown's 'red-hot poker, his string of sausages, and his butter-slide – a grease trap for the unwary – were the pantomime's *raison d'être*'.⁷⁴³

David Mayer draws on similar accounts to theorise these audience reactions from a historical and cultural distance. He characterises the Regency pantomime form generally as 'violence, cruelty, greed, callousness, indifference, folly [...] all but concealed behind jollity, plenty, and splendor'.⁷⁴⁴ Within this he views the Grimaldian Clown as 'a happy criminal, who knew neither shame, nor guilt, nor repentance'.⁷⁴⁵

Mayer attributes this to the vicarious pleasure that audiences took in Grimaldi's pranks, as he acted as their surrogate for the violation of social codes and excessive bodily pain. As Mayer explains, by 'comically manipulating his face and body, [Grimaldi] invited spectators to feel and to experience with him, without the exertion or pain or ridicule of doing so, and encouraged them to participate in his wildest misdeeds and wittiest jests'. As a consequence, the applause that they gave contained a 'quality of self-satisfaction, as if they also had been so scandalously impudent or so roguishly satirical'.⁷⁴⁶ Dickens also recognised this factor in the enjoyment of pantomime when he wryly commented in the

⁷⁴² Thomas Frost, *The Old Showmen and the Old London Fairs* (London: Tinsley, 1874), p. 29.

⁷⁴³ Wilson, *Christmas Pantomime*, p. 113; Frow, p. 7.

⁷⁴⁴ *Harlequin*, pp. 1-2.

⁷⁴⁵ *Harlequin*, p. 47.

⁷⁴⁶ *Harlequin*, p. 48.

Memoirs that 'characters in a state of starvation are almost invariably laughed at upon the stage' because 'the audience have had their dinner'.⁷⁴⁷

Pantomime historians have often attempted to explain why and how the audience becomes implicated in the violence on stage. For example, Moody explores how the constitutional illegitimacy of the pantomime form (according to the prevailing licensing laws and pantomime's association with carnivalesque holidays) is embodied in the 'illegality' of the acts shown on stage, particularly in the anarchic harlequinade. She comments that Clown's crimes 'were allowed to exist because of pantomime's perceived status as a theatrical genre beyond rationality' and further that 'pantomime's illegitimate status permitted a certain satirical licence which made possible the theatrical defeat of beadles and constables, or the self-aggrandisement of military men'.⁷⁴⁸ As a consequence, Grimaldi in particular became 'a precious symbol of social licence', who 'was presumed to inhabit an imaginary space outside ordinary human morality'.⁷⁴⁹

Theorists of comedy (as a genre) and laughter (as a reader response) have also tried to situate the mechanics of humour in this way, and regard the suspension of moral law as essential to the effectiveness of laughter. For example, Henri Bergson asserted that there is 'no greater foe than emotion', and thus the audience 'must, for the moment, put [their] affection out of court and impose silence on [their] pity'.⁷⁵⁰ This is particularly true of slapstick comedy, because the pain of the victim is something universally understood; whilst some laughter operates upon more sophisticated emotions like embarrassment, or the incongruity of words or objects, the laughter derived from slapstick can transcend class, gender and age.

⁷⁴⁷ *Memoirs*, I, p. 15.

⁷⁴⁸ Moody, p. 215; p. 225.

⁷⁴⁹ Moody, p. 14; p. 215.

⁷⁵⁰ Sypher, p. 63.

Muriel Andrin relates Bergson's arguments to the slapstick, commenting that 'Slapstick laughter plays on the spectator's insensitivity by allowing no time for healing or commiserating'.⁷⁵¹ The harlequinade is a constant round of buffeting and injury for the clown, during which he has to repeatedly pick himself up (and in some cases even rebuild himself) and move onto the next pratfall or blow.

Thomas Hobbes theorises laughter in similar terms and suggests a psychological or sociological basis, related to a human desire to assert superiority. Nelson cites his comment in *Human Nature* (1650) that 'the cause of laughter is the exaltation at a triumph of our own or an indignity suffered by someone else: we laugh when we feel superior to others', and so associates him with the 'superiority or malice' school of comedy.⁷⁵² Hobbes also describes laughter as 'nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly', and as such is, according to Stott, always 'antagonistic and conflictual'.⁷⁵³

Another characteristic of laughter that both Bergson and Hobbes agree on is its shared quality. Hobbes notes that if laughter is to be 'without offence', it 'must be at absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons, and where all the company may laugh together' and to Bergson, laughter 'always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary'.⁷⁵⁴ Laughter becomes 'a sort of *social gesture*' which 'singles out and represses' things regarded as undesirable and damaging to society such as absentmindedness or inelasticity.⁷⁵⁵ Thus in laughter 'we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbour, if not in his will, at least

⁷⁵¹ Muriel Andrin, 'Back to the "Slap": Slapstick's Hyperbolic Gesture and the Rhetoric of Violence', in *Slapstick Comedy*, pp. 226-235 (p. 229).

⁷⁵² Nelson, p. 5.

⁷⁵³ Thomas Hobbes, 'Human Nature' in *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, ed. by J.C.A. Gaskin (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 21-108 (pp. 54-55); Andrew McConnell Stott, *Comedy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), p. 133.

⁷⁵⁴ Hobbes, p. 55; Bergson, p. 64.

⁷⁵⁵ Sypher, p. 73; p. 117.

in his deed'.⁷⁵⁶ To Bergson, then, 'laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it'.⁷⁵⁷

David Mayer develops this idea of corrective comedy specifically in relation to pantomime. He describes it as a form of 'normative' comedy, that primarily reaffirms 'the conservative position from which [it] operates' by presenting aberrations from the perceived norms of society and directing the audience to 'compare the aberration that he sees on the stage with the norm as he understands it'. By laughing 'at the disparity between the two', the audience confirms their 'allegiance to the norms'.⁷⁵⁸

This method would appear to align with Dickens's rhetorical use of laughter, as described by Kincaid. He focuses on Dickens's 'use of laughter to persuade', and starting from the view that laughter implies 'a very solid agreement with a certain value system', he argues that Dickens uses that agreement for 'subtle thematic and aesthetic purposes'.⁷⁵⁹ Through the course of his argument, he characterises Dickens's novels as being governed by a particular type of laughter. For example, 'the vicious and barbed black humour' in *Oliver Twist* is 'used primarily as a weapon, to suggest that we are the villains' in an unfeeling world where life is cheap.⁷⁶⁰ Kincaid ultimately contends that Dickens's use of humour is deliberately designed to condition our response to the subject matter at hand, and is (with the exception of *Pickwick*) an 'aggressive' impulse, directed towards disrupting and changing his readers' worldview.⁷⁶¹ Douglas-Fairhurst endorses this view when he describes Dickens's characteristic, early technique as a 'carefully judged disparity between weighty

⁷⁵⁶ Sypher, p. 148.

⁷⁵⁷ Sypher, p. 187.

⁷⁵⁸ *Harlequin*, p. 52.

⁷⁵⁹ Kincaid, p. vii; p. 1.

⁷⁶⁰ Kincaid, p. 52.

⁷⁶¹ Kincaid, p. 20.

subject matter and airy tone', which he uses 'as a way of shocking his readers out of automatic responses to serious social problems'.⁷⁶²

This method is a negative inflection of Aristotle's view of comedy, whereby the 'laughable is an error or disgrace that does not involve pain or destruction: for example, a comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not involve pain'.⁷⁶³ Indeed, it is difficult to accommodate slapstick within Aristotle's definition; while Clown and his fellow performers only infrequently register pain (and only as an exaggeratedly unreal acknowledgement), the audience must recognise the possibility of real pain in order to appreciate the comedy.

The other kind of humour that Mayer associates with pantomime is 'retributive' comedy, which is closely related to the ideas of Bakhtin and would ostensibly seem to be closer to the style of slapstick violence. In retributive comedy, scenes of order shift towards chaos and solemn occasions become moments of merriment. As Mayer explains:

Grave and stately persons are knocked into undignified positions, magistrates and policemen are assaulted, elegant clothes are dirtied and torn, valuable merchandise is deliberately broken, orderly silence is turned into bedlam.⁷⁶⁴

This enacts 'a vicarious release from society's strictures and taboos', and represents another subversion of the laws that govern our existence, be they natural laws of biology and mortality or the civil laws of society. Under the terms of retributive comedy, 'mutiny [is] made harmless and even pleasurable' and protest can occur 'without injurious consequences to the protester'.⁷⁶⁵ The comedy is not directed by representatives of the *status quo* towards the non-conformists (as it is in normative comedy), but rather by the governed against those who govern. This shifts it away from conservatism to radicalism,

⁷⁶² Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 113.

⁷⁶³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 10.

⁷⁶⁴ *Harlequin*, p. 56.

⁷⁶⁵ *Harlequin*, p. 56.

and explains Grimaldi's attractions to thinkers like Hazlitt and Hunt, who, as Moody describes, saw the 'episodic violence' of the harlequinade as enacting 'the pleasures of a delicious political retribution'.⁷⁶⁶ It thus parallels Bakhtin's carnivalesque comedy, which is summarised by Stott as 'the vehicle of an authentic proletarian voice answering the ascetic oppressions of the ruling classes'.⁷⁶⁷

When considering how slapstick violence is read by Grimaldi's audience and Dickens's reader, an apt motif can be drawn from *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Towards the end of the novel, after Kit Nubbles has been falsely imprisoned, his family visit him in jail. Little Jacob reaches out to his brother but is prevented by the prison bars, which causes the family group to collapse into tears. On the one hand, this scene clearly carries elements of pathos, as Dickens wishes the reader to feel the injustice of Kit's situation and the exclusion from the familial touch that he suffers. However one character is unmoved:

During this melancholy pause, the turnkey read his newspaper with a waggish look (he had evidently got among the facetious paragraphs) until, happening to take his eyes off it for an instant, as if to get by dint of contemplation at the very marrow of some joke of a deeper sort than the rest, it appeared to occur to him for the first time that somebody was crying.

This perfectly encapsulates the effect of Dickens's slapstick violence in his novels. His primary effect is often comedy, and what might lie behind can be obscured. The dangers of this strategy are hinted at by the unfeeling response of this jailor, to which he has been conditioned by the comedy he reads. He asks them to stop making 'a noise' about their plight, which 'can't be helped, you know':

⁷⁶⁶ Moody, p. 14.

⁷⁶⁷ *Comedy*, p. 33.

With that, he went on reading. The man was not naturally cruel or hard-hearted. He had come to look upon felony as a kind of disorder, like the scarlet fever or erysipelas: some people had it – some hadn't – just as it might be.⁷⁶⁸

Later Kit's mother asks for his help, and he seems further paralysed in an alternative, comic world:

The turnkey, being in the very crisis and passion of a joke, motioned to her with his hand to keep silent one minute longer, for her life. Nor did he remove his hand into its former posture, but kept it in the same warning attitude until he had finished the paragraph, when he paused for a few seconds; with a smile upon his face, as who should say 'this editor is a comical blade – a funny dog', and then asked her what she wanted.⁷⁶⁹

In imbuing his novels with the pantomime spirit to the extent that he does, Dickens risks leaving his readers with this same attitude.



Figure 26: Hablot K. Browne ('Phiz'), 'Kit in Jail' (1840), *Curiosity Shop*

⁷⁶⁸ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 473.

⁷⁶⁹ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 474.

The cycle of pantomime violence

A key characteristic of pantomime slapstick is its repetitive, accumulative and seemingly relentless nature as primarily demonstrated during the harlequinade. Principal among the tricks and stunts were those in which Clown (or sometimes other characters like Harlequin) played a cruel trick, or was a victim of cruelty himself. Even judging from the brief scene descriptions (much of the harlequinade was improvised 'business') it is apparent that Clown was the epicentre of an unceasing barrage of blows and shocks.

For example, in *Harlequin Mother Goose*, Clown is shot by a 'sportsman' who emerges from a clock (Scene IV), beats up the landlord of 'A Country Inn' (Scene V), has two crockery fights (Scenes VI and XIV), gets caught in 'a steel trap and spring gun' (Scene IX), is beaten like a clock bell at St. Dunstan's Church (Scene XII) and is chased by stinging bees (Scene XVII).⁷⁷⁰

In *Harlequin in His Element*, Clown's movement through the harlequinade is a similar accumulation of bodily assault. He is beaten by Harlequin for dancing with Columbine (Scene II), strung up a Dyer's pole and then falls off a broken ladder when he tries to escape (Scene V), stung by a wasp, thrown off a bench, dragged by the throat to the top of a tree by a giant arm (Scene VI), is roasted alive in a glass-house furnace (Scene VII), smashes his arm through a pane of glass (Scene XI), chokes on a hunter's horn and is lynched by a group of irate printers (Scene XII).⁷⁷¹ In *Harlequin and Fortunio*, Clown comes in for yet more rough treatment. The punning subtitle of a harlequinade scene in a 'Timber-Yard and Saw-pit', suggests the nature of Clown's bodily harm, as 'The Clown [is] not half himself – but he is soon himself again'.⁷⁷²

⁷⁷⁰ *Mother Goose*, pp. 333-341.

⁷⁷¹ *Element*, pp. 5-16.

⁷⁷² *Fortunio*, p. 13.

Across several pantomimes, the most popular elements were repeated or slightly varied, thus forming distinct patterns in the abuse of Clown. For example, the 'steel trap and spring gun' scene was reprised in *The Astrologer* as 'Spring Gun and Man Trap', while in *Bang Up! or Harlequin Prime*, the glass-house furnace becomes a kitchen fire in a scene subtitled 'Clown out of the Frying Pan into the Fire'.⁷⁷³

As these examples demonstrate, this violence is characteristically relentless and circular. Clown would typically assault another character only to be assaulted himself in the next scene, which sometimes served as a kind of poetic justice, but could also work in the opposite direction, as Clown in turn kicked downwards.

Dickens's texts sometimes take on these characteristics of the harlequinade, when violence intrudes and interrupts the progression of the overarching narrative. These moments can appear to be casual or ephemeral, but are no less striking for it. For example, at one point in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) the pot-boy of the Three Jolly Fellowship Porters mentions that he 'hadn't been "so rattled to bed"', since his late mother had systematically accelerated his retirement to rest with a poker'.⁷⁷⁴ Similarly, comic violence hovers at the edge of *Dombey and Son* when Bagstock alludes to his military past and the tough regime at Sandhurst:

'We put each other to the torture there, Sir. We roasted the new fellows at a slow fire, and hung 'em out of a three pair of stairs window, with their heads downwards. Joseph Bagstock, Sir, was held out of window by the heels of his boots, for thirteen minutes by the college clock'.⁷⁷⁵

⁷⁷³ *Astrologer*, p. 15; *Bang Up!*, p. 11.

⁷⁷⁴ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Arthur Waugh and others (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch Press, 1938), p. 77.

⁷⁷⁵ *Dombey*, p. 128.

However, Dickens provides a more sustained treatment of this in *The Pickwick Papers*, where Sam Weller's dark anecdotes and aphorisms burst in upon the gentle scenes of Samuel Pickwick's existence. Through their repetitive and cumulative nature they reveal a violent underside to the world of punch (with a small 'p') and Christmas games.

