

The University of Manitoba

***The Rhetoric of Middle-Class Conservatism:
Carnival in Two Early Dickens Novels***

by Maurice A. Mierau

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts**

**Department of English
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Winnipeg, Manitoba**

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CARNIVAL IN TWO EARLY DICKENS NOVELS

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MAURICE A. MIERAU

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"We are not, of course, concerned with the kind of people who say that they wish that Dickens was more refined." -- G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*

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Abstract

My thesis explores what John Kucich refers to as the clash between excess and restraint in two early Dickens novels, *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. I argue that these novels settle firmly on the side of restraint. Excess is discussed in terms of the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival; my first chapter is devoted to determining a method for using Bakhtin's difficult and often ambivalent study of carnival in Rabelais (*Rabelais and His World*), as an interpretive tool for the two Dickens novels. Chapters two and three apply this method to *Pickwick* and *Nickleby*.

The concept of carnival, as I read it in Bakhtin's study of Rabelais, casts a certain illumination on these two novels. The novels, I contend, exhibit the marks of carnival in an attenuated and diminished form, not, as one might expect, in celebration of the anarchic and revolutionary energies of the masses, but in part as an attempt to aid the bourgeois in adapting to rapid social change and to alleviate their anxiety concerning it. Ultimately, however, even a diminished carnival is more than the novels can comfortably deal with; the conclusion of both shows their protagonists in retreat from carnival. *Pickwick* and *Nickleby* both use carnival to formulate a rhetoric of middle-class conservatism, a conservatism that can be seen to harden in Dickens's later novels.

Introduction

Northrop Frye noted at a conference on Charles Dickens twenty-four years ago that "it may be significant that his last written words are 'falls to with an appetite'" (55). Dickens's glorification of unrestrained appetite in imagination was coupled with a rigid control of appetite in reality; Dolby, his reading tour manager in America, observed of his employer that "Although he so frequently both wrote and talked about eating and drinking, I have never met a man who partook less freely of the kindly fare placed before him" (qtd. in Edgar 137).¹ The clash between excess and restraint in Dickens the novelist gives him what John Kucich so persuasively argues is "a purely verbal excessiveness" (*Excess and Restraint* 3), one that attempts to articulate "a social order based in excess" (15). This excess, which I see expressed in *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby* in terms of the Bakhtinian carnival, whets an appetite for a particular kind of conservative, middle-class order.

Kucich's larger argument, in *Excess and Restraint in the Novels of Charles Dickens*, is that Dickens's fiction balances two contradictory forces: repression and release. Both *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, in my view, present novelistic structures that accommodate this contradiction by balancing artistic release against social repression. In an article titled "Repression and Representation," Kucich suggests that ". . . Dickens's heroes exemplify the passion of repression, not the repression of passion" (77). This is a useful simplification, because it highlights the constrained yet highly concentrated and energetic form of Dickens's aesthetic. In *Pickwick* and *Nickleby*, the acknowledgment of excess leads directly to the need for a rhetoric of restraint.

The need for restraint felt so keenly in Dickens's early novels is rooted in the rapid change and social anxiety of the 1830s. David Edgar, who adapted *Nicholas Nickleby* for the Royal Shakespeare Company's brilliant production, describes the feeling of social unease in the 1830s particularly well: "behind the unparalleled sense of excitement and opportunity lay a sense, too, of great if undefined loss. The old certainties . . . were dissolving" (138). As a correspondent

¹ This point is reiterated in John Forster's biography, where he quotes a letter Dickens wrote him during the second American reading tour:

I rarely take any breakfast but an egg and a cup of tea--not even toast or bread and butter. My small dinner at three, and a little quail or some such light thing when I come home at night, is my daily fare; and at the hall I have established the custom of taking an egg beaten up in sherry before going in, and another between the parts' . . . (336-7).

Edgar Johnson describes similar habits from earlier in Dickens's life, during the Gad's Hill period: "At one o'clock Dickens emerged for lunch, a substantial meal, though again he himself ate little, usually confining himself to bread and cheese and a glass of ale" (2: 1054).

wrote to the *New Sporting Magazine* in 1836:

Once upon a time there was your scholar, your traveller, your libertine, and a just and proper distinction amongst mankind. There was no jostling over the lines of demarcation naturally . . . drawn between one class and another. (qtd. in Giddings 13)

The anxiety-provoking "jostling over the lines" identified above is reflected in the ambivalent middle-class conservatism of *Nickleby* and *Pickwick*, where Nicholas Nickleby's potentially permanent loss of social status and Pickwick's need for suburban tranquillity are the overwhelming issues, rather than reform of the educational or legal system. Some remedy must be found for the jostling suffered by these displaced sons of the middle-class.

The remedy for Dickens's heroes is the precise manner in which artistic release and social repression are balanced in the early novels: through the use of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "carnavalesque" imagery and material (*Rabelais*, "Introduction" 1-58). Dickens's peculiarly Victorian and bourgeois form of social anxiety leads him to a deformation of Bakhtin's carnivalesque which is uniquely reflective of its era and his own class interests; carnival excess is acknowledged and indulged, but only for the greater purpose of transcending itself in an ideal of middle-class restraint and order. Carnival functions partly, then, as a way for the bourgeois to adapt to rapid social change and to alleviate their accompanying anxiety. Nicholas ends up re-occupying his father's house after his flirtations with the violent and theatrical aspects of carnival, and Pickwick is finally enchained in Dulwich because of the success with which Dickens frightens himself and his audience with the spectre of carnivalesque social chaos. What these early novels attempt is to put limits on the carnival of social flux, the incredible upward and downward mobility of early Victorian society: they attempt to ensure the *temporary* nature of the carnival.

My title links this limited, temporary carnival in the early Dickens with a "rhetoric of middle-class conservatism" in order to challenge a number of received ideas. The first of these is the stereotype of Dickens, especially in the early part of his career, as a complacently middle-class writer of melodramatic potboilers; part of what needs to be recuperated is an understanding of how *radical* a vigorous promotion of middle-class values and institutions was in post-Regency England. Equally pernicious is the idea that Dickens was some kind of left-leaning liberal humanist, perhaps a prototype for J.S. Woodsworth. John Carey's *The Violent Effigy* is valuable if only for its recital of Dickens's self-contradictory and frequently reactionary political opinions.² Finally, the relatively recently received idea that Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival

² See also the illuminating discussion of Dickens's support for Governor Eyre's murderous repression of the Jamaican slave rebellion in Michael Goldberg's *Carlyle and Dickens*, and the contrast with Dickens's earlier positions on related issues (Goldberg 147-49).

is both left-liberal and part of the well-equipped postmodernist's arsenal is one that I am concerned with undermining, however indirectly.

Chapter I

The Politics of Carnival

The concept of carnival, as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin in his study of Rabelais, casts a certain illumination on two of Dickens's earliest novels, *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. These texts, I contend, exhibit the marks of carnival in an attenuated and diminished form, not, as one might expect, in celebration of the anarchic and revolutionary energies of the masses, but in part as an attempt to aid the bourgeois in adapting to rapid social change and to alleviate their anxiety concerning it. Ultimately, however, even a diminished carnival is more than the novels can comfortably deal with; the conclusion of both shows their protagonists in retreat from carnival.

There is a contradiction at the heart of Dickens's use of the carnivalesque. Carnival aids the bourgeois in adapting to change only when it is not too extreme; by its very nature, however, carnival constantly threatens to become extreme. Fortunately the carnival is, by definition, a *temporary* phenomenon, a passing convulsion, and the eventual retreat from carnival is virtually guaranteed. *Pickwick* and *Nickleby* therefore *sanction* a limited role for the carnival within a conservative, middle-class ideology; the novels work out a kind of balance between carnival energy and conservative limitation.

Bakhtin's concept of carnival goes further than anything else, I believe, in articulating and explicating what John Kucich calls "a special kind of tension between energy and limits" in Dickens (*Excess and Restraint* 1). The carnival is defined by Bakhtin as a temporary inversion and even subversion of normal societal hierarchies; it is precisely what Linda Hutcheon calls "authorized transgression" (26), a careful balancing of the forces of excess and restraint. The temporary revolution of carnival takes place in an atmosphere of excess: feasting, banquets, drinking, free and scatological speech and parody (written or oral), comic reversals and descents, and clowning and fooling are only restrained only by their impermanence. There is a focus on the "bodily lower stratum" (*Rabelais* 23), which seeks to debase the 'high and mighty' by putting it or them on a level with the 'low'. These elements are all present in the Dickensian texts I will be discussing, although in attenuated and even censored forms.

This "excess," however, is restrained by its very temporariness, a restraint consistent with Dickens's well-known obsession with authority. The carnivalesque "uncrowning" (*Rabelais* 23) of authority is one that Bakhtin says "celebrate[s] temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order. . . . Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal" (10). At the same time, however, Bakhtin sees carnival as an *institution* that still has the revitalizing power to be a catalyst for change. The change carnival brings about does not necessarily take place with the lightning speed and use of force that characterize a

violent left-wing revolution. Similarly, Dickens's novels show carnivalesque forces as playing an essential role in transforming society in what would usually be thought of as rather unrevolutionary ways.

Bakhtin insists throughout *Rabelais* that carnival is not merely an art form, or a social or religious rite, but a "condition" which has the effect of transforming society, specifically by acting to promote change. This transformation is repeatedly described as having reviving and renewing effects, but that does not define or delimit its political character. In Bakhtin's own introduction to *Rabelais*, he brings out his totalizing definition of carnival for the first time, one that conflates the aesthetic and the sociohistoric manifestations of the carnival:

the basic carnival nucleus of this culture [the Renaissance] is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play.

. . . .

[Carnival] has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. (7)

The difficulty in Bakhtin's definition is his attempt to posit carnival as both an art form *and* a social condition.

In keeping with Bakhtin's attempt to identify carnival as both an aesthetic and a historical phenomenon, he tries not to limit carnival to a specific historical period. At the same time, however, he sees the Renaissance as the pinnacle of artistic achievement in the carnival tradition:

Renaissance grotesque imagery, directly related to folk carnival culture, as we find it in *Rabelais*, Cervantes, and Shakespeare, influenced the entire realistic literature of the following centuries. Realism of grand style, in Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, and Dickens, for instance, was always linked directly or indirectly with the Renaissance tradition. (52)

For my purposes, Bakhtin's attempt to disconnect carnival from a specific time in history is helpful, because it prevents the concept from being tied to any particular ideology, 'revolutionary' or otherwise. (I will return to the problem of Bakhtin's conflation of the aesthetic and social in relation to carnival.)

Early Dickensian carnival, then, announces a typically paradoxical kind of change, one that is really a middle-class, bourgeois 'revolution'. The French social historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie acknowledges this same paradox as characteristic of carnival, both in its conservative nature and its inherent "modifying force":

Carnival is not only . . . destined in the last analysis to justify in a . . . conservative fashion the world as it is. It is rather more . . . an instrument of

action, with eventual modifying force, in the direction of social change and possible *progress*, with respect to society as a whole. . . . (qtd. in LaCapra 295)

"Progress" can be an ambiguous concept, and does not necessarily entail the promotion of a liberal or even a democratic ideology. The political ambiguity of carnival renewal or progress is especially important in reading Dickens. Any careful student of the novelist will recognize that, in his work and life, he combined progressivist or reformist notions with what Humphry House described long ago as "a strong authoritarian strain" (201). Again, Hutcheon's concept of "authorized transgression" perfectly embodies the paradoxical balancing of excess and restraint, energy and limits that are realized in *Pickwick* and *Nickleby*. In other words Dickens's transgressive reformist impulses in those novels are authorized or legitimated by their conservative, middle-class tendencies. Bakhtin identifies the idea of authorized transgression as "legalized carnival licentiousness" (13), and thereby recognizes the way in which carnival ("licentiousness") was framed by a conventional ("legalized") context. *Pickwick* ends in a suburbanized version of a severely limited carnival, and *Nickleby* also legalizes carnival by refusing to allow it to disrupt the middle-class domestic sphere.

The apparent paradox of "authorized transgression" points to carnival's primary function: to aid "the folk" in adapting to rapidly changing social conditions. In *Rabelais* this adaptation involves the movement from the rigid hierarchies of the medieval world to the more flexible and less secure world of the Renaissance. In *Pickwick* and *Nickleby* it involves a movement from the domination of the land and title-holding aristocracy to the rise of the urban lower middle-class, of which Dickens was one of the most articulate spokespersons. Carnival in these novels only liberates a limited, middle-class group; the upper classes are uncrowned and the lower classes are kept firmly in their place. Richard Faber observes of early Victorian society that "there was a good deal of climbing up and down the ladder; but the ladder itself stood still" (11). Dickens the novelist and activist believed very strongly in the stability of that metaphorical ladder.

A restrained version of the carnivalesque form in *Pickwick* and *Nickleby*, then, serves a specific social function: it allows the predominantly middle-class and lower middle-class audience to deal with its own anxiety about upward mobility. This anxiety revolves around the fear that a social ladder in constant use might break down under the strain. An unrestrained carnival social structure is what worries the *New Sporting Magazine's* 1836 correspondent, who complains that "just and proper distinction" in society is disappearing (qtd. in Giddings 13). This anxiety about a society increasingly without "distinction" is further provoked by downward movement, both socially or in terms of class, and physically, through an emphasis on what Bakhtin calls the "lower bodily stratum" (23) and its functions. Inversion and subversion of social hierarchies, as disturbing as they are, however, work to establish new definitions and configurations of those hierarchies, rather than demolishing them. Feasting and drinking are

frequently used to symbolize the apparent freedom of the new social order. While scatological speech is obviously restricted in the self-censoring context of the Victorian novel, Dickens's exuberant injection of the vernacular into the novel, beginning with *Pickwick*, is again a reflection of the consciousness of the emerging middle-class. Over the last decade, there has been a great deal of interest among North American literary critics in Bakhtin.¹ The problem for these critics has been interpreting Bakhtin's theories so they can be meaningfully applied in a Western context. Bakhtin's biographers, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, for example, want to regard him as someone who practiced "philosophical anthropology" (*Mikhail Bakhtin* 3), which, while it may be true, is nevertheless too general a definition for questions such as how one applies Bakhtin's concept of the carnival to the interpretation of Dickens, or even how one interprets Bakhtin's concept of the carnival.

Critics largely are in agreement about the nature of carnival, but are divided on the question of its transformative effects. A critic such as Fredric Jameson sees carnival as having a purely escapist function, and therefore no transformative social effect; on the other hand Linda Hutcheon and Maroussia Ahmed, for example, believe it has a 'revolutionary' effect, serving as a catalyst for social reform; and still others, such as Carol M. Bové, see it as transformative in politically unspecific ways. Jameson questions the idea that carnival forms can be an overturning of hierarchies when the carnival itself is a kind of officially sanctioned pacifier, a holiday granted by the authorities (Jameson 84). This point of view strikes me as simplistic since it ignores the fact that social change often begins within the realm of the officially sanctioned. By contrast Hutcheon, in her *Theory of Parody*, seems to assume that Bakhtin sees carnival (or "parody," which she largely equates with carnival) as "a revolutionary genre" (26). This assumption is common in Bakhtinian criticism. Maroussia Ahmed, for example, notes "[t]he fact that the Carnival is a transgression of the law, and therefore is anti-law . . ." (119). The fallacy of assuming that any transgression of the law is by definition anti-law is clear enough, but

¹ The most important primary texts are Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist's definitive biography, *Mikhail Bakhtin* is also very useful. Michael Holquist's article "The Carnival of Discourse: Baxtin [sic] and Simultaneity" is very interesting on the social role of carnival. *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature's* fall, 1984 edition is devoted to articles about Bakhtin, as is the *University of Ottawa Quarterly's* January-March 1983 issue. Gary Saul Morson has edited a collection titled *Bakhtin: Essays & Dialogues on His Work* that also contains interesting material. For one of the best overviews of trends in Bakhtin criticism--and one that anticipates a number of later developments--see George Steiner, "At the Carnival of Language," *Times Literary Supplement* (17 July 1981): 800. My own first attempt to apply Bakhtin's concept of carnival to a novel appeared in *The Canadian Review of American Studies* as "Carnival and Jeremiad: Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*".

Hutcheon herself, in an article on Norman Mailer, concludes unequivocally by saying that "the [carnavalesque] use of popular forms . . . represents a serious challenging of cultural hierarchies" ("Pop Culture and the Erotic" 94). She refers here to "creations" which "subvert the accepted norms--both aesthetic and social. One has to wonder what precisely is meant by "subvert" here. The easy use of this term is rampant in the field. Michael Holquist writes that *Rabelais* is "about the subversive openness of the Rabelaisian novel" and is "a subversively open book itself" (Prologue xvi), without giving any specific idea of what he means by "subversive."

Carol M. Bové, in an article on Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva and commenting more specifically on literary carnival, articulates more precisely what carnivalesque subversion might entail: "By calling into question authoritative or 'official' discourses, they [novelists] undermine the existing social order and propel forward a new one" (117-118). This statement respects the political ambiguity of Bakhtin's position because it does not dictate the tenor of the new social order which carnivalesque undermining of official discourses may "propel forward". Bové's statement also describes Dickens's project very accurately; *Pickwick* could be said to be concerned with undermining pre-Reform bill England and propelling forward post-Reform and early Victorian society, just as *Nickleby* could be seen encompassing similar forces.

The critical argument over the effects and indeed, the very nature of Bakhtinian carnival is rooted in the elusive and problematic qualities of *Rabelais and his World*, the major locus for Bakhtin's work on the carnival. The circumstances around the composition of this seminal work are as unusual as the book itself. Bakhtin began it during the 1930s, during the height of the Stalinist repression. It was presented as a doctoral dissertation in the late 1940s, but because of its controversial nature, Bakhtin was not awarded the doctoral degree until twelve years later. *Rabelais and his World* was finally published in 1965, and translated into English in 1968. (The fact that Bakhtin was virtually unknown, unpublished, and out of touch with the West through most of his productive years as a scholar is perhaps one reason his work seems removed from a Western context).

In his work on Rabelais, Bakhtin celebrates the Renaissance as the climax of what he describes as the "thousand year history" of folk laughter, and *Gargantua and Pantagruel* as the epitome of the carnival form. As noted above, the implied problem with Bakhtin's linkage between a historical period (the Renaissance) and a literary form (the carnival, best exemplified in *Gargantua*) is that it conflates the social/historical and literary expressions of carnival. Therefore any discussion of carnival's *effect* in this context is double-edged. The social and aesthetic manifestations of carnival become inseparable in Bakhtin's analysis. For Dickens the novelist, use of the carnivalesque form provides both an artistic and a policing opportunity, a chance for both excess and restraint. The fact that "carnival does not know footlights, in . . . that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators" (7) allows Dickens to

create a whole series of elaborate analogies and relationships between various characters in different social strata: witness, for example, the parallels between the Crummles troupe's melodramas and *Nickleby's* larger and more serious melodrama, and the relationship between the two Samuels in *Pickwick*. On the other hand, obliterating the distinction between actors and spectators brings out the policeman in Dickens, the overbearing narrative voice that Mark Lambert has identified.² Dickens-the-policeman is responsible for whisking Nicholas away from the Crummles troupe, and for making sure that strong domestic chains will restrain the two Samuels.

Another result of Bakhtin's insistence on carnival as both a social and aesthetic phenomenon has been the temptation for his readers to equate the 'unofficial,' anarchic energy of carnival with radical, revolutionary social change. The sources for this temptation are again in Bakhtin's own text, which stresses a series of radical and even simplistic oppositions in order to advance its argument:³

² Mark Lambert shows in his study *Dickens and the Suspended Quotation* that authorial interruptions in the middle of quotations are peculiar to novels that are transitional from the Regency to the Victorian periods. The suspended quotation is a cocky, *upwardly mobile* style, but also one that allows Dickens to interfere in the manner of a policeman. In other words it is the perfect artistic vehicle for him to express his profoundly contradictory social impulses.

