'WE ARE ALL ACTORS IN THE PANTOMIME OF LIFE': CHARLES DICKENS AND THE *MEMOIRS OF JOSEPH GRIMALDI*

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Abstract

During the nineteenth century, a number of writers, including W.H. Ainsworth and Wilkie Collins, proposed a relationship between fiction and drama. A number of critics have also examined this relationship in the work of Charles Dickens, but one of his most theatrical texts, the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* (1838), has been given little critical attention.

Yet by examining the *Memoirs* within the context of Dickens's earlier essay, 'The Pantomime of Life' (1837), I argue that in the *Memoirs* Dickens foregrounds the themes of theatre and performance in his depiction of Grimaldi's "offstage" life. Dickens integrates the principal figure of the pantomime Clown into the *Memoirs*, and uses both text and illustration to demonstrate the theatrical quality of life through the persistent presence of a demanding pantomime audience.

In 'The Pantomime of Life', Dickens demonstrates the theatrical nature of life by mixing off-stage and on-stage scenes in a way that shows how the stock characters of the pantomime have identifiable counterparts in the "real" world. In particular, he focuses on the mischievous figure of the Clown (as formulated in Grimaldi's act), who appears in life as the confidence trickster who uses his play-acting skills to dupe an audience so socially self-conscious that they are willing to believe in the pretence. This sort of character had already briefly appeared in *Sketches by Boz* (1836) but had been developed further in *The PickwickPapers* (1837) through the character of Alfred Jingle. In the *Memoirs*, the fictional figure of Jingle is reformulated in the real-life villain, Mackintosh.

The other aspect of the theatrical dynamic is the persistent presence of a pantomime audience, which Dickens often conflates with a volatile public mob. In a number of episodes in the *Memoirs*, Dickens demonstrates how the audience's misreading of the boundaries between on-stage and off-stage, which initially made them so attractive to confidence tricksters, becomes something more threatening. Grimaldi's identity becomes fixed, as he is forced regularly to perform outside of the playhouse, either for a large and unregulated mob on the London streets, or for a smaller group of people in the barber's shop.

Despite the author's early optimism, the *Memoirs* was a commercial failure for Dickens and, unsurprisingly, he declined the offer of helping Tom Ellar with a similar project. However, the *Memoirs* is better seen as part of one of Dickens's early projects in characterisation, in which life was refigured as a pantomime performance. Theorised in 'The Pantomime of Life', this theme runs through much of his early work, from *Sketches by Boz* to *Oliver Twist* (1838) and is also a recurrent motif in later characters such as Seth Pecksniff and Wilkins Micawber. In this way, Dickens refigures the character of Grimaldi, taking him from the stage and into the pages of his novels.

Writing for the stage

During the nineteenth century, a number of writers proposed a relationship between

fiction and drama. For example, W.H. Ainsworth asserted that 'the novelist is precisely in the position of the dramatist', and according to Wilkie Collins 'the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the Family of Fiction'.[1] Both of these authors would indeed demonstrate these claims in their own sensation novels, which Joseph Litvak calls 'the most obviously theatrical Victorian subgenre'.[2] But perhaps the most theatrical of all Victorian novelists was Charles Dickens. Dickens claimed that 'every writer of fiction […] writes, in effect, for the stage', and the theatrical sensibility of his major fiction has been examined by a number of scholars. Edwin Eigner, for example, feels that Dickens was 'a delighted spectator and [...] serious critic' of pantomime, and regards it as 'the essential pattern of Dickens's comedy, the basis for his psychological insights and his social vision, as well as the modus operandi of his aesthetics'.[3] Juliet John similarly acknowledges that Dickens's 'dramatic' techniques of characterisation are associated with 'contemporary forms of popular theatre like pantomime'.[4] However, she places greater emphasis on melodrama, arguing that it was the more popular theatrical genre and also because the evanescent, constantly changing nature of the pantomime form means that 'selfhood is metamorphic from the outset', and 'not circumscribed but protean'. Because of this lack of fixity, John feels that we cannot formulate a complex emotional response to pantomime characters: we do not see them 'as emotional – or psychological – beings but as fantastical, kaleidoscopic figures'.[5]

This article builds on the work of both of these critics. Most significantly, neither has adequately examined Dickens's *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, a text in which there are clear affinities between theatre (including pantomime) and fiction. Moreover, while Dickens's 'pantomimic' clowns may not be as complex as his villains, they are not as ephemeral and evanescent as John suggests. Certain behaviours were expected of pantomime Clowns, and A. E. Wilson notes, pantomime was, in fact, 'a stereotyped and heavily conventionalised business'.[6] As I shall demonstrate, both Grimaldi and Dickens articulated a very definite image of the Clown and his role, which became a template to which both would regularly return in performance and fiction respectively.