These interruptions cover a wide range of subjects, such as infanticide:

'Business first, pleasure arterwards, as King Richard the Third said ven he stabbed the t'other king in the Tower, afore he smothered the babbies'.⁷⁷⁶

Drug abuse:

'There's nothin' so refreshin' as sleep, Sir, as the servant-girl said afore she drank the egg-cup-full o' laudanum'.⁷⁷⁷

Gallows humour:

'If you walley my precious life don't upset me, as the gen'l'man said to the driver, when they was a carryin' him to Tyburn'.⁷⁷⁸

Dubious culinary practices:

"' Mr Weller [...] don't mention this here agin, but it's the seasonin' as does it. They're all made o' them noble animals", says he, a pointin' to a very nice little tabby kitten, "and I seasons 'em for beef-steak, weal, or kidney, 'cordin to the demand."⁷⁷⁹

⁷⁷⁶ *Pickwick*, p. 371.

⁷⁷⁷ *Pickwick*, p. 233.

⁷⁷⁸ *Pickwick*, p. 277.

⁷⁷⁹ *Pickwick*, p. 278.

And domestic abuse and murder:

‘You know what the counsel said, Sammy, as defended the gen’lem’n as beat his wife with the poker, venever he got jolly. “And arter all, my Lord”, says he, “it’s a amiable weakness”’.⁷⁸⁰

In Sam’s story of the ‘Celebrated Sassage factory’, the ‘inwenter o’ the patent-never-leavin-off sassage steam ‘ingine’ is forced by his shrewish wife into ‘a fit of temporary insanity’. In this state, he “rashly converted his-self into sassages!”, which was only discovered when a disgruntled customer finds trouser buttons in his dinner.⁷⁸¹

This is also supported by the equally remarkable anecdotes of Jingle, which in their disjointed style often read like stage directions or programme notes from the harlequinade:

‘Terrible place – dangerous work – other day – five children – mother – tall lady, eating sandwiches – forgot the arch – crash – knock – children look round – mother’s head off – sandwich in her hand – no head to put it in – head of a family off – shocking, shocking’.⁷⁸²

Kincaid feels that Sam Weller’s purpose in the narrative of *Pickwick Papers* is to educate his master ‘into a world of pain and poverty, limitation and morality’, and the sheer weight of these bleakly comic moments make violence a humorous, commonplace occurrence like the slapstick violence of the pantomime.⁷⁸³ Kincaid alerts us to the resemblance between the harlequinade and the movements of the characters in *The Old Curiosity Shop*; he locates the novel in ‘a madhouse world’ in which ‘for all the travelling and frantic rushing

⁷⁸⁰ *Pickwick*, p. 344.

⁷⁸¹ *Pickwick*, pp. 464-465.

⁷⁸² *Pickwick*, p. 14.

⁷⁸³ Kincaid, p. 32.

about that goes on, no one really moves anywhere or finally escapes from the pursuers'.⁷⁸⁴

This echoes the absurd, circumlocutory spectacle of the pantomime, where despite all of the slapstick stunts, the harlequinade does not progress the plot any further forward.

Bumble the beadle in *Oliver Twist* is another figure whose progress within the narrative embodies this cyclical, recurrent pattern of pantomime violence. In the early part of the novel he is, like Clown, an eager dispenser of violence (discussed further in Section IV of this chapter), but towards the end he becomes a victim. The scene in which Mrs Corney asserts her authority over her new husband is thoroughly pantomimic, and lends itself particularly well to being read as a piece of slapstick humour. Bumble upsets his wife, and takes enjoyment from his own mischief in a highly theatrical and non-verbal manner reminiscent of Grimaldi:

Mr Bumble took his hat from a peg; and putting it on, rather rakishly, on one side [...] thrust his hands into his pockets, and sauntered towards the door with much ease and waggishness depicted in his whole appearance.

This creates the archetypal slapstick setup; Bumble has been puffed to his utmost level of *hauteur*, and so now the scene can proceed to deflate him as quickly, and as thoroughly, as possible. The first target is the sartorial symbol of his supposed authority. He experiences 'the sudden flying off of his hat to the opposite end of the room'. Mrs Corney then assaults him in a double salvo, as 'clasping him tight round the throat with one hand, [she] inflicted a shower of blows (dealt with singular vigour and dexterity) upon it with the other'. Here, Dickens employs a variety of comic hyperbole – the double-handedness of the assault and the 'shower' of blows – to give the attack a heightened effect that takes it beyond reality.

⁷⁸⁴ Kincaid, p. 76.

As a final comic *coup de grace*, Bumble succumbs to a carefully managed and stereotypical prank: 'she pushed him over a chair, which was luckily well situated for the purpose'.⁷⁸⁵

But this is not the final action, for Bumble, whose violence towards children dominated much of the novel's early sections, has more violence to suffer in retribution for his previous wrongs. According to the scheme of Mayer's retributive comedy, violence (or the threat of violence) is further visited upon him. He is discovered by the shrewish Mrs Corney berating the women in the workhouse laundry and, anxious to preserve her own authority, she 'caught up a bowl of soap-suds, and motioning him towards the door, ordered him instantly to depart, on pain of receiving the contents upon his portly person'.⁷⁸⁶ Here, then, Bumble is threatened by involvement in a 'slosh' scene, a messy routine of pantomime slapstick whereby characters were doused in water or other liquids. This pattern had been prefigured in an earlier sketch where the pompous beadle caught a cold and died, we are told, 'in his capacity of director of the parish engine, by inadvertently playing over himself instead of a fire'.⁷⁸⁷

Lisa Surridge interprets Bumble's treatment by Mrs Corney as a negative example of a combative relationship between married couples, of which the Victorian middle-class reader would disapprove because it shows the representatives of public authority exhibiting a domestic lawlessness.⁷⁸⁸ However, Dickens frames this within comedy in a way that is entirely in keeping with the cyclical pattern of pantomime violence and gives Bumble an ending befitting the expectations of this shared 'culture text' (to return to Vlock's term).

It is therefore possible to reconsider Kincaid's reading of this scene. While Bumble does indeed become the 'hen-pecked husband', Kincaid's view that Bumble 'can no longer be

⁷⁸⁵ *Twist*, pp. 241-242.

⁷⁸⁶ *Twist*, p. 243.

⁷⁸⁷ Charles Dickens, 'The Election for Beadle', in *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 20-26 (p.22).

⁷⁸⁸ Lisa Surridge, *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), p. 39.

laughed at so easily' because the novel has moved us away from 'comfortable laughter' and towards sympathy with the victim is less secure.⁷⁸⁹ He feels that we 'delight in Bumble's fall, but we are revolted at the extended details of his degradation', as Dickens exposes 'the potential darkness within us', but, as this chapter has demonstrated, the pantomime form primarily engenders further laughter rather than revulsion.⁷⁹⁰

This cyclical pattern enables Dickens to satisfy the audience's generic expectations, by having the bullies beaten and also by demonstrating the fun inherent in their bullying. Noah Claypole is another figure who embodies this – indeed, his very name associates him with an earlier 'country bumpkin' type of clown, Clodpoll. Fagin certainly reads Claypole in this way when he disguises this 'awkward, ungainly, and raw-boned' fellow as 'some country fellow from Covent Garden market', and has 'no fear but that he would look the part to perfection'.⁷⁹¹ Claypole also displays a comical streak of cowardice (for example, blaming his crimes on Charlotte) and is implicated in several scenes of slapstick violence. When he first meets Oliver he 'administered a kick to [him], and entered the shop with a dignified air, which did him great credit', and after Oliver has beaten him in return, he mimes this attack to Bumble.⁷⁹² In a manner reminiscent of a silent clown, he

writhed and twisted his body into an extensive variety of eel-like positions; thereby giving Mr. Bumble to understand that, from the violent and sanguinary onset of *Oliver Twist*, he had sustained severe internal imagery and damage, from which he was at that moment suffering the acutest torture.⁷⁹³

⁷⁸⁹ Kincaid, p. 63; p. 68.

⁷⁹⁰ Kincaid, p. 57.

⁷⁹¹ *Twist*, p. 293.

⁷⁹² *Twist*, p. 43.

⁷⁹³ *Twist*, p. 55.

His final capture by the police also resembles a harlequinade episode; while trying to escape, he 'got into the empty water-butt, head downwards; but his legs were so precious long that they stuck out at the top, and so [the police] took him too'.⁷⁹⁴

The trajectory of Wackford Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby* also demonstrates this cyclical nature of slapstick violence. We laugh guiltily at his cruelty to the boys (see Section IV of this chapter), but then laugh more comfortably when he is beaten on several occasions himself. Moreover, the theatricality of these punishments displays an impermanence that suggests they will be repeated again in another routine the following night.

For example, Nicholas's first revolt against Squeers begins as a pure piece of melodrama. After a lofty exchange, Squeers, 'in a violent outbreak of wrath, and with a cry like the howl of a wild beast', strikes Nicholas with his ruler 'which raised up a bar of livid flesh as it was inflicted'. But as Nicholas retaliates, and Squeers's family intervene, the scene shifts towards pantomime: 'Mrs Squeers, with many shrieks for aid, hung on to the tail of her partner's coat, and endeavoured to drag him from his infuriated adversary'. Similarly Fanny Squeers, 'after launching a shower of inkstands at the usher's head, beat Nicholas to her heart's content: animating herself at every blow with the recollection of his having refused her proffered love'.⁷⁹⁵ This allusion to her comical wooing of Nicholas heightens the comedy of this scene.

⁷⁹⁴ *Twist*, p. 333.

⁷⁹⁵ *Nickleby*, p. 156.

Squeers is attacked in a similar fashion later on:

John Browdie just jerked his elbow into the chest of Mr Squeers who was advancing upon Smike; with so much dexterity that the schoolmaster reeled and staggered back upon Ralph Nickleby, and being unable to recover his balance, knocked that gentleman off his chair, and stumbled heavily on him.⁷⁹⁶

This chain reaction of effects is another stage-managed instance of Dickensian slapstick, as characters knock into each other like automata.

At the close of the novel, Dickens even manages to combine the cycle of violence and the carnivalesque inversion associated with retributive comedy. As part of the Dotheboys rebellion, one boy takes up Mrs Squeers's symbols of office, as he 'snatched off her cap and beaver-bonnet, put it on his own head, armed himself with the wooden spoon, and bade her, on pain of death, go down upon her knees and take a dose directly'. This display of misrule continues when she is forced to swallow the brimstone and treacle in front of 'a crowd of shouting tormentors', echoing the threat of the mob-audience again. This is then followed by a 'slosh' scene, as the bowl of liquor was 'rendered more than usually savoury by the immersion in the bowl of Master Wackford's head, whose ducking was entrusted to another rebel'.⁷⁹⁷

The indestructible clown

One important prerequisite of the repetitive, cyclical violence of the pantomime is Clown's indestructibility. He must be able to stand up again immediately to take the next blow, or as Wylie Sypher describes, the clown must be 'He Who Gets Slapped – and "is none the worse for his slapping"'.⁷⁹⁸ As Findlater notes when describing pantomime violence, 'If any

⁷⁹⁶ *Nickleby*, p. 596.

⁷⁹⁷ *Nickleby*, p. 830.

⁷⁹⁸ Sypher, p. 232.

Clodpoll in real life had been caught in one of these man-traps, set for those criminals who trespassed on private property, he might have been transported for life to Australia’.

However, because ‘this is the realm of pantomime [...] no injuries are mortal here: there is no crime, and no punishment’.⁷⁹⁹

This section will consider how both Grimaldi’s Clown and Dickens’s clownish characters disobey the laws of human biology by remaining impervious to the relentless assaults to which their bodies are subject. Paulus and King claim that slapstick ‘provided the means for inscribing the body as a central term of cinematic pleasure’ and it is also possible to observe a similar effect within pantomime.⁸⁰⁰ As the previous chapters on gluttony and clothing have demonstrated, Clown used a number of strategies to assert the centrality of the human body, which were underscored by his use of it as a site on which to inflict blows, punches, slaps, burns and gunshots.

According to Bakhtin, the violent beating enacted during the carnival represents a reincarnation, a renewal or a rebirth, as the ‘abuse and thrashing are equivalent to a change of costume, to a metamorphosis’.⁸⁰¹ In this way, the slapstick beatings take on a symbolic meaning, and ‘at once kill and regenerate, put an end to the old life and start the new’.⁸⁰² Here, the concern with Clown’s indestructibility and the very physical ordeal of the pantomime that his body undergoes is a further extension of the bodily grotesque, which, according to Stott, operates by ‘invoking the abject body as a risible concept to be laughed at rather than feared’ so that ‘its power of horror may be lifted and our fear of decay and

⁷⁹⁹ Grimaldi, p. 118.

⁸⁰⁰ Tom Paulus and Rob King, ‘Introduction: Restoring Slapstick to the Historiography of American Film’, in *Slapstick Comedy*, pp. 1-17 (p. 13).

⁸⁰¹ Bakhtin, p. 197.

⁸⁰² Bakhtin, p. 205.

degeneration alleviated'.⁸⁰³ Nelson similarly notes, 'one of comedy's responses to death' is 'a denial of its power or right to extinguish human personalities'.⁸⁰⁴

This superhuman indestructibility in the face of severe violence was also noted by contemporary commentators. For example, Baudelaire saw Clown guillotined on stage in an English pantomime:

His head came away from his neck, a big white and red head, rolling down with a thump in front of the prompter's box and exposing the bleeding neck, split vertebrae and all the details of a piece of butcher's meat, just cut up for the shop window.

But then suddenly, 'the truncated torso, driven by the irresistible monomania of thieving, got up, triumphantly filched its own head, like a ham or a bottle of wine, and [...] rammed it into its pocket!'.⁸⁰⁵ In an episode resembling Mr Grimwig's impossible eating of his own head, Clown's head here becomes just like any other stage prop, to be stashed away with all of the other stolen goods.

Wilson again draws on the reminiscences of Walter Freewood to describe Clown's indestructibility, who noted that:

I think we felt a little nervous in the ancient scene when Clown was mangled as flat as a flounder, but we were relieved by his appearing down the chimney immediately afterwards in his natural shape just as if nothing had happened.⁸⁰⁶

⁸⁰³ *Comedy*, p. 87.

⁸⁰⁴ Nelson, p. 73.

⁸⁰⁵ 'Essence of Laughter', pp. 156-157.

⁸⁰⁶ *Christmas Pantomime*, p. 102.

Similarly, a *Times* reviewer comments that ‘it is absolutely surprising that any human head or hide can resist the rough trials which [Clown] volunteers’ and ‘Serious tumbles from serious heights, innumerable kicks, and incessant beatings, come on him as matters of common occurrence, and leave him every night fresh and free for the next night’s flagellation’.⁸⁰⁷

In this way, the Grimaldian clown shares affinities with the Punch doll, who as Leach points out epitomises the ‘jack-in-the-box’ comedy outlined by Bergson:

No sooner does the policeman put in an appearance on the [*Punch and Judy*] stage than [...] he receives a blow which fells him. He springs to his feet, a second blow lays him flat. A repetition of the offence is followed by a repetition of the punishment. Up and down the constable flops and hops with the uniform rhythm of the bending and release of a spring, whilst the spectators laugh louder and louder.⁸⁰⁸

Clown’s indestructibility was of course part of a carefully managed illusion and Findlater chronicles the physical toll of the ‘mimic tortures’ that Grimaldi and his fellow performers undertook:

The agonies were often all too real. Broken bones, wrenched muscles, wounds with swords and pistols were all endured by Grimaldi and his colleagues in the cause of fun; Jack Bologna broke a collarbone, the elder Follet lost a leg, James Parsloe was blinded in one eye.⁸⁰⁹

Dickens was entirely aware of the actual vulnerability of Clown. In the *Memoirs* he refers to the various accidents and injuries of Grimaldi’s career, often adding moralising

⁸⁰⁷ *Times*, 5 January 1813, p. 3.