³ Perhaps one of the reasons Bakhtin's readers have been so tempted to label him as a revolutionary lies in these artificial dichotomies Bakhtin sets up. David Lodge observes that "the spectre of a critical dualism hovers over Bakhtin's work" (95), and, given the intellectual climate of the 1930s in the Soviet Union, it is easy to understand why someone would have to employ a dualistic rhetoric in order to get published, or in Bakhtin's case simply to survive on the fringes of the Soviet academy, in Kazakstan. *Rabelais* features an almost constant dichotomy between 'official' and 'unofficial,' and much of Bakhtin's theorizing in his book on Dostoevsky rests on an equally artificial dichotomy between poetry, which he characterizes as "monologic," and the novel, which is understood as "dialogic" (see *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 5- 46, 181-204). Aron Gurevich complains that "Bakhtin's understanding of medieval official culture is extremely one-sided" (179), but he also recognizes that "Bakhtin, of course, knew full well that carnival and laughter were closely connected to clerical culture, the carnivalesque being to a great extent the inversion of the official culture" (179). Bakhtin's biographers point to his spontaneous recitations of poetry and his prodigious memory for it as evidence that his stated view of poetry as "monological" (and by implication inferior, as compared to the "dialogical" qualities of prose fiction) was much more ambiguous than might at first appear (*Mikhail Bakhtin* 327). Bakhtin may have simply been looking for a politically acceptable set of oppositions to present his arguments with: the monological qualities of poetry would be associated with elitism and the pre-revolutionary order, where Dostoevsky's novelistic dialogism could now receive a revisionist interpretation as being the voice of the people. Clark and Holquist also cite much evidence that Bakhtin's apparently negative view of Tolstoy (as compared to Dostoevsky) was something of a rhetorical/critical gambit as well. It is very possible (although hard evidence for this may never be forthcoming) that Bakhtin's superficially extreme points of view on Tolstoy, poetry, official

All these forms of [carnival] protocol and ritual based on laughter and consecrated by tradition existed in all the countries of medieval Europe; they were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials. (5)

After shrilly attempting to keep a straw man standing by insisting on the dubious distinction between official and unofficial forms of carnival,⁴ Bakhtin becomes more specific about the form of carnival that he champions:

They [carnival rituals] offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and *extrapolitical* aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year. (emphasis added 6)

This "second life" of carnival is "extrapolitical" because it sees the world from "the perspective of ever-changing and renewed time" (213); it does not take sides in the mere border disputes involved in ideological conflict. Instead Bakhtin's emphasis, in a line of argument that is almost a Soviet version of Sir James Frazer, is on the connection between the medieval carnival and the ancient 'pagan' ones: "Even more significant is the generic link of these festivals [the carnivals] with ancient pagan festivities, agrarian in nature, which included the comic element in their rituals" (8). Bakhtin stresses the extrapolitical so far as to say:

A political crisis was nothing more than a tempest in a teapot, the crowning and uncrowning of a clown of the Roman Saturnalia and European carnivals. (138)

To demonstrate the remarkable similarity between this view of politics and Dickens's own, one only has to think of an exemplary political fool from the novelist's large portrait gallery: Mr. Gregsby, M.P. from *Nickleby*, for instance, or Eatanswill's Mr. Pott in *Pickwick*.

What all the above statements manifest, to some extent, is what Mircea Eliade identified as the "revolt against concrete, historical time . . . [traditional societies'] nostalgia for a periodical return to the mythical time of the beginning of things" (ix). Once again, however, Bakhtin's views are not extreme enough to be characterized as purely nostalgic or anti-historical. It would be more accurate to describe Bakhtin's carnival as a way of accommodating and participating in

and unofficial culture, and so on, were deliberate attempts to give his politically unpalatable point of view a hearing in the intellectually repressive climate of the day.

⁴ No doubt this recurrence of an artificial dichotomy is due to some extent because of the difficult circumstances under which Bakhtin wrote; Holquist observes in a prologue that

[a]t one level *Rabelais and his World* is a parable and guidebook for its times, inexplicable without reference to the close connection between the circumstances of its own production and Soviet intellectual and political history. (*Rabelais* xiv)

inevitable process of societal change.⁵ Clark and Holquist are illuminating on this point:

Bakhtin . . . connects carnival with two key elements in his scheme, time and the body. The kind of time peculiar to carnival is the release from time, a respite from the relatively closed and rigid historical patterns that dominant ideologies impose on time's flux. But this freedom cannot be understood merely as playing hooky from the norms of non-carnivalized life at any particular point in history. The physical experience of carnival expresses not just a negative escapism but has a positive aspect as well. Carnival is not time wasted but time filled with profound and rich experience. (302)

It is my contention, then, that the carnival, in Bakhtin's view as presented in *Rabelais*, is neither revolutionary, anti-law, nor subversive, given the conventional understanding of those terms. Carnival is amoral and apolitical, and its transformative power is neither simply an instrument of the left nor of the right. Carnavalesque transformation involves release from natural excess into accepted limits. It has to be constantly borne in mind that Dickens worked in a mass medium, the serial novel, at a time when the carnivalesque put on a particularly conservative costume.

The key to understanding Bakhtin's fundamentally apolitical concept of carnival *and* Dickens's incarnation of it is Bakhtin's stress on carnival's *temporary* nature. "While carnival lasts" is a significant proviso that indicates the temporary carnivalization of the world: Bakhtin writes that medieval carnivals " . . . were the second life of the people, *who for a time* entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance" (9, my emphasis). In both *Pickwick* and *Nickleby* the world is carnivalized only "for a time," and it is then transformed into a brave new world of middle-class ideals. Dickens's transformative idealizing has its roots in the carnival form itself; Bakhtin describes the "utopian freedom" of one carnival manifestation, the feast, in "temporary suspension" of the status quo:

The feast was a temporary suspension of the entire official system with all its prohibitions and hierarchic barriers. For a short time life came out of its usual, legalized and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom. The very brevity of this freedom increased its fantastic nature and utopian radicalism, born in the festive atmosphere of images. (89)

In Dingley Dell this "utopian radicalism" consists of allowing the servants to drink with their masters; Dickens is by no means advocating a change in their status, however.

⁵ Tony Bennett, in his *Formalism and Marxism*, resists this point of view, possibly because so little of Bakhtin was available in English translation at the time he was writing (90).

What is most interesting about the above series of quotations from *Rabelais* is the essentially transhistorical nature of Bakhtin's carnival; carnival serves as what Bakhtin refers to as "the people's second life" (33), a *sacred* time (rather than a revolutionary, historical one) when the death of the past and the birth of the future are part of the same moment. Bakhtin even points to a kind of utopian pre-history, when "at the early stages of preclass and prepolitical social order . . . the serious and the comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally 'official'" (6). Hutcheon has also noticed the "utopian impulse in Bakhtin" (*Theory of Parody* 71), and it is exactly this impulse that prevents Bakhtin's carnival from being an easy, unambivalent endorsement for the status quo. However, there is no doubt that the carnival concept itself endorses a social renewal or transformation that can, in the hands of a great novelist like Dickens, embody the vision of a rising social class.

In the case of Dickens, and especially in the early novels, the energy and dynamism of the carnival is employed to herald the triumph of the middle-class and its emerging values. The middle-class world view, for all its narrowness, provincialism, and bigotry, was very much the dynamic and emerging social force in English society at the beginning of Dickens's career.⁶ The "rhetoric of middle-class conservatism," then, is not simply a pejorative phrase; as Walter Bagehot put it in his justly-famous description, Dickens was a "sentimental radical,"⁷ a force for change whose deeply intuitive, sentimental connection with his mass audience also made him profoundly conservative and even reactionary by our standards.

⁶ The dynamic and emerging nature of the Victorian middle-class is underscored by Mary Eagleton, in her *Attitudes to Class in the English Novel from Walter Scott to David Storey*, where she writes that

characteristic of the Victorian middle class, as seen through the novel, is a consciousness of itself as a *new* middle-class in a new kind of society and with the energy, power, and obligation to solve the problems of society. (33)

⁷ Quoted in Marcus, *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey* (114).

Chapter II

On the Road to Dulwich: Pickwick in Chains

In *The Pickwick Papers* Dickens attempts to provide a carnivalesque remedy for post-Reform bill England's social anxieties. *Pickwick* portrays England as carnivalesque in its terrifying upward and downward social mobility: thus social change itself is closely associated with the novel's carnival elements. *Pickwick* celebrates, in carnival fashion, those social changes that have allowed Dickens's lower middle-class readership a bigger stake in their society. It also encourages this same audience to resist social change that does not benefit them; further extension of the franchise is definitely not part of *Pickwick's* political agenda. The celebration of social change in *Pickwick* is best represented by Sam Weller, a servant who is humanized by being allowed to drink with his master. The novel rejects those aspects of carnival that are not congruent with its middle-class values. Dickens applies his reformist energies to those characters who indulge excessively in carnival liberty. *Pickwick* is very much a play between excess and restraint, and the balance it suggests is weighted heavily in favour of a conservative, middle-class restraint.

In spite of *Pickwick's* emphasis on restraint, however, Dickens's novelistic lens moves in a downward direction characteristic of carnivalesque literature, panning over the ugly and often amusing reality of England below its capacious waist. The movement downward is, Bakhtin observes, part of the tradition of grotesque realism that carnival comes from, and *Pickwick* takes exactly this topsy-turvy view of the world:

[the] downward movement is also inherent in all forms of popular-festive merriment and grotesque realism. Down, inside out, vice versa, upside down, such is the direction of all these movements. (*Rabelais* 370)

Even so, Dickens is also extremely prone to pulling these below-the-waist pans back up to head level, thereby revealing himself as a middle-class moralist. What is *low* and carnivalesque, in the end, has to be rejected; the sleepy suburb of Dulwich provides the remedy for social anxiety by ending Pickwick's journeys and imprisoning him in a completely ordered and predictable situation.

Pickwick's fascinating inability to explore the carnivalesque more thoroughly grows out of its obsession with propriety. The notion of propriety is really a systematic way of relieving the anxiety of rapid social change. *Pickwick* didactically envisions a *proper* way to partake of two major categories of carnivalesque behaviour: the festive and the aggressive. Both these categories involve a movement *downward* into what the Western, Christian tradition conceives of as the 'lower' part of human nature. Carnival festivity moves downward into the world of the flesh, into a banquet where the appetites are fully indulged, where the world is devoured. *Pickwick's* proper

version of the carnival feast is largely a sublimated sexuality which leads to the founding of a new social order: the suburban utopia of Dulwich. Carnival aggression provides a way to sublimate the destructive energy of the socially ambitious by symbolically annihilating those above and below one's place on the social ladder. Michael Hollington has identified what I am terming carnival aggression as "the barely suppressed violence of the ambitious, upwardly mobile lower middle classes--clerks, tradesmen and their like" in Dickens's early work (39). The potential violence of the upwardly mobile, like their potentially unruly festivity, must be suppressed and sublimated into propriety, into socially acceptable formulas.¹

Just as *Pickwick* keeps carnival suppressed, so Samuel Pickwick himself is kept on a short leash during this rotund hero's brief sallies into the carnivalesque world. The emerging rhetoric of middle-class conservatism is what determines the length of his leash, and the respective leashes of his colleagues. The members of the Pickwick Club all have seemingly infinite amounts of time and leisure on their hands during the course of the novel, and yet by the end of the story each has found his niche in a suburban middle-class milieu. Pickwick moves from an innocent naivete to an innocence born of a certain amount of experience, and "retires" again.² This time he retires not from whatever business occupied his youth, but instead from both the picaresque English world of coaches,³ elopements, and unintended marital entanglements and from the carnivalesque downward mobility of the Victorian world symbolized most notably by his fall into imprisonment for debt. Garrett Stewart takes a similar view of Mr. Pickwick, titling the first part of his book "Quarantine of Imagination: The Pickwickian Reign."

¹ Richard Faber offers a profound understanding of the early Victorians' simultaneous advocacy of reform and tradition. I believe his point of view supports my larger argument that middle-class propriety in 1830s England consisted of balancing the need for change with the need for social order and stability. Faber's title, *Proper Stations*, comes from a stage adaptation of Dickens's *The Chimes*, and again it signals Dickens's concern with propriety. Faber comments as follows on the Victorian period in general (his book deals with novelists writing between 1830 and 1880):

More complex, more class-conscious, but scarcely less hierarchical than in the previous century, the system had developed a classic assurance, an Augustan bloom. Its stability was the trellis on which doubt, reform and enterprise flourished. It offered the enterprising and successful a sense of purpose and achievement; the reformers, both a base and a target; the thinkers, space and shelter. It was oppressive, but not to the point of crushing vigour or the forces that were eventually to transform it. (11)

² See Appendix A for a discussion of the critical controversy over Pickwick's education or change during the course of the novel.

³ Steven Marcus has written what is still the best account of Dickens's relationship to the picaresque tradition in England in his *From Pickwick to Dombey* (13-53).

He writes that

it is perhaps the novel's most original and disturbing insight that Mr. Pickwick must be excluded equally from both sorts of imagination, from the imprisonment of psychosis and the release of fancy--saved from nightmare but denied the daydream. (32)

Stewart's discussion suggests the kind of balance between excess and restraint that I am arguing for; excess in his terms is nightmare or daydream, and restraint involves quarantine from those extremes. He does title a chapter "Release" (implying the release of fancy alluded to above) but this appears to be mostly embodied in the character of Sam (30-65). It also seems to me that even Sam is restrained in the end with the leash of domesticity, rather than released to the freedom of fancy or daydream. Quarantine, I would submit, is the fate of the entire Pickwick Club.

The retirement or quarantine of the Pickwick Club, then, is to a large extent the result of their retreat from the improper aspects of carnival energy. Pickwick's experience of the world leads him to conclude that the best way to adapt to change is to remove himself from it. The forty-fifth chapter's title is really a microcosm of Pickwick's whole story: "Mr. Pickwick makes a Tour of the diminutive World he inhabits, and resolves to mix with it, in future, as little as possible" (720). The anarchic force of carnival can be kept in line only by withdrawing from that world, by refusing to "mix with it". The public world in *Pickwick* is portrayed as a dangerous, carnival-loving place where social boundaries are not respected. There is a deep structural contradiction here, since carnival is largely about the removal of barriers, while *Pickwick* seems very involved with erecting new ones, or at least withdrawing from a free-wheeling carnivalesque society.

Pickwick's movement towards withdrawal is perhaps best illustrated by an interpolated tale that serves as an analogue to Pickwick's experience. Sam tells Pickwick this tale while Pickwick is incarcerated in the Fleet prison. The story concerns someone named "Bill" who, like Pickwick, is in prison for debt. Unlike the affluent Pickwick, Bill does not have the option of paying off his debt. Because he is completely trustworthy, however, he is allowed to leave the prison unsupervised on some occasions. When he begins to frequent a local public-house night after night, coming in later and later, the turnkey says to him:

"it's my 'pinion as you've got into bad company o' late, which I'm wery sorry to see. Now, I don't wish to do nothing harsh,' he says, 'but if you can't confine yourself to steady circles, and find your vay back at reglar hours, as sure as you're a standin' there, I'll shut you out altogether!' The little man was seized vith a wiolent fit o' tremblin', and never vent outside the prison walls arterwards!" (668)

Bill is so terrified by the carnival force of the outside world, as represented by the public-house, that the threat of being "shut out" of prison is very real to him. The carnival is bearable only as

long as it can be kept in its place as a temporary excursion. Like Pickwick, he needs the security of his chains to provide him with a stable social identity in the face of a carnivalesque world; also like Pickwick, he needs a relatively short leash--a diminished and ultimately banished carnival--to quell his anxieties about change.

Pickwick's problem is much like Bill's: carnival threatens his social identity and even his individuality. Pickwick's moral authority deriving from his status as a gentleman disappears in the world of carnival, precisely because this world eradicates social identity and barriers.⁴ The scene in the pound, where Pickwick is pelted with rotten vegetables and accused of having no friends (340) is profoundly disturbing to him because it *lowers* him to a place where he becomes the victim of carnival aggression. Most disturbing of all, however, is the experience that the pound foreshadows--that of the Fleet prison. It is here that Pickwick resolves to withdraw from the world and assume his voluntary, middle-class chains:

The whole place seemed restless and troubled; and the people were crowding and flitting to and fro, like the shadows in an uneasy dream.

'I have seen enough,' said Mr. Pickwick, as he threw himself into a chair in his little apartment, 'My head aches with these scenes, and my heart too. Henceforth I will be a prisoner in my own room.' (737)

The effect of this part of the carnival atmosphere is to push Pickwick away from carnival and toward Dulwich, which will accommodate only the benevolently festive aspects of carnival.

The disturbing aspects of England's carnivalized society manifest themselves immediately in *Pickwick*. Dickens alerts the reader that England is in a carnivalesque state--one that is decidedly more anarchic than the settled, rural world of the eighteenth-century novelists--when Pickwick expresses his gratitude, in the third person, at being elected chairman of the Pickwick Club:

Still he could not but feel that they had selected him for a service of great honour,

⁴ Stan S. Rubin's commentary on *Pickwick* includes the following concept of "balance" between what I would call the carnivalesque crowd and Pickwick, the out-of-place gentleman. This concept in Rubin's article is a technical version of *Pickwick's* balance between excess and restraint:

Dickens's vision--really, it is an exploration--shows far more complexity than it has usually been credited with in *Pickwick Papers* (or in his early work in general). The crowd is the index of this complexity. For the true "spectator" is the author, whose narrative *persona* creates for us a delicate balance, a careful poise, in the shifting relationship of Pickwick, a kindly old eighteenth century gentleman who fancies himself worldly, yet who is so patently unfit for the nineteenth century industrial world, to the crowd that the world has spawned. (193)

and of some danger. Travelling was in a troubled state, and the minds of coachmen were unsettled. Let them look abroad, and contemplate the scenes which were enacting around them. Stage coaches were upsetting in all directions, horses were bolting, boats were overturning, and boilers were bursting. (71)

That the minds of coachmen should be upset in a novel where the coach is such a powerful symbol of the old England is a sign of just what a danger Pickwick's adventures promise. The "troubled state" of England, however, points to a larger issue, and that is the novel's reflection of the wider feeling that there was a lack of social order or stability in the world's most powerful country.

The England of *Pickwick* is, to some extent, a laboratory for exploring the new, carnivalesque, and dangerously shifting social grounds of post-Reform bill England. Pickwick, the businessman retired from an unspecified career, going out to experience this laboratory, is the novel's rat: his job is getting through the maze. The maze encountered by the Pickwick Club contains the challenge of how to be a gentleman, a member of the leisure class, when social roles are changing and are no longer rigidly defined. Leisure--and the carnivalesque amusements that are part of it--became a unique problem in 1830s England because it was a society obsessed with both social control and social reform. As Peter Bailey notes:

In the 1830s and 1840s English society faced appalling problems of social order and public health which provoked a wide-ranging debate on the 'Condition of England'. One strand in the debate concerned popular recreations and the desirability of promoting their reform in such a way as to make a constructive contribution to the general drive for social amelioration or 'improvement'. In this scenario improved recreations were an important instrument for educating the working classes in the social values of middle-class orthodoxy. (35)

In this social context, *Pickwick* attempts to harness its carnivalesque play into a utilitarian goal: the education of a rising class (the lower middle-class) in properly middle-class values.⁵ The novel's didactic insistence on the proper socializing of its heroes necessitates the eventual retreat from carnival. *Pickwick* uses its social laboratory to neutralize the shock of the new; it attempts to place emphasis on middle-class goals and values, rather than on the trauma of living during a transitional period.⁶

⁵ Mark M. Hennelly has attempted to apply Johan Huizinga's study, *Homo Ludens* in his article "Dickens's Praise of Folly: Play in *The Pickwick Papers*," but unfortunately does not go much further than cataloguing the novel's many references to games and play.

⁶ F.M.L. Thompson comments in his book *The Rise of Respectable Society* that "all [historians] would agree that [by 1830] structural, technical, and organizational changes had gone so far that a wholly new kind of society was bound to develop" (22). It would be fair to say that Dickens

The emergence of a new set of middle-class goals and values designed to accommodate the wider franchise and increased social mobility of the 1830s is, finally, what *Pickwick* presents its readers. The novel attempts to employ carnivalesque festive and aggressive behaviours in the promotion of a new society. As Northrop Frye writes: "in *Pickwick Papers*--a work which signals the demise of an older comedy and the birth of a new social fiction--these two . . . are inextricably linked" (202). It is the emergence of this "new social fiction" that, in the final analysis, gives unity to the novel.⁷

Pickwick's version of carnival, then, provides an education in the proper uses of freedom. The suppressed violence and aggression of the lower middle-classes is expressed in the emergence of a new social fiction. The didactic thrust of the novel is evident in this harnessing of carnival energy for both the rejection of a permanently carnivalized world--such as Eatanswill--and the realization of a middle-class social vision. The new social vision advocated by *Pickwick* revolves around a suburban, male-dominated family: all roads lead to Dulwich, the ultimate expression of freedom in the novel. The earlier uninhibited carnival of Eatanswill, Jingle, and Bob Sawyer is clearly rejected; the lens is jiggled back up from its downward travels.

One of the major sources of carnival energy in *Pickwick* is Eatanswill, a society that is entirely focussed on its stomach. Here the downward-moving energy of carnival revolves around what Bakhtin calls the "lower bodily stratum" (*Rabelais* 23), that area of carnival which emphasizes the digestive and reproductive processes. Eatanswill, as its name implies, is a place where the carnivalesque feast dominates society, and where political candidates are chosen on the basis of their ability to aid the voters in eating and swilling. In keeping with *Pickwick's* didactic thrust, the reader is encouraged to enjoy Eatanswill's excess while simultaneously rejecting its improper use of the festive elements of carnival.