Grimaldi, who died in May 1837, was the pre-eminent pantomime performer

1 William Harrison Ainsworth, Preface to *Rookwood* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. xii.; Wilkie Collins, 'Letter of Dedication' in *Basil: A Story of Modern Life* (London: Blackwood, 1856), p. vi.
2 Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 129.
3 Edwin M. Eigner, *The Dickens Pantomime* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. x; Eigner, p. 8.
4 Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 8.
5 John, p. 12.
6 A.E. Wilson, *Christmas Pantomime: The Story of an English Institution* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1934), p. 92.

of his age. The pantomime historian Richard Findlater comments that from '1800 onwards, within a year of his first appearance in the role, Grimaldi was recognised as one of London's leading clowns', as he reinvented the role from the more Shakespearean fool or country bumpkin.[7] His theatrical collaborator, Charles Dibdin, asserts that Grimaldi 'in every respect, founded a New School for Clowns', as he made the great innovations in the make-up, costume and technique of the Clown role and overtook the Harlequin role in terms of importance.[8]

Dickens became engaged with the *Memoirs* project in October 1837, after his publisher Richard Bentley had acquired a hack-written manuscript directly based on Grimaldi's reminiscences. Despite his own enthusiasm for pantomime and Grimaldi, Dickens reluctantly took on the job of reworking this manuscript at an already busy time for him, as he juggled the serials of *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) and *Oliver Twist* (1838) and the editorship of *Bentley's Miscellany*. Given Grimaldi's relatively recent death, time was of the essence, and Dickens agreed to produce his own edited version by February 1838. In the final published edition, Dickens claims to be merely the editor, yet his creative input is revealed when he admits that he was 'much struck' by a number of the episodes and 'told some of the stories in [his] own way'.[9]

Since its publication, most critics have held this text in low regard; for example, Forster noted its 'great many critical faults' and Peter Ackroyd sees it as something Dickens wrote just 'to fill up the empty days' between novels.[10] More recently Michael Slater has offered a more constructive reading, but Richard Findlater epitomises the popular view when he dismisses the *Memoirs* as 'a literary misalliance' and 'among the most disappointing reminiscences in our theatrical literature'.[11] Findlater's principal complaint against the *Memoirs* is its 'failure to suggest [Grimaldi's] theatrical genius', as he argues that it is too full of green-room trivia and makes 'merely perfunctory' reference to Grimaldi's art and technique.[12] However, by examining the *Memoirs* within the context of Dickens's essay 'The Pantomime of Life' (1837), I would suggest that Dickens foregrounds the themes of theatre and performance in the *Memoirs* through his depiction of Grimaldi's 'offstage' life. Dickens both integrates the figure of the pantomime Clown into the *Memoirs*,

7 Richard Findlater, *Joe Grimaldi: His Life and Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 89-90.

8 Charles Dibdin, *Professional and Literary Memoirs of Charles Dibdin the Younger*, ed. by George Speaight (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1956), pp. 47-48.

9 *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, ed. by Charles Dickens, 2 vols, (London: Richard Bentley, 1846), I, p. x. Further references are given after quotations in the text, using the abbreviation *JG*; Letter to Dr J.A. Wilson (? 14 February 1838) in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Madeline House and Graham Storey, 12 vols, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965-2002), I, p. 373.

10 John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 3 vols, (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1872) I, p. 122; Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Minerva, 1991), p. 254.

11 Findlater, *Joe Grimaldi*, pp. 246-247.

12 Findlater, p. 247.

and uses text and illustration to demonstrate another aspect of the theatrical quality of life, the persistent presence of an audience.