⁸⁰⁸ Sypher, p. 106.

⁸⁰⁹ *Grimaldi*, p. 140.

interjections. For example, he observes of Grimaldi that 'if at any one portion of his life his gains were very great, the actual toil both of mind and body by which they were purchased, was at least equally so'. According to Dickens's account, Grimaldi's life serves as a lesson to the 'stage-stricken young gentlemen who hang about Sadler's Wells, and Astley's, and the Surrey, and private theatres of all kinds' and painfully demonstrates the 'anxieties, and hardships, and privations, and sorrows, which make the sum of most actors' lives'.⁸¹⁰ The final words of the *Memoirs* could not be further from its light-hearted Introduction, as Dickens ruminates on Grimaldi's death and notes finally how 'the light and life of a brilliant theatre were exchanged in an instant for the gloom and sadness of a dull sick room'.⁸¹¹

Dickens had presented an earlier version of this story in his Stroller's Tale of *The Pickwick Papers*. This tells the pathetic life-story of a degraded and drunken clown who 'by unnaturally taxing [his] bodily energies' had prematurely lost 'those physical powers on which alone they can depend for subsistence'.⁸¹² But if, as Douglas-Fairhurst suggests, this is 'an early warning [...] that the victims of slapstick violence can bruise like anyone else', it was a warning that Dickens was reluctant to acknowledge in his later works.⁸¹³ Dickens's subsequent clowns are often both indestructible and seemingly immortal, regularly resisting serious injury and even evading the clutches of Death.

A minor but interesting member of this troupe of indestructible clowns is Sim Tappertit in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841). Sim is one of the surviving Gordon rioters and, while his legs are damaged in the crush of the mob he manages to replace them with wooden ones. Kincaid calls the final scenes with Sim as 'the most truly obscene [...] anywhere in his novels', but

⁸¹⁰ *Memoirs*, I, pp. 10-11.

⁸¹¹ *Memoirs*, II, p. 263.

⁸¹² *Pickwick*, p. 42.

⁸¹³ Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 113.

they could be read as a comic affirmation of Sim's clownish indestructibility.⁸¹⁴ He may have been 'shorn of his graceful limbs, and brought down from his high estate', but he still becomes relatively comfortable 'in great domestic happiness'. Moreover, when he is threatens to pompously inflate himself again 'in assertion of his prerogative' and 'correct his lady with a brush, or boot, or shoe', she would temporarily check his hubris by taking off his legs, in a manner that recalls Grimaldi's beheading or his loss of limbs in the harlequinade.⁸¹⁵

Tappetit's detachable legs recall a group of earlier comic automatons. In his 'Full Report of the Second Meeting of the Mudfog Association For the Advancement of Everything' (September 1838), Dickens describes one of the inventions proposed by the Association as 'an entirely new police force, composed entirely of automaton figures'. The model policeman could 'walk about until knocked down like any real man', and the

great advantage would be, that a policeman's limbs might all be knocked off, and yet he would be in a condition to do duty next day. He might even give his evidence next morning with his head in his hand, and give it equally well.⁸¹⁶

⁸¹⁴ Kincaid, p. 129.

⁸¹⁵ Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, ed. by Arthur Waugh and others (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch Press, 1937), pp. 680-681.

⁸¹⁶ Charles Dickens, 'Full Report Of the First Meeting of the Mudfog Association for the Advancement of Everything', in *Dickens' Journalism*, pp. 530-551 (p. 545).

Cruikshank's illustration neatly encapsulates the slapstick violence of this, as the officers giving evidence clearly lost their arms and heads in scuffles with the assembled 'offenders' to the right of the picture:



Figure 27: George Cruikshank, 'Automaton Police Office and the Real Offenders', 'The Full Report of the Second Meeting of the Mudfog Association For the Advancement of Everything' (1837), *Bentley's Miscellany* (October 1837)

Similarly, Daniel Quilp seems to defeat Death, not once but twice. In the first incident, he achieves this at a symbolic level: he appears before an assembled entourage of family and associates to prove that the reports of his death are emphatically wrong and as Kincaid notes, thus achieves 'a victory over the ghouls'. These ghouls (such as the Brasses) represent 'cold and artificial mourning' versus the clown's 'belligerent life and honesty' and such a scene both affirms Clown's resistance to death and punctures the pretence of those around him (another duty of the clown).⁸¹⁷

⁸¹⁷ Kincaid, p. 98.

Even when Death seems certain to claim Quilp at the end of the novel, Dickens leaves us with the suggestion that he may still be alive. He appears to drown in his final scene, but a number of details indicate that Quilp is not entirely dead. His body initially refuses to be still, as the tide 'toyed and sported with its ghastly freight, now bruising it against the slimy piles, now hiding it in mud or long rank grass, now dragging it heavily over rough stones and gravel'. Finally the clown's beating is over, and the 'ugly plaything' is washed onto a swamp, but at this point he seems ready to rise again. The fire reflects upon his face, giving the appearance of animation, his hair is 'stirred by the damp breeze [...] in a kind of mockery of death' and his clothes 'fluttered idly in the night wind'.⁸¹⁸

A final hint at Quilp's possible ability to 'rise' again is the suggestively thrusting pillar (sometimes negatively read as a stake through his heart) depicted in the print of his 'dead' body:

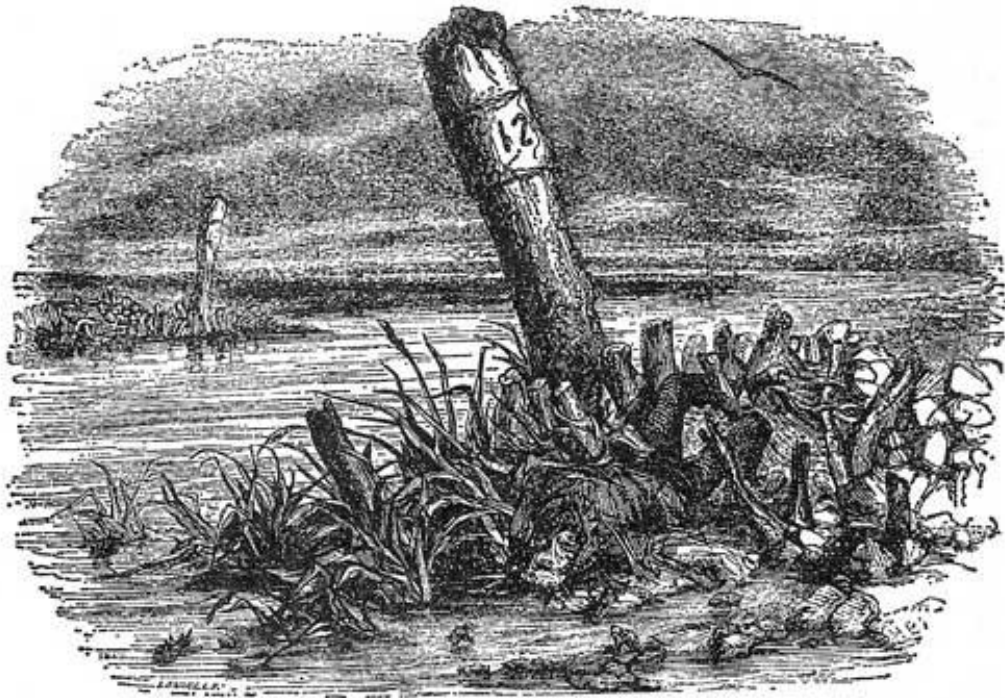


Figure 28: Hablot K. Browne ('Phiz'), 'The End of Quilp' (1840), *Curiosity Shop*

⁸¹⁸ *Curiosity Shop*, pp. 528-529.

The Artful Dodger offers another type of clownish indestructibility. Despite his seniority in Fagin's ranks, he escapes the full weight of justice within the terms of Dickens's narrative, which sees the other principal criminals hung by civil law (Fagin), hung by divine law (Sikes) and murdered (Nancy). Dodger also represents the pantomime clown in his humorous flouting of the law and attitude to stealing, which resembles a harlequinade prank.

When we first meet him, in his outsized clothes and precarious hat, he is described 'as roystering and swaggering a young gentleman as ever stood four foot six, or something less, in his bluchers'.⁸¹⁹ To rouse their spirits after his arrest, Fagin and Charley Bates imagine his trial scene as comical theatre. Fagin declares that it would be reported in the papers as 'Artful Dodger – shrieks of laughter – here the court was convulsed', and Bates's vision further underlines this sense of a pantomime performance by the anarchic clown:

'What a game! What a regular game! All the big-wigs trying to look solemn, and Jack Dawkins addressing of 'em as intimate and comfortable as if he was the judge's own son making a speech arter dinner – ha! ha! ha!'

Dickens observes of this scene that Fagin had so transformed Charley's way of thinking, that rather than seeing Dodger as a victim he 'now looked upon him as the chief actor in a scene of most uncommon and exquisite humour'.⁸²⁰

Dodger's actual trial scene matches Fagin's imagined version perfectly, and while it is mostly the sort of verbal performance denied to Grimaldi's clown, it certainly pitches the same daring attitude towards the law. Even when Dodger is finally taken down, he leaves us in no doubt of his clownish credentials, 'grinning in the officer's face, with great glee and self-approval'.⁸²¹ Here he echoes an earlier prototype in *Sketches by Boz*, who after

⁸¹⁹ *Twist*, p. 62.

⁸²⁰ *Twist*, p. 291.

⁸²¹ *Twist*, p. 296.

indulging in similar comic *badinage* with the judge and jury, is taken down after sentencing 'congratulating himself on having succeeded in giving every body as much trouble as possible'.⁸²² Here again, we have the self-evident delight in mischief that was emblematic of the clown, as well as an affirmation of life.

Dickens's most potent example of the indestructible clown is perhaps Seth Pecksniff in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, who repeatedly demonstrates a dogged refusal to be beaten by pain, and constantly bounces back from his blows. Kincaid notes that in this novel Dickens moves towards 'a new kind of humour [...] which finds laughter not in a denial of the pains of living but in an acceptance of them', and this is underscored by the particularly clownish antics of Pecksniff.⁸²³ For violence is ever-present within the novel, but through Pecksniff it is diminished and rendered comical: the slapstick has absorbed the pain once more.

Kincaid calls Pecksniff a 'Bergsonian automaton', and there is certainly a mechanical element to the way in which he is repeatedly knocked over and springs back up again for more punishment.⁸²⁴ He is associated with that wooden miniature of the pantomime clown, Mr Punch: 'constantly diving down [...] and coming up again like the intelligent householder in Punch's show, who avoids being knocked on the head with a cudgel'.⁸²⁵ He also fulfills another role akin to the Pantaloon as well when, as Kincaid puts it, he plays the 'pompous man [who] *begins* by being deflated'.⁸²⁶

From the outset, Pecksniff's environment conspires against him, as he falls foul of a series of pratfalls. The wind blows the leaves around outside Pecksniff's house, but Dickens notes that 'the oddest feat' that the wind achieved was when it 'slammed the front-door against Mr. Pecksniff who was at that moment entering, with such violence, that in the twinkling of

⁸²² Charles Dickens, 'Criminal Courts' in *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 194-198 (p. 198).

⁸²³ Kincaid, p. 135.

⁸²⁴ Kincaid, p. 139.

⁸²⁵ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 491.

⁸²⁶ Kincaid, p. 139.

an eye he lay on his back at the bottom of the steps'. The wind moves on 'weary of such trifling performances'. These descriptions are invested with a sense that he is proceeding through a series of stage traps that have been carefully placed rather than accidentally discovered.

Moreover, even the blow Pecksniff receives is described in highly unrealistic terms as he

received, from a sharp angle in the bottom step but one, that sort of knock on the head which lights up, for the patient's entertainment, an imaginary general illumination of very bright short-sixes, [and] lay placidly staring at his own street-door.

As he lies in this prone state, his position is the occasion for further comic business, as his concerned daughter opens the door and peers out with her candle looking 'provokingly round him, and about him, and over him, and everywhere but at him'.

Later, Pecksniff's revival is described in these terms:

Mr Pecksniff, being in the act of extinguishing the candles before mentioned pretty rapidly, and of reducing the number of brass knobs on his street-door from four or five hundred (which had previously been juggling of their own accord before his eyes in a very novel manner) to a dozen or so, might in one sense have been said to be coming round the corner, and just turning it.⁸²⁷

He is clearly concussed, but Dickens renders his injury into comic terms, as suggested by the amusing hyperbole of the 'four or five hundred' brass knobs 'juggling' in front of his eyes.

⁸²⁷ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 9.

Pecksniff is also a violent sleeper, and in one scene he demonstrates a clownish pliability and also neatly encapsulates the entire cycle of slapstick violence:

The tendency of mankind when it falls asleep in coaches, is to wake up cross; to find its legs in its way; and its corns an aggravation. Mr. Pecksniff not being exempt from the common lot of humanity, found himself, at the end of his nap, so decidedly the victim of these infirmities, that he had an irresistible inclination to visit them upon his daughters; which he had already begun to do so in the shape of divers random kicks, and the other unexpected motions of his shoes [...].⁸²⁸

Even in the dramatic scene when Pecksniff throws young Martin out of his house, Dickens the director cannot resist dropping his ever-reliable prop chair into the scene. As in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the episode begins with melodrama as the theatrical Pecksniff has declared that ‘Like all who know you, I renounce you!’, but then:

With what intention Martin made a stride forward at these words, it is impossible to say. It is enough to know that Tom Pinch caught him in his arms, and that at the same moment Mr. Pecksniff stepped back so hastily, that he missed his footing, tumbled over a chair, and fell in a sitting posture on the ground; where he remained without an effort to get up again, with his head in a corner; perhaps considering it the safest place.

Again we have the Dickensian disingenuousness – as the author, only he could know what Martin’s intention was, but instead he attributes it to the kind of ineffable, comic laws that govern pantomime. Later, as Martin continues to denounce him, we are told that he sat on the carpet ‘with his head in an acute angle of the wainscot, and all the damage and

⁸²⁸ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 119.

detriment of an uncomfortable journey about him'. He is 'not exactly a model of all that is prepossessing and dignified in man', and instead resembles that substitute for man's indignity, the clown.⁸²⁹

Phiz provides a supporting illustration for this scene:



Figure 29: Hablot K. Browne ('Phiz'), 'Mr Pecksniff renounces the deceiver' (1843), *Martin Chuzzlewit*

The caption begins the process of deflation, for according to what we see, the 'renouncer' appears to be Martin, with the actual 'deceiver' on his backside with his legs waving in the air. Pecksniff's position here is what Bakhtin would characterise as carnivalesque inversion

⁸²⁹ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 211.

of normality, with the upper and lower bodily strata at risk of being inverted as his legs point upwards and his torso drops beneath him. Moreover, two more prop versions of Pecksniff are visible in the scene. Both are more tidy and perfect than the dishevelled real version, and suggest that the real 'flesh and blood' version is merely another prop, a stunt dummy to be knocked around at will.