The town of Eatanswill provides a comic microcosm of contemporary British politics, and reveals it as an inappropriate sphere of action for the Pickwick Club. Proper middle-class morality for the Pickwickians should not involve the descent into the English political system, which *Pickwick* consistently debases and lowers by presenting it as unrestrained carnival. The Eatanswill political candidates each attribute carnival behaviour to the other side, showing their extreme focus on carnivalesque issues of the lower body rather than substantive 'head' issues involving politics and platforms:

[the candidates] each darkly hinted his suspicions that the electors in the opposite interest had certain swinish and besotted infirmities which rendered them unfit for

began his career as a novelist in the midst of far-reaching social change, and spent his entire career trying to educate his audience in how to accommodate that change.

⁷ See Appendix B for a short account of the critical controversy over *Pickwick's* unity or coherence.

the exercise of the important duties they were called upon to discharge. (254)

The "important duties" are left deliberately vague, implying their lack of importance. It is interesting that even the supposedly serious job the candidates are running for is a duty that must be *discharged*; appetite ("swinish and besotted"), disease ("infirmities"), and "discharge"--all typical aspects of the Rabelaisian feast--appear to characterize the political milieu (cf. *Rabelais*, 89, 361ff, 175ff). *Pickwick's* attitude toward politics could be described as Rabelaisian, but with a particular nineteenth-century twist. Bakhtin writes that to Rabelais "[a] political crisis was nothing more than a tempest in a teapot, the crowning and uncrowning of a clown" (138), and the Eatanswill political landscape does seem to be entirely populated by clowns whose crowning and uncrowning is equally undignified.⁸

The question remains as to what the target of Dickens's carnivalesque humour really is in the Eatanswill episodes. My suggestion is that they are not satirical at all, but rather *regenerative* in the Bakhtinian sense of a renewal of energy through a comic descent (*Rabelais* 23). The Eatanswill scene serves not only to illustrate the futility of politics as a gentlemanly pursuit, but also to renew the Pickwick Club's energies when they meet Wardle and discover Dingley Dell, the prototype for Dulwich. Bakhtin notes an analogous tendency in Rabelais, whom he sees as "not a satirist in the ordinary sense of the word. His laughter is by no means directed at the distinct, purely negative aspects of reality" (141). Similarly, *Pickwick* is not primarily concerned with satire as a means of exposing the "negative aspects of reality". Perker, for example, is a political organizer in Eatanswill; he is not presented in the Bardell case as a corrupt lawyer, but merely as one who participates fully in his carnivalized surroundings. He sees his job as facilitating the eating and swilling of the electorate in order to promote his candidate:

'Oh yes,' said the little man [Perker], 'very much so indeed. We have opened all

⁸ W.H. Auden takes the view that the portrayal of Eatanswill is a satirical attack on what happens when politics is turned into a mere game, and that an idealistic conception of politics lurks beneath the satire:

Party politics presupposes that it is possible for two people, equally rational and well-meaning, to hold different opinions about a policy and possible for a man to be convinced by argument that his opinion has been mistaken. It also presupposes that, however widely their political opinions may differ, all voters are agreed that the goal of politics is the establishment of a just and smoothly running society. But in Eatanswill the pleasure of party rivalry and debate has become an end in itself to both parties, a closed game world, and the real goal of politics has been forgotten. (77)

My suggestion is that Eatanswill, as the name implies, is an entirely carnivalized social arena, where party politics are revealed to be irrational. I also reject Auden's larger argument in which he attempts to impose the Christian myth of the fall onto the structure of *Pickwick*. Auden is conflating the pre-Christian descent pattern of grotesque realism with the later Christian version.

the public houses in the place, and left our adversary nothing but the beer-shops--masterly stroke of policy that, my dear sir, eh?--the little man smiled complacently, and took a large pinch of snuff. (240)

There is no moral disapprobation for Perker implied in this narrative, only admiration for someone who has managed to attain gentlemanly complacence while still enjoying large pinches of snuff. Perker provides an example throughout the novel of a character who balances excess and restraint in an acceptable middle-class manner.

One of the most powerfully carnivalesque features of the Eatanswill episodes--the scatological abuse between two competing newspapers, the Gazette and the Independent--is also one which reveals the incompatibility of middle-class values with a too thoroughly carnivalesque, downward-moving and ungentlemanly world. This fierce--and absurd--name-calling competition takes on the character of "the downward movement [of carnival] . . . also expressed in curses and abuses" (*Rabelais* 370):

Fine newspapers they were. Such leading articles, and such spirited attacks!--'Our worthless contemporary, the Gazette--'That disgraceful and dastardly journal, the Independent'--'That false and scurrilous print, the Independent'--'That vile and slanderous calumniator, the Gazette;' these, and other spirit-stirring denunciations were strewn plentifully over the columns of each, in every number, and excited feelings of the most intense delight and indignation in the bosoms of the townspeople. (238)

These denunciations are "spirit-stirring" because they provide an outlet for the aggressive carnival banqueters--the citizens--of Eatanswill. The dry, ironic tone of the narrative here ("Fine newspapers they were") reveals *Pickwick's* real perspective on this festive abuse, however: it is not a proper place for middle-class gentlemen.

The newspapers' abuse campaign becomes more clearly linked with the lower body as it becomes more scatological, more a veiled form of excrement-tossing; the scatology also leads to *Pickwick's* rejection of this form of carnival in favour of more gentlemanly ones, such as vigorous drinking, dining, and roughing up of villains. When the editors of the two noble rags meet face to face, they trot out a litany of thinly veiled scatology:

'The Independent, sir,' replied Pott, 'is still dragging on a wretched and lingering career. Abhorred and despised by even the few who are cognizant of its miserable and disgraceful existence; stifled by the very filth it so profusely scatters; rendered deaf and blind by the exhalations of its own slime; the obscene journal, happily unconscious of its degraded state, is rapidly sinking beneath that treacherous mud which, while it seems to give it a firm standing with the low and debased classes of society, is nevertheless, rising above its detested head, and will speedily engulf

it for ever.' (814)

All this talk of "filth," "slime," "mud," and "obscene" leads finally to blows between the two editors. Again, this energetic obscenity presents not a critique of journalism during the period, but rather an example of what happens when carnival runs wild. Newspapers are simply part of the public carnival in *Pickwick*, and, as such, they are both amusing and horrifying. One cannot imagine Pickwick reading the newspaper in Dulwich. Instead of social criticism or satire, what *Pickwick* really presents here is an example of unbridled carnival. Newspaper editors who indulge in verbal excrement-tossing are clearly not gentlemen. Bakhtin's idea of excrement as "gay matter," "linked to the generating force and to fertility . . . and its special role in overcoming fear" is at work here only in a very diminished form (*Rabelais* 175). Pickwick overcomes his fear long enough to intervene in the physical battle that breaks out between the editors, although he has to be rescued by Weller (822). Regeneration and fertility arise out of the episode only indirectly, through its juxtaposition with the following chapter's events: these involve Sam's flirtation with Mary, which moves him closer to fatherhood, and the regenerative and unmourned death of Mrs. Tony Weller. Meanwhile, though, the editors are shown to be ridiculous and politically impotent, and Pickwick's bravery is a temporary aberration, shortly to be placed in its context by his final retirement to Dulwich.

While the prospect of characters dropping down the social scale either in terms of their behaviour or their actual status is treated as a horrifying occurrence, *Pickwick* repeatedly lowers romantic images and language to what Bakhtin calls the "lower bodily stratum of [carnival]" (*Rabelais* 23). The purpose of this lowering is often to discredit or uncrown the romantic illusions of the old order. In this way carnival is allowed a certain (short) amount of leash in order to scare off the mailman, as it were, of the past. For example, Sam is reminded that he needs to send a valentine note by seeing a peculiarly carnivalesque valentine in a shop-window:

The particular picture on which Sam Weller's eyes were fixed . . . was a highly coloured representation of a couple of human hearts skewered together with an arrow, cooking before a cheerful fire, while a male and female cannibal in modern attire: the gentleman being clad in a blue coat and white trousers, and the lady in a deep red pelisse with a parasol of the same: were approaching the meal with hungry eyes, up a serpentine gravel path leading thereunto. (536)

The sexuality here is presented in a slyly euphemistic way, as cannibalistic appetite. Romantic love, as represented by the human hearts, is debased (or "skewered") through its transformation into a carnivalesque feast. The "picture" contains all the signs of Bakhtin's "ambivalent lower stratum"; the scene involves "laughter, food, the procreative force, [and] abuse" (Bakhtin 170). Since Sam is the only representative of uninhibited male sexuality in *Pickwick* (he is the only member of the Pickwick group whose union is reported as resulting in children) it is appropriate

that Sam should be the one to see this startling card. It is equally appropriate that the "serpentine" path, with its parodic reference to the garden of Eden notwithstanding, leads him directly to Dulwich. One of the wryest carnivalesque jokes in the novel is thus directed to getting Sam on the path toward domesticity. The aristocratic-romantic illusion of marriage for love is made rough carnivalesque fun of, and it is replaced by a notion of love based on appetite and the desire for suburban utopia.

The character Jingle is also very involved with lowering and debasing aristocratic and romantic illusions, and like the Eatanswill newspaper editors, he provides an example of carnival out of control: his leash will need to be shortened. When Jingle impresses the Pickwickians, especially Tupman, with his romantic history, the movement is downward--from "high-souled" to the stomach pump, a movement that Jingle will encourage in the Pickwick Club and among victims like Rachel Wardle:

Conquests! Thousands. Don Bolaro Fizzgig--Grandee--only daughter--Donna Christina--splendid creature--loved me to distraction--jealous father--high-souled daughter--handsome Englishman--Donna Christina in despair--prussic acid--stomach pump in my portmanteau--operation performed--old Bolaro in ecstasies--consent to our union--join hands and floods of tears--romantic story--very.' (81)

The conquest of Donna Christina goes through a whole series of carnivalesque conquests of romantic illusion. Jingle seems rather unromantically prepared for his role as stomach-pumper, carrying the instrument in his portmanteau, and inducing "ecstasies" in the father thanks to his prompt and hilariously utilitarian evacuation of the prussic acid from Donna's stomach. Jingle conquers the Pickwick Club in the same way: through their stomachs and appetites, and through their desire for romantic illusion.

A wandering actor, Jingle specializes in taking advantage of the illusions of gentfolk like the Pickwickians; it is this aspect of his character that will require correction. Jingle's place of origin is "No Hall, Nowhere" (167), and his parodic impersonations of gentlemen show his victims how unstable and erratic their social identities really are. More than any other character in the novel Jingle represents what Bakhtin calls "carnivalesque revelry," which "is marked by absolute familiarity. Differences between superiors and inferiors disappear for a short time . . ." (*Rabelais* 246). Because Jingle is so utterly disrespectful of the proprieties of life as Pickwick and his friends understand them, he is both a source of horror and amusement. Jingle's speech is a veritable carnival lexicon. When he warns the Pickwick club about a low archway they are passing through, he moves rhetorically in the classic carnival direction--downward, from the head of the household, to a headless woman and a literally uncrowned, beheaded king:

'Heads, heads--take care of your heads!' cried the loquacious stranger [Jingle], as they came out under the low archway, which in those days formed the entrance to

the coach-yard. '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 mouth to put it in--head of a family off--shocking, shocking! Looking at Whitehall, sir?--fine place--little window--somebody else's head off there, eh, sir?--he didn't keep a sharp look-out enough either--eh, sir, eh?' (78-9)

The waggish reference to English history underscores the seriousness of failing to keep "a sharp look-out" with the Jingles of this world, who are not really shocked by carnivalesque social fluidity. Like the novel's carnival energy, Jingle has to be contained. He is useful for his ability to shake things up, to uncrown the old order, and remind the Pickwick Club of the old aristocracy's decline, but finally a sharp look-out has to be maintained to prevent *mother's* head from coming off too.

The "dismal man" is, like Jingle, a strolling actor--a typical carnival character--and he happens to be the brother of Jingle's servant; all three men are consummate confidence artists whose careers demonstrate the humour and danger of the carnivalesque social flux. The dismal man narrates one of the interpolated tales, and his story takes a carnivalesque downward direction that illustrates a point Dickens will make more systematically in *Nickleby*: that an excess of the carnival spirit will propel a character down the frighteningly greasy social pole. The dismal man says of the protagonist in his story--whom he describes as "a low pantomime actor": "I traced his progress downwards, step by step, until at last he reached that excess of destitution from which he never rose again" (105). It is precisely this actor's failure to restrain his excess, to make a distinction between his "low" career and his destitution that make life impossible for him. The pantomime actor suffers from excess, and he is too wantonly carnivalesque, too *impractical* to be kept alive in a novel like *Pickwick*.

I have shown how part of *Pickwick's* briskly practical uncrowning of the old order is its attack on romantic illusion; this attack extends further into a satire on elitist, impractical scholarship, science, and publishing, as practiced by old-fashioned gentlemen-amateurs in the early nineteenth century.⁹ *Pickwick's* uncrownings of absurd and elitist science are analogous to what Bakhtin finds in Renaissance carnival: "in medieval humorous literature. . . the prevailing forms are the secular parody and travesty, which present the droll aspect of the feudal system" (*Rabelais* 15). The carnivalesque secular parodies (including parodies of scholarship and scholarly debate) became a component of what Bakhtin calls "the grotesque symposium" (296),

⁹ See N.N. Feltes' essay on the transition from gentleman-amateur to professional publishers during the early nineteenth century, in his *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels*, especially the chapter "The Production of a Commodity Text: the Moment of *Pickwick*" (1-17).

or banquet humour. Pickwick's 'scientific' detachment early in the novel is really a manifestation of the old society that is being uncrowned in *Pickwick*; it reveals the droll aspect of the old order, as it survived in post-Reform bill England.

The Pickwick Club itself begins as a body dedicated to the production of meaningless, elitist research and publications; it is a grotesque symposium on the road to middle-class enlightenment--on the road to Dulwich. Pickwick starts out very much a participant in the old order's mad, impractical science, with his "Speculations on the Source of the Hampstead Ponds, with some Observations on the Theory of Tittlebats," promulgated in "the cause of science" (67). J. Hillis Miller has commented on how Pickwick begins as "a parody of the good scientist," confronting experience with "detachment" (6-7). Miller also notes that Pickwick "believes that he can safely travel everywhere and to every level of society . . . certain that all of his experiences will be without danger for him" (9). Pickwick's assumption of personal immunity is based on the values of a declining order. *Detachment* is the characteristic attitude of the aristocrat as well, and it is exactly the one that Pickwick discovers no longer works in a carnivalized England.

The grotesque symposium, though, takes on wider membership than just Pickwick and his club members. It takes shape almost literally in Mrs. Leo Hunter's party, which is described to Pickwick as a place for "feasts of reason, sir, and flows of soul" (274). Her husband points out how logical Pickwick's participation would be: "Consider, sir, how many appropriate characters are open for your selection. Plato, Zeno, Epicurus, Pythagoras--all founders of clubs" (276). These "founders of clubs" are not only wonderfully uncrowned here by their reduction to Pickwick's mock-heroic level, but the aristocratic world of the classics is degraded to the level of a pretentious provincial "fancy-dress breakfast" (276). Pickwick is not the only character who is mocked at the fancy-dress breakfast. Count Smorltork, like Pickwick, keeps a notebook in which he records his comically distorted impressions of the carnivalesque reality around him. He begins taking notes almost as soon as he meets Pickwick:

'The word politics, sir,' said Mr. Pickwick, 'comprises, in itself, a difficult study of no inconsiderable magnitude.'

'Ah!' said the Count, drawing out the tablets again, 'ver good--fine words to begin a chapter. Chapter forty-seven. Politics. The word politic surprises by himself--' And down went Mr. Pickwick's remark, in Count Smorltork's tablets, with such variations and additions as the Count's exuberant fancy suggested, or his imperfect knowledge of the language, occasioned. (284)

Smorltork's attraction for Pickwick's pompous phrases shows Pickwick still caught in the middle of this world of debased scholarship, one that is far too dim to see that Eatanswill is far from being "a difficult study of no inconsiderable magnitude." Once again, carnival is used as a remedy for anxiety: *Pickwick's* audience need not concern itself with the old, gentlemanly

science; it has nothing to contribute to Dulwich except its amusement value. The reassuring irrelevance of the old order in *Pickwick* is best illustrated by the conflict between Mr. Blotton and Pickwick when Pickwick makes what he believes is an antiquarian discovery. Here Pickwick's absurd misreading of a marker becomes a matter of mock-scholarly debate:

Hereupon the virtuous indignation of the seventeen learned societies, native and foreign, being roused, several fresh pamphlets appeared; the foreign learned societies corresponded with the native learned societies; the native learned societies translated the pamphlets of the foreign learned societies into English; the foreign learned societies translated the pamphlets of the native learned societies into all sorts of languages; and thus commenced that celebrated scientific discussion so well known to all men, as the Pickwick controversy. (228)

The utter pointlessness of this scholarly tower of Babel is what fuels the parody here. The version of carnivalesque parody of scholarship in *Pickwick* is completely safe because it cannot become excessive: nothing could exaggerate the irrelevance of the old order's scientists to the brave new world of Dulwich. Like Eatanswill, the parody of scholarship represents an outbreak of carnival that is entirely containable because it is irrelevant to the novel's final solution; Dingley Dell is the prototype for Dulwich after all, not Eatanswill or the Pickwick Club.

Pickwick's containable carnival, for all its reassuring and safe qualities, is still one that places tremendous stress on Dingley Dell's gradual displacement of Eatanswill as the site for alcoholic and festive regeneration; alcohol is the lubricant that will aid the entry of the new society over the dead bodies of the old order's pseudo-science and romantic illusions. Dingley Dell is a version of the balanced carnival, as opposed to the uncontrolled but harmless carnival of Eatanswill. The Eatanswill electorate's drinking may be excessive, but the perpetual thirst of the Pickwick Club emphasizes the restorative or even magical effects of alcohol in a way that is reminiscent of the ancient idea that drinking (and urinating) have not only purgative but also renewing and regenerating qualities (*Rabelais* 278-302). According to Bakhtin, carnivalesque literature often presents the consumption of intoxicating drink as a restorative for the community after some threat to its cohesion (278ff). Examples of drink as a restorative to community abound in *Pickwick*: after Pickwick's near-drowning, "a bowl of punch was carried up . . . and a grand carouse held in honour of his [Pickwick's] safety" (502). When there are drinks after the narrowly averted duel with Dr. Slammer, alcohol is both the catalyst for a socially disturbing situation, and the restorative for the Pickwick group (115). The cherry brandy after the incident with the "refractory steed" (138), the "convivial glass" at Eatanswill (218), the brandy after Pickwick's confinement in the pound (342), Bob Sawyer's restorative drink from the "black bottle" (772), and old Mr. Winkle's ordering of the wine after his reconciliation with his son (865) all are examples where drink serves a primarily restorative and regenerating function.

Michael Cotsell sees the novel's vision as largely filtered through the use of alcohol: "drink operates as both the means and metaphor of the imagination in *The Pickwick Papers*" (14), and contrasts this with Coleridge's (personal) use of laudanum. Indeed the drinking takes on the character of Rabelaisian feasting, of what Bakhtin calls "the great utopia of the banquet" or "the feast for all the world" (185), which is certainly the vision through a bottle of a world temporarily unified. After the marriage of Isabella Wardle and Mr. Trundle, for example, Mr. Wardle calls in all the servants and they are given "a glass of wine each, to drink the toast in" (470). Thus everyone--including the "poor relations" of the Wardles--is made to feel part of the marriage celebration (or carnival); even Sam Weller, a mere servant, "was as much at home as if he had been born on the land" (467). By breaking down traditional social barriers and showing the possibility for a re-organized social structure, Dingley Dell's utopianism becomes the prototype for Dulwich, where the middle-class revolution can begin in earnest.

There is another reason, though, for *Pickwick's* obsession with drink. Ian Watt, in an article titled "Oral Dickens," writes that in *Pickwick*, "the ancient traditions of feasting and comedy have outwitted Victorian sexual taboos" (169). In other words the oral obsession in the novel is a form of carnivalesque free speech which allows Dickens to explore taboo subject matter in a manner acceptable to his large, main stream audience. Barbara Hardy similarly suggests that "the sexual inhibition may well explain the great stress laid on eating and swilling" (*The Moral Art of Dickens* 94). Her rationale for Dickens's adaptation of carnival festivity to the constricted moral climate of the 1830s is particularly insightful: "Dickens can only celebrate the flesh in an inhibited and veiled way; food and drink have to suggest the carnal joviality of comedy" (95).