Section II of this article will examine Dickens's depiction of the Clown in the *Memoirs*. In 'The Pantomime of Life', in which Dickens demonstrates how the stock characters of the pantomime have identifiable counterparts in the "real" world, he focuses on the mischievous figure of the Clown. The Clown's real life equivalent is the confidence trickster, who uses his play-acting skills to dupe an audience so socially self-conscious that they are willing to believe in his pretence. This sort of character had already briefly appeared in Dickens's writing but had appeared in the more fully developed figure of Alfred Jingle in *The Pickwick Papers* (1837). I will show how the fictional character Jingle is reformulated in the *Memoirs* into the real-life villain Mackintosh.

In Section III I will consider the other aspect of the theatrical dynamic, which is the persistent presence of a pantomime audience. Dickens often conflates this group with a volatile public mob, and in the *Memoirs*, he demonstrates how the audience's misreading of the boundaries between on-stage and off-stage, which initially made them so attractive to confidence tricksters, becomes something more threatening. Grimaldi's identity becomes fixed by the mob, as he is regularly forced to perform outside of the playhouse, either out on the London streets, or for smaller groups of people in more domestic settings.

Finally, Section IV will consider the position of *the Memoirs* within Dickens's work as a whole. Despite its commercial and critical failure, it nevertheless represents one of Dickens's early projects in characterisation. Theorised in 'The Pantomime of Life', Dickens's variation on the theme of *the theatrum mundi* runs through much of his early work and is also a recurrent motif in later characters such as Seth Pecksniff and Wilkins Micawber. In this way, Dickens refigures the character of Grimaldi, taking him from the stage and into the pages of his novels.

The players in life's pantomime

Dickens's essay 'The Pantomime of Life' first appeared in *Bentley's Miscellany* in March 1837, and is crucial to our understanding of Dickens's conception of the pantomime Clown and his theatrical sensibility as a whole. Although it appeared under the inauspicious heading 'Stray Chapters by Boz', and was only included to make up the page count after a short number of *Oliver Twist*, it belies its 'makeweight' function and, as Michael Slater comments, it 'may be seen as a sort of artistic manifesto by Dickens justifying the essential theatricality of his art'.[13]

Dickens sets out the central premise of this theatricality in the essay's opening paragraphs. He praises pantomime as a spectacular form of entertainment associated with two of his key indicators of value, holidays and childhood. But then, in an echo

13 Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 96.

of Hamlet, he explains its deeper appeal as 'a mirror of life', subtly interweaving depictions of pantomime scenes with episodes from everyday life in order to show how the stock types of pantomime correspond to real-life figures.[14] For example, the 'worthless and debauched' Pantaloon is twinned with 'that old gentleman who has just emerged from the *Café de l'Europe* in the Haymarket' (*PL*, p. 502). Dickens expects that his readers would know many such figures in their own social circles, and similarly claims that 'We see harlequins [*sic*] of so many kinds in the real living pantomime, that we hardly know which to select as the proper fellow of him of the theatres' (*PL*, p. 505). Even the supernumeraries, those 'men […] sent upon the stage for the express purpose of being cheated, or knocked down, or both' appear outside the playhouse as those 'odd, lazy, large-headed men, whom one is in the habit of meeting here, and there, and everywhere […] with no other view than to be constantly tumbling over each other, and running their heads against all sorts of strange things' (*PL*, p. 504). However, the central figure in this essay is the Clown, the figure that Dickens believes most suited to life in early nineteenth-century London. Grimaldi had developed the role of the pantomime Clown to be more than just the simple butt of the humour, and instead become 'very much the master of his fate' who 'displays the eager mischief of the *zanni*'.[15] Jane Moody neatly sums up the importance of Grimaldi's new Clown, when she describes him as 'the whimsical, practical satirist of the Regency city' who 'became a precious symbol of social licence'.[16]