This careful positioning of Pecksniff as a pantomime clown trapped within a circle of violence is important when the reader comes to interpret Pecksniff's violent exit from the novel. The cyclical pattern of pantomime violence dictates that Pecksniff's retributive beating at the end of the narrative is an expected event which provides relief and gratification to the audience/reader, without having serious or lasting consequences.

When old Martin strikes Pecksniff with his stick, with 'a well-directed nervous blow', he goes down 'as heavily and true as if the charge of a Life-Guardsman had tumbled him out of a saddle'. Here we are provided with a wholesome military image, like the patriotic tar at the end of the Regency pantomime brought on to sing 'Rule Britannia'. Pecksniff, we are told, lies on the floor stunned, 'looking about him, with a disconcerted meekness in his face so enormously ridiculous, that neither Mark Tapley nor John Westlock could repress a smile', even as they held back old Martin from striking again.⁸³⁰ Here the detached observers direct us on how to read the scene. This is not quite the 'wild hallo' over Pecksniff's 'prostrate carcase' or the 'whoop and yell' as he lies 'humbled' beneath the audience that Dickens described in 'The Pantomime of Life', but it subtly suggests the same identification with the audience/mob.

However Pecksniff the automaton cannot be kept down for long and rises up to make a dignified exit, only to be immediately deflated again:

⁸³⁰ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 799.

With [a] sublime address Mr. Pecksniff departed. But the effect of his departure was much impaired by his being immediately afterwards run against, and nearly knocked down by, a monstrously-excited little man in velveteen shorts and a very tall hat.⁸³¹

Of course, he was never meant to make a dignified exit – his ‘sublime address’ is merely the set-up for his final fall. He is not invited to his daughter’s wedding, and so Pecksniff exits Dickens’s narrative just as he entered it - on a slapstick note.

IV. The victims of slapstick comedy

To further develop this argument, this section will examine Dickens’s treatment of three groups of the most vulnerable figures within society, who were also the most common and popular victims of Clown’s violence – women, the elderly and the young.

Violence against women

While Grimaldi’s performances furnish few examples of slapstick violence towards women, Dickens provides a number of such cases. Due to this disparity, Dickens’s female victims will only be briefly considered here as pointers to a more gender-inflected reading of slapstick violence which is outside the scope of this study.

Kincaid feels that in *The Old Curiosity Shop* the reader is asked ‘to participate in hostile laughter at all women’, whereby the ‘softness, humility, and gentle subservience of women is both staunchly supported and ridiculed’ and this is clearly evident in Quilp’s treatment of his wife and her friends.⁸³² The other characters in the novel conspicuously fail to notice Quilp’s violence towards his wife – for example, when Quilp pinches his wife and causes her to scream, Dick Swiveller makes no acknowledgement of the act or the impact of such violence. This provides a cue to the reader to pay it no serious attention either.

⁸³¹ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 808.

⁸³² Kincaid, p. 83.

Moreover, the women in this novel are sometimes presented as willing participants in the knockabout violence of the harlequinade, rather than solely as the passive victims of violence. Discussing the model of resistance to violence offered by Mrs Jiniwin and her entourage, Surridge observes that:

The Old Curiosity Shop acknowledges the political reality of resistant women – and indeed shows a veritable sisterhood of supportive women around Mrs Quilp – but it simultaneously undercuts their resistance as vicious and shrewish, almost as distasteful and in need of reform as Quilp himself.⁸³³

By contrast, Nancy in *Oliver Twist* is described by Surridge as ‘Mrs Jiniwin’s antitype’ who does not resist Sikes’s violence.⁸³⁴ This is because Dickens ‘dwells almost obsessively on this moment when the ‘private’ violence of the home enters the public eye’, yet holds ‘a deep ambivalence concerning public intrusion into domestic privacy’.⁸³⁵ He is thus inclined to favour figures like Nancy, who strive to maintain that privacy by remaining silent about the violence they suffer, and conversely relegates those who make a public performance of such violence, like Mrs Jiniwin, to the realms of the comic. Such resistance to violence becomes something comical and even fantastical, and moves towards slapstick itself.

This comical treatment of female self-assertion is also visible in *Little Dorrit*. Kincaid feels that Affery is ‘so much a real victim of physical cruelty’, but Dickens’s persistent slapstick tone attempts to obscure this from the reader.⁸³⁶ He forces the exchanges between Affery and her violent husband Flintwinch into the realms of the pantomimic through depicting the effects of Flintwinch’s violence as exaggerated and impermanent and also through his transformation of Affery into a Bergsonian automaton.

⁸³³ Surridge, p. 159.

⁸³⁴ Surridge, p. 30.

⁸³⁵ Surridge, p. 18.

⁸³⁶ Kincaid, p. 216.

Bergson views the stumbling man as potentially comic due to his ‘mechanical inelasticity’ and ‘rigidity’.⁸³⁷ These traits make him an automaton and thus an inherently comic figure: ‘The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine’.⁸³⁸ Just as the clown becomes a rigid object when he is struck or bounces off other objects, Affery and Flintwinch resemble two violent figures in a mechanised clock:

He kept his eyes upon her, and kept advancing; and she, completely under his influence, kept retiring before him. Thus, she walking backward and he walking forward, they came into their own room. They were no sooner shut in there, than Mr. Flintwinch took her by the throat, and shook her till she was black in the face.⁸³⁹

The pair are regularly characterised as examples of Bergson’s ‘mechanical encrusted on the living’.⁸⁴⁰ Flintwinch seems to run on crooked rails as he prepares to attack his wife, screwing ‘himself a curve or two in the direction of the window-seat’ and later continuing ‘with a menacing grin to screw himself in the direction of his wife’.⁸⁴¹ Similarly, Affery adopts repetitive actions as a frightened response to her husband’s threats: ‘In this dilemma, Mistress Affery, with her apron as a hood to keep the rain off, ran crying up and down the solitary paved enclosure several times’.⁸⁴²

Dickens also accentuates the comic in his depiction of Affery’s constant fear. At one point she is scared that their house is haunted and tells Flintwinch that she felt “‘a rustle and a sort of trembling touch behind [her]’”, to which he responds, “‘Affery, my woman [...] if you

⁸³⁷ Sypher, pp. 66-67.

⁸³⁸ Sypher, p. 79.

⁸³⁹ *Dorrit*, p. 43.

⁸⁴⁰ Sypher, p. 84.

⁸⁴¹ *Dorrit*, p. 745.

⁸⁴² *Dorrit*, p. 337.

don't get tea pretty quick [...] you'll become sensible of a rustle and a touch that'll send you flying to the other end of the kitchen'''.⁸⁴³

Flintwinch even makes a dark joke of trying to soothe her nerves, casting his violence and her suffering into a comic frame. To cure her 'distempered antics', he feels that she 'must have some physic' and offers to give her 'such a comfortable dose' when they are alone. However, given that this promise is delivered 'with his fists clenched, and his elbows quivering with impatience to shake her', it is clear what sort of medicine he has in mind.⁸⁴⁴

There are limited examples of slapstick violence against women, then, although Dickens would find other stylistic methods by which to commit violence on the women of his novels, such as caricature and objectification. Yet while Columbine escaped Clown's violence, Pantaloon would often bear its full weight, and this will be considered in the next section.

Violence against the elderly

Pantaloon was the archetypal elderly figure within the pantomime, an old and often miserly character who propels the plot by attempting to marry his attractive young daughter to an inappropriate suitor. As a consequence of this behaviour, and as part of his role as Clown's master, he is the butt of many of Clown's violent acts, embodying the retributive comedy of pantomime (described earlier in Section III).

For example, in *Harlequin Mother Goose*, Clown 'breaks [a wooden] board in two upon [Pantaloon's] head' when he emerges from a basket.⁸⁴⁵ In *Harlequin in His Element*, Clown puts a stinging wasp on the Pantaloon's nose, and then tricks him into sitting on a moving bench which tips him over. Later in a glass factory, Clown 'sweeps [a] stick round, breaks

⁸⁴³ *Dorrit*, p. 181.

⁸⁴⁴ *Dorrit*, pp. 607-608.

⁸⁴⁵ *Mother Goose*, p. 340.

[Pantaloone]'s shins, and knocks him down – Clown discovers his mistake, pretends to cry, but laughs aside'. He further compounds his crime when he 'burns [his] master trying to show how the figures served him'.⁸⁴⁶

David Mayer characterises the traditional Pantaloone as beset by 'egotism and ruthless stupidity', which thus provides a 'comic edge' to the cruelty inflicted upon him.⁸⁴⁷ One *Times* reviewer asserts that:

It does one good to see how heartily the clowns and pantaloons [...] cuff and bang each other; indeed, as naturalists, we marvel much touching the organization of their joints and sinews, and, as moralists, with respect to those idiosyncrasies of disposition which make the annoyance of a fellow-creature the only business and comfort of existence. Hobbes must have been deep in the philosophy of pantomimes.⁸⁴⁸

The reference to Hobbes is a significant one, as this chapter has already noted the relationship between comedy and violence that he proposed.

'The Pantomime of Life' demonstrates that Dickens was well aware of Pantaloone's conventional role as a deserved victim of violence. The Pantaloone is described there as the 'most worthless and debauched' figure of the cast and 'a treacherous worldly-minded old villain'. For Dickens, his age compounds his crimes as he offers an indecorous example to the young, indulging in 'disagreeable' 'amorous propensities' towards younger girls and luring young men into 'acts of fraud or petty larceny'.⁸⁴⁹

⁸⁴⁶ *Element*, pp. 9-10.

⁸⁴⁷ *Harlequin*, p. 43.

⁸⁴⁸ 'Adelphi Theatre', *The Times*, 27 December 1832, p. 3.

⁸⁴⁹ 'Pantomime', pp- 501-502.

This disagreeable portrayal comes immediately after a scene in which Pantaloon falls on stage, in which Dickens had observed how the audience ‘roar’, ‘scream with delight’, become ‘convulsed with merriment’ and ‘are exhausted with laughter’ at the sight of this mishap.⁸⁵⁰ He also suggests how these attitudes carry through into the real, ‘offstage’ life of the beleaguered Pantaloon and, in emphasising the comedy of the situation, Dickens moves towards Kincaid’s ‘jungle whoop of triumph after murder’:

What a wild hallo is raised over his prostrate carcase by the shouting mob; how they whoop and yell as he lies humbled beneath them! Mark how eagerly they set upon him when he is down; and how they mock and deride him as he slinks away.⁸⁵¹

The amusement of the pantomime audience shifts into mob violence. Such laughter is reminiscent of Northrop Frye’s description of comedy as ‘the condition of savagery, the world in which comedy consists of inflicting pain on a helpless victim, and tragedy in enduring it’.⁸⁵² Bernard Shaw similarly describes ‘farcical comedy’ as the ‘deliberate indulgence of that horrible, derisive joy in humiliation and suffering which is the beastliest element in human nature’.⁸⁵³

Dickens explored this real-life antipathy towards Pantaloon in the *Memoirs*, when he described the cruel treatment of ‘Billy Coombes’, who played Pantaloon to Grimaldi’s Clown (as discussed in Chapter 2). Moreover, in an *All the Year Round* article from 1863 entitled ‘Pantaloon’, Andrew Halliday, in the persona of a retired Pantaloon reminiscing in his dotage, describes the sufferings caused by his Clown Pelloni. According to Halliday’s

⁸⁵⁰ ‘Pantomime’, p. 501.

⁸⁵¹ Kincaid, p. 9; *Pantomime*, p. 501.

⁸⁵² Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 45.

⁸⁵³ George Bernard Shaw, ‘The Farcical Comedy Outbreak’, in *Our Theatres in the Nineties*, 3 vols (London: Constable, 1932), II, pp. 118-124 (p. 118).

character, 'Joey' the Clown 'has kicked and cuffed and battered me into what I am—a shaky old pantaloons, stiff at the joints and weak about the small of the back'. He portrays Clown as a sadistic egotist, who satisfies his own violent streak as well as that of the audience:

He was always very rough at his business. If I missed the slap, Joey would give me a real one, a regular stinger; and the people in the front liked the real thing best. They always laughed more at the real thing, and that encouraged Joey to do the real thing. Once, when he nearly broke my back with the barber's shutter, the gallery went into regular convulsions, and shouted "Encore".⁸⁵⁴

While Grimaldi does not indulge in the same viciousness and bragging, he nonetheless treats Coombes with uncharacteristic suspicion and disdain whether onstage or offstage.

Although more recent interpretations (such as Roman Polanski's 2005 film) have tried to create some pity for Fagin, in some respects he is an early Pantaloon, an avaricious old man who tries to foil the moral and social progress of the hero Oliver. The reader's dislike of Fagin on this basis is meant to excuse a brief scene of slapstick violence in which he is involved, as he gets caught in between a quarrel between two of his accomplices:

[The] abused Mr. Chitling [...] rushed across the room, and aimed a blow at the offender, who [...] ducked to avoid it; and chose his time so well that it lighted on the chest of the merry old gentleman, and caused him stagger to the wall, where he stood panting for breath, while Mr. Chitling looked on, in intense dismay.⁸⁵⁵

⁸⁵⁴ Andrew Halliday, 'Pantaloon', *All the Year Round*, 13 September 1863, p. 10.

⁸⁵⁵ *Twist*, p. 169.

Chitling's timing has, of course, nothing to do with this – here, Dickens's language resembles that of Mrs Corney's assault on Bumble, as he slyly makes us aware of his agency in choreographing the scene to derive the perfect comic finale. As Garis has it, Dickens cannot resist revealing his directorial hand in events, betraying it in the slightest detail. Dodger's presence is also significant because he represents one of Dickens's indestructible clowns (discussed above). The scene ends with Dickens composing the final *tableau* for our appreciation, framing attacker and victim.

Moreover, *Oliver Twist* also investigates the transformation of the audience into the mob through his depiction of what Jeremy Tambling calls 'lynch-law':

Lynch-law is regarded with fascination in *Oliver Twist* [...] and no detective is needed when the crowd itself turns detective, as though punishment is being presented here as the due that is owing to an outraged society.⁸⁵⁶

The movement here is cyclical, as the active mob becomes the passive - but threatening - audience. They begin as the mob trying to lynch Fagin when he is arrested ('jumping up, one behind another, and snarling with their teeth and making at him like wild beast'), and then become the audience for Fagin's final performance.⁸⁵⁷ There is a theatrical feel to Fagin's trial:

Before him and behind; above, below, on the right and on the left; he seemed to stand surrounded by a firmament, all bright with gleaming eyes.

He stood there, in all this glare of living light.⁸⁵⁸

⁸⁵⁶ Jeremy Tambling, *Dickens, Violence and the Modern State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p. 150.

⁸⁵⁷ *Twist*, p. 334.

⁸⁵⁸ *Twist*, p. 350.

This continues in his execution scene, with the assembled multitude ‘pushing, quarrelling and joking’ before ‘the black stage’.⁸⁵⁹ Here, Dickens punishes the Pantaloon as the reader would expect, but simultaneously recognises the threatening and destructive impulse of the audience-mob – just as he had in ‘The Pantomime of Life’.