Even within this inhibited context, however, Dickens is concerned about the potential for alcohol's restorative effects to become excessive and destructive. In the interpolated tale of "The Parish Clerk," the clerk is filled with carnival gaiety, a gaiety relatively unconcerned with celebrating the restoration of an approved social group: "on the night of the wedding he was incarcerated in the village cage, for having, in a state of extreme intoxication, committed sundry excesses in the streets . . ." (317). Pickwick himself witnesses carnivalesque celebration in the Fleet, where the carnival appears to provide comfort to those whose social circumstances have descended to the lowest possible level:

a man in a broad-skirted green coat, with corduroy knee smalls and grey cotton stockings, was performing the most popular steps of a hornpipe, with a slang and burlesque caricature of grace and lightness, which . . . was inexpressibly absurd. Another man, evidently very drunk, who had probably been tumbled into bed by his companions, was sitting up between the sheets, warbling as much as he could recollect of a comic song, with the most intensely sentimental feeling and

expression; while a third, seated on one of the bedsteads was applauding both performers with the air of a profound connoisseur, and encouraging them by such ebullitions of feeling as had already roused Mr. Pickwick from his sleep. (670-71)

The inexpressible absurdity of these figures is clearly meant to amuse, but at the same time there is an element of excess in these "ebullitions of feeling": since this is the type of carnivalesque exuberance that robs a good householder of his sleep, it is the force that Dickens will ultimately separate his hero and his associates from. It seems possible that the Pickwick Club in Dulwich will become as abstemious as their creator.

The emphasis on the lower bodily stratum, and particularly on eating and devouring, is very high in the Eatanswill and Dingley Dell episodes, and once again it points to *Pickwick's* concern with the *proper* administration of the feast.¹⁰ The Pickwickians can adapt to change only in a properly controlled environment, one that includes a feast where their leader can give a sensible retirement speech. Bakhtin's less-restrained account of the Rabelaisian feast contains the "element of victory and triumph . . . inherent in all banquet images" (278-9). In *Pickwick* Jingle is one of the prime movers in this triumph of the feast: "[t]he stranger [Jingle], meanwhile, had been eating, drinking, and talking, without cessation" (164); like Gargantua in Rabelais' *Pantagruel*, Jingle's mouth is perpetually open so he can experience the world by swallowing it. But Jingle's zeal for the carnivalesque feast is excessive, and he is severely reformed. For the larger part of the novel, though, Jingle seems to be constantly leading the Pickwickians to the great carnival banquet:

This way--this way--capital fun--lots of beer--hogsheads, rounds of beef--bullocks; mustard--cart loads; glorious day--down with you--make yourself at home--glad to see you--very.' (162-3)

Jingle urges the Pickwick Club "down" to the "capital fun" of beer, hogsheads, beef--in short to the feast, but the freedom he invites them to proves to be excessive in the end.

Pickwick presents not only Jingle's world of leisure as a carnivalesque banquet, but business itself is portrayed in the same way. It is part of the world that Pickwick is so eager to retire from, partly because its excessive energy, like Jingle's, threatens the stability of Dulwich. Banquet feeding becomes, at times, a metaphor for the capitalist enterprise; the accumulation and consumption of food is a similar process to that of the entrepreneur. When the Wellers contract Solomon Pell to settle the late Mrs. Weller's will, he devours their business in the same way that

¹⁰ Hardy also engages in one of the most sustained and interesting discussions of a carnivalesque obsession in Dickens in her chapter on food in *Great Expectations* (*The Moral Art of Dickens* 139-55).

he swallows their food and drink. So carnivalized is his work that Pell--and his underlings--actually gain weight as a result of this particularly lucrative engagement:

Next week, there were more visits to Doctors' Commons, and there was a visit to the Legacy Duty Office besides, and there were treaties entered into, for the disposal of the lease and business, and ratifications to the same, and inventories to be made out, and lunches to be taken, and dinners to be eaten, and so many profitable things to be done, and such a mass of papers accumulated, that Mr. Solomon Pell, and the boy, and the blue bag to boot, all got so stout that scarcely anybody would have known them for the same man, boy, and bag, that had loitered about Portugal Street, a few days before. (871)

Pell introduces them to a stock broker, Wilkins Flasher, Esquire, who works on the same principles as Pell does. The feast triumphs over other circumstances, even over death, so that when a mutual acquaintance goes bankrupt Flasher's first concern is about missing the bankrupt's dinner parties:

'I'm very sorry he has failed,' said Wilkins Flasher, Esquire. 'Capital dinners he gave.'

'Fine port he had too,' remarked Mr. Simmery. 'We are going to send our butler to the sale tomorrow, to pick up some of that sixty-four.' (876)

Flasher is more than slightly tainted by Dickens's middle class disapproval of *speculation* (his client Mr. Simmery is portrayed as a decadent aristocrat) and he is portrayed as a man of business in a dangerously carnivalesque world. *Pickwick* admires the festive gusto of Flasher and Pell, but hesitates to endorse their way of life; once again, carnival is diluted significantly.

The aggressive aspects of carnivalesque behaviour in *Pickwick* also are treated to a large dilution in order to render them proper and useful in reassuring middle-class anxiety and neutralizing the socioeconomic dominance of the upper classes. "We also see the downward movement in fights, beatings, and blows" (370), notes Bakhtin, and *Pickwick's* downward movement is marked by many thumps and physically aggressive conflicts. Before the peace of Dulwich, the Pickwickians frequently experience the aggressive carnival in the form of what Bakhtin terms "mock wars" and comic beatings (*Rabelais* 251, 268ff); this is a form of "ritual" or "comic play" enacted to unleash aggressive energies against the old order. Just before they are rescued by Jingle at the beginning of their adventures, Pickwick and his crew are attacked by a suspicious cabman:

the cabman dashed his hat upon the ground, with a reckless disregard of his own private property, and knocked Mr. Pickwick's spectacles off, and followed up the attack with a blow on Mr. Pickwick's nose, and another on Mr. Pickwick's chest, and a third in Mr. Snodgrass's eye, and a fourth, by way of variety, in Mr.

Tupman's waistcoat, and then danced into the road, and then back again to the pavement, and finally dashed the whole temporary supply of breath out of Mr. Winkle's body. . . . (75)

The cabman's "reckless disregard of his own private property" signals that a carnivalesque act is about to take place, very likely a dangerously excessive one that has no regard for property--which after all is the most important form of propriety. The anatomical list of the offended parts of Pickwick's body (nose, chest, eye) is characteristic of the carnivalesque beating in Rabelais,¹¹ in which "bloodshed, dismemberment, burning, death, beatings, blows, curses, and abuses--all these elements are steeped in 'merry time,' time which kills and gives birth, which allows nothing old to be perpetuated and never ceases to generate the new and the youthful" (211). The Pickwick Club need to have the stuffing knocked out of them in order for them to join the forces of youth; Pickwick will see the world more clearly with his glasses knocked off.

An essential part of *Pickwick's* aggressive carnival is its series of portraits of shrewish women who persecute men. For example, Dickens expects his readers to find the very notion of an older, rather unattractive spinster like Rachael Wardle having any romantic or sexual feelings inherently laughable; she is pictured as a persecutor rather than as a pathetic victim of Jingle's villainy. Steven Marcus notes the frequency of the woman-as-shrew in *Pickwick*:

throughout its pages men are persecuted by women. Tony is hounded by his wife and all the widows in southern England. Mr. Pickwick is hauled before Nupkins by a hysterical spinster, and is further entangled with the law by the absurd Mrs. Bardell. Mrs. Potts harasses and finally deserts the editor of the *Eatanswill Gazette*, Mrs. Leo Hunter has made her husband her errand-boy, Mrs. Nupkins devotes her life to intimidating her gorgeous windbag of a husband. . . . (40)

Similarly, Michael Slater observes that "virtually all the single women, whether maids or widows, in Dickens's early fiction are presented primarily as husband-hunters of one sort or another" (*Dickens and Women* 231). Slater describes Dickens's shrews as part of a "time-honoured vein of anti-woman comedy" (230).

The "time-honoured vein" of "anti-woman" humour that Slater discusses is very much

¹¹ Bakhtin quotes Rabelais' description of the beating by Friar John of 13,622 men in the abbey close:

He brained some, smashed the legs and arms of others, broke a neck here, cracked a rib there. He flattened a nose or knocked an eye out, crushed a jaw or sent thirty-two teeth rattling down a bloody gullet. Thumping others under the ribs, he mauled their stomachs so severely that they died at once. A whack on the navel and what enemy tripe came spurting forth!" (208)

Nothing in *Pickwick* is this violent, although Tony Weller's beating of Stiggins comes as close as Dickens could have given his professional circumstances.

part of the traditional carnivalesque world of images, where woman is treated ambivalently as both a destroying, debasing force and a positive, life-giving one (*Rabelais* 240-41). For most modern readers, however, sexist humour does not seem to be particularly liberating even in the diminished manner of the Bakhtinian carnival. Wayne Booth discusses this problem in relation to Rabelais' sexist humour. He first cites Bakhtin's defense of Rabelais against the charge of misogyny, where Bakhtin describes the carnival treatment of woman as "that which degrades and regenerates simultaneously" (*Rabelais* 240), and recapitulates Bakhtin's defense of Rabelais:

he [Rabelais] was essentially defensible on the woman question, when we place him in his true tradition, the tradition of the carnivalesque laughter of grotesque realism, the tradition of a true ambivalence about the destructive and energizing powers of the lower body. If we imagine the world that Rabelais imagined, and laugh as he would have us laugh, we are healed. (162)

In the end, however, Booth rejects Bakhtin's defense, on the grounds that: "Rabelais' work is unjust to women not simply in the superficial ways that the traditions have claimed but, to some degree, in its fundamental imaginative act" (166).

Dickens's "fundamental imaginative act" in *Pickwick* is similarly unjust to women. Marcus asserts that "the ideal or idealized world of *Pickwick Papers* is thoroughly masculine" (39). Dickens, for example, never bothers giving readers even the slightest idea of what courtship and marriage mean to a woman instead of to a man. As for the traditional carnival depiction of the woman as both a degrading and a regenerating force, the emphasis in this novel is very much on the negative, destructive aspect of the feminine. Nannies will be more important in Dulwich than nurturing mothers; children appear at the end of the novel as if delivered by storks. Men in *Pickwick* are usually emasculated by the feminine, and the bawdiness of traditional carnival is transformed into something that would never attract a censor's attention.

The only unemasculated male in *Pickwick* who is not punished for his excess is Sam Weller, who also is the main source of relatively uncensored, carnivalesque vernacular in the novel; the famous "wellerism"¹² is a version of what Bakhtin terms "billingsgate," which comprises "curses, oaths, and popular blazons" (*Rabelais* 5ff). Dickens is more concerned with exploiting Wellers' billingsgate-ridden speech as a source of influence and energy than with domesticating him. The link between the life force of renewal and birth, and the death force of destruction, abuse, and uncrowning (Bakhtin 327), is also preserved uniquely in Sam's speech style; for example, he tells Pickwick the following story about a butcher who gets caught in his

¹² See Florence E. Baer interpretive article on the social history of wellerisms. She quotes a *Quarterly Review* article of 1837 identifying wellerisms as belonging to the "'genuine mother-wit and unadulterated vernacular idioms of the lower classes' (174)".

sausage-making machine:

'They're my husband's buttons!' says the widder, beginnin' to faint. [an irate customer has just pointed them out in a sausage from the widow's late husband's shop]

'What!' screams the little old gen'l'm'n, turnin' wery pale.

'I see it all,' says the widder; 'in a fit of temporary insanity he rashly converted himself into sassage!' (510)

This is a brilliantly carnivalesque series of metaphors: the sausage machine kills the butcher and makes food out of his buttons, thus transforming death into life. Only through Weller does *Pickwick* achieve such graphic versions of carnival renewal; but in the end Weller and Pickwick both retire to Dulwich, safely removed from the metaphorical sausage machine of 1830s England.

While Dickens displays a beautifully tuned ear for vernacular speech, he clearly censors the full range of scatology and insults directed against authorities and the deity that mark the carnival (see *Rabelais* 16). A contemporary of Dickens, Mary Russell Mitford, described *Pickwick's* unique combination of graphic presentation and perfect inoffensiveness:

It is fun--London life--but without any thing unpleasant: a lady might read it all *aloud*; and it is so graphic, so individual, and so true, that you could courtesy [sic] to all the people as you met them in the streets. (*Pickwick*, "Introduction" 17)

When the Pickwickians first meet Jingle, he makes the kind of "graphic" impression that Mitford alludes to, without saying anything explicitly offensive. His speech is a bit like the muttered curses of the villains in a movie intended for children:

'Never mind . . . said enough,--no more; smart chap that cabman--handled his fives well; but if I'd been your friend in the green jemmy--damn me--punch his head,--'cod I would, 'pig's whisper--pieman too,--no gammon.' (78)

Euphemisms in this context abound. They are especially prevalent in the interpolated tales, which contain the writing that is most artificial and out of touch with any realistic setting. In "The Convict's Return," for example, the monstrous father of the convict utters "a dreadful oath" just before his death (154). In the story of the bagman's uncle, the oaths are from the popular theatre rather than off the street:

'Death and lightning!' exclaimed the young gentleman, laying his hand upon his sword as my uncle entered the coach.

'Blood and thunder!' roared the other gentleman. (784)

The narrator also paraphrases carnivalesque speech in an ironic, superior tone; this

technique allows Dickens to be euphemistic while appearing to be merely humorous.¹³ For example, when Pickwick is taken to his place in the Fleet by Mr. Roker, and comments "my friend . . . you don't really mean to say that human beings live down in those wretched dungeons?" Mr. Roker "muttered in an excited fashion certain unpleasant invocations concerning his own eyes, limbs, and circulating fluids . . ." (663-4). Again we have a brilliant nineteenth-century mimesis of the colloquial that manages to be simultaneously graphically carnivalesque and inoffensive. Free carnivalesque speech is assimilable in *Pickwick*, as long as it is not *too* free.

Pickwick presents us, then, with the spectacle of a carnival reformed--perhaps deformed--into respectability, with Pickwick and company in their pleasant chains in Dulwich. The novel is obsessed with curing excess, advocating the idea that the road of middle-class prudence leads to the palace of suburbia. The very real domestic and social violence in *Pickwick* is repressed and subordinated structurally by being included in the interpolated tales; it is also easily dismissed because of the clumsy, melodramatic nature of the tales.¹⁴ The violent thrashings and oaths that occur in the tales are a kind of humourless carnivalesque, unlike what Bakhtin notes in Rabelais, where the "ambivalent" nature of the beatings means they are done "for laughter's sake" (208). On the one hand there is a didactic implication for Dickens's original readers in these thrashings, providing an object lesson in how societies and families should *not* behave. On the other hand Dickens rejects an important part of the carnival by removing the ambivalence from these carnival elements, and by isolating them in tales that frighten Pickwick so badly he keeps trying to sleep off their effects. Dickens attempts to show Pickwick being educated into wakefulness, but ends by placing Pickwick in Dulwich, the ideal neighbourhood for a long nap.

Pickwick recognizes the incompatibility between the realities reflected in the interpolated tales and its idealized notions of social and family life. The recognition of this incompatibility is evident in the novel's rigid compartmentalizing of the real and the ideal, the brutal violence of the interpolated tales, and the idealized society of Dulwich. *Nickleby* includes a comical lunatic, the mad neighbour of the Nickleby family; this character is treated in the full light of carnivalesque

¹³ Garrett Stewart has also noted how Dickens uses euphemisms to avoid offending his audience, while simultaneously mocking "the Victorian syndrome of delicate and evasive diction" (9).

¹⁴ Steven Marcus has commented on the interpolated tales as a kind of return of the repressed in *Pickwick*:

there are pockets of darkness . . . in the novel, the most remarkable of them the apparently conventional tales which Dickens interpolates in the progress of Pickwick's travels. Here, with a wild and naked intensity that often sputters into inarticulateness, something that Dickens conceals or withholds throughout the body of the novel makes its appearance. (41)

realism. In *Pickwick* the murderous madman of one of the tales has to be kept out of the main narrative; "I mix up realities with my dreams" (224), he says about his own pathology. Breaking down the boundaries, carnival-fashion, between ideal domesticity and family violence makes the madman so dangerous to the novel's social vision that he must be locked up. The danger of carnival madness is an insupportable one in *Pickwick*, and so its unsettling force is confined to the periphery of the narrative.

Pickwick is quite systematic about curing its characters of carnival excess: Sawyer and Allen become temperate after fourteen supposedly purgative bouts of yellow fever (897), Tupman takes "lodgings at Richmond" permanently and "never propose[s] again" (897), Mrs. Bardell makes "great profit" as a landlady "but never brought any more actions for breach of promise of marriage" (897). Finally, Winkle leaves his ludicrous sporting days with the Pickwick Club, and

being engaged in the City as agent or town correspondent of his father, exchanged his old costume for the ordinary dress of Englishmen, and presented all the external appearance of a civilised Christian ever afterwards. (896)

"The external appearance" is the crucial phrase here; Winkle's carnivalesque side is now thoroughly repressed and he appears in "the ordinary dress of Englishmen," ready to carry on his father's business--the serious business of the middle-class English gentleman.

Pickwick himself expresses his willingness to put on chains that are, after all, gilded. The "novelty" of the carnivalesque world has entertained and even educated him and the readers of *Pickwick*, but Dulwich, "one of the most pleasant spots near London," will be a restrained, polite, thoroughly suburbanized world which only dimly echoes the exuberant life of carnival that has flickered on and off throughout the novel. Pickwick's last speech is on a muted, elegiac note which shows him appropriately chastised by his experience but still exuding a sentimental carnival benevolence:

With these words, Mr. Pickwick filled and drained a bumper with a trembling hand, and his eyes moistened as his friends rose with one accord, and pledged him from their hearts. (893)

Pickwick is still draining bumpers, but other than that, there is very little carnival left in his neighbourhood; he has solved the problem of carnival by simply rejecting it.

Weller becomes the touchstone for *Pickwick's* attempt to balance excess and restraint. Weller manages to balance his own carnivalesque excess, his verbal carnival, his knowledge of the world, and his dangerous sexuality, with a fitting sense of prudence and a keen understanding of his rise in the world. Sam's account of his carnivalesque rise up the social ladder is especially revealing:

"When I was first pitched neck and crop into the world, to play at leap-frog with

its troubles,' replied Sam. 'I was a carrier's boy at startin': then a vagginer's, then a helper, then a boots. Now I'm a gen'l'm'n's servant. I shall be a gen'l'm'n myself one of these days, perhaps with a pipe in my mouth, and a summer-house in the back garden. Who knows? *I shouldn't be surprised, for one.*' (290)

Sam will not be surprised because he understands the remarkable new fact of social mobility; but he also understands the limits of that mobility, just as he understands, throughout the novel, the limits of various forms of carnival excess.

Sam's father Tony Weller is the voice of a less adulterated and prudent carnival; he leaves his late wife's money in Pickwick's trust because "No man knows how much he can spend, till he tries" (883). He has been reformed, but he is not blessed with Sam's wisdom. In this Tony is similar to Jingle, who is described as "without one spark of his old animation" when he reappears, much chastened, in the Fleet (735); Jingle and Trotter are ready to make good for their previous amusing but grievous sins. Perker pronounces their reform complete, saying "They are unquestionably penitent now" (843).

Pickwick's suburbanite Elysium looks forward to the superficial world of the Podsnaps and Veneerings in *Our Mutual Friend*, which entirely abandons sympathy for the no-longer-new middle-class. Carnival in *Pickwick* proves to be a force that is ultimately too volatile to usher in the kind of limited change that the novel envisions. *Nicholas Nickleby* will go further in this regard, although it too will impose a conservative, middle-class balance at the expense of carnival excess.

Chapter III

Making a Success of Carnival in *Nicholas Nickleby*

In *Nicholas Nickleby* the renewing effect of carnival comes, for a limited group in a large cast of characters, through the temporary experience of a carnivalized social world. Renewal, for the characters who are successful, involves the eventual rejection of the carnival world, a transcendence of what the novel depicts as the world's savage aggression. Myron Magnet argues that

Far from being Adam Smith's reasonable creatures governed by rational self-interest, men as Dickens sees them [specifically in *Nickleby*] are beset by dark, extravagantly irrational, inborn impulses, which often lead them to imprudent, antisocial, or self-destructive actions. (33)

Carnival allows the acknowledgement of "inborn" aggressive impulses, and at the same time it provides an outlet for that aggression by functioning as an authorized transgression against an old and decaying aristocratic value system. Those characters who cannot transcend the "extravagantly irrational" aspects of carnival are generally those who do not share the middle-class values embodied in the novel's hero.