In 'The Pantomime of Life', Dickens states that 'the close resemblance which the clowns [*sic*] of the stage bear to those of everyday life is perfectly extraordinary' and that 'Clowns that beat Grimaldi all to nothing turn up every day'. According to Dickens, in pantomime scenes in tailor's shops and boarding houses, the Clown creates 'the great fun of the thing' by 'taking lodgings which he has not the slightest intention of paying for', 'obtaining goods under false pretences' and 'swindling everybody he possibly can'. Moreover, the audience is enmeshed within a mutually gratifying relationship with the performer onstage; as Dickens asserts, 'the more extensive the swindling is, and the more barefaced the impudence of the swindler' then 'the greater the rapture and ecstasy of the audience' (*PL*, p. 503). As a real-life example of this character Dickens offers the example of 'Honourable Captain Fitz-Whisker Fiercy' who obtains a variety of goods based on his name and reputation. This reputation is maintained solely through performance, as he 'struts and swaggers about with that compound air of conscious superiority and general bloodthirstiness'

14 Charles Dickens 'The Pantomime of Life', in *Dickens' Journalism: Sketches by Boz and Other Early Papers 1833-1839*, ed. by Michael Slater (London: Phoenix, 1996), pp. 500-7 (p. 500). Further references are given after quotations in the text, using the abbreviation *PL*.

15 Findlater, p. 117.

16 Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-184*0 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 14.

expected of a military man (*PL*, p. 504). Eventually, however, he is exposed as an imposter and is imprisoned: in a pantomime ending, a kind of moral justice has been served. Crucially, however, Dickens once again points to the complicity of the Captain's 'audience' in his act. While *in* the theatre, the people whom the Captain defrauded happily sat in the front row and laughed the most exuberantly at the Clown's crimes. However, *outside* the playhouse, their confusion of onstage and offstage and willingness to believe the captain's performance have left them vulnerable to his deception.

Dickens's most significant inclusion of this Clownish figure in the *Memoirs* occurs in Grimaldi's encounters with the villain Mackintosh. This type of confidence trickster had originally appeared in *Sketches by Boz*, where figures like Horatio Sparkins, Theodosius Butler and Captain Waters used their most effective skills of impersonation to dupe an audience who were so anxious about their own social position that they were willing to believe these pretences of status. But the closest fictional prototype of Mackintosh is Alfred Jingle in *The Pickwick Papers*, the strolling actor thoroughly familiar with theatricality in all of its forms. Indeed, even the name of one of Jingle's assumed roles, 'Mr Charles Fitz-Marshall' carries echoes of the 'Honourable Captain Fitz-Whisker Fiercy'. In both the Jingle and Mackintosh episodes, Dickens demonstrates that the relationship between the pantomime player and the audience is based around two different types of assumption: the assumption of a role by the actor and the assumptions made by the audience about that actor.

Even before he appears in person, Mackintosh's audience articulate a number of preconceptions about him, which are later proved to be unfounded. For example, Grimaldi's friend Jack Bologna tells him that 'Mackintosh was understood to be […] a large landed proprietor, [with] most splendid preserves', only for it to be later revealed that the 'Mackintosh' named above the door of the public house is actually his mother (*JG*, I, p. 187). The villain knowingly reveals this with a wink and, while Bologna visibly displays his shock, Grimaldi laughs at this deception, which is a cue to us to read this incident like a piece of pantomime knockabout, a comical dig at the socially precious Bologna. Mackintosh explains his actions in terms that reveal his own awareness of this dual sense of assumption: 'I never let my London friends know who or what I am [...] I just lead them to guess I'm a great man, and there I leave 'em' (*JG*, I, p. 189). In a similar fashion, Jingle advises Tupman against announcing their names at the Rochester ball, asserting that 'Names won't do' and that '*incog*. [is] the thing', recommending that they pass themselves off as 'Gentlemen from London – distinguished foreigners – anything.'[17]

Both Mackintosh and Jingle develop this model of Clownish behaviour, adopting roles that artificially elevate their social standing. For example, Mackintosh takes his guests for a day's shooting on land that they mistakenly believe belongs to

17 Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 33-34. Further references are given after quotations in the text, using the abbreviation *PP*.

him, and Dickens again treats this event ambivalently by suggesting that Bologna's over-inflated expectations are as much to blame as anything Mackintosh has said or done. When he shows them the field of pigeons they will be shooting, Bologna and Grimaldi claim that they expected to find proper game birds, such as pheasants and partridges. Mackintosh shows incredulity at this, and he tells them that 'I invited you down here to shoot birds - and pigeons are birds: and there are the pigeons; - shoot away, if you like. I have performed my part of the agreement' (*JG*, I, p. 191).