Another minor example of the punished Pantaloon is Silas Wegg in *Our Mutual Friend*. He has no daughter to marry off, but he nonetheless interferes in the love plot of the novel by trying to obstruct the progress of the hero - John Rokesmith - as he proceeds towards his fortune. Kincaid aligns him with Dickens’s earlier pantomimic figures when he comments that Wegg and Venus ‘hearken back to much simpler comic types: they are both completely unselfconscious and quite uncomplex’. He also aligns them with the pantomimic, noting their physical ‘Marx Brothers’ humour when sliding around the dust mounds, which makes them ‘so nearly puppets that they can be played for the kind of visual humour not found in Dickens since Mr. Pickwick chased his wind-blown hat for several pages’.⁸⁶⁰

If we view Wegg with this pantomimic sensibility, his ultimate fate in a ‘slosh’ scene is an entirely justified and expected conclusion. Sloppy is asked to throw him out of the Boffin house:

[...] but, a scavenger’s cart happening to stand unattended at the corner, with its little ladder planted against the wheel, Mr. S. found it impossible to resist the temptation of shooting Mr. Silas Wegg into the cart’s contents. A somewhat difficult feat, achieved with a great dexterity, and with a prodigious splash.⁸⁶¹

⁸⁵⁹ *Twist*, p. 357.

⁸⁶⁰ Kincaid, p. 248.

⁸⁶¹ *Mutual Friend*, p. 893.

Here once again we have Dickens's carefully placed reference to the fortuitous circumstances of the situation (the cart 'happening to stand unattended at the corner'), when of course it is anything but. Throughout the novel Sloppy's ungainly action, incessant chuckling and physical appearance (he is 'a very long boy, with a very little head, and an open mouth of disproportionate capacity') closely associate him with Clown, and he fulfills this conventional role here by impeding the villainous Pantaloon and assisting the lovers' progress.⁸⁶²

John Carey censures this scene (along with the final beating of Pecksniff by old Martin Chuzzlewit, which is considered in Section III of this chapter) as among Dickens's most unimaginative writing. He calls it a 'dutiful, perfunctory business', which Dickens tries to mask with the 'shoddy subterfuge' of 'military imagery' when Rokesmith holds Wegg in what Dickens calls a 'sailor-like turn on his cravat'.⁸⁶³ However Kincaid reads this scene differently when he describes this resolution as a typically pantomimic piece of slapstick justice, during which 'true wisdom [...] doesn't reward the cheats but plops them into carts of night-soil'.⁸⁶⁴

Violence against children

According to the 'Captious Critic' of the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* in 1887, child actors were far more suited to the 'brutal buffoonery' of the harlequinade than their adult counterparts, because it represented 'essentially the wild frolics of childhood' and 'the utter abandonment of animal spirits only proper to the time of life before care of experience have begun to sober down the temperament of mankind'.⁸⁶⁵ This would suggest that the child would be the ideal conduit for the slapstick violence of the harlequinade, and this indeed seems to be the case.

⁸⁶² *Mutual Friend*, p. 221.

⁸⁶³ Carey, p. 29; *Mutual Friend*, p. 890.

⁸⁶⁴ Kincaid, p. 250.

⁸⁶⁵ [Anon.], 'Our Captious Critic', *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 6 January 1877, p. 365.

Babies were particularly popular targets for pantomime violence. As A.E. Wilson relates, Clown would 'kidnap [them] from too-confiding nursemaids' and then submit them to all manner of cruel pranks.⁸⁶⁶ A clearer picture of this treatment can be ascertained from contemporary reviews and commentaries, which were divided as to the propriety of such routines. For example *The Morning Herald* gave a disapproving account of an Adelphi pantomime of 1827, in which 'An effigy of a child was flung towards the pit':

This incident was loudly applauded. The manner in which the child in the cradle was managed cannot be too reprobated. No one can view the stifling of an infant, even in jest, and the supposed flattening of its body by the pressure of a superior weight, even though that weight should be the ridiculous person of Pantaloon himself, without an unmixed sense of pain.⁸⁶⁷

Similarly, Robert Paulet, a foreign visitor to the English pantomime questioned, 'Whence can arise the pleasure of seeing children suspended in the air, or tossed about, at the utmost hazard of their lives, to gratify the avarice of unnatural parents?'.⁸⁶⁸ By contrast, Andrew Halliday in his history of the pantomime asked the reader: 'Where is the witticism that can compete with sitting on a baby, and flattening it to the shape of a pancake?'⁸⁶⁹

The popularity of children on the stage in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century reflected a wider cultural shift in perceptions of the child. As Anne Varty has demonstrated, Romantic conceptions of the child as the guileless natural or the *tabula rasa*, rather than the small adults and cursed inheritors of original sin of previous centuries, were soon reflected in the way that they were viewed on the stage. Varty cites Jonas Barish's examination of the 'anti-theatrical prejudice', which favourably situated the nineteenth-

⁸⁶⁶ *Pantomime Pageant*, p. 38.

⁸⁶⁷ See Frow, p. 84.

⁸⁶⁸ Cradock, p. 66.

⁸⁶⁹ *Comical Fellows*, p. 5.

century 'performing' child within the ranks of 'the peasant, the savage, [and] the idiot', 'in whom the histrionic impulse remains undeveloped'.⁸⁷⁰ Developing this argument, she comments that 'the performing child stood unblemished and its audience unsullied in an era when prejudice against actors and their profession focussed on their doubleness or duplicity'.⁸⁷¹

Varty also views John Ruskin as one of the earliest critics to reconfigure the Romantic ideal of the child in a Victorian context, and to situate Dickens's children as a fictional continuation of those ideals. In his 1884 essay 'Fairy Land' Ruskin notes the prominence of 'child benediction' in Dickens's work, tracing an imaginary London 'pilgrimage' on which one meets 'the Little Nells and boy David Copperfields, and in the heart of it, Kit's baby brother at Astley's, indenting his cheek with an oyster-shell to the admiration of all beholders'.

To Ruskin, Dickens's children represent 'the radiance and innocence of reinstated infant divinity' and Peter Coveney has more recently described the Dickensian child as a principal symbol of innocence and purity in an increasingly sordid and impure machine age.⁸⁷²

Coveney asserts that 'Dickens is the central figure in the transference of the romantic child into the Victorian novel', arguing that Dickens saw the pure child as an excellent vehicle for 'the pivot of his mature art', which Coveney regards as the depiction of 'the struggle of innocence with evil'.⁸⁷³ However, while Coveney correctly notes Dickens's inconsistent treatment of children, claiming that the child alternates between being 'a symbol of growth and development' to 'a symbol of retreat into personal regression and self-pity', he

⁸⁷⁰ Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, LA, London: University of California Press, 1981), p. 326.

⁸⁷¹ Anne Varty, *Children and Theatre in Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 12.

⁸⁷² John Ruskin, 'Fairy Land', in *The Art of England, The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: Allen, 1903-1912), XXXIII, p. 338.

⁸⁷³ Peter Coveney, *Poor Monkey: The Child in Literature* (London: Rockcliff, 1957), p. 70; p. 74.

neglects to consider the child's role in slapstick comedy.⁸⁷⁴ For while Dickens's fictional children were often 'agents in a moral or political thesis', they also served another role as agents of the darker and Regency-inflected humour.⁸⁷⁵ Indeed, it is a remarkable fact that the most prevalent form of slapstick violence in the work of Dickens, a writer who regularly championed the protection of the young, is that directed towards children.

Significantly Coveney characterises a variety of popular entertainments, such as the theatre, the circus and *Punch and Judy* show, as representative of 'the idea of human joy in [Dickens's] work' and the 'free' playground of 'emotion and imagination', but does not consider the precise mechanics of these entertainments.⁸⁷⁶ For within pantomime, and its close corollary the *Punch and Judy* show, the slapstick violence enacted on children aims to amuse. Coveney's view is applicable for some of Dickens's fiction, but it must also share a conceptual space with an equally persuasive, and contradictory, view of the Dickensian child. For while on the one hand Dickens sees the child as a repository of Victorian sympathy, he also sees it through his pantomimic sensibility as a small and perfectly malleable receptacle of slapstick violence.

Dickens asserts this alternative view in his essay 'A Curious Dance Round A Curious Tree' (1852), in which he describes the harlequinade as an escapist world

where babies may be knocked about and sat upon, or choked with gravy spoons, in the process of feeding, and yet no Coroner be wanted, nor anybody made uncomfortable [...] where everyone, in short, is so superior to all the accidents of life, though encountering them at every turn, that I suspect this to be the secret (though many persons may not present it to themselves) of the

⁸⁷⁴ Coveney, p. xii.

⁸⁷⁵ Coveney, p. 65.

⁸⁷⁶ Coveney, p. 74.

general enjoyment which an audience of vulnerable spectators, liable to pain and sorrow, find in this class of entertainment.⁸⁷⁷

This explicit reference to infants at the beginning of the description of slapstick violence clearly demarcates this alternative attitude towards them. In his 'pantomime of life', Dickens's children are not just the waifs and sympathetic orphans for which he has become famous, the Olivers and Little Nells, but also the anonymous, miniature and seemingly indestructible clowns that populate his fiction. This description once again demonstrates the vicarious enjoyment on offer from the pantomime, as a celebration of the invulnerability of others in defiance of the suffering to which the audience is vulnerable.

The life of young Grimaldi as depicted in the *Memoirs* offers a model for Dickens's slapstick child. The boy is beaten on stage by his father for disobedience, and both the father's angry blows and the child's vociferous cries are treated by the audience as 'a most capital joke', and are welcomed by 'shouts of laughter and peals of applause'. The reviews of this performance commented that 'it was perfectly wonderful to see a mere child perform so naturally, and highly creditable to his father's talents as a teacher'.

⁸⁷⁷ Charles Dickens, 'A Curious Dance Round A Curious Tree', *Household Words*, 17 January 1852, p.386.

At this point, Grimaldi seems to be in a grotesque, liminal state between real, feeling humanity and a performed role. This is underscored by Dickens's description of him, by which

The tears running down his face, which was painted 'an inch thick', came to the 'complexion at last', in parts, and made him look as much like a little clown as like a little human being, to neither of which characters he bore the more distant resemblance.⁸⁷⁸

The real tears he sheds penetrate his performing mask and partially reveal the human figure beneath this artifice, leaving him in an indeterminate and alienated position. The performing mask is once again insufficient to completely obscure the real, feeling human underneath. Moreover, the reactions to Grimaldi's onstage beating seem to hold two ideas simultaneously, as they demonstrate the desirability and attraction of performing 'naturally', but also seem to contradict this by acknowledging its performed and taught nature.

A similar dynamic is played out in another, more private, domestic scene in the *Memoirs* (described in Chapter 3 of this thesis). Grimaldi's father feigns his own death to assess his children's true feelings for him, and Joe - the stage son - uses his training to select an appropriate 'line of conduct' (based on 'a seeming transport of anguish' and 'a passion of tears'), which leads to praise as 'the son who truly and sincerely loved him'. By contrast, his unworldly and non-performing brother John reacts naturally, openly celebrating his father's demise, and so is beaten 'most unmercifully' as a result.⁸⁷⁹

Clearly Joe is far from the 'natural' child, and in fact stage children were only ever manufactured replicas of the 'natural'. As Varty comments, 'the license to act out an

⁸⁷⁸ *Memoirs*, I, p. 14.

⁸⁷⁹ *Memoirs*, I, pp. 27-28.

authentic self that was nevertheless learned, repeatable and various was the special preserve of the child actor'.⁸⁸⁰ In violent scenes, then, children could suffer real pain under the pretext (agreed by the audience) that they were merely performing. Dickens attempts a similar trick with his readers in beating a number of his fictional children in a slapstick way, which further distances the violence from reality.

Nelson also considers the cruel treatment of children in his study of comedy and suggests similar reasons for its popularity. He cites such cases as the infant 'mewling and puking in the nurse's arms' from *As You Like It* as representative of the 'nausea of parenthood', by which 'the longing not to be responsible for the child in its more repellent aspects' represents 'one of the many antisocial emotions which comedy allows itself to express'. However he also feels that comic children represent 'liveliness' and 'the natural [and] the instinctual' which has been closed off to the civilised adult.⁸⁸¹ Thus the image of the child becomes multivalent, embodying both the woes of care and a lost state of freedom. If, as Nelson suggests, the 'response to comedy' is 'two-faced', it is therefore no surprise that the 'work of Dickens betrays a conflict of impulses' in this regard.⁸⁸²

As agitation for the improved welfare of children grew during the nineteenth century, the actual pain of the child performer became a specific focus for debate. One strategy adopted by the reformers was to contrast the protected and comfortable child in the audience with the suffering child on stage. For example, in *Pantomime Waifs; or, A Plea for our City Children* (1884), Ellen Barlee notes that after the curtain has fallen on the show 'few persons [...] give a thought to [the] curtain's reverse shadows, or inquire into the well-being of the human machinery which provided their evening's amusement'.⁸⁸³ In the

⁸⁸⁰ Varty, p. 12.

⁸⁸¹ Nelson, p. 60.

⁸⁸² Nelson, pp. 63-64.

⁸⁸³ Ellen Barlee, *Pantomime Waifs; or, A Plea for our City Children* (London: Partridge, 1884), p. xiv.

Memoirs, the performing child does indeed become a piece of ‘human machinery’, a Bergsonian automaton comically taking the blows of the slapstick and then springing up for more punishment.

Varty has observed that the increased technical sophistication of performances represented both an opportunity for stage managers to attract spectators and a threat to the vulnerable child performers, as ‘theatrical machinery functioned as a kind of trap, [within which] children were particularly reluctant’.⁸⁸⁴ However Dickens attempts to derive comic capital from the onstage traps into which the young Grimaldi falls. As a regular part of the performance, Joe was attached to a chain while dressed as an imp and his father would swing him ‘round and round, at arm’s length, with the utmost velocity’. On one particular night, the chain snapped, and Grimaldi junior was ‘hurled a considerable distance into the pit’, but Dickens quickly points out that it was ‘fortunately without sustaining the slightest injury’. Instead, he focuses on the boy’s landing ‘into the very arms of an old gentleman who was sitting gazing at the stage with intense interest’.⁸⁸⁵ After a fleeting reference to the boy’s welfare, Dickens’s interest is in the comical reaction of the bewildered observer.

In another incident, Joe is dressed in a cat costume as part of what is known as ‘skin work’. Welfare reformers regarded this type of role as particularly cruel; for example in 1872 Lord Shaftesbury described to Parliament how children would be beaten to fit ‘into skins too small for them because [they] would be required [...] to represent monkeys and devils’.⁸⁸⁶ Indeed, Dickens’s account of Joe’s skin work initially fits this description, as we are told that the ‘dress he wore was so clumsily contrived, that when it was sewn upon him he could not see before him’. However, Dickens transforms it into an opportunity for more slapstick

⁸⁸⁴ Varty, p. 39.

⁸⁸⁵ *Memoirs*, I, pp. 16-17.

⁸⁸⁶ *Hansard*, 4 July 1872, p. 622.

violence, as he falls down an open trap-door when 'running about the stage'. Dickens prefaces the incident with a commentary that forces us to read the incident as humorous. He tells us that when wearing the cat costume Grimaldi 'met with an accident, his speedy recovery from which would almost induce one to believe that he had so completely identified himself with the character as to have eight additional chances for his life'. Here Grimaldi is associated with the myth of the nine-lived cat as a variation on the indestructible clown, and even when we are told that he actually suffered severe injury, 'breaking his collar-bone, and inflicting several contusions on his body', Dickens is quick to mention his speedy recovery.⁸⁸⁷

Such depictions of the hazardous lives of seemingly indestructible children can be contrasted with the presentation of an accident reported in the *Era*, and cited by Varty as a typical stage accident involving children. During an Australian production of the romantic musical *The Slave* in August 1860, a child was thrown across a chasm before his supporting wire had been properly attached and 'the poor little fellow fell on to the stage', causing 'the greatest alarm' within the audience. Unlike Dickens's lighter references, which display little concern and do not disrupt the narrative, this accident arrests the progress of the performance as well as the *Era*'s description of it. The curtain drops, the onstage performance is halted, and the child's offstage recovery becomes the principal drama as the audience wait for news. When his safety is finally assured it is 'warmly welcomed by the house' and the play continues.⁸⁸⁸

Two novels from the *Memoirs* period - *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* - are central to Coveney's presentation of the Dickensian child as 'the symbol of sensitive feeling [within] a

⁸⁸⁷ *Memoirs*, I, p. 19.