Dickens's *good* characters in *Nickleby* are those who successfully accommodate the social change that threatens to overwhelm them. They do this by domesticating their own carnival tendencies in ways that allow them properly to fulfil middle-class roles. *Nickleby* very specifically demonstrates the ways in which characters who deny the temporary nature of carnival, and thus fail to domesticate it, become unbalanced and excessive. The *balanced* carnival is rooted in one of Bakhtin's most significant metaphors, which compares carnival to theatre: "Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance" (*Rabelais* 7); in other words, during carnival actors and spectators become united, and the fourth wall of the theatre--the one between actor and spectator--is broken: "While carnival lasts," writes Bakhtin, "there is no other life outside it" (7). Bakhtin's emphasis is on the temporary nature of carnival; the carnival is an authorized transgression exactly because the authorities know that after the festivities, the footlights will be back in place. The danger of denying carnival's temporary nature for characters in *Nickleby* is that they become rigid automatons and self-destructive caricatures of themselves, the "extravagantly irrational" creatures described by Magnet in the passage above. The denial of carnival's temporary nature usually results from characters attempting to remove permanently the footlights from the stage of their lives, as if their experience of carnival could be never-ending. This leads to a fatal lack of balance

for characters who appear to draw no distinction between their often stereotyped, public role, and their private selves: Ralph Nickleby, Squeers, and Mantalini all provide good examples of this tendency. Successful characters like Nicholas reinstate the footlights at some point in the drama of their lives; they draw a distinction between private and public roles that is absolutely essential to a middle-class version of social order. In Nicholas's case his public life as an actor is rejected and is thus made absolutely distinct from the private melodrama he eventually enacts in triumphing over Ralph and restoring his family's status by marrying Madeline Bray.

The problem in *Nickleby* is essentially one of finding a way to *Victorianise* the carnival, of finding a way to balance change and the building of a new, middle-class social order by neutralizing the destructive aggression attendant on the whole process. Characters like Ralph Nickleby and Mantalini show signs of carnivalesque vitality, but they fail to Victorianise the carnival sufficiently because they fail to achieve a balance between excess and restraint; both Ralph and Mantalini long for a permanent state of carnival where they can continue to take advantage of their positions indefinitely. Mantalini fails to dilute his carnivalesque vitality with a proper admixture of prudence and the work ethic. Ralph Nickleby, however, is the extreme opposite of Mantalini in this regard: he is extremely prudent and hard-working, but he fails to leaven these middle class virtues with the proper carnival seasoning. Ralph's only appetite is for money. As Newman Noggs points out:

'I don't believe he ever had an appetite,' said Newman, 'except for pounds, shillings, and pence, and with them he's as greedy as a wolf. I should like to have him compelled to swallow one of every English coin. The penny would be an awkward morsel--but the crown--ha! ha!' (702)

Ralph fulfils the miser's stereotype completely, participating too completely--as if carnival were permanent--in his zeal for the role; in Noggs's excremental vision Ralph's only appetite is for a very debased crown. Ralph's unnatural appetite is perverted precisely because, unlike Noggs's drinking, it is not an agreeable carnival weakness. Ralph does not participate in carnival's renewing energy because he desires its permanence only in order to take advantage of those like Mantalini, who cannot restrain their enjoyment of and participation in carnival. Both Ralph and Mantalini's aggression is finally turned back on themselves. Ralph's fate is self-destruction and Mantalini's is being abused by a laundress who rescues him from debtors' prison.

Nickleby's solution to the problem of balancing carnival aggression is to stress the temporary nature of carnival by--metaphorically speaking--putting the footlights of the carnival theatre back in place. The result is a kind of stasis, a cessation of the social change experienced by the novel's protagonists, the ascendancy of middle-class values, as represented by the ultimate triumph of family groups (including the Grogzwegs and the Five Sisters of the interpolated tales, and the Nicklebys), and the triumph of circles of fellowship most notably represented by the

Cheeryble circle (which includes the Nickleby family). *Nickleby* moves, in my reading, toward a static social world, very much like the one described by Thomas M. Leitch in his article "Closure and Teleology in Dickens":

The endings of Dickens's novels are characteristically marked by a passage . . . to an apocalyptic sense [of time] which confirms the final order of society by arresting its development. (143)¹

The arrested development of carnival is *Nickleby's* final solution to the problem of balancing carnival aggression.

Dickens's use of the carnival aptly fits Bakhtin's description of the post-Renaissance carnival as one which suffered from "the specific limitations of the bourgeois world outlook" (*Rabelais* 52). *Nickleby* is deeply ambivalent about the carnival of social change, especially as it is manifested in the crossing of class boundaries. *Nickleby's* eagerness to flush the Crummles troupe from the novel demonstrates the profound unease with which this novel treats the carnival. *Nickleby* seems intent on asserting the barriers between audience and performer, on maintaining the footlights; it tears down old barriers only to erect new ones. *Nickleby* attempts to exercise reformist impulses, that is, impulses for change, most notably in the treatment of Dotheboys Hall, but at the same time the novel moves, as does *Pickwick*, inexorably towards a static and idealized social world, towards an *exorcism* of the need for reform. Like Bakhtin, the novel has trouble distinguishing between societies and texts; where Bakhtin idealizes "the folk" and "the

¹ *Nickleby*, for example, ends with Nicholas having a kind of dream of order, where a "longing after home" substitutes itself for his zeal for retributive justice, and where thoughts of Madeline crowd out "the story of the bold Baron of Grogzwig;" here time is stopped and the social reality of the novel is dismissed as "fancy":

passing through Stamford and Grantham, and by the little alehouse where . . . [Nicholas] had heard the story of the bold Baron of Grogzwig, everything looked as if he had seen it but yesterday, and not even a flake of the white crust upon the roofs had melted away. Encouraging the train of ideas which flocked upon him, he could almost persuade himself that he sat again outside the coach, with Squeers and the boys, that he heard their voices in the air, and that he felt again, but with a mingled sensation of pain and pleasure now, that old sinking of the heart and longing after home. While he was yet yielding himself up to these fancies he fell asleep, and, dreaming of Madeline, forgot them. (923)

The above passage represents perhaps a softer apocalypse than what Leitch describes. *Pickwick* ends with the same kind of soft landing and arrested forward motion, with Pickwick's answer to Sam:

'My good fellow,' replied Mr. Pickwick, 'the recent changes among my friends will alter my mode of life in future, entirely; besides, I am growing older, and want repose and quiet. My rambles, Sam, are over.' (886)

people" and consequently distorts his conception of carnival into a purely literary one,² *Nickleby* idealizes middle-class aspirations and downplays its own reformist impulses.

The novel goes out of its way, in its opening pages, to establish the voices of the middle-class professions as significant sources of moral judgement; this is the new bourgeois society, revolving around the middle-class family, for which Dickens's Victorian carnival will expend its energy in preparing the way. The context is Nicholas's father's collapse, from which his neighbours urge him to recover:

'Such things happen every day,' remarked the lawyer.

'And it is very sinful to rebel against them,' whispered the clergyman.

'And what no man with a family ought to do,' added the neighbours. (63)

This polyphony of the new establishment is presented in a somewhat wry fashion, but it sets the tone for much of *Nickleby's* moral ground, where the maintenance of the family or a limited social circle is upheld as the ideal. Indeed, anything beyond such a limited circle or community appears to be out of reach of *Nickleby's* vision, as Magnet comments:

The largest social unit Dickens can see in *Nickleby*--when he can see any unit larger than the individual--is a 'little world,' like the 'little world of the theatre' or the 'little kingdom' of Madame Mantalini's workshop. (32)

This limited, static social world is the destination of the novel, which envisions only these "little worlds" as capable of meliorating the violence and aggression of a permanent carnival.³

The interpolated tales or travellers' stories near the beginning of *Nickleby* function as paradigms for the artistic pattern of the novel as a whole,⁴ and for Dickens's use of the carnival to advance his vision of a restricted "little kingdom" within a middle-class context. The artistic

² Bakhtin frequently introduces a very idealized notion of the "folk" or the "people"; for example:

Rabelais did not implicitly believe in what his time 'said and imagined about itself'; he strove to disclose its true meaning for the people, the people who grow and are immortal. (*Rabelais* 439)

³ Northrop Frye also makes note of "the only social unit that Dickens really regards as genuine, the family . . ." (63).

⁴ Gary H. Day's article "The Relevance of the *Nickleby* Stories" comes to a similar conclusion to mine:

At a very general level both tales, *The Five Sisters of York* and *The Baron of Grogzwig*, reproduce the pattern of the main narrative. An initial state of harmony is disrupted but is eventually restored in a modified form. (54)

Without using Bakhtin or Bakhtinian terminology, he also makes note of *The Baron of Grogzwig* and the main narrative sharing "a certain grotesque vision" as well as "a common view of laughter" (54).

pattern involves a limitation on the free social play of the carnival; *Nickleby* diminishes the temporary anarchy of the carnival so that the ideals of family and tradition can be kept in their proper places.

The most typically carnivalesque of the two tales is "The Baron of Grogzwick" (129ff); its conclusion, though, points to a domesticated carnival, one that perfectly accommodates the middle-class family. The tale begins with a recounting of the Baron's hedonistic, pre-nuptial life:

This was a merry life for the Baron of Grogzwick, and a merrier still for the baron's retainers, who drank Rhine wine every night till they fell under the table, and then had the bottles on the floor, and called for pipes. Never were such jolly, roystering, rollicking, merrymaking blades, as the jovial crew of Grogzwick. (131)

In all, this is probably the most uninhibited account of carnival in the entire book. The names are obvious puns associated with excessive drinking: von Koeldwewithout, Grogzwick, Swillenhausen.

The excessiveness here does not bring this version of carnival anywhere near a Renaissance level; the traditional association of carnival drinking with fertility and other bodily functions is entirely censored from Dickens's text. There is, however, a great deal of the casual, even cheerful violence which distinguishes carnival, and which can and does include even the murder of a guest (cf. *Rabelais* 208, 269): "I believe that one of the baron's ancestors, being short of money, had inserted a dagger in a gentleman who called one night to ask his way" (130), notes the breezily anonymous narrator. The baron's remedy for boredom partakes of the same casually violent spirit: "The baron grew weary, and. . . took to quarrelling with his gentlemen, and tried kicking two or three of them every day after dinner" (131).

The story of "The Baron of Grogzwick," then, begins in a general atmosphere of freedom and gaiety that is unfettered by the constraints of the domestic sphere. It is significant that with the Baron's marriage and with the intrusion of the female into this masculine paradise, depression and thoughts of suicide quickly follow:

[The Baron] had no feasting, no revelry, no hunting train, and no hunting--nothing in short that he liked, or used to have . . . he was decidedly snubbed and put down by his own lady, in his own castle of Grogzwick.

. . . .

The poor baron bore it all as long as he could, and when he could bear it no longer lost his appetite and his spirits, and sat himself gloomily and dejectedly down. . . . Times changed. He got into debt. . . .

'I don't see what is to be done,' said the baron. 'I think I'll kill myself.' (133-34)

The Dickensian carnival in both *Nickleby* and *Pickwick* imagines woman as profoundly negative, and at the same time as the locus of the highest ideals; in the case of the baron, woman is the

reality principle, reining in his rebellious carnivalesque pleasure principle. The baron's life after marriage is one that lacks his former carnivalesque pleasures, but also one that enshrines domestic ideals. Like the characters in *Nickleby*--and ultimately its readers--the baron needs to learn that carnival forces must be repressed after their temporary release, and that the energies of carnival must eventually be subsumed to the ideals of domestic life.

However, it is not merely the transcendence of carnivalesque pleasures that allows the baron to adapt to his new circumstances; instead, it is a sense of renewal that proceeds from his enjoyment of precisely those carnivalesque pleasures. The baron resolves to end it all, but first declares, "I'll smoke a last pipe" (135). As well, he is distracted from cutting his throat by the squawls of his children; thus the baron is attached to his life not only by carnivalesque pleasures such as smoking, drinking, and hunting, but also by the lustiness of his progeny. To encourage him to leave these pleasures, then, he is joined by a grotesque figure, the "Genius of Despair and Suicide" (136):

He [the baron] thought about a great many things--about his present troubles and past days of bachelorship, and about the Lincoln greens long since dispersed up and down the country no one knew whither, with the exception of two who had been unfortunately beheaded, and four who had killed themselves with drinking. His mind was running upon bears and boars, when in the process of draining his glass to the bottom he raised his eyes, and saw for the first time and with unbounded astonishment, that he was not alone. (135)

The Genius inadvertently makes the baron laugh, and this dredges up his long-dead optimism. It is important here that the baron immediately resolves to resurrect those of his carnivalesque habits which are not disruptive to family life in a conclusion that parallels the endings of both *Nickleby* and *Pickwick*:

Having once made up his mind to action, he soon brought the baroness and the Von Swillenhousens to reason, and died many years afterwards, not a rich man that I am aware of, but certainly a happy one: leaving behind him a numerous family, who had been carefully educated in bear and boar-hunting under his own personal eye. And my advice to all men is, that if ever they become hipped and melancholy from similar causes (as very many men do), they look at both sides of the question, applying a magnifying glass to the best one; and if they still feel tempted to retire without leave, that they smoke a large pipe and drink a full bottle first, and profit by the laudable example of the Baron of Grogzwig. (139)

The baron's family is "carefully educated" in a carnivalesque manner: bear and boar-hunting and the carnivalesque feast are the best remedies for the depression and anxiety that sometimes accompany social change. (One should add that the final statement in the above passage is

emphatically not an endorsement for the unrestrained use of tobacco and alcohol products. Instead, it suggests that a properly domesticated version of carnival--one that provides an education in its proper use--can help ease the transition into a new way of life for those like the baron, whose lives have changed almost beyond recognition.)

The tale of Baron Grogzwig, although the most obvious, is not the only tale to possess a broader thematic relevance. The tale of the "Five Sisters" illustrates *Nickleby's* ideal of a community bound by a common tradition and socialization. While Grogzwig rejects carnivalesque excess, "The Five Sisters" rejects ascetic excess. Again, an ideal of balance is advanced. Alice, the heroine of this tale, very clearly rejects the asceticism of the convent: "Dear sisters, let us live and die, if you list, in this green garden's compass; only shun the gloom and sadness of a cloister and we shall be happy" (124). The narrator notes that "nature will smile though priests may frown. . ." (125), emphasizing the tale's refusal to reject what the priests see as a fallen, thoroughly carnivalized world. The monk's ascetic argument is clearly opposed to Victorian middle-class values:

'How much better,' he said at length, 'to shun all such thoughts and chances and in the peaceful shelter of the church devote your lives to Heaven? Infancy, childhood, the prime of life, and old age, wither as rapidly as they crowd upon each other. . . . The veil, daughters, the veil!' (123)

While there is nothing explicitly carnivalesque in the sisters' refusal to adopt the veil, the theme is very much in the carnival tradition: the sisters upset--and by implication uncrown--the official hierarchy of the church by refusing to participate in it on any terms but their own.

Within the context of the tale, the assertion of community in the five sisters' stand against churchly authority is offered as a contrast to the uncontrolled aggression and social chaos of the fifteenth century; again the stress is laid on a balance between restraint and excess. Myron Magnet observes that

this historical moment [the early 1400s] is crucial to the story's point, for the Wars of the Roses and these incessant rebellions leading up to them are, along with the civil wars of the seventeenth century, the only notable instances in English history when the social fabric was dramatically unravelling. (40)

What Magnet fails to recognize here is that the social fabric was unravelling in the England of the 1830s too, even if civil war did not break out. The tale's response to social chaos by withdrawal to a small community is a clear parallel to the larger pattern of the novel. As Magnet observes:

The world is indeed filled with aggression; but instead of responding with scorn, the sisters untiringly create counterprinciples to violence, loss, and death, chief among which is the community they have steadfastly forged.

....

Essential to their sustaining communal life are art and memory, virtually modes of each other in this story. Their embroidery . . . is an agency of association, binding them together with links of affection and connecting their present with their past lives. . . . For the sisters, time has been socialized and transformed into history. (41)

Even though the sisters' "socialized" time may not appear to be part of the carnival world, it does fit Bakhtin's description of "the utopian realm" of carnival, which, he writes, was "the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance" (9). The utopian community is offered in this tale as a concrete alternative to the sterile asceticism of the church.

The stress on a balanced version of carnival--one that allows for a particular kind of social adaptation--is especially clear in *Nickleby's* treatment of the life of pleasure. The Baron of Grogzwig provides the model here, demonstrating the proper use of the festive elements of carnival. The baron confirms that the life of pleasure need not be inconsistent with communal values: he is, after all, a family man who balances his responsibilities with a hearty enjoyment of his old bachelor pleasures. An indulgence in drink or tobacco, as long it is conducted in a generous spirit, is perfectly acceptable; Barbara Hardy suggests a similar line of thinking with regard to *Great Expectations* in a seminal essay in *The Moral Art of Dickens* (139-55). *Nickleby's* carnival is much more pointedly moralistic than the Renaissance one in identifying selfish indulgence in carnival pleasure as morally unacceptable. Frequently, therefore, behaviour related to the consumption of food and drink functions as an indicator of the moral qualities of the various characters. Squeers, who starves his young students at Dotheboys Hall both physically and spiritually, is one of the best illustrations of this point:

'Conquer your passions, boys, and don't be eager after vittles.' As he uttered this moral precept, Mr Squeers took a large bite out of the cold beef, and recognised Nicholas. (106)

Squeers's sadism is exactly encapsulated by his hypocrisy and greed; the boys *should* be "eager after vittles," and Squeers's "precept" is utterly immoral. Even though his mouth is as wide open as Gargantua's, he lacks the true carnival spirit: there is no generosity or sense of community in him to balance his very healthy appetite. Squeers and his wife form a parody of a Victorian family, and they employ the symbolism of the feast in perfect concert:

Mr Squeers treated himself to a stiff tumbler of brandy and water, made on the liberal half-and-half principle, allowing for the dissolution of the sugar; and his amiable helpmate mixed Nicholas the ghost of a small glassful of the same compound. (146)

The Squeers family's liberality extends only to itself; even the name *Squeers* seems to imply a

squeeze, a desire to reduce the guest's portion to a ghostly amount. The Squeers's sadism and their lack of generosity, which continues in a much more exaggerated vein with the children at Dotheboys Hall, are indications to the reader of their moral poverty.

Nickleby judges characters like the miser Arthur Gride even more harshly than Squeers, because his carnivalesque appetites (primarily his lust for money and his lust for Madeline Bray) are not agreeable weaknesses by any means; they cannot redeem him and bring him into the utopian community of carnival. Unlike Ralph Nickleby, Gride concentrates his desire not only on the acquisition of money, but also on the acquisition of Madeline, and this more outwardly-directed sublimation leads finally, with the novel's strange sense of justice, to his being murdered by thieves; Ralph's obsession with money results in literal self-destruction. Gride's lack of carnival spirit is manifested in his reluctance to share his liquor, an act which, as noted previously, carries with it certain moral implications: when Newman insists on a drink at Gride's house Gride slowly fills Noggs's glass "with a deep sigh," "though not to the brim--and then filled his own" (771). Newman Noggs, in contrast with Gride and Squeers, has a claim on gentility, both moral and social. Noggs alludes to his history as a gentleman--that is, his social gentility--in a note to Nicholas, where he offers to extend what credit he has left so Nicholas can buy ale at Barnard Castle: "You may say MR Noggs there [at Barnard Castle], for I was a gentleman then. I was indeed" (148). Noggs demonstrates his moral gentility in the alacrity with which he comes to the aid of Nicholas and Smike after their escape from Dotheboys; appropriately, his aid is in the form of a carnivalesque gift:

Newman's first act was to compel Nicholas, with gentle force, to swallow half of the punch at a breath, nearly boiling as it was, and his next to pour the remainder down the throat of Smike, who, never having tasted anything stronger than aperient medicine in his whole life, exhibited various odd manifestations of surprise and delight, during the passage of the liquor down his throat, and turned up his eyes most emphatically when it was all gone. (239-40)

Noggs's generosity is part of what identifies him as a gentleman; it also links him with the larger community. Noggs's excessive appetite for alcohol is balanced by his generosity.

Nickleby does not succeed in entirely repressing carnival excess for its didactic ends; the novel is not simplistically or schematically moralistic about its handling of festive elements of the carnival. Sir Mulberry Hawk's two sidekicks Pyke and Pluck, for example, are described as "these two gentlemen eating of every dish, and drinking of every bottle, with a capacity and perseverance truly astonishing" (309). Although they participate in Hawk's sadistic pursuit of Kate Nickleby, their "capacity and perseverance" are sources of comic admiration. It is as if the novel *wants* to disapprove of these characters, but cannot really frown on such carnivalesque vitality. The actress Miss Petowker, who is morally questionable because she deserts her

husband, is also a source of carnival vitality: "Miss Petowker [was] blushing very much when anybody was looking, and eating very much when anybody was *not* looking. . ." (403); this is certainly not the way Madeline Bray would act.