In a similar fashion, Jingle does not actually steal Nathaniel Winkle's jacket to wear to the ball, but assumes the role of a touring gentleman whose luggage is carried by barge. The suggestible Pickwick Club then assumes Jingle is the person he says he is, and provides him with a jacket: in which he can assume another role, that of Winkle. Furthermore, as Jingle's impersonation of Winkle progresses, Dickens continues to show how this performance relies on audience participation. Jingle gives no name at the door, and does not verbally identify himself with Winkle in any way at all. In fact, the powers of 'assumption' are so strong on *both* sides that Winkle mistakenly believes that he really must have done the things of which he is accused: 'The fact is, I was very drunk; - I must have changed my coat - gone somewhere - and insulted somebody - I have no doubt of it; and this message is the terrible consequence' (*PP*, p. 40).

In the *Memoirs*, Mackintosh dismisses the shooting episode as a 'little trick [...] played in mere thoughtlessness', and even Grimaldi himself regards it as an 'absurd scrape' (*JG*, I, p. 225). However, their second encounter has a more serious tone, and the player/audience dynamic of 'The Pantomime of Life', in which 'the more barefaced the impudence of the swindler', the greater the captivation of the audience, is strained even further. Mackintosh invites Grimaldi into a new group of friends in London, telling him that they were very wealthy and could be very useful to him, again relying on Grimaldi's own social expectations to make his own assumptions about how these people might be useful. Dickens indicates the facade of this act in terms that firmly position Grimaldi as an enraptured member of an audience. We are told that he had 'cause for astonishment' when he visited Mackintosh's new house and that, like someone watching one of his pantomimes, he 'actually began to doubt the reality of what he saw' (*JG*, I, pp. 226-227).

In *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens similarly depicts the coach journey to Rochester as one of the audacious actor entrancing his audience, as each member of the Pickwick Club takes his turn to demonstrate how far they are taken in by Jingle's act. They each accept the wildly varying tales he tells of his life to the extent that Pickwick and Snodgrass write them down as a matter of record, filling their notebooks with Jingle's adventures. When Jingle leaves the group at the end of the journey, Dickens leaves us in no doubt that all of the members of the Pickwick Club had been thoroughly taken in:

> "Evidently a traveller in many countries, and a close observer of men and things," said Mr Pickwick.
> "I should like to see his poem", said Mr Snodgrass.
> "I should like to have seen that dog", said Mr Winkle.
> Mr Tupman said nothing; but he thought of Donna Christina, the stomach pump, and the fountain; and his eyes filled with tears. (*PP*, p. 29).

When the crimes of both villains are finally revealed, they both display the sort of amused and mischievous contempt at the gullibility of their victims regularly displayed by Grimaldi's Clown as he fooled the Pantaloon or Dandy Lover. When confronted by Grimaldi's willingness to believe in Mackintosh's act even when he has been imprisoned, the imposter finds it hard to suppress his mirth, and explains his deceptions 'with a slight tremor in his voice which, despite his serious situation, arose from an incipient tendency to laughter' (*JG*, I, p. 5). Jingle acts in the same way; when Pickwick's coach crashes in pursuit of him, a 'shameless' Jingle shows mock concern: 'any body damaged? – elderly gentlemen – no light weights – dangerous work – very' (*PP*, p. 127). Wardle's designation of him as 'a rascal' seems to amuse him further and as his coach escapes, Jingle derisively flutters a white handkerchief from the coach window. These casual attitudes provoke angry responses in their victims, and in 'The Pantomime of Life' Dickens called this indignant reaction of the audience 'the best of the joke'. He observed that the member of the audience 'who is the loudest in his complaints against the person who defrauded him' outside of the theatre, was very often 'the identical man who […] laughed most boisterously at this very same thing' when in the theatre (*PL*, p. 504).