⁸⁸⁸ [Anon.], 'Theatricals in Australia', *Era*, 12 August 1860, p. 12.

society maddened with the pursuit of material progress'.⁸⁸⁹ However, these texts also support the opposite argument. By using highly theatrical and comical figures like Bumble and Squeers as central dispensers of slapstick violence, Dickens returns to the world of the pantomime clown. While Dickens directs 'exaggerated emotions of pathos' towards his principal *loci* of sympathy, Oliver and Smike, and thus creates images of his own vulnerable childhood self, there are many other anonymous children in both narratives who fare less well.⁸⁹⁰ They in fact function as supernumeraries, who in 'The Pantomime of Life' have the 'express purpose of being cheated, or knocked down, or both'.⁸⁹¹ Coveney notes that Dickens's fictional children 'tend to move in a world of terror, fantasy, melodrama, and death', but fails to notice that this was also the world of the pantomime.⁸⁹²

The satirical first section of *Oliver Twist* contains a profusion of slapstick violence against children. For example, just before Oliver is presented to the board 'Mr Bumble gave him a tap on the head, with his cane, to wake him up; and another on the back to make him lively'.⁸⁹³ Immediately after Oliver asks for more gruel, the master of the workhouse 'aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle' and later, at the pauper's funeral, Bumble 'threshed a boy or two, to keep up appearances'.⁸⁹⁴

These 'appearances' are highly effective, as Bumble becomes synonymous with his parochial slapstick, which causes great noise but seemingly little physical harm. When Oliver attacks Noah during his apprenticeship at Sowerberry's, Noah asks whether "'Mr Bumble can spare time to step up there, directly, and flog [Oliver], 'cause master's out'". A member of the workhouse board similarly orders Bumble to "'step up to Sowerberry's with

⁸⁸⁹ Coveney, p. 74.

⁸⁹⁰ Coveney, p. 116.

⁸⁹¹ 'Pantomime', p. 504.

⁸⁹² Coveney, p. 118.

⁸⁹³ *Twist*, p. 24.

⁸⁹⁴ *Twist*, p. 27; p. 49.

[his] cane, and see what's best to be done'''. Dickens tells us of Bumble's preparations for the visit, 'adjusting the wax-end which was twisted round the bottom of his cane, for the purposes of parochial flagellation'.⁸⁹⁵

Nearly all of these violent incidents against children are perpetrated by adults, the supposed representatives of authority, of which Bumble is the primary symbol. The tone of many of these incidents is established early in the novel, as the board ponder possible ways to dispose of Oliver and feel that sending him off to sea may be preferable:

the probability being, that the skipper would flog him to death, in a playful mood, some day after dinner; or would knock his brains out with an iron bar, both pastimes being, as is pretty generally known, very favourite and common recreations among gentlemen of that class.⁸⁹⁶

This playful tone is also set in more indirect ways. As Lisa Surridge points out, violence against animals is often an important signifier in Victorian fiction:

Starting around the mid-1800s, [writers] deployed the analogy between wife and animal (often a dog or horse, as the animals most associated with men's ownership) to suggest the connection between wife assault and the legal nonexistence of women.⁸⁹⁷

Surridge primarily examines Sikes's treatment of his dog Bullseye as analogous to the relationship between Bill Sikes and Nancy, and it is possible to observe Dickens using a similar strategy when depicting the cruelty of the chimney-sweep Gamfield. However, as Surridge demonstrates, Sikes's cruel treatment of his dog is depicted more seriously, as a direct corollary of his treatment of his female companion that is intended to elicit a certain

⁸⁹⁵ *Twist*, pp. 55-56.

⁸⁹⁶ *Twist*, p. 36.

⁸⁹⁷ Surridge, p. 87.

measure of sympathy. By contrast, Gamfield's beating of his donkey has a lighter, comic tone, which invites us to read the incidents of violence towards the young boys in Gamfield's charge, who are the donkey's human corollary, in a similar way.

For example, as Gamfield thinks hard about his financial predicament, we are told that he was 'alternately cudgelling his brains and his donkey'. Dickens dismisses a number of cruel acts - 'a blow on [the donkey's] head, which would have inevitably beaten in any skull but a donkey's', 'a sharp wrench' of the animal's jaw and 'another blow on the head, just to stun him till he came back again' - as mere 'arrangements' before Gamfield approaches the workhouse gate. When Bumble observes this 'little dispute' he 'smiled joyously [...] for he saw at once that Mr Gamfield was exactly the sort of master Oliver Twist wanted', indicating a clear correspondence between the discipline enacted on the animal and that which would be enacted on the boy.⁸⁹⁸ The repetitive nature of slapstick violence is later underscored when Gamfield returns to the donkey to give him 'another blow on the head, and another wrench of the jaw'.⁸⁹⁹ The astute reader may notice that the donkey is never allowed to cry out in pain, and Dickens does not give us any other indication of his suffering.

Gamfield's own description of the treatment of young chimney-sweeps also carries a comic tone, and carries similar slapstick connotations. In refutation of the charge that young boys are smothered in chimneys, Gamfield explains how

Boys is wery obstinit, and wery lazy, gen'lmen, and there's nothink like a good hot blaze to make 'em come down vith a run. It's humane too, gen'lmen,

⁸⁹⁸ *Twist*, p. 30.

⁸⁹⁹ *Twist*, p. 31.

acause, even if they've stuck in the chimbley, roastin' their feet makes 'em struggle to hextricate themselves.⁹⁰⁰

Lisa Surridge notes how early nineteenth-century reports of working-class marital abuse cases used accented speech or brogues as a kind of comic patter in order to frame these assaults as humorous, and thus Dickens's appropriation of a working-class idiom here gives us one clue as to how to read this scene. However, the hyperbolic energy of the scene that Gamfield describes further identifies it as slapstick. Here, the reader is only invited to observe the scene through the proxy of Gamfield and is given no insight into the pain of the boys with roasted feet.

Similar effects are observable in *Nicholas Nickleby*. In the Preface, Dickens explains that his intention in writing this novel was to call 'public attention to the system' whereby 'lasting agonies and disfigurements' are

inflicted upon children by the treatment of the master in these places, involving such offensive and foul details of neglect, cruelty and disease, as no writer of fiction would have the boldness to imagine[.]⁹⁰¹

Thus Bernard Bergonzi describes the novel as 'one huge indictment of the failure of parental responsibility', and Peter Coveney characterises life at Dotheboys Hall as 'grotesque savagery'.⁹⁰² It is also possible to view this as the savagery of the pantomime – Dotheboys Hall is a name that would have neatly fitted into any harlequinade set, and Nelson notes a more subtle process at work here; Dickens's stated agenda may suggest that *Nickleby* is 'pro-child propaganda', but this agenda is 'constantly infiltrated by

⁹⁰⁰ *Twist*, p. 31.

⁹⁰¹ *Nickleby*, p. xii.

⁹⁰² Bernard Bergonzi, 'Nicholas Nickleby' in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. by John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), pp. 65-76 (p. 74); Coveney, p. 94.

antifamilial humour, and by the acknowledgement that children are a source of cares as well as blessings'.⁹⁰³

At one point, Dickens admits this himself. After a lengthy description of the suffering at Dotheboys, which ends with the rhetorical cry 'What an incipient Hell was breeding there!', he abruptly switches tone:

And yet this scene, painful as it was, had its grotesque features, which, in a less interested observer than Nicholas, might have provoked a smile.

As the audience at the Dickens pantomime, the reader is the 'less interested observer', whom Dickens subsequently entertains with several scenes of slapstick violence. For example, Mrs Squeers administers the brimstone and treacle using 'a common wooden spoon, which might have been originally manufactured for some gigantic top, and which widened every young gentleman's mouth considerably'.⁹⁰⁴ Such an observation closely resembles Dickens's description of pantomime quoted earlier, whereby 'babies may be knocked about and sat upon, or choked with gravy spoons'.⁹⁰⁵

When Squeers later disciplines a crying youngster, the boy is given clownish powers of elasticity: 'Mr Squeers knocked him off the trunk with a blow on one side of his face, and knocked him on again with a blow on the other'.⁹⁰⁶ The journey to Dotheboys also indulges in this knockabout comedy:

The little boys' legs being too short to admit of their feet resting upon anything as they sat, and the little boys' bodies being consequently in

⁹⁰³ Nelson, p. 64.

⁹⁰⁴ *Nickleby*, pp. 89-90.

⁹⁰⁵ 'A Curious Dance', p. 386.

⁹⁰⁶ *Nickleby*, p. 33.

imminent hazard of being jerked off the coach, Nicholas had enough to do to hold them on.⁹⁰⁷

Even the cruelty enacted on Smike is sometimes presented in a comic tone reminiscent of Bumble's violent actions. On one occasion he is 'pushed by Mrs Squeers and boxed by Mr Squeers' which is a 'course of treatment' aimed at 'brightening his intellects'.⁹⁰⁸ Douglas-Fairhurst feels that in these scenes, Dickens 'dares us to laugh at or ignore child abuse', and in fact 'warns us away from such thoughtless reactions by seeming to expect them so fully'.⁹⁰⁹ However, the expectation of comic violence has been engendered by Dickens's adoption of the tropes of the pantomime, and as a consequence the success of his warning here is somewhat debatable. Here, the strength of his writing seems to work against him, and, as John Carey observes, Dickens's real imagination seems to lie in the violence rather than any social message that may also be present; he feels that Dickens's 'writing deteriorates once the violence becomes virtuous', because 'riot, murder, savagery have to be there before Dickens' [sic] imagination is gripped'.⁹¹⁰

By associating children with the pantomime, and the theatre more generally, Dickens seems to move his reader into the position of a member of the audience at a theatre – where children are beyond the reach of any physical reality and pain. Varty cites a performance of *Nicholas Nickleby* at the Bijou Theatre in 1843 which was, like young Grimaldi's own stricken onstage plight, closer to reality than the audience realised.

⁹⁰⁷ *Nickleby*, pp. 49-50.

⁹⁰⁸ *Nickleby*, p. 87.

⁹⁰⁹ Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 113.

⁹¹⁰ Carey, p. 29.

The children had been kidnapped and coerced onto the stage by a local villain named 'Figaro' and once trapped in this stage version of Dotheboys Hall they were forced to suffer the same cruelties as Squeers's own charges:

Amidst crying and moaning they were placed on the stage, sitting on benches and kept in order by Figaro's cane – poor children, completely bewildered.

When the treacle was administered, most of them cried.

Significantly the reaction of the audience here is the same as that of the pantomime reviewers who watched Grimaldi; the bewilderment and crying of the children 'delighted the audience, thinking it was natural (so it was)'.⁹¹¹ In their privileging of the natural and unaffected stage child, then, the audience celebrated enactments of pain that appeared to be natural and unaffected precisely because they were.

This unwritten licence to disregard children's safety pushed them towards great dangers, as the risks were heavily offset by the opportunities for spectacle (and therefore profit) that they offered to stage managers. As Varty notes, the reformers argued this precise point, bitterly rebuking 'the theatre manager [who] treated his juvenile employees as items of theatre property, commodities and props to be disposed of purely with regard to the aesthetic effect they could be made to create and the income this could generate'.⁹¹²

Dickens sometimes treats the children of his novels in a similarly manipulative way.

Although his presentation of children sometimes aims higher than merely 'aesthetic effect', at other times children are indeed 'commodities and props' to be knocked together or thrown around.

⁹¹¹ Varty, p. 21.

⁹¹² Varty, p. 38.

Dickens had observed real prop babies on his travels in Italy. In Genoa, he visited ‘the little country Church of San Martino, a couple of miles from the city’ and watched a service there:

[...] but I had no more idea, until the ceremony was over, that it was a baptism, or that the curious stiff little instrument, that was passed from one to another, in the course of the ceremony, by the handle – like a short poker – was a child [...]. I borrowed the child afterwards, for a minute or two (it was lying across the font then), and found it very red in the face but perfectly quiet, and not to be bent on any terms.⁹¹³

This ‘prop’ baby is also a recurrent presence in Dickens’s fiction, and is given a slapstick inflection through the casual attitude of their mothers and carers. One famous example is the nurse, midwife and layer-out Mrs Gamp, who describes her first acquaintance with Mrs Harris’s ‘little Tommy’ as a comical episode of child suffocation, ‘with his small red worsted shoe a gurglin in his throat, where he had put it in his play, a chick, wile they was leavin of him on the floor a lookin for it through the ouse and him a chokin sweetly in the parlor’.⁹¹⁴ In an age of high infant mortality rates, one primal response to such treatment of children would be to grimly laugh, and this forms the basis of much of Dickens’s black comedy. The more civilised response would be to improve the situation, which Dickens the reformer tries to do. However in many cases, his comic impulse prevails and the former response undermines the latter.

⁹¹³ Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, ed. by Arthur Waugh and others (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch Press, 1938), p. 299.

⁹¹⁴ *Chuzzlewit*, p. 755.

Thus when Pip visits the Pockets in *Great Expectations*, he observes the Pocket children who 'were not growing up or being brought up, but were tumbling up'.⁹¹⁵ 'Baby' Pocket is immediately involved in comic business from his first appearance:

[Nurse] Millers came down with the baby, which baby was handed to [Nurse] Flopson, which Flopson was handing it to Mrs Pocket, when she too went fairly head-foremost over Mrs Pocket, baby and all, and was caught by Herbert and myself.⁹¹⁶

The baby is passed around like the Italian baby by the two comically-named nurses, until the business ends with a pratfall *denouement*.

Later, the baby is passed around again with more violent results; Flopson passes it to Mrs Pocket, who 'got its head upon the table; which was announced to all present by a prodigious concussion'. The baby starts to cry, but is pacified by a dancing sister, who prompts laughter in everyone at the table. More comic peril ensues when it is given nutcrackers to play with, and 'did the most appalling things' with them until 'little Jane perceiving its young brains to be imperilled [...] with many small artifices coaxed the dangerous weapon away'.⁹¹⁷ Mrs Pocket, however, opposes this interference, prompting Mr Pocket to fear that "'infants [are] to be nutcrackered into their tombs, and [...] nobody [is] to save them'" and "'Babies are to be nutcrackered dead, for people's poor grandpapa's positions!'"⁹¹⁸

The final misadventure of baby Pocket occurs when, in an ironic juxtaposition, Mr Pocket is 'out lecturing [...] on the management of children and servants'. The nurseless Mrs Pocket gives him 'a needle-case to keep him quiet', but 'more needles were missing than it could

⁹¹⁵ *Great Expectations*, p. 146.

⁹¹⁶ *Great Expectations*, p. 147.

⁹¹⁷ *Great Expectations*, p. 151.