The gentle Yorkshire giant, John Browdie, like Noggs, is an eccentric figure who is promoted by Dickens to the emerging moral centre of the novel. Browdie makes a carnivalesque moral gesture at a breakfast, "vigorously attacking the pie" and offering to share his meal with Squeers (591); he balances his huge carnival appetite and strength with a commitment to the community forming around Nicholas. Browdie's approval of Nicholas's assault on Squeers, and his bold rescue of Smike from Squeers's clutches establish him as an active agent in the uncrowning of the old order. His vivid, vernacular speech has a marked carnival energy in it, as when he congratulates Nicholas on beating Squeers: "'Giv' us thee hond agean, yoongster. Beatten a schoolmeaster! Dang it, I loove thee for't'" (225). Browdie also clearly understands his place in the new middle-class community; he does not presume to do more than flirt with crossing class boundaries, and does not take kindly to Nicholas flirting with his fiance before their marriage.

The Cheerybles are *Nickleby's* bankers in their investment in the regeneration of the Nickleby family; they provide essential help in uncovering the truth about Ralph Nickleby's past, and thus uncrowning the old order, and also they are the catalysts and chief banquet-organizers for the founding of the next generation of Nicklebys and Cheerybles. Even more central than Browdie, the Cheerybles function as the exemplars of Dickens's moral ideal in *Nickleby*, and part of this function is to enforce the carnival spirit, even though they themselves seem to have transcended carnival, as I will later demonstrate. For example, the Cheerybles urge drink on a coachman so strongly that they "all but choked him with a glass of spirits of uncommon strength. . ." (564). The Cheerybles are also responsible for making possible the most carnivalesque feast of the entire novel, where three pairs of lovers are united at a banquet; "never was such a dinner as that since the world began" (917), says the narrator, surely describing what Bakhtin calls "the great utopia of the banquet" or "the feast for all the world" (*Rabelais* 185). Interestingly, though, *this* feast is private and certainly not open to "all the world." It unites only a small group, rather than renewing or uniting the larger society of the novel.

The seriocomic passages concerned with child abuse at Dotheboys Hall are one of the strongest instances in *Nickleby* of carnivalesque themes and imagery seeming to overwhelm a didactic or reformist intention; here the novel attempts to stress a balanced version of carnival in its treatment of the aggressive aspects of carnival, much as it does with the life of pleasure. Again, the Baron of Grogzwig supplies a model, illustrating the proper use and even proper sublimation of the violent and aggressive aspects of carnival. The baron demonstrates that carnival pleasures, including aggressive and violent ones such as hunting boar, are compatible

with the proprieties of the domestic sphere. For Nicholas, it turns out that hunting and punishing school masters is highly compatible with a domesticated and thoroughly suburban carnival.

The baron, however, does not provide a neatly applicable model for interpreting the Dotheboys episodes; the reader is never invited to enjoy the comedy of seeing a Grogzwig infant beaten. The violence and aggression which is most problematic in *Nickleby*, then, is the brutalization of children at Dotheboys Hall by the Squeers family. What makes these pathetic victims unsettling for the reader is the ambivalence in the novel's treatment of them: on the one hand we are invited to laugh, and on the other to sympathize deeply with their plight. The most notable scene of this type occurs in chapter eight, which begins with a comical but affecting introduction, by Squeers, to the carnivalesque business of sadistically thrashing boys whose parents do not pay their bills:

'Boys, I've been to London, and have returned to my family and you, as strong and well as ever.'

According to half-yearly custom, the boys gave three feeble cheers at this refreshing intelligence. Such cheers! Sighs of extra strength with the chill on.

....

'I have had disappointments to contend against,' said Squeers, looking very grim, 'Bolder's father was two pound ten short. Where is Bolder?'

....

'Bolder,' said Squeers, tucking up wristbands and moistening the palm of his right hand to get a good grip of the cane, 'you're an incorrigible young scoundrel, and as the last thrashing did you no good, we must see what another will do towards beating it out of you.'

With this, and wholly disregarding a piteous cry for mercy, Mr Squeers fell upon the boy and caned him soundly: not leaving off indeed, until his arm was tired out. (157-8)

This passage partakes--in a peculiarly uncomfortable way to a modern reader I think--in the carnivalesque tradition of thrashings and beatings. Again, the traditional carnival violence involved in these thrashings is casual and even cheerful, and can even include, as I noted earlier, the murder of a guest (*Rabelais* 208, 269). While there are no murders for readers to witness in Dotheboys, there is much casual brutality. The humour of the passage comes largely from the semi-jocular tone of the narrator's phrase "refreshing intelligence". The reader's sympathy for Bolder is not entirely unmingled with amusement because of this jocular tone and because of Squeers's ludicrous diction ("incorrigible young scoundrel") and even his sadism, limited as it is by his becoming "tired out". The same chapter from which the above passage comes begins with a moving description of the children at Dotheboys, but concludes on this ambivalent note: "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" (152). The reader is asked both to identify with Nicholas's outrage at Squeers's barbarism, *and* to embrace a disinterested, objective appreciation of the carnivalesque humour of this same Squeersian barbarism.

Carol A. Bock, in her article "Violence and the Fictional Modes of *Nicholas Nickleby*" also identifies "the young author's ambivalent attitude toward his subject matter" (88), but she attributes this primarily to Dickens's immaturity at an early stage in his career:

these varying perspectives on violence make *Nicholas Nickleby* a formally complex novel; thematic inconsistency is mirrored by shifts between fictional modes--from sentimentalism to realism, from melodrama to irony--as the apprentice novelist attempts to create a new mode suited to his particular genius and to his vision of reality. (88)

My suggestion is that while *Nickleby* is obviously flawed from a technical point of view, the novel is not at all inconsistent in its attitude toward violence; instead, the ambivalent carnivalesque elements work to advance rather than overwhelm reformist intentions. James Kincaid points in a more fruitful direction than Bock's when he suggests a thematic significance in the "contradictory" emotional responses readers have to the treatment of violence in Dickens:

Dickens often asks us to laugh at the very subjects he is, in other parts of the novel, asking us to sympathize or be angry with: death, loneliness, improvidence, rigidity, spontaneity, cruelty. . . . [He] confronts us . . . with these contradictory lures and, time and again, uses our alternate responses to intensify our relationship to his principal appeals. (7)

This begs the question, though, of what the principal appeal of a novel such as *Nickleby* (which Kincaid does not discuss) really is. *Nickleby's* "principal appeal" in the context of the Dotheboys episodes may not be easily identified: to some extent it encourages what Bakhtin discusses as "laughter [that] liberates from fear" (*Rabelais* 94).⁵ Carnavalesque laughter is liberating because it is even capable of making fun of the horrible suffering inflicted by the old order, such as Squeers's beating of his charges. What may first appear as moral ambivalence about child abuse in *Nickleby*, examined in the light of the Bakhtinian carnival, turns out to be carnivalesque ambivalent laughter that liberates the oppressed and uncrowns the oppressor. *Nickleby* invites its readers to laugh at an institution associated with the old, upper class order, one that is passing away. Many of the inmates of Dotheboys Hall are the bastard sons of sexually decadent aristocrats; one of the thematic implications of *Nickleby* is that the new middle-class

⁵ See Appendix C for a discussion of critical responses to the question of *Nickleby's* "principal appeal" or theme.

order will take better care of its young than the brutal upper classes, who waste no sentiment on their offspring. Those members of the middle-class who, like the Baron of Grogzwig and Nicholas, are able to tame their carnival excesses, are also much more likely to make good parents than characters like Ralph, whose barbarism towards Smike qualifies him for honorary membership in the aristocracy.

Throughout *Nickleby* it is clear that the upper classes, as representatives of the old order, are unable to balance excess and restraint, and thus to be liberated by carnival into a new, middle-class-dominated order; the uncrowning of these representatives of the upper classes is bound to be as violent as their own careers. Sir Mulberry Hawk is one of those characters whose unrestrained violence and corruption signify the decadence of the old order, an order whose only response to change is uncontrolled participation in carnival excess; witness his obsessive drinking, gaming, and verbal abuse. The threats against Nicholas that Hawk utters to Ralph are impressively vivid, in spite of their euphemistic vocabulary:

I'll slit his nose and ears--flog him--maim him for life. I'll do more than that; I'll drag that pattern of chastity, that pink of prudery the delicate sister, through--'

. . . .

He . . . confirmed the unuttered threat with a tremendous oath. (577)

Hawk breaks off with what the narrator suggests might be a hint of shame before specifying just what he'll drag Kate through, but the threats of maiming and rape have a flavour of extreme, uncontrolled violence. Hawk's merciless pursuit of Kate, and his cold-blooded murder of Lord Verisopht make it clear that his undoing or uncrowning will bring his uncontrolled version of carnival rebounding back at himself.

There is no ambiguity about the superiority of Nicholas's value system to those of the novel's many villains, and this superiority is frequently reinforced with carnival-style drubbings. Similarly--although more explicitly--barbaric beatings occur in Rabelais where, I suggest, they serve a similar purpose. Bakhtin writes that Rabelais "uses the popular-festive system of images with its charter of freedoms consecrated by many centuries; and he uses them to inflict a severe punishment upon his foe, the Gothic age" (268). In the case of *Nickleby*, the foe is clearly what Magnet calls "the Regency male ethic," the barbarism of an age that will be replaced by an emphatically middle-class, "defensive chivalry" (*Dickens and the Social Order* 34); the novel is absolutely intent on *thrashing* the old order, as represented by the decaying order of the Regency. As Robin Gilmour observes, *Nickleby* focuses on "the question of the middle-class relationship to aristocratic style and values" (111), but this question is not treated in the manner of a polite debate.

Nickleby metes out punishment to a number of characters with a systematic moralism that might at first seem utterly uncharacteristic of the carnival. Arthur Gride, for example, is "found

horribly murdered in his bed" (931) at the end of the novel, and Mantalini is turned into a cowering and beaten subject of a laundress's whims; Ralph's generalized hatred turns into self-loathing and he hangs himself. Once again, however, all these characters are either usurers or rakes, and they are all clearly identified as members of a declining and corrupt moral order. As such the moralism is subsumed in the carnivalesque celebration of the punishment of the old and the ushering in of the new.

The most significant of *Nickleby's* violent thrashings is Nicholas's tremendously satisfying beating of Squeers. Nicholas precedes the beating with an absurdly melodramatic speech, but it is also a speech that places the beating in the moral context of Nicholas as the champion of the new order, an order of middle-class chivalry:

'I have a long series of insults to avenge,' said Nicholas, flushed with passion; 'and my indignation is aggravated by the dastardly cruelties practised on helpless infancy in this foul den. Have a care; for if you do raise the devil within me, the consequences shall fall heavily upon your own head.'

He had scarcely spoken when Squeers, in a violent outbreak of wrath and with a cry like a howl of a wild beast, spat upon him and struck him a blow across the face with his instrument of torture, which raised up a bar of livid flesh as it was inflicted. Smarting with the agony of the blow, and concentrating into that one moment all his feelings of rage, scorn, and indignation, Nicholas sprang upon him, wrested the weapon from his hand, and, pinning him by the throat, beat the ruffian till he roared for mercy. (222)

Nicholas's "devil within" is one that he has the option of releasing; his self-control marks his balanced version of carnivalesque aggression. In Magnet's terms, Nicholas provides a model of middle-class masculinity in contrast to the uncontrolled, animalistic masculinity of Squeers, who attacks Nicholas "with a cry like a howl of a wild beast" (Magnet 34-5).

The "pinning . . . by the throat" and "concentrat[ion]" of all his rage in the act of violence by Nicholas almost turn this into a murder scene; *Nickleby*, however, restrains this kind of fully consummated version of carnival in two ways. First, Nicholas is *the* moral touchstone for the novel, providing a model for male middle-class conduct in a social world that changed so rapidly that roles were no longer clear-cut. David Edgar sees Nicholas as exactly this kind of touchstone for "the new middle classes," when he describes

the dilemma of class as it is portrayed in *Nickleby*: that the new middle classes have no firm sense of an identity, of an independent "essence" which they might affirm, and so take their style from an aristocratic order which despises them.

. . . .

In Nicholas . . . we can see a new middle class 'affirming its own essence.'

(Giddings 114-115)

Second, *Nickleby* cannot express the full violence of a carnivalesque beating, but it can achieve the same effect by comically transferring some of the aggression to Fanny's letter, which exhibits brilliant carnival violence pitched so as not to offend Victorian sensitivities:

'When your neveu that you recommended for a teacher had done this to my pa and jumped upon his body with his feet and also langwedge which I will not pollewt my pen with describing, he assaulted my ma with dreadful violence, dashed her to the earth, and drove her back comb several inches into her head. A very little more and it must have entered her skull. We have a medical certifiket that if it had, the tortershell would have affected the brain.' (243)

The movement from a description of apparently serious violence to the comically hypothetical description of Mrs. Squeers's injuries undermines the carnival violence and distances Nicholas from the violent thuggery associated with characters like Squeers and Hawk. This passage simultaneously reassures the reader that the saintly Nicholas has not done any real damage to Squeers, and that he did indeed thrash a villain whose entire family is equally corrupt.⁶

The problem of how to handle innate aggression in *Nickleby* is part of the larger problem of how to achieve balance in a carnivalesque world, how to avoid excess. Characters in *Nickleby* who attempt to deny the temporary nature of carnival become permanently excessive; they are transformed into rigid self-caricatures. One of Bakhtin's most significant metaphors, which I've already quoted in part, is a theatrical one, and it has a special relevance to *Nickleby*:

carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. (7)

In this theatrical metaphor, the cardinal rule of traditional theatre is broken "while carnival lasts": there is no distinction acknowledged between actors and spectators. This breaking down of the normal social codes and hierarchies is clearly one that threatens Victorian propriety; *Nickleby* is

⁶ Carol A. Bock makes a similar point about Nicholas and the defusing of violence in this scene: As a figure of outraged virtue, he directs his violence against a deserving object--a villain like Squeers or Sir Mulberry Hawk--though, in a typically Victorian modification, he is not allowed to cause serious injury. In the attack on Squeers, for example, the potentially disturbing violence of the scene is defused, through humour, by Fanny "launching a shower of inkstands at [Nicholas's] head" and by little Wackford, who "harassed the enemy in the rear." (90)

very careful to limit the participatory, hierarchy-smashing carnival by demonstrating the results of excess in characters who attempt to make the transgressive carnival permanent. In many of *Nickleby's* characters success or failure is predicated on the ability to recognize the reinstatement of the footlights at crucial times: that is, characters must be able to accommodate change by recognizing when carnival transgression is no longer authorized or advisable. Characters who draw no distinction between their own 'acts' (in the theatrical sense) and their lives are the ones who fail; they suffer from a fatal lack of balance.

Mrs. Witterly is one of *Nickleby's* characters who is incapable of reinstating the footlights in the constrained and pretentious drama of her life:

The lady had an air of sweet insipidity, and a face of engaging paleness; there was a faded look about her, and about the furniture, and about the house altogether. She was reclining on a sofa in such a very unstudied attitude, that she might have been taken for an actress all ready for the first scene in a ballet, and only waiting for the drop curtain to go up. (340)

She is "faded," someone whose vitality has been drained by the pressure of her maintaining her role, her absurd, self-dramatizing act. The heavy irony of the narrator's reference to Witterly's "unstudied attitude" portrays her as someone fatally out of touch with her very middle-class reality:

'Mrs Witterly,' said her husband, addressing himself to Mrs Nickleby, 'is sought after and courted by glittering crowds, and brilliant circles. She is excited by the opera, the drama, the fine arts, the--the--the--'

'The nobility, my love,' interposed Mrs Witterly.

'The nobility, of course,' said Mr Witterly. 'And the military. . . .' (342)

Although Mrs. Witterly pretends to be more conversant with the upper reaches of society than her husband, who is not even sure what to call them, her ignorance is revealed in her acceptance of the attentions of Pyke and Pluck as examples of noble behaviour.

Mantalini is another character who identifies so completely with his own absurdly theatrical act that his private, personal carnival pushes him into a complete and dangerous separation from his precarious middle-class reality. He changes his name from "Muntle" to the more exotic-sounding "Mantalini" apparently in order to help his wife attract customers to her dress-making business (190), but his unconscious motivation seems to be one of attempting to enshrine carnival. Mantalini the Italian playboy wants to keep carnival going, and to prevent the footlights from ever coming back. His name-change turns out to be the only help Mantalini ever offers to his wife's business prospects, but it is only the beginning of his self-dramatization: every time his wife threatens to curtail his reckless spending of her hard-won resources, he threatens to commit suicide. Mantalini, "who had doubtless well considered his part" (336),

unashamedly indulges in this act seven times in a fortnight during the last stage of his wife's disillusionment with him (669). His relentless immaturity is the result of his illusion that the carnival never ends, that bankruptcy and a slide down the social ladder are impossible for a man with a successful-looking moustache.

Mantalini's language is another symbol of his excessive nature; it is often violent and more often subliminally sexual. Mantalini's speech gains its subversively sexual aspect through what Ian Watt calls "the ancient traditions of . . . comedy . . . outwit[ting] Victorian sexual taboos" (169). Mantalini calls his wife "my essential juice of pine-apple" and "[s]he, who coils her fascinations round me like a pure and angelic rattle-snake!" (511); she is, figuratively, an "essential juice" to be consumed by her thirsty lover, and a virgin-whore, pure and snake-like. The effect of Mantalini's subversively sexual speech is to remind the reader of his excessive sexual and social energies. Mantalini's conversation with his wife also partakes of the carnivalesque pattern of praise mingled with abuse, where "abusive expressions are used affectionately" (*Rabelais* 16):

'Do not put itself out of humour,' said Mr Mantalini [to his wife], breaking an egg. It is a pretty bewitching little demd countenance, and it should not be out of humour, for it spoils its loveliness, and makes it cross and gloomy like a frightful, naughty, demd hobgoblin.' (276)

Here violent speech ("demd countenance" and "demd hobgoblin," strong expressions to early Victorian readers) and a kind of teasing abuse combine to demonstrate a case of carnivalesque humour going out of control. Although Mantalini tries to play the Regency rake and dandy, he ends up separated from his wife and becomes the much-abused partner of a vulgar laundress. His excessive carnival energy, which stems from his inability to recognize the temporary nature of carnival, beats him back down the social ladder. Mantalini is excluded from that group of characters who succeed in forming middle-class family and social groups, and instead becomes the prisoner of his own delusions, with a wife who is replaced by a "frightful" shrew.⁷

Lord Verisopht, whose very name suggests a lack of carnivalesque virility, is a perfect symbol of the old order in *Nickleby*; like Mantalini, he is a dandy in a world that no longer tolerates dandies. Unlike Mantalini, he is well-intentioned and even kind, but soft and corrupted

⁷ Interestingly, confusion about the identity of Mantalini's new partner caused Dickens to alter the text here, as Michael Slater notes in the Penguin edition of *Nickleby*:

In 1848 Dickens added the words, 'not the lawful Madame Mantalini, but' . . . no doubt in response to letters he had received asking whether or not the proprietress of the mangle was, in fact, Kate's former employer. (974)

The significance of this alteration is that it emphasizes Mantalini's slide down the social ladder as a result of his own excess and imprudence.

by his association with Hawk. The lord's soft spot for Madeline and his respect for Nicholas allow him a kind of redemption through death. At his death scene *Nickleby* reminds the reader that Lord Verisopht could have become an acceptable middle-class *pater familias*: "he might have lived a happy man, and died with children's faces round his bed" (763), but Verisopht's belated rejection of Regency rakishness makes it impossible for him to get footlights back up in time to prevent the ultimate Regency drama-in-real-life--the duel with Hawk that kills him. Verisopht, in the very act of duelling with Hawk, demonstrates that he has outgrown the role of the Regency rake; ironically, this growth comes too late and Verisopht perishes as a representative of the old order, punished for his excessive, wasted life of gaming and drinking.

Ralph, like Verisopht, ends unhappily because of his failure to recognize the reality of his middle-class social context. This reality includes the paramount one, embodied in his nephew Nicholas, of middle-class chivalry. Ralph, in contrast to Verisopht's growing admiration for Nicholas, assumes a rakish cynicism about Nicholas's chivalry. Ralph's cynicism identifies him unquestionably as representative of the same decadent old order symbolized by Hawk and Squeers. Ralph, like Squeers, his partner in evil, makes his living through parasitism on the old order, and is inexorably bound up with it. Squeers takes custody of and torments the unwanted offspring of the decadent upper classes as well as children who are rejected by unloving middle-class families; he has even practiced his brutality on Smike, Ralph's unwanted son. Ralph is a usurer who profits from social failure, as represented by a failure of ready money. That Ralph and Squeers end up in "business" together, and that it is a business that ruins them both, is perfectly just in the moral atmosphere of *Nickleby*. Just as any parasite attached to a dying organism is doomed, so are they.