Accordingly, both Grimaldi and Pickwick express outrage towards figures who they had regarded with amusement not so long ago. In the face of Mackintosh's casual attitude, Grimaldi becomes very angry, 'starting up with uncontrollable fury', and seizing Mackintosh by the throat (*JG*, II, p.7). Similarly, when Jingle is bought off by Wardle, we are told that anyone watching Pickwick 'would have been almost induced to wonder that the indignant fire which flashed from his eyes did not melt the glasses of his spectacles – so majestic was his wrath. His nostrils dilated, and his fists clenched involuntarily' (*PP*, p. 142). Finally, the supposed epitome of Dickensian benevolence explodes, madly hurling an inkstand at Jingle and lunging at him.

Playhouse audiences and public mobs

These violent consequences demonstrate the sometimes volatile nature of the player/audience relationship and both 'The Pantomime of Life' and the *Memoirs* often suggest that the player has as much to lose as he has to gain from the transaction. Indeed, in his presentation of the audience as an unregulated mob providing their own unpredictable interpretations of the performances before them, Dickens reveals an anxiety about the overall value and limitations of the player/audience dynamic.

In this section, I will demonstrate how this is articulated through both text and illustration. The *Memoirs* was one of Dickens's four collaborations with George Cruikshank, who personally knew Grimaldi as an Islington neighbour and member of his 'Crib' drinking club. Through their work together here, I would argue that Dickens and Cruikshank refigure Meisel's assertion that the nineteenth-century play 'is the evident meeting place of story and picture' by making Grimaldi's story the meeting-place of theatre and picture.[18] In this subtle synthesis, Dickens invests this story with images of theatricality, while Cruikshank underscores this theatricality through his pictures. These plates are both 'realisations' and 'illustrations' according to Meisel's definitions of these terms; they both give a 'concrete perceptual form to a literary text' but also offer an 'interpretive re-creation' that enrich and embellish the text further.[19] To demonstrate this, I shall later examine a number of the scenes in the *Memoirs* that were presented as both text and picture.

Dickens establishes the uneasy nature of the relationship between performer and audience early on in 'The Pantomime of Life' when we are introduced to the elderly Pantaloon. His happiness is interrupted when he falls over in the street and is violently attacked by a 'noisy and officious crowd', much to the amusement of the audience, who 'roar', become 'convulsed with merriment' and 'exhausted with laughter'. But when Dickens describes the same scene in the real world, in the Stock Exchange or a tradesman's shop, the audience transform from being merely a passive group of spectators into the actual mob; they raise 'a wild hallo' and 'whoop and yell as [the man] lies humbled beneath them' (*PL*, p. 501). Within the same sentence, they are simultaneously actors and observers, both attacking him as he lies on the floor, and then mocking and deriding him as he tries to escape. The very quality that make the audience such an attractive prospect for confidence tricksters, which is the way in which they misread or even ignore the boundaries between theatre and real life, here becomes something disruptive and something to fear. Thus in the *Memoirs* the audience treat a very real and violent beating that young Joe Grimaldi receives onstage as part of his performance. They regard the thrashing of Joe, who cried and 'roared vociferously', as 'a most capital joke', laughing and applauding, while the reviewers comment that it was 'perfectly wonderful to see a mere child perform so naturally' (*JG*, I, p. 16).

In another episode from his childhood, Joe goes to visit his grandfather's in clothes that his father hopes will present him as 'a gentleman' to everyone who sees him on the street. But the boy is treated with derision rather than admiration by the passing public, as his performance is again misinterpreted and read as another comedy routine, rather than a serious social appearance. He is variously called a 'monkey', a 'bear dressed for a dance' and a 'cat going out for a party', and rather than

18 Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 3.
19 Meisel, p. 32.

growing in status through his performance, he is diminished; the mob-audience 'could not help laughing heartily, and saying how ridiculous it was to trust a child in the streets alone' (*JG*, I, p. 24).