⁹¹⁸ *Great Expectations*, p. 152.

be regarded as quite wholesome for a patient of such tender years either to apply externally or to take as a tonic'.⁹¹⁹ Like 'physic' for Judy and Affery, the ingestion of needles is wryly suggested as a medicine for the baby, who eats them in a feat of extreme consumption.

In *The Old Curiosity Shop* the Nubbles's visit to Astley's is similarly punctuated with mishaps befalling the children which scarcely merit comment or concern. By the time they have rushed to the theatre, 'little Jacob was squeezed flat, and the baby had received divers concussions', yet in the space of two paragraphs Jacob is sufficiently recovered to watch the play and applaud at the finale.⁹²⁰

The illustration to this scene underscores the perils attendant on the children:



Figure 30: George Cattermole, 'The Balcony audience at Astley's Amphitheatre' (1840), *Curiosity Shop*

⁹¹⁹ *Great Expectations*, p. 207.

⁹²⁰ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 304.

The two children are seated on the front row, dangling precariously over the balcony with the rest of the audience banked in steep rows and bearing down upon them. In its depiction of the riotous diversity of the crowd, we see a variety of dangers attendant on the children; drunks, pickpockets and a man on the right-hand side of the frame who menacingly wields a stick above the baby's head. These are either unobserved or treated with smiles and laughter rather than horror or surprise.

At the feast afterwards, the baby is constantly at hazard of inflicting pain on himself, for if he is not 'trying to force a large orange into his mouth', he is 'making indentations in his soft visage with an oyster-shell'.⁹²¹ While Ruskin had fondly read this scene as simple infant innocence (as discussed in Section III), it is also emblematic of Dickens's slapstick treatment of children, whereby they are receptive to whatever violent impressions he can mark upon them.

Later, Kit's mother worries about these children on the coach journey she takes with the single gentleman, imagining all manner of mishaps that may have befallen them without her attendance. She suffers

[...] maternal apprehensions that perhaps by this time little Jacob, or the baby, or both, had fallen into the fire, or tumbled down stairs, or had been squeezed behind doors, or had scalded their windpipes in endeavouring to allay their thirst at the open spouts of tea-kettles[.]⁹²²

Dickens is trying to mock the exaggerated worries that comprise the maternal instinct, but his vivid depictions of these potential accidents also closely fit with the slapstick violence of his pantomime.

⁹²¹ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 306.

⁹²² *Curiosity Shop*, p. 364.

The small children in *Dombey and Son* also have this comical pliability, deliberately at odds with the hardness of Mr Dombey and his uncomical son Paul. Mrs Chick attempts to manage her 'one mass of babies' and her eldest boy receives a 'blister on his nose' when 'the little creature, in his mother's absence smelt a warm flat iron'.⁹²³

The young Alexander Mac Stinger receives similarly slapstick treatment. When Florence and Susan visit Mrs Mac Stinger, she is conducting her son out into the street and we are told that he is 'black in the face, with holding his breath after punishment', which his mother resolves using 'a cool paving-stone' – 'usually found to act as a powerful restorative in such cases'.⁹²⁴

Alexander is later upset by his mother's choice of husband, Mr Bunsby, and 'in the anguish of this conviction he screamed with astonishing force, and turned black in the face.' Again, her solution is a slapstick one:

[...] after vainly endeavouring to convince his reason by shakes, pokes, bawlings-out, and similar applications to his head, she led him into the air, and tried another method; which was manifested to the marriage party by a quick succession of sharp sounds, resembling applause, and, subsequently, by their seeing Alexander in contact with the coolest paving-stone in the court, greatly flushed, and loudly lamenting.⁹²⁵

Daniel Quilp's comparable attitude to children further demonstrates his extensive clownish credentials. His reaction to the Nubbles children is to comment that 'Don't be frightened [...] Your son knows me; I don't eat babies; I don't like 'em', and he is described by Kincaid

⁹²³ *Dombey*, p. 12; p. 16.

⁹²⁴ *Dombey*, p. 320.

⁹²⁵ *Dombey*, p. 816.

as ‘the deadly enemy of the stock sentiment, of babies and all little, presumably helpless objects of easy tears’.⁹²⁶

His violence is always carefully managed for the reader; it is never given full reign and is always mediated through comedy – as Kincaid notes, ‘his sadism, pure as it is, is often neutralized by the narrative tone’.⁹²⁷ Indeed, just like events at Dotheboys Hall, Quilp’s violence is framed as a spectacle: when he beats the wooden ship’s head with an iron bar Dickens notes that ‘this might have been a very comical thing to look at from a secure gallery’, in the manner of a *Punch and Judy* show or pantomime.⁹²⁸

Sampson Brass identifies Quilp’s slapstick sensibility when he comments that Quilp would view “‘throttling me, and dropping me softly into the river when the tide was at its strongest”” as “‘a pleasant joke””.⁹²⁹ Brass is one of the few figures on whose body Quilp’s cruelty is visibly written, as at one point he limps in with ‘a scratched face, a green shade over one eye [which covered ‘an eye most horribly discoloured’], and a hat grievously crushed’.⁹³⁰ Yet even here the effect is diminished because these injuries are received ‘off-stage’ between chapters. He was last seen escaping from Quilp’s wharf, ‘stumbling up the yard, and now and then falling heavily down’ and wary of the various traps that may lay in his way – such as ‘the timber [with] all the rusty nails [...] upwards’ and the dog that ‘killed a child – but that was in play’.⁹³¹ His return to the narrative in this bruised state subtly demonstrates to the reader that he has indeed fallen foul of the traps laid for him by Quilp and Tom Scott and so provides a comical *denouement* to the episode.

⁹²⁶ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 168; Kincaid, p. 95.

⁹²⁷ Kincaid, p. 97.

⁹²⁸ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 479.

⁹²⁹ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 476.

⁹³⁰ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 515.

⁹³¹ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 484.

Quilp's propensity for slapstick violence is primarily explored through his relationship with Tom Scott, the boy who works for him at the wharf and acts as a foil for his pantomimic antics. Their relationship is defined through knockabout comedy from Tom's very first appearance, and his introduction aligns him with the Bakhtinian 'topsy-turvy' performer of the pantomime. We are told he is 'of an eccentric spirit [with] a natural taste for tumbling' and he enters the narrative standing on his head. Once he is the right way up, his duel with Quilp begins – 'as soon as his head was in its right position, Mr Quilp, to speak expressively in the absence of a better verb, "punched it" for him'. But Quilp's attack has no effect, and the boy fights back, until Quilp gets the upper hand after all, 'dexterously diving in between the elbows and catching the boy's head as it dodged from side to side, [he] gave it three or four good hard knocks'.⁹³² Even when this battle is over Quilp is ready to strike again – 'lying in wait at a little distance from the sash armed with a large piece of wood, which, being rough and jagged and studded in many parts with broken nails, might possibly have hurt him'.⁹³³ Here again the comical tone provides the 'slap' that diverts us from a realist reading of this cruelty.

Their violent altercations are depicted in similar terms elsewhere. In the scene in which they clear Nell's house, Dickens eschews a scene of pathos and disappointment for Little Nell and her grandfather and provides another scene of hyperbolic slapstick in which violence sprays in all directions:

Not to be behind-hand in the bustle, Mr Quilp went to work with surprising vigour; hustling and driving the people about, like an evil spirit; setting Mrs Quilp upon all kinds of arduous and impracticable tasks; carrying great weights up and down with no apparent effort; kicking the boy from the wharf

⁹³² *Curiosity Shop*, p. 47.

⁹³³ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 49.

whenever he could get near him; and inflicting with his loads a great many sly bumps and blows upon the shoulders of Mr Brass[.]⁹³⁴

Tom reappears later, once again taunting Quilp with his handstands, at which point his master grabs his 'infallible poker' (one of Grimaldi's famous weapons of choice), 'with which, after some dodging and lying in ambush, he paid his young friend one or two such unequivocal compliments that he vanished precipitately, and left him in quiet possession of the field'.⁹³⁵

This violent relationship is so integral to Tom's existence that when Quilp is killed, he immediately searches for a replacement sparring partner. He had 'a strong desire to assault the jury' at the inquest into Quilp's death (perhaps refusing to believe his seemingly indestructible master was dead at all), and finds a surrogate Quilp in the form of 'a cautious beadle' who knocks him back to his feet again. The last we hear of him is that he has become a street clown, assuming 'the name of an Italian image lad' and tumbling 'with extraordinary success, and to overflowing audiences'.⁹³⁶

Dickens is keen to point out the unusual and yet compelling nature of their companionship. He tells us that 'there existed a strange kind of mutual liking between the pair', as their quarrels resemble a double act, with Quilp as the sadist and Tom the masochist. 'Quilp would certainly suffer nobody to contradict him but the boy, and the boy would assuredly not have submitted to be so knocked about by anybody but Quilp, when he had the power to run away at any time he chose'.⁹³⁷ Other characters acknowledge this confederacy of violence: as Sampson Brass stumbles across the ground towards Quilp's wharf, he comments that 'I believe that boy strews the ground differently every day, on purpose to

⁹³⁴ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 113.

⁹³⁵ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 524.

⁹³⁶ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 569.

⁹³⁷ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 48.

bruise and maim one; unless his master does it with his own hands, which is more than likely'.⁹³⁸

In this way, Quilp and Tom could be added to Holly Furneaux's 'queer' pairings of male Dickens characters, who demonstrate Dickens's 'positive representation of same-sex desire and other non-heterosexual life choices'.⁹³⁹ Their mutually beneficial relationship based on violence (a necessarily bodily activity) offers an unusual example of 'surrogate and adoptive parenting', and while Furneaux's study of 'queer masculinities' focuses on Dickens's 'admiration of figures who exhibited particularly tender and nurturing styles of masculinity', Quilp and Scott offer an alternative model founded on precisely opposite styles, but one that seems no less valid.⁹⁴⁰

Leach also describes Quilp's affinities with 'that merry outlaw' Punch (who, as has been demonstrated, is another version of the Grimaldian clown), drawing particular associations with 'his physical deformity and ugliness, his violence, his treatment of his wife, [and] his manic gales of laughter'.⁹⁴¹ Like Punch, 'Quilp startles people by his sudden appearances, he fights a dog, [and] he pretends to be dead'. But here Leach limits Quilp's character to 'an extreme manifestation of the worser parts of Punch', or 'the clown become villain'. In doing so, he fails to account for the attraction of that villainy, as manifested in figures like Grimaldi's Clown when he asserts that 'we do not follow [Quilp's] adventures with the glee we reserve for Punch'. In fact, the more favourable attributes of Punch that he ascribes to Dick Swiveller - 'his unquenchable good humour, his frequent self-dramatization, his careless idleness and his refusal to be bound by convention or the law' - might equally apply to our enjoyment of Quilp, in the more rounded guise of Clown. So whereas Leach

⁹³⁸ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 476.

⁹³⁹ Holly Furneaux, *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 3.

⁹⁴⁰ Furneaux, p. 7.

⁹⁴¹ *Curiosity Shop*, p. 138; Leach, p. 68.

feels that Dickens 'never resolved the contradiction between Punch hero and Punch villain', it could be argued that he resolved it through the more ambivalent figure of the Grimaldian clown, who played both hero and (forgivable) villain.⁹⁴²

V. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the most problematic aspect of Grimaldi's pantomime clown, which is his involvement in scenes of slapstick violence. The paradox of these scenes, encapsulated in such terms as 'brutal buffoonery', was that this was violence deliberately designed to be laughed at. Moreover, such routines were a potentially disruptive element in other ways, both halting the narrative flow and undermining any social welfare agenda Dickens wished to put forward.

Nonetheless, Dickens was attracted to the idea of the slapstick as the blow that produces the greatest amount of noise (which for Dickens could mean comedic impact or simply verbal flourish) for the least amount of pain. Slapstick was also attractive as another conduit into the rich seam of folk entertainments that Dickens repeatedly tapped into, through its use in pantomime and its affinities to the Punch and Judy Show. But in pursuing this interest, and adopting the same social licence which placed Grimaldi beyond the regular bounds of morality, Dickens risked cultivating a readership who treated his fictional scenes of violence in the same way as the pantomime audience, that is largely unsympathetically.

To palliate this, Dickens leant towards the pattern of retributive violence, which offered readers the vicarious treat of seeing natural justice being dealt towards abusers like Bumble and Squeers. Grimaldi's indestructible clown offered Dickens a model for this, as victims could be knocked down and then rise up again for another beating.

⁹⁴² Leach, pp. 68-69.

However, he also incorporated the more disturbing normative violence, particularly directed towards the elderly, who risked punishment for not conforming to Dickens's expectations of behaviour. Even in his ostensibly lighter comedies (particularly his earlier work), Dickens also uses slapstick violence to reveal a darker and more threatening universe where life is cheap, and laughter at death is a coping mechanism.

The three case studies presented here demonstrate the wide scope of Dickens's treatment of slapstick, ranging across several strata of society. In his most sustained treatment, which was in those scenes of slapstick comedy against the child, Dickens reflects a wider cultural concern situated around the figure of the infant. Varty calls the symbol of the child 'janus-faced', representing 'the anarchic-arcadian primitive to be accommodated within civilised society' and in his novels Dickens is torn between these alternative faces within the very same work.⁹⁴³ He presents the arcadian innocence at threat from the malignant forces within society, while simultaneously using the tropes of pantomime violence to present the 'anarchic-arcadian primitive' through the form of the clown, who both beats and is beaten without any material consequence.

⁹⁴³ Varty, p. 234.

CHAPTER 7 - Conclusion

This thesis has considered the key themes of the pantomime clown that Dickens drew on in his fiction, but this concluding chapter will briefly consider other valuable directions in which research in this area could be taken.

I. Grimaldi's other accomplishments

Horatio Smith's catalogue of Grimaldi's abilities has already been discussed within the thesis, as it reflected several key pantomime tropes, but it would be useful to look at other parts of this description, and ascertain the extent to which Dickens's clowns fully embrace the Grimaldian spirit.

Smith's description in *Drama* notes Grimaldi's ability to 'rob a pieman or open an oyster, imitate a chimney-sweep or a dandy, grasp a red-hot poker or devour a pudding, take snuff, sneeze, make love, mimic a tragedian, cheat his master, pick a pocket, beat a watchman, or nurse a child'; consumption, dandyism and violence have already been discussed, but this description offers several other potentially rewarding themes.

One of the most prominent is Grimaldi's kleptomania. Theft was a regular routine employed during the harlequinade, and was often combined with other parts of his act, such as his eating or tricks of construction. For example, in *Harlequin Mother Goose*, he steals (or attempts to steal) the wares of a St. Giles street-girl, table-cloths from a country dance, the contents of letters, bread from the baker and so on.

Clown's excellence as a thief was noted in *Oxberry's Dramatic Biography* (1827), in which he is described as 'the very *beau ideal* of thieves' in whose hands 'robbery became a science'. Grimaldi's methods are carefully described, as he 'abstracted a leg of mutton from a butcher's tray with such a delightful assumption of nonchalance'. During this performance, he manages to couple 'plump stupidity' and 'slyness of observation' in his trickery, demonstrating perfectly his ancestry from the 'artificial Fool', or one who pretends

to be an idiot for material gain.⁹⁴⁴ Another approving description of Grimaldi's stealing observed that 'never did I see a leg of mutton stolen with such superhumanly sublime impudence as by that man'.⁹⁴⁵

As Phillip Collins has noted, Dickens's imaginative interest in crime inclined towards the sort of criminals depicted in sensation fiction - thieves, swindlers, and murderers - rather than civil, 'white-collar' criminals, such as rapacious landlords and greedy money-lenders.⁹⁴⁶ Moreover, although Dickens generally hardens in his attitudes to criminals, in his early depictions of them he exhibits a Regency-inflected relish which may be linked to the same thrill exhibited by observers of Clown's crimes in the pantomime. Fagin turns his crimes into a comic game for the child thieves in *Oliver Twist*, and it would be worthwhile to discover the extent to which Dickens does this for his readers in other works.