The most striking instance of Ralph's failure to understand middle-class chivalry is when he attempts to convince the *Nickleby* family that Smike is Snawley's son, believing that this would deter them from defending him:

'Your romance, sir,' said Ralph, lingering for a moment, 'is destroyed, I take it. No unknown; no persecuted descendant of a man of high degree; but the weak, imbecile son of a poor, petty tradesman. We shall see how your sympathy melts before plain matter of fact.' (685)

Ralph's grasp of reality is drastically incomplete because it does not include Nicholas's chivalric "romance" of a restored, respectable middle-class family; this romance is far from over, because Nicholas is in tune with the very middle-class values Ralph rejects.

Nicholas successfully adopts an "authorized version" of carnival, that is, a domesticated one which uses a middle-class chivalry to tame the savage beast of human aggression. Ralph, on the other hand, cannot reconcile his aggressive impulses with the need for balance and restraint, since he rejects Nicholas's "romance". Ralph's final high-pitched, Shakespearean speech is filled

with imagery that could be described as dark and humourlessly carnivalesque:

'Lie on!' cried the usurer, 'with your iron tongue! Ring merrily for births that make expectants writhe, and marriages that are made in hell, and toll ruefully for the dead whose shoes are worn already! Call men to prayers who are godly because not found out, and ring chimes for the coming in of every year that brings this cursed world nearer to its end. No bell or book for me; throw me on a dunghill, and let me rot there to infect the air!' (906)

Interestingly, Ralph is identified here only as "the usurer"--he has no identity outside his professional one as loan shark to a carnivalized world. The reference to "births that make expectants writhe" is related to those images Bakhtin describes as illustrating "pregnant death" (*Rabelais* 211ff), which typically symbolize a phoenix-like birth of the new from the ashes of the old. In this death speech, Ralph is signalling the death of an old order so corrupt it can "infect the air." Appropriately it is the Cheerybles who have been instrumental in bringing him to this juncture, and the birth of the new signalled by Ralph's demise involves the ascendancy of the Nickleby and Cheeryble circles.

The comic version of Ralph's dark carnivalesque is the madman who lives next door to the Nicklebys; like Ralph, he has failed in his duty as a father, and the only accommodation of his carnivalesque aggression he is capable of is a descent into madness. The madman's keeper informs Kate and Mrs. Nickleby that the madman is a failed family man, and Kate understands that this is someone who is now attempting to disrupt her family with the force of his unrestrained carnival energy:

'He's a deal pleasanter without his senses than with 'em. He was the cruellest, wickedest, out-and-outerest old flint that ever drewed breath.' (628)

Mrs. Nickleby repeatedly refuses to acknowledge their neighbour's madness, thereby revealing her own lack of balance. She is saved only by the fact that Nicholas takes on the role of father and protects her from her own excessive tolerance for carnival. Mrs. Nickleby's tolerance extends to lending an ear to a lunatic courtship speech from the mad neighbour:

'Then are you [Mrs. Nickleby] any relation to the Archbishop of Canterbury? inquired the old gentleman with great anxiety, 'or to the Pope of Rome? or the Speaker of the House of Commons? Forgive me, if I am wrong, but I was told you were niece to the Commissioners of Paving, and daughter-in-law to the Lord Mayor and Court of Common Council, which would account for your relationship to all three.'

.....

'I do know,' said the old gentleman, laying his finger on his nose with an air of familiarity most reprehensible, 'that this is a sacred and enchanted spot, where the

most divine charms'--here he kissed his hand and bowed again--'waft mellifluousness over the neighbours' gardens, and force the fruit and vegetables into premature existence.' (621-22)

The mad gentleman jumbles social hierarchies by suggesting randomly intimate relations with symbolic authority figures--the archbishop, the pope, the speaker of the house of commons, and so on. His "air of familiarity" is "reprehensible" because it not only bespeaks an excessively familiar carnival democracy, but also in its symbolically phallic strain. The mad gentleman's discourse moves in the downward direction of all carnival speech, from poetic diction to an explicitly phallic metaphor. The neighbour says "I venture to presume that we are fitted for each other" (625), and he is Mrs. Nickleby's symbolic double, suggesting the direction in which she could go were she not protected by her son.

Even Mrs. Nickleby acknowledges the neighbour's madness, though, when he begins directing a stream of carnival abuse at her after she rejects his previously flattering advances:

'Cat!' repeated the old gentleman. 'Puss, Kit, Tit, Grimalkin, Tabby, Brindle--Whoosh!' with which last sound, uttered in a hissing manner between his teeth, the old gentleman swung his arms violently round and round, and at the same time alternately advanced on Mrs. Nickleby, and retreated from her, in that species of savage dance with which boys on market-days may be seen to frighten pigs, sheep, and other animals, when they give out obstinate indications of turning down a wrong street. (745)

According to Bakhtin, the market-place is the classical locus for carnival abuse (*Rabelais* 145ff), and so the madman's "market-day" dance is the ideal symbol for his hostility toward Mrs. Nickleby. The list of abusive epithets is Rabelaisian in its energy and length here too, as is the comic malevolence with which the mad gentleman delivers it.

As well as by his remarkable carnivalesque language, the madman also manifests his unbalanced excess by throwing vegetables over the wall into the Nickleby's yard. This is *Nickleby's* version of the excrement-tossing episodes in *Rabelais*, which in turn are a rough folk version of a fertility rite (*Rabelais* 147-52); "the language of excrement was closely linked with fertility," writes Bakhtin, and in the case of *Nickleby's* madman, this fertility desperately needs to be repressed, as does even the *implicitly* scatological. Nicholas's reactions suggest that what came over the wall was considerably worse than fresh vegetables:

'But when he began to throw his cucumbers over our wall--'

'To throw his cucumbers over our wall!' repeated Nicholas, in great astonishment.

'Yes, Nicholas, my dear' replied Mrs. Nickleby, in a very serious tone; 'his cucumbers over our wall. And vegetable-marrows likewise.'

'Confound his impudence!' said Nicholas, firing immediately.

....

'What!' said Nicholas, 'cucumbers and vegetable-marrows flying at the heads of the family as they walk in their own garden, and not meant impertinently! Why, mother--' (567)

As the guarantor of his family's triumph over carnival excess, Nicholas is the ideal character to react to the madman's fertile symbolism. He understands its impropriety immediately, where his mother has still not understood the way in which the mad neighbour's carnival excess belies "the appearance of a gentleman" (567). Nicholas advises his mother that "there is no language of vegetables which converts a cucumber into a formal declaration of attachment" (569); he understands the incongruity of carnival excess in a middle-class context.

Mrs. Nickleby comes very close to being a character who lives in a permanent, delusory carnival. Mrs. Nickleby's mental atmosphere of free association, as it is constantly revealed in her speech, is in a way the carnivalesque opposite to her brother-in-law Ralph's furious concentration on the acquisition of wealth. Her mind is comically diffuse:

'Kate, my dear,' said Mrs Nickleby; 'I don't know how it is, but a fine warm summer day like this, with the birds singing in every direction, always puts me in mind of roast pig, with sage and onion sauce and made gravy.'

"That's a curious association of ideas, is it not, mama?" (616)

The association is curious, and it is also typically carnivalesque. The conventional eulogy to a warm summer day proceeds downward, in carnival fashion, toward the concerns of the stomach: it is a crowning touch that Mrs. Nickleby uses the phrase "puts me in mind," underlining the movement from top to bottom, head to stomach. Where Ralph debases everything he touches into money, Mrs. Nickleby ranges freely over a whole range of carnivalesque imagery.

Nickleby's promotion of *moderate* values turns Mrs. Nickleby's carnivalesque excess into an object lesson as well, for she needs to recognize the reality of her family's position in society more clearly. Her pretentious airs and misunderstandings provide comedy and examples of a character in need of reform, someone who needs to allow for the temporary nature of carnival. For example, Mrs. Nickleby attempts to impress the rural Browdies by describing the sophisticated, hedonistic neighbours the Nicklebys used to have:

There was one family in particular, that used to live about a mile from us--not straight down the road, but turning sharp off to the left by the turnpike where the Plymouth mail ran over the donkey--that were quite extraordinary people for giving the most extravagant parties, with artificial flowers and champagne, and variegated lamps, and, in short, every delicacy of eating and drinking that the most singular epicure could possibly require--I don't think there ever were such

people as those Peltiroguses.' (675)

Mrs. Nickleby's admiration for the "rakes" among which she used to live is a sign that she is out of touch with the middle-class temper of the times; she aligns herself dangerously with the old order here, risking being purged by the forces of the newly dominant group. Her social blindness leads her to a state of utter innocence about Madeline's growing attachment to Nicholas:

Mr. Nickleby used to say--your poor papa I am speaking of, Kate my dear--used to say that appetite was the best clock in the world, but you have no appetite, my dear Miss Bray, I wish you had, and upon my word I really think you ought to take something that would give you one; I am sure I don't know, but I have heard that two or three dozen native lobsters give an appetite, though that comes to the same thing after all, for I suppose you must have an appetite before you can take 'em. If I said lobsters, I meant oysters, but of course it's all the same, though really how you came to know about Nicholas--' (823)

Here Dickens turns the cliché "appetite was the best clock in the world" on its head: Mrs. Nickleby has a fine appetite, and a strong connection with processes and concerns related to the carnivalesque lower body, but this does not mean that she knows, metaphorically speaking, what time it is. As her disjointed syntax indicates, she is *at sea*: more in touch with seafood than with her son's feelings, or the reasons for Madeline's lack of appetite. Mrs. Nickleby's appetites, however, are straightforward enough, and combined with Nicholas's influence, they hold her back from a complete descent into diffusion and madness. She longs, quite simply, for her family to flourish; she desires her children's happiness, and a good life for her family. These good intentions do not come too late, as they did with Verisopht, and Nicholas is a much better adviser than Hawk.

The Browdies rise in the world through their association with the Nicklebys, and John Browdie is one of the few characters who does not require the carnival to be educated out of him; here, for example he demonstrates his understanding of the regenerating power of food and laughter:

He chuckled, roared, half suffocated himself by laughing large pieces of beef into his windpipe, roared again, persisted in eating at the same time, got red in the face and black in the forehead, coughed, cried, got better, went off again laughing inwardly, got worse, choked, had his back thumped, stamped about, frightened his wife, and at last recovered in a state of the last exhaustion and with the water streaming from his eyes, but still faintly ejaculating 'A godfeyther--a godfeyther, Tilly!' in a tone bespeaking an exquisite relish of the sally, which no suffering could diminish. (631)

Browdie's "exquisite relish" for life is also exquisitely carnivalesque; his enjoyment of the life of

the body partakes of the "elemental force" of the traditional giants of carnival (*Rabelais* 341-44). It is Browdie's vital, approving laughter that first greets Nicholas after his assault on Squeers. Browdie manages his carnival tendencies to perfection; the best example is his combination of prudence and trickery in rescuing Smike from Squeers, when he demonstrates his masterly timing, putting the footlights back and escaping from Squeers's sadistic carnival.

The Cheerybles have not so much mastered carnival, like Browdie, as they have completely transcended the need for it. Their transcendence or even rejection of carnival for a kind of paternalism show *Nickleby's* larger skittishness about the carnival. The Cheerybles become Nicholas's parents, replacing his incompetent mother and deceased father, and thereby completing the restoration of the *Nickleby* family. The Cheerybles also are responsible for making Nicholas financially independent of his uncle, and for helping to uncover Ralph's dark secrets which lead to his ruin. For all their inspiring and practical role in setting in motion a violent chain of events, there is no sense that the Cheeryble brothers ever would countenance a theatre without footlights, or any kind of carnival that went beyond a well-orchestrated and orderly banquet. Their harmlessness is so extreme that *Nickleby* even presents a neatly-packaged symbol for it in this description of the Cheerybles' office:

A blunderbuss and two swords hung above the chimney-piece for the terror of evil-doers, but the blunderbuss was rusty and shattered, and the swords were broken and edgeless. Elsewhere, their open display in such a condition would have raised a smile, but there it seemed as though even violent and offensive weapons partook of the reigning influence, and became emblems of mercy and forbearance. (554-55)⁸

The "reigning influence" of the Cheerybles is not a carnivalesque one; instead they represent a new conflict-free society that transcends the need for any carnivalesque adaptations to change: the Cheerybles are *Nickleby's* equivalent of Dulwich, people whose weapons--whose capacities for aggression--are "rusty and shattered". Magnet, commenting on the House of Cheeryble Brothers, which he calls "an all-in-one combination of home, brotherhood, and business," argues that "to the extent . . . economic life is a theatre of conflict, Dickens's wish to show how it might easily be an arena of sociability and harmony is central to his impulse to disarm hostility in this aggression-haunted novel" (37). Magnet goes on to suggest that *Nickleby* presents a "false" picture of business, since the Cheerybles "do not practice capitalism: the ledgers can only contain large debits for munificent charitable donations and small ones for turkey and champagne" (37). The Cheerybles function as a heavily domesticated version of the Crummles, stage-directing,

⁸ Magnet quotes this same passage in a somewhat different context: his discussion concerns what he sees as Dickens's Hobbesian view of human nature.

providing employment, beaming benevolently, full of good cheer, but they do it all without soiling themselves in an actual middle-class business or on an actual stage; here they are helping the novel end like the last act of a Victorian melodrama, where all the lovers are united:

Then let him take her away, Ned, let him take her away. Madeline's in the next room. Let all the lovers get out of the way, and talk among themselves, if they've anything to say. Turn 'em out, Ned, every one!' (913)

The Cheerybles may be presiding over a banquet that displays some traces of the carnival, just as Pickwick drains a bumper in Dulwich in a faint reflection of carnival symposia past, but the Cheerybles are really fairy godfathers celebrating the establishment of their own miniature middle-class society; they are not convenors of a carnivalesque feast.

The other area where *Nickleby* seems to be most skittish about the carnival is in its treatment of the Crummles theatrical troupe. The popular stage, whether presenting melodrama or burlesque, was probably the most carnivalesque part of mainstream Victorian society. Yet in the Crummles episodes more than anywhere else the novel displays a fear of the socially anarchic forces unleashed by carnival, and ends up dismissing the Crummles troupe to America with breathtaking dispatch (America functions as a convenient symbol of an excessively carnivalized, obscenely democratized society). On the one hand *Nickleby* apprehends that the stage is a place from which to understand the carnival of society; on the other hand, the disappearance of footlights and the democratizing tendencies of carnival have to be sternly put in their place. The Cheerybles eventually have to replace the Crummles as a toothless version of carnival benevolence, because the Crummlesian good will and theatrical vitality are unhealthily excessive.

Crummles' eventual banishment comes as a result of his being an actor who does not really believe in footlights: his entire life is a theatrical performance, and he breaks social barriers with a carelessness that leads to his banishment from the novel. Here, for example, he stages a highly theatrical "farewell" to Nicholas:

In fact, Mr Crummles, who could never lose any opportunity for professional display, had turned out for the express purpose of taking a public farewell of Nicholas; and to render it the more imposing, he was now, to that young gentleman's most profound annoyance, inflicting upon him a rapid succession of stage embraces, which, as everybody knows, are performed by the embracer's laying his or her chin on the shoulder of the object of affection, and looking over it. This Mr Crummles did in the highest style of melodrama, pouring forth at the same time all the most dismal forms of farewell he could think of, out of the stock pieces. (478)

Crummles is too tainted with carnival excess for *Nickleby* to include him in its new order. There can be no doubt of Crummles's carnivalesque vitality: he demonstrates his good will on first

meeting Nicholas by "inviting his new acquaintance to share a bowl of punch" (357). But the theatrical community that Crummles so eagerly invites Nicholas to join is incongruent with *Nickleby's* moral direction; the Crummles troupe is a permanent carnival, and it represents the same kind of excess as the unreformed Baron of Grogzwig.

Nicholas, in sharp contrast to Crummles, succeeds in drawing a distinction between his professional acting and melodramatic personal actions; the distinction is drawn by simply rejecting the unrestrainedly carnivalesque side of his character, allowing him to rescue his family fortune by adopting an authorized version of carnival. Part of the rejection of carnival for Nicholas includes the rejection of the Crummles; their endless, naive self-dramatization is an attempt to make carnival infinite, and *Nickleby* thoroughly discredits such attempts. Sylvia Manning observes that

Nicholas's stint with this troupe [the Crummles] is a sort of holiday and the segment a hiatus in the march of the plot. For the Crummles family, all the world's a stage and all of life is a drama. The narrator remains aloof from them, and so does Nicholas; we are aware that the serious business of life is taking place elsewhere. (59)

The "serious business of life" for Nicholas is the restoration of his family and its establishment in a 'proper,' middle-class milieu. This "business" is impossible in the social context of the Crummles, who specialize in removing social barriers, not in inventing new ones. *Nickleby's* anxiety and aloofness toward an unrestrained, permanent carnival is best exemplified in the following passage, which banishes the Crummles world in class terms more surely than they will later be banished geographically:

There were graver reasons, too, against his [Nicholas's] returning to that mode of life [the theatre]. Independently of those arising out of its spare and precarious earnings, and his own internal conviction that he could never hope to aspire to any great distinction, even as a provincial actor, how could he carry his sister from town to town, and place to place, and debar her from any other associates than those with whom he would be compelled, almost without distinction, to mingle? (530)

Mingling "almost without distinction" with the great unwashed is the most fearful danger of the carnival world. Kate's reputation could suffer a permanent stain from such mingling, and so clearly the theatre is an inappropriate context for a gentleman such as Nicholas. The "graver reasons" for Nicholas's withdrawal from the Crummles world centre on his desire to restore the *Nickleby* family to its old gentility.

While the Crummles troupe provide what proves to be an unacceptable atmosphere for the full blossoming of *Nickleby* gentility, the Kenwigs family is *Nickleby's* comic but seriously-

intended model for Nicholas's family-building. Magnet notes that the Kenwigses are "ceaselessly making themselves up, tirelessly dramatizing themselves according to their image of what solidly middle-class people, one rung above them on the social ladder, should be" (38). The bachelors Nicholas and Smike, back in London from their brief careers as provincial actors, lodge in the same building with the Kenwigs clan and absorb some of their passion for self-improvement. Nicholas also has the opportunity to observe a family which is obsessed with appearances but which still understands that appearance and reality differ, that the footlights do, in the final analysis, separate actor and spectator. The Kenwigses, like the Nicklebys, are engaged in a grim struggle to climb the social ladder; both families require a victory over carnival excess *and* an appropriation of carnival energy to achieve what they see as their proper stations. David Edgar suggests that

The point [of the Kenwigs subplot], of course, is that fifty years earlier Mrs. Kenwigs would not have married beneath her, and the rules and regulations of family life would see to it that her inheritance would either be on the way or conversely not: but *there would be no doubt in the matter.* (Giddings 139)

The shabby gentility of the Kenwigses, like that of the Nicklebys, is against the old order's "rules and regulations of family life." The rules have changed drastically, and the families' mere survival in carnivalized times is in some doubt.

While the Kenwigs drama is not played out to a fully suburban conclusion, the Nickleby one is. Nicholas uncrowns his uncle and Squeers, representatives of the old, corrupt order, and learns that his own carnival energies must be repressed after their temporary release. His reward for learning the Baron of Grogzwig's lesson--that the energies of carnival must eventually be subsumed to the ideals of domestic life--is, in short, a middle-class family of his own. Nicholas's violent transgressions against Squeers and Hawk are authorized by his moral authority as a representative of a new middle-class male sensibility. After this temporary release of carnival violence, Nicholas's self-restraint enables him to court and marry Madeline Bray, become a partner in Cheeryble Brothers, and finally re-possess his family home. His sister marries Frank Cheeryble, thus becoming a partner as well and further binding the family to the unarguable foundation of wealth that the Cheerybles represent. The Nickleby family's triumph is suffused with a conservative nostalgia perfectly reflective of a class whose greatest desire is to protect itself from those above and below it, a class which enjoys the carnival, but only on holidays:

The first act of Nicholas, when he became a rich and prosperous merchant, was to buy his father's old house. As time crept on, and there came gradually about him a group of lovely children, it was altered and enlarged, but none of the old rooms were ever pulled down, no old tree was rooted up, nothing with which there was any association of bygone times was ever removed or changed. (932)

Like *Pickwick*, Dickens freezes the carnival of social change in the end and insists on a static social world, one in which change itself becomes an offense against the sanctity of the past; this is exactly the arrested social development that Thomas M. Leitch refers to as "apocalyptic" (143).