Cruikshank's accompanying illustration, 'Master Joey going to visit his Godpapa', develops these themes further. It shows the small figure of Joe promenading along the pavement as the very model of deportment, and striking an attitude appropriate to his gentleman's costume. He holds his head very upright, looking straight forward in the approved posture, and remaining solemnly aloof from the crowd gathering around him. Here he is very much in the role of the observed, and has attracted quite an audience, which Cruikshank carefully delineates for us. For example, the poor woman who receives Joe's guinea clasps her hands together as if begging or possibly even in anxious prayer for the boy's safety, and two taller figures are in conversation, discussing and reviewing the spectacle before them. The group of figures immediately behind him include a ragged collection of four or five boys that constitute the core of the mob-audience. They all menacingly dwarf 'Master Joey' and at least three carry the tools of various trades, denoting them as firmly proletarian: the centre boy carries a pair of baskets, the boy to his left a sack, and the boy to the right a broom (an early predecessor of Jo in *Bleak House* (1853)). As we have seen, Joe's life as a boy-actor was hardly a comfortable or genteel one, but his father's insistence that his son is 'a gentleman' puts him into stark contrast with these boys. Finally, right in the centre is the largest figure of all, who wears a tradesman's apron; his jaunty hat, coloured nose and slightly irregular eyes suggest drunkenness, in contrast with Joe's temperate father. The composition of the picture is such that Joe is enclosed on all sides by these characters, as well as by railings, a closed door and a brick wall in the background. He is forced to perform in the public space, and is at the mercy of their interpretation.

George Cruikshank, 'Master Joey going to visit his Godpapas' (*'Memoirs', Book I*)

A parallel episode occurs in *Oliver Twist*, a novel in which the narrative is driven entirely by the player/audience dynamic and the different reactions that the audience have to the main performer, Oliver. Like Joe's father, Mr Brownlow carefully prepares the runaway boy for his new role as a young gentleman, and Oliver's initial break from criminality and poverty is primarily signalled through a

similar set of stage props: a 'complete new suit, and a new cap, and a new pair of shoes'.[20] Oliver's performance is also a failure, as the people he meets on his way to the bookseller's designate him as a 'young wretch' and a 'little brute' (pp. 107-8). Although Bill and Nancy act as physical assailants, it is significant that Dickens tells us that what really overpowers the boy is the audience's unfavourable response to his performance, 'the conviction of the bystanders that he really was the hardened little wretch he was described to be' (pp. 107-8). J. Hillis Miller offers a similar interpretation, recognising how the "fourth wall", that gap between the player and their audience, has collapsed. He explains that 'the labyrinth' of the city has 'turned into a hostile crowd which, no longer remaining at a distance, turns on the protagonist and hunts him down'.[21] Here the mob-audience's malevolent intent is fully realised; 'the aim of the mob is not simply to catch him, but to 'crowd' him to death. The crowd 'jostles' and 'struggles' centripetally toward Oliver, and will suffocate him or crush him if it can'.[22]

Cruikshank's drawing of this scene, 'Oliver claimed by his affectionate friends', once again complements and reinforces the ideas of the text, and also echoes the *Memoirs* illustration. This time the figures are fewer, but are more tightly closed around the boy, who is far from the aloof and steady 'Master Joe': physically assailed on three sides by Nancy, Bill Sikes and even Bullseye, he looks upwards with visible anguish. The composed posture of young Grimaldi is replaced by the frightened Oliver desperately clutching the books that symbolise his more refined life with Mr Brownlow. The smarter setting of the *Memoirs* illustration, with its relatively genteel house-door, front railings and clear pavement is replaced by the more squalid doorway of a beer-shop. With its gaudy signage, this shop-front and doorway frames the scene like a proscenium arch, underscoring its theatrical nature further. The crowd no longer keep their distance; two of them have laid their hands on the boy, and one of them is a nightmarish distortion of the slightly drunken figure at the centre of the Grimaldi illustration; his benevolent smile has been replaced by the grim features of the heavy-drinking Bill Sikes.

20 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1993), p. 96.
21 J. Hillis Miller, 'Oliver Twist' in *Oliver Twist* (1993), (pp. 432-441), p. 440.
22 Hillis Miller, *Oliver Twist*, p. 440.