Horatio Smith also mentions Clown's amorous adventures, which have already been considered by Eigner in relation to Clown's function within the plot. According to Eigner, Clown often has to stand aside and sacrifice his own feelings to allow the Harlequin hero unimpeded access to Columbine's affections. Eigner catalogues a number of Dickens's clowns who match this description; Smike, Kit Nubbles, John Chivery and so on.

However, he feels that this has another dimension, which he does not fully explore. He states that:

One of the major differences between melodrama and pantomime is that in the first the heroine, although of course she does not go to bed with anyone,

⁹⁴⁴ [Anon], 'Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi', *Oxberry's Dramatic Biography, or the Green Room Spy*, 2 vols (London: Virtue, 1827), I, pp. 109-122 (p. 119).

⁹⁴⁵ *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 December 1877.

⁹⁴⁶ Collins, p. 2.

has her most significant sexual relation with the villain, whom she despises,
and in the second she has it with the Clown, whom she pities.⁹⁴⁷

As Chapter 4 of this thesis has demonstrated, Clown was strongly associated with a sexual appetite, particularly in the popular prints of the time (see Figures 9 and 10), and this could also be productively explored in relation to Dickens's clowns. Joe the Fat Boy and Noah Claypole are both involved in potentially sexualised feasting scenes with female companions which are reminiscent of Clown's eating in the presence of Columbine, for example in *Harlequin in his Element*, and such scenes merit further consideration. Critics such as Schlicke have recognised the sexual threat offered by some of Dickens's clowns, for example Daniel Quilp (who Schlicke describes as a Punch-like representative of 'overt sexuality [...] amazingly free from normal physical limitations'), and this consideration would productively expand on this work.⁹⁴⁸

II. Clown's physiognomy

Another very important characteristic of the Grimaldian Clown that has not been explored within this thesis was his incredibly expressive face. Thomas Wright describes the enduring popularity of the simple entertainment of face-pulling or 'mug-cutting' as follows:

To unrefined and uneducated minds, no object conveys so perfect a notion of mirth as an ugly and distorted face. Hence it is that among the most common peasantry at a country fair few exhibitions are more satisfactory than that of grinning through a horse-collar.⁹⁴⁹

⁹⁴⁷ Eigner, p. 143.

⁹⁴⁸ Schlicke, p. 127.

⁹⁴⁹ Thomas Wright, *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art* ([S.l.]: Virtue, 1865), p. 144.

Because Grimaldi's performances were predominantly mute, reviews of his act eloquently described his facial features and how they were skilfully employed to support his other bodily expressions; as *The Champion* (1815) comments, 'his eye [...] fully seconds his thoughts'.⁹⁵⁰ *The New Monthly Magazine* described his eyes as 'large, globular and sparkling, rolled in a riot of joy', and 'nearly closed, but twinkling forth his rapture'.⁹⁵¹ Thomas Hood's 'Ode to Joseph Grimaldi, Senior' (1825) further labels them as 'winking, reeling, *drunken eyes*'.⁹⁵²

Other parts of his face were similarly marshalled to support the overall effect. His nose is described by *The New Monthly Magazine* as 'a vivacious excrescence capable of exhibiting disdain, fear, anger, even joy', and his ears and jaw work in tandem 'on any sudden surprise' to produce an 'alarming effect'.⁹⁵³ Findlater refers to his 'capacious mouth' which seemed designed for his exaggerated grimacing.⁹⁵⁴

These features were accentuated by Grimaldi's innovative and elaborate stage make-up. As Andrew Halliday observes, he 'did not chalk and paint his face in the elaborate manner now adopted [...] but put on some patches of red, so as to give the notion of a greedy boy who had smeared himself with jam in robbing a cupboard'.⁹⁵⁵ While Findlater feels that this colourful makeup has a practical value in being discernible from the back of the auditorium, others have noted the symbolic effect of this appearance; Charles Dibdin asserts that Grimaldi's gluttony was reflected in his face, and there is also a sense of drunkenness, just as Dubois had painted his face 'in imitation of a florid nature'.⁹⁵⁶

⁹⁵⁰ *The Champion*, 29 September 1816, p. 132.

⁹⁵¹ [Anon], 'The Humorist: Some Recollections of Grimaldi', *New Monthly Magazine*, July 1839, p. 383.

⁹⁵² See *Grimaldi*, p. 251.

⁹⁵³ *New Monthly Magazine*, July 1839, p. 383.

⁹⁵⁴ *Grimaldi*, p. 170.

⁹⁵⁵ *Comical Fellows*, p. 35.

⁹⁵⁶ *Professional Memoirs*, pp. 47-48.

The physiognomy of Dickens's characters is also an important element of their characterisation, in line with the broader, gestural style identified by Vlock and John as inherited from the theatre. Just as Grimaldi's expressiveness enables him to quickly circumvent the necessity of speech to reveal his emotions, the expressiveness of his characters' faces enables Dickens to quickly convey their feelings without the necessity of dialogue. Vlock notes that Dickens 'usually plants signifiers of their spiritual condition on his characters' bodies and faces' and he often explicitly uses the broader term 'pantomime' to denote his characters physically expressing their emotions in this way, utilising their faces as the primary instrument.⁹⁵⁷

A prominent example of this is Newman Noggs, who is associated with gestural expressions or silent 'pantomimes' through the narrative. On his first appearance, great attention is paid to Noggs's eyes, one of which 'was a fixture'. We are told that 'an inexperienced observer' would be struck by his 'communication of a fixed and rigid look to his unaffected eye, so as to make it uniform with the other, and to render it impossible for anybody to determine where or at what he was looking'.⁹⁵⁸ He uses his eyes later, 'looking steadfastly at nothing, out of the tops of his eyes, in a most ghastly manner', which Nicholas carelessly misinterprets as drunkenness or a fit, but which could be reinterpreted through the vocabulary of pantomime as something of greater significance.⁹⁵⁹ Many other Dickensian clowns use a similar means of expression, and could be further scrutinised in this way.

As discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, Helen Kensick has primarily considered the expressive face of the pantomime clown within the context of Dickens's 'negation of life', which she feels he articulates through 'an emotive facial mask [...] cut off from life and

⁹⁵⁷ Vlock, p. 20.

⁹⁵⁸ *Nickleby*, pp. 8-9.

⁹⁵⁹ *Nickleby*, p. 42.

forever forced to face death'.⁹⁶⁰ However, this fails to account for Dickens's use of the same facial mask to affirm life through the clown's mugging antics.

For example, in *Pickwick Papers*, Bob Sawyer and Ben Allen evoke the great clown's mask in a moment of high comedy:

Just at this moment, Mr. Bob Sawyer, whose wit had lain dormant for some minutes, placed his hands upon his knees and made a face after the portraits of the late Mr. Grimaldi, as clown.⁹⁶¹

This disrupts the sombreness of the occasion, and ridicules the excessive sobriety of Mr Winkle senior, who threatens to negate the comic spirit of the novel. Dickens's recourse to an amusing grimace as a tonal anchor for the comedy of the novel could also be considered as part of this discussion of the clown's physiognomy.

III. Tricks of construction

Clown was also instrumental in the 'tricks of construction' that became a popular and expected staple of the harlequinade. These routines were considered within the context of Grimaldi's clothing in Chapter 5 of this thesis, but his repertoire extended beyond this.

One popular theme for these tricks was transport. As part of his satire on fashionable hobbies in *Harlequin and Padmanaba [sic], or the Golden Fish* (Covent Garden, 1811), Grimaldi created a carriage from a wicker cradle and four cheeses, which was then pulled by a dog.⁹⁶² In *Harlequin and Don Quixote* (Covent Garden, 1819) a 'washing-tub [was] changed into an elegant gilt chariot, which, with three swine harnessed to it, and a game-cock on the coach-box as driver, [was] drawn off in triumph'.⁹⁶³

⁹⁶⁰ Kensick, p. 141.

⁹⁶¹ *Pickwick*, p. 781.

⁹⁶² *The Morning Post*, 27 December 1822.

⁹⁶³ 'Covent-Garden Theatre', *The Times*, 28 December 1819, p. 3.

Grimaldi also created other types of vehicle. In *Harlequin and Mother Bunch, or the Yellow Dwarf* (Covent Garden, 1821), Clown creates a boat 'by seizing a bathing tub and equipping it with a barber's pole, a gown as a sail, a bonnet as a pennant, and a cleaver as a helm', as well as 'a steam conveyance' 'by means of a tinker's stove, a boiling tea-kettle, and the leg of a jack-boot for a funnel'.⁹⁶⁴

Grimaldi was able to extend this construction to other subjects, for example the creation of an 'army' of soldiers from items lying around an alehouse garden (*Harlequin and the Swans*), or a concert of instruments in Vauxhall Gardens composed of broomsticks, tin kettles and other domestic utensils.

Findlater interprets this improvisational tendency as a reflection on the *zeitgeist*, noting that the early nineteenth century was a period of great invention. This happened on a variety of scales, for it was both a time of significant strides in the field of 'serious' science but also a period which celebrated unusual and whimsical gadgetry, such as folding carriage-steps and chairs created from walking sticks. Grimaldi wholly embraced this spirit of inventiveness into his act, as a *Times* reviewer noted in 1828:

Place him in any warehouse, and he soon produced a creation that you would have sworn was indigenous to the soil. Again, what various uses did he not make of the passing fashions and propensities of the day? When he turned one of them into ridicule, he became a living epigram, so terse and pointed, as to set translation entirely at defiance.⁹⁶⁵

⁹⁶⁴ 'Covent-Garden', *The European Magazine and London Review*, January 1822, p. 77; 'Covent-Garden', *The European Magazine and London Review*, January 1821, p. 68.

⁹⁶⁵ 'Drury-Lane', *The Times*, 27 December 1828, p. 3.

Mayer suggests an almost metaphysical basis for this part of Grimaldi's repertoire, claiming that such tricks operated on the assumption that 'one object shared a hidden kinship with another, and that it was the job of the pantomime comic to reveal this relationship'.⁹⁶⁶

Dickens's imaginative use of simile and metaphor constantly linked different objects together and revealed this hitherto 'hidden kinship' by performing a verbal transformation from one state to another before our very eyes. Chapter 5 considered this idea within the scope of Dickens's Frankenstein-like assembly of people from inanimate objects, but there are a variety of other examples of this Clown-like construction within Dickens's work that would merit further exploration.

From the very start of Dickens's career, in his depiction of Samuel Pickwick's endeavours towards 'the advancement of knowledge, and the diffusion of learning' that make up *The Pickwick Papers*, such as 'Observations on the Theory of Tittlebats', he demonstrates a playful and imaginative attitude towards science.⁹⁶⁷ These Pickwickian amateur forays into science, as well as his early 'reports' from the First and Second Meetings of 'the Mudfog Association For the Advancement of Everything' (*Bentley's Miscellany*, October 1837 and September 1838 respectively), could be productively linked to Grimaldi's pantomime experiments.

IV. Clown and the Holy Fool/Innocent tradition

This thesis has focused on the more apparently calculated aspects of Grimaldi's routine, such as his satirical intent. However, Grimaldi's Clown was also likened to a natural infantile figure. For example, *Oxberry's Dramatic Biography* praises Grimaldi on the 'nicety' of

⁹⁶⁶ *Harlequin*, p. 49.

⁹⁶⁷ *Pickwick*, p. 2.

portraying the ‘hopelessness of one who knows not what to do next’, and calls Grimaldi ‘a grown child, waking to perception, but wondering at every object he beholds’.⁹⁶⁸

This childish innocence, albeit part of a controlled performance, offers another point of investigation and comparison with the folk traditions of the Holy Fool figure. In contrast to the ‘artificial’ fool, or court jester type, the holy or ‘natural’ fool was an entirely unselfconscious figure, who nonetheless offered an artless wisdom to society and punctured the pretensions of authority in the same way as their more knowing counterparts.

The link between Dickens’s characters and the Holy Fool has already been considered by Natalie McKnight, who observes that ‘Dickens uses and transforms certain elements, such as physical deformities, motley clothes, heightened spirituality, and the fool’s challenge to authority, in creating densely metaphoric, politically suggestive figures’.⁹⁶⁹

McKnight does not link this to the pantomime clown, but given the inherent theatricality of much of Dickens’s work (which has been explored in this thesis), this represents a further possibility for research. Dickens’s novels present a number of notable ‘Holy fools’, who also demonstrate a propensity towards clowning; Mr Dick in *David Copperfield*, Barnaby Rudge, possibly Maggie in *Little Dorrit* and Sloppy in *Our Mutual Friend* (whose clownishness has already been briefly considered).

V. Other types of clown in Dickens

Beyond the Grimaldian tradition of clowning, Dickens’s clown may be receptive to analysis against other models of clownishness. The clown as cultural figure is an extremely broad topic, so this brief survey will be restricted to two incarnations that could most fruitfully be contextualised alongside the Grimaldian clown.

⁹⁶⁸ *Dramatic Biography*, p. 119.

⁹⁶⁹ McKnight, p. 35.

Considering one of Dickens's earlier antecedents, Shakespeare used a variety of clowns in different contexts. Bente Videbaek has compiled an extensive catalogue of Shakespeare's stage clowns, and considered each in relation to their function within Shakespeare's play-world. For example, the minor clown role (as demonstrated by 'Clown' in *Titus Andronicus* or The Porter in *Macbeth*) 'provides the audience with an interesting possibility for a more flexible and ambiguous interpretation of the plot'.⁹⁷⁰ Another group, including Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* or Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, have more sustained roles, acting as 'the audience's bridge between play and interpretation' and sometimes as catalysts, 'furthering events but remaining unchanged by them'.⁹⁷¹ Videbaek also devotes significant attention to specific sub-categories like court jesters (Feste in *Twelfth Night* or Touchstone in *As You Like It*) or 'bitter Fools' (King Lear's Fool and Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida*), as well as perhaps Shakespeare's greatest clown, Falstaff. Videbaek's study could provide a productive framework on which to situate Dickens's clowns as well.

Looking forward to the present day, the contemporary writer Salman Rushdie also has his own conception of the clown. Salman Rushdie has claimed that 'in my early novels I tried to draw on the genius of Dickens', and four broad themes are at the heart of both writers' work - the city, magical realism, the figure of the migrant and the filmic.⁹⁷² The figure of the clown occurs regularly in the depiction of these themes – for example, Wee Willie Winkie in *Midnight's Children* (1981), Osman in *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and Shalimar in *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) and this represents another area of investigation.

⁹⁷⁰ Bente A. Videbaek, *The Stage Clown in Shakespeare's Theatre* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 35.

⁹⁷¹ Videbaek, p. 39.

⁹⁷² Salman Rushdie, 'Influence', in Salman Rushdie, *Step Across This Line* (London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 69-76 (p. 71).

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