In the end the Nicklebys manage to prosper in a world which constantly threatens to imprison them in a carnivalesque madhouse. The Nicklebys triumph through their belief in their own entitlement, and especially through their successful domestication of the carnival energies in and around them. They make a success of the carnival by using it to impose order on the social flux of Victorian England. Like any good capitalists, the Nicklebys are against monopoly only when they do not have it; once they are ensconced in suburbia, change no longer seems necessary.

Conclusion

Camille Paglia, in her book *Sexual Personae*, writes that "[r]epression is an evolutionary adaptation permitting us to function under the burden of our expanded consciousness" (16). My study of carnival in *Pickwick* and *Nickleby* is a demonstration of the same phenomenon Paglia identifies: how repression, or the quest for balance, allowed--and continues to allow--Dickens's readers to function under the burden of a consciousness taken over by the burden of rapid social change. This repressive quest for balance takes on the form of a conservative, middle-class world-view in these two novels, one that is more concerned with limits than freedom. For all that, the early Victorian middle-class was reacting to a situation of unprecedented social freedom for themselves and their children; in Dickens's early work, however, this sense of freedom leads directly to Paglia's statement that "[s]ystem and order shelter us against sex and nature" (25). The natural, sexualized carnival, with its emphasis on the lower body and insistent connection with reproduction and digestion, was one that found expression in Dickens; but the carnival also found, in Dickens, its most nimble censor. Geoffrey Hughes, in his study *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English*, has this to say about Dickens and "the schizophrenic quality of Victorian culture" (151):

Dickens, whose life epitomized the Victorian schism, being first bourgeois *paterfamilias* and then sexual adventurer, bounder and cad, showed a similarly ambivalent attitude towards the lower registers of the language. The creative artist familiarized his readers with such rhyming slang forms as *Barnaby Rudge* ('judge'), *Artful Dodger* for 'lodger' and much of the argot of lower classes and criminal slang, such as *beak* (magistrate), *brat* (child), *crack* (break open, burgle) . . . *stone jug* (prison) and *trap* (a policeman). But in the persona of *Vox Populi* Dickens denounced 'the sewerage and verbiage of slang' in *Household Words*, no. 183, 24 September 1853. (152)

A similar schizophrenic quality inhabits the two novels I have discussed: opening the Pandora's box of an aggressive, sexualized carnival is exciting, but it also leads to a desire for order and system.

Freedom is achieved, in *Nickleby* and *Pickwick*, in a kind of middle-class triumphalist version of carnival, where the old order of Regency England is overturned in favour of a new bourgeois order. Mary Eagleton discusses the social problem novels of the 1840s and fifties as the clearest examples of a consolidation of middle-class power and values, but I think her analysis applies equally to the early Dickens:

the support of moderation, gradual reform, personal dialogue as opposed to

collective action, common humanity as opposed to class solidarity, succeed chiefly in consolidating the power of the middle-class and have few material benefits for the working class. (10)

One might add that few benefits accrued for the Mulberry Hawks of the early Dickens world either. Consolidation of power here is largely a limiting of the forces of change; change is necessary, but the process has to be made temporary rather than continuous for it to serve middle-class interests.

The carnival is distinguished, as I argued in my first chapter, by its temporary nature; for all of its ability to accommodate change, however, carnival is finally rejected or transcended in its early Dickensian incarnations. The reason for this final rejection is because carnival is, in both the novels I discuss, the signifier of social anxiety, and as such, some remedy must be found. Pickwick and Nicholas find their remedy in *retirement* from carnival, Pickwick by putting an end to his irresponsible, picaresque travels, and Nicholas by retiring from the public melodramas of the Crummies, and from the private stage where his class ambition forces him to enact a private melodrama. Both novels end in suburbanite Elysium, comfortably removed from the social chaos of the urban environment.

The suburban consolidation of power, and the concomitant construction of a middle-class set of values, is an analogous process to what Bakhtin describes as the crumbling of the medieval world during Rabelais' time:

At the time of Rabelais the hierarchical world of the Middle Ages was crumbling. The narrow, vertical, extratemporal model of the world, with its absolute top and bottom, its system of ascents and descents, was in the process of reconstruction. (403)

In the social context of post-Regency England, the "vertical" class system was not so much disappearing as it was being reconstructed. The extreme anxieties attendant upon this type of reconstruction distinguish it from the Renaissance; *Pickwick* and *Nickleby* leave their now-successful, middle-class protagonists living in a suburban Eden carefully separated from the carnival.

Perhaps much of the reason for many critics' tendency to dismiss these early novels has been their embarrassment over Dickens's enthusiasm for crass and often conservative Victorian middle-class values.¹ As my epigraph from G.K. Chesterton suggests, tastefulness--or political correctness, as we are learning to say--rarely goes hand in hand with a love for Dickens.

¹ See Myron Magnet's excellent discussion of politically liberal critics' discomfort with Dickens's politics (4-5).

Appendix A

The Critical Controversy over Pickwick's "Education"

The question of Pickwick's change or education has occupied a major place in the history of Dickensian criticism. Claims for Pickwick's education, change, or moral growth have been advanced by older critics such as James Kincaid in *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter*, Sylvère Monod in *Dickens the Novelist*, W.H. Auden in "Dingley Dell and the Fleet," and Robert L. Patten in "I Thought of Mr. Pickwick, and Wrote the First Number": Dickens and the Evolution of Character". The most cogent and convincing rejections of the view that Pickwick acquires an education have come from Michael Cotsell in "*The Pickwick Papers* and Travel: A Critical Diversion," Barbara Hardy in *The Moral Art of Dickens*, and Philip Rogers in "Mr. Pickwick's Innocence". I find Michael Cotsell's position to be least distracted by what has often become the critical red herring of Pickwick's change over the course of the novel:

The emphasis on travel [in *Pickwick*] helps resist not only hard-headed Christianising critics, who believe that a good-humored Christmas is a state of paradise, but other analogous criticisms, which may be characterized as directed, insistent on getting somewhere, unwilling to enjoy the journey: for instance, John Lucas's account of interpolated darkness gradually incorporated into the novel's center, or J. Hillis Miller's arrangement of quotations to draw it into a vortex of meaninglessness and misery. Such readers and readings, reminiscent of the various dismal men with melancholy tales that the Pickwickians come across, picture a novel that is traveling towards some dark center, some profundity, the truth, each incident a signpost pointing inexorably towards this discovery. (14)

Monroe Engel is perhaps the most extreme exponent of the *Bildungsroman* position in his *The Maturity of Dickens*, where he discovers the unifying principle of the novel in "the really fundamental movement . . . in the direction of gravity, seriousness, and profundity," of which the Bardell case is for him, as it is for many other commentators, the pivotal example (80). J. Hillis Miller takes an ambiguous position on this issue in his seminal study *Charles Dickens: the World of his Novels*, where he appears to deny the possibility of change in Pickwick while claiming that Pickwick discovers the harshness of the world and consequently withdraws from it. Miller is one of the first critics to identify Pickwick as a transitional character in sociohistorical terms, describing him as "a farewell to the eighteenth century" (34). He also isolates the key problem in *Pickwick* as being its social commentary, which he describes as "[one of] the fundamental questions of all Dickens' novels: How is a person who cannot withdraw going to avoid being destroyed by the evil forces in the world?" (35).

William Axton, in his "Variety and Coherence in *The Pickwick Papers*," finds the novel's

unity in its satire on the "newly enfranchised middle-class society" of 1830s England (665). This leads him to a point of view regarding Pickwick's education that is close to my own (that is he does not posit a significant change in Pickwick), except that he emphasizes the *satirical* aspect of the novel instead of carnivalesque celebration of the very middle-class values that Axton (perhaps anticipating the later Dickens) finds so worthy of belittlement (Axton 671). I would insist here on Bakhtin's distinction between satire and carnival; Bakhtin argues that carnival is participatory and inclusive, where satire is destructive and exclusive (*Rabelais* 12).

James Kincaid takes a similar point of view towards the idea of freedom in *Pickwick*, even though he does believe in Pickwick's education, which he describes as "the central motif of initiation" (27). Like Axton, though, he adopts a kind of liberal-humanist sentimentality about the novel's apparent advocacy of freedom:

In terms of value, our laughter consistently works to expel the conservative and orderly and to reaffirm the free and generally uninhibited. Involved in this set of values is the rejection of law and the entire world of rigid and isolated principle for a world of flexible accommodation and humanity. (28)

Kincaid goes on to describe the "new society" as "free and uninhibited," "a society of play" (28). My work on *Pickwick* is entirely at variance with this view.

Barbara Hardy's *The Moral Art of Dickens* argues bluntly against an educated Pickwick:

It is true that he [Pickwick] sees certain facts and sees through certain illusions, but Dickens makes no attempt to demonstrate enlargement of mind or improvement of understanding. . . . (83)

Hardy's conclusion is quite close to mine in its assertion that reality is banished in favour of an idealizing tendency, although she is not very specific about what that idealizing constitutes:

Dickens may be trying to show innocence coming into a knowledge of the real world but Dingley Dell surely triumphs in the end, and the real world is held at bay while innocence nods happily. (99)

Philip Rogers also demonstrates, in "Mr. Pickwick's Innocence," that Pickwick does not "grow in the knowledge of evil," but remains "happily unaware of the full nature of the world he passes through" (20). Rogers has a very strong sense of the carnivalesque world that Dickens evokes, and it is a shame that Bakhtin was still unknown in English departments when he wrote this article, even though the English translation was already four years old:

On the level of awareness he evoked for his audience the street scenes of their childhood and adolescence. The pisan, the dogs'-meat man, the peepshow and penny theatre performances of Bluebeard and Doctor Faustus, the coloured pictures of Edmund Keane as Richard III, pantomimes of the Battle of Waterloo, exhibitions of freaks and of performing animals--all appear in the wellerisms and

are nostalgically remembered by nineteenth-century readers of *Pickwick Papers*. As the century wore on, these street people became a vanishing breed, thus adding to their charm. (177)

Although Rogers does not pursue the social implications of his observations about Sam Weller, these could easily be developed into a line of investigation similar to my own: "Weller is a spokesman for the urban folk, conservative of traditions" (179), he writes.

Appendix B

The Critical Controversy over the Unity of *Pickwick*

David Trotter's remarks about unity in the Dickens novel are relevant here; he understands more clearly than many traditional Dickens critics that conventional literary criticism fails to discover coherence or unity in Dickens because it is looking for the wrong things:

Dickens's strengths as a writer are incidental to the literary strategies which confer unity and singularity on a novel: plot, the representation of inner life, symbolism. He deployed these strategies ostentatiously enough, but often wrote best when ignoring them. Something else shapes and fires his work, and we read him because of the something else. (163)

For a very useful history of the reception of the novel, especially its long haul in the bog of New Criticism over its unity and coherence, see Elliot D. Engel and Margaret F. King's article "Pickwick's Progress: The Critical Reception of *The Pickwick Papers* from 1836 to 1986". Gordon D. Hirsch's "Mr. Pickwick's Impotence" also looks backwards, encouraging Dickens critics to reconsider Chesterton's ground-breaking work:

in . . . [Chesterton's] emphasis on the change in Dickens' perspective rather than on the change in Samuel Pickwick's character, he seems closer to the truth than many more recent critics. It is not so much a matter of Pickwick's 'education' by Sam Weller (as James Kincaid has argued), or of Pickwick's growth in moral seriousness, devotion to virtue, and defense of the oppressed (as Sylvère Monod has claimed). This is to see the novel too much as a sophisticated *Bildungsroman*, which it is not. (32)

Hirsch isolates Pickwick as the character who most represents carnival in chains, or a domesticated carnival, and becomes the ideal figure in the novel: "Out of Pickwick's impotence, his lack of desire for anything for himself, grew his liberality, his beneficence" (32).

Unfortunately there is a small but influential tribe of Dickens critics who simply refuse to take the early novels seriously, usually dismissing them for their lack of coherence. Of these the most prominent are probably F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, who title the first chapter of their book *Dickens the Novelist* "The First Major Novel: 'Dombey and Son'." The previous novels are apparently not worth the attention of serious-minded critics. Similarly, Sylvère Monod's identically-titled book has a chapter on *Pickwick* that comments on the (undeniable) shortcomings of Dickens's early craftsmanship. However, the examples he chooses often reveal Monod's simple inability to understand why Dickens is funny and worthwhile. Monod's chapter begins like this: "Dickens' career as a novelist falls easily into three main periods: before *Copperfield* (1836-49), *David Copperfield* (1849-50), and after *Copperfield* (1851-70)" (83). This gross

overestimate of Dickens's only *Kunstlerroman* perhaps illustrates Monod's peculiar bias.

Taylor Stoehr's *Dickens: The Dreamer's Stance* emphasizes "The Dark Novels" (93) starting with *Bleak House*; he is plainly uninterested in the early ones. Harry Stone's similar theme in *Dickens and the Invisible World: Fairy Tales, Fantasy, and Novel-Making* lead him to virtually the same conclusions about the early Dickens. Stone believes that "The fusion of fairy tales and reality" is achieved by Dickens only later in his career, and he consequently tends to dismiss the early novels (84ff).

Appendix C

The Critical Controversy over *Nickleby's* Thematic "Coherence"

The "principal appeal"¹ or *theme* of *Nickleby* is a topic upon which the majority of critics do not even venture to generalize. Joseph Gold, in *Charles Dickens: Radical Moralists* (1972), speculates that *Nickleby* "remains the most critically neglected of Dickens' novels, probably because the images do not produce a sufficiently integrating cohesion in spite of what seems to me the clarity of the author's intention. . . (67). More recently Carol A. Bock has observed that

Nicholas Nickleby is a boisterous novel, remarkable for its numerous assaults, accidents, beatings, brawls, and--perhaps not incidentally--for its lack of formal coherence. (87)

This is in many ways the conventional view of *Nickleby*, which damns with faint praise by presenting it as brilliant but incoherent and immature apprentice work. Michael Slater calls the main plot of the novel "largely a lifeless bore" in his introduction to the Penguin edition (28), showing himself as part of the same school of thought on this matter as Bock. Joseph Gold writes that "[i]f critics have noticed little else about *Nicholas Nickleby* they have seen that isolation, or fragmentation, is one of its central themes" (66). This observation reflects the lasting influence of J. Hillis Miller's *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (1958), in which he asserts that a number of the early novels have "at [their] center characters who are alienated from society. . ." (91). Miller has trouble locating the thematic centre of *Nickleby* partly because of his distaste for its melodramatic conventions:

the central action of *Nicholas Nickleby* is the elaborate performance of a cheap melodrama, complete with sneering villains, insulted virginity, and a courageous young hero who appears in the nick of time.

. . . .

The scenes of the provincial theater thus act as a parody of the main plot, and of the life of the chief characters in the main story. (90)

Here Miller even identifies one of the main structural devices of the novel, but he does not take *Nickleby* seriously enough to bother discussing it.

John Forster's *The Life of Charles Dickens*, as is so often the case, supplies a very suggestive starting point for a fresh look at Dickens, and in this case specifically at *Nickleby*:

Newman Noggs ushered in that class of the creatures of his fancy in which . . .

¹ I am again quoting James Kincaid's phrase from his study *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (7).

[Dickens] took himself perhaps the most delight, and which the oftener he dealt with the more he seemed to know how to vary and render attractive; gentlemen by nature, however shocking bad their hats or ungentle their dialects; philosophers of modest endurance, and needy but most respectable coats; a sort of humble angels of sympathy [sic] and self-denial, though without a particle of splendour or even good looks about them, except what an eye as fine as their own feelings might discern. (96)

"Gentlemen by nature" are the heroes of *Nickleby*, characters who will themselves into middle class respectability through sensibilities--"fine . . . feelings"--that successfully balance excess and restraint.

A number of the early, usually interesting Dickens commentators have little to say about *Nickleby*. G.K. Chesterton is too excited by *Pickwick* to be very helpful with the more complicated novels: "His books are a carnival of liberty, and there is more of the real spirit of the French Revolution in 'Nicholas Nickleby' than in 'The Tale of Two Cities'" (14). Where Chesterton is sometimes carelessly hyperbolic, George Gissing is so fastidious as to be equally unenlightening on the subject of *Nickleby*:

A mature reader turns away in disgust, and, if he belong to a hasty school of modern criticism, henceforth declares that Dickens is hopelessly antiquated, and was always vastly overpraised. (*Charles Dickens* 47)

Like many a critic after him, Gissing gives up coherent theories in favour of admiration for youthful energy in *The Immortal Dickens*: "the notable thing about it [*Nickleby*] is the vigorous spontaneity of its better parts" (89).

Edgar Johnson, in his classic Dickens biography, senses the carnivalesque at work in the novel, but he does not seem to have the critical tools to deal with it; he notes that "everywhere the individual scenes are vibrant with this anarchistic vitality" (287), but fails to see any unifying pattern:

Nickleby, however lacks the essential unity and coherence that blankets all of *Oliver* with its heavy evil. . . . In *Nickleby*, on the other hand, the diverse threads are loosely woven together, its varied scenes and crowds of characters related to each other in a sprawling picaresque improvisation in the eighteenth-century tradition of *Tom Jones* and *Roderick Random*.

....

But the triumphant achievement of the book is that these gratuitous interludes [Dotheboys, Crummies, the Mantalinis] start into a life so far exceeding their structural importance as to represent, in fact, *Nicholas Nickleby's* most vivid claim upon our memories. (285)

Once again, readers are asked to admire the novel purely for its high-spiritedness.

A number of critics are diverted by relatively minor themes in the novel. These include John Lucas in his *The Melancholy Man*, where he says "It is the theme of lives sacrificed to financial interest which gives *Nicholas Nickleby* such coherence as it has" (62). Sylvère Monod's *Dickens the Novelist* similarly ignores parts of the novel that do not fit his idea of the vital, incoherent early Dickens. Monod picks up on the critical red herring Dickens introduced in his prefaces to *Nickleby*, where Dickens insists on the veracity of his portrait of Dotheboys Hall and Squeers, and Monod proceeds to turn Dickens's satire of the Yorkshire schools into the central issue of the novel: "It [the first number] launched the plot vigorously and directed it at once toward the goal Dickens had chosen, the Yorkshire schools" (141). Monod also describes the early chapters with interpolated tales as "packed with irrelevant matter," a very different conclusion from other critics (see, for example, Gary H. Day's article "The Relevance of the *Nickleby* Stories") and my own. Finally, Monod grossly underestimates Dickens's artistic seriousness in the novel:

Yet Dickens' chief purpose in *Nickleby*--apart from the permanent need of earning money--remained sentimental rather than artistic. He wished above all to be in sympathy with his readers and to be loved by them. (165)

Philip Collins's *Dickens and Education* has much to say about the social effects of *Nickleby*, which Collins sums up as follows: "*Nicholas Nickleby* seems to have had an indiscriminate, but on the whole beneficial, effect" (104). Collins quotes a letter by Dickens to a five-year-old fan who wrote the novelist regarding his overly-lax treatment of the Squeers family. Dickens's wonderfully playful letter suggests, among other things, carnivalesque rewards for 'good' characters:

Nicholas had his roast lamb, as you said he was to, but he could not eat it all, and says if you do not mind his doing so he should like to have the rest hashed tomorrow with some greens, which he is very fond of, and so am I. He said he did not like to have his porter hot, for he thought it spoilt the flavour, so I let him have it cold. You should have seen him drink it. (104)

What this correspondence suggests is more the carnivalesque system of images and the uses Dickens made of it than an audience preoccupied with Dickens's reformist impulses.

Edmund Wilson's classic essay "The Wound and the Bow," puts its finger right on *Nickleby*'s middle-class pulse: "The main theme of *Nicholas Nickleby* is the efforts of Nicholas and his sister to vindicate their position as gentlefolk" (29). Like Forster, although more self-consciously, Wilson understands the importance of social self-construction in Dickens. Even more suggestive on this subject, and on its middle-class basis, is Steven Marcus's *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey*:

Nicholas Nickleby is a novel about the middle class, and Dickens unerringly made out that one qualifies for membership in it only by appearing to have joined long ago. (101)

Marcus also puts "this special preoccupation with children" (103) in its place as a middle-class obsession, and part of Dickens's larger social theme. Finally, he understands the essentially conservative social vision of the novel probably better than any other commentator:

Though . . . [the Cheerybles] dispense bags of money at the drop of a sugar cask, they are altogether indifferent to the prevention of poverty, and like most contemporary Christian philanthropists apply themselves to relief, not cure. *Nicholas Nickleby* in no way implies that poverty might be ameliorated through some organized procedure, let alone prevented, and the apparently deliberate absence in it of any prescriptive notions suggests even more strongly the ambiguity of Dickens's relation, at this moment, to the current radical movements. (113)

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