George Cruikshank, 'Oliver claimed by his affectionate friends', Frontispiece to 'Oliver Twist' (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966)

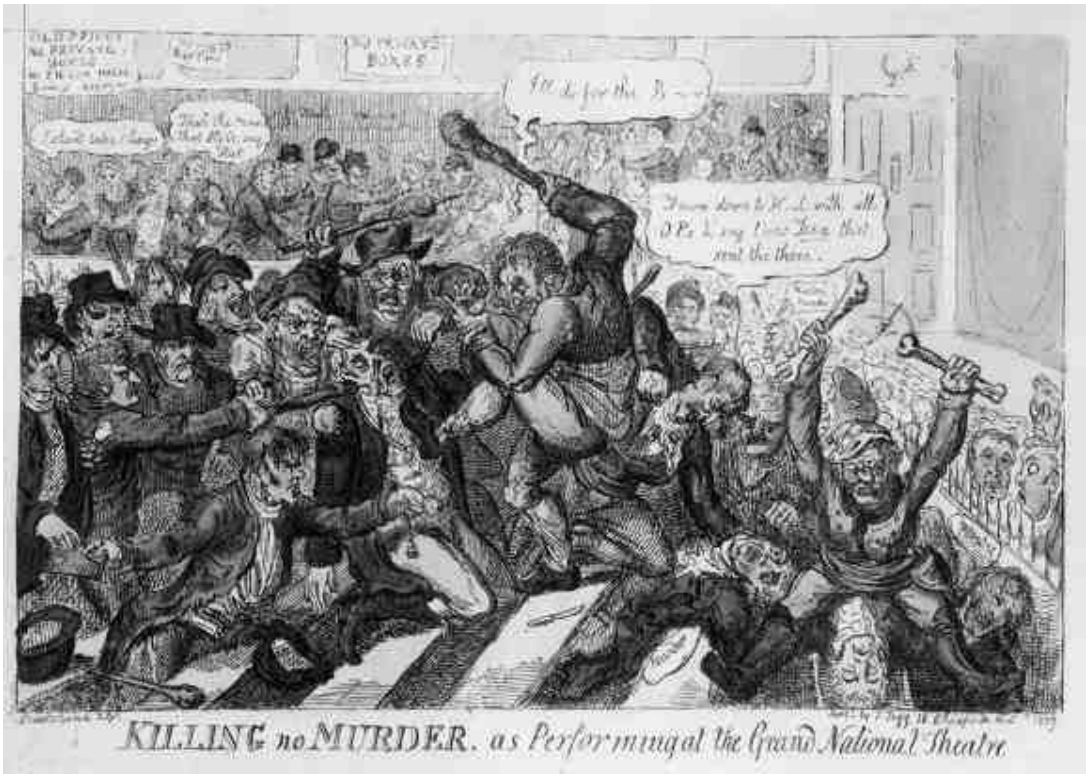
Indeed, the careful composition of this illustration made it sufficiently theatrical to merit its remediation in J. Stuart Blackton's silent film version of the novel in 1909. Juliet John describes Blackton's film as 'the earliest screen version that is more than a filmed scene', but this close visual correspondence clearly owes a debt to the idea of the *tableau vivant*.[23] As Meisel demonstrates, in the theatre the *tableau* represented the fusion of narrative and picture, in which 'the actors strike an expressive stance [...] that crystallizes a stage of the narrative as a situation, or

23 Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 216n.

summarizes and punctuates it', and in the case of Cruikshank's illustration, this adaptation of a theatrical mode into a pictorial realization (which is then in turn reconfigured as an early cinematic technique) demonstrates the versatility of Dickens's imagery.[24]

It is also worth considering that Dickens's conflation of the raucous mob of the street with the playhouse audience was no mere imaginative construct, but carried a strong historical precedent in which both Grimaldi and George Cruikshank were implicated. During the 'Old Price' Riots of 1809 and 1810, during which theatre audiences at the Covent Garden theatre angrily protested against rises in ticket prices and the installation of private boxes, the audience *became* the mob and entirely collapsed the boundary between stage and audience. These events touched both Grimaldi, as a performer at Covent Garden, and also George Cruikshank, who, with his brother Robert, produced at least fourteen O.P. propaganda prints between October and November 1809. Robert's print 'Killing No Murder, as Performing at the Grand National Theatre' neatly encapsulates the porousness of the on-stage/off-stage boundary. The caption suggests that we will see the realisation of a play scene, but what we actually get is a grisly scene from the real-life drama that was happening within the audience. The original stage is curtained off to the right, and is peripheral to the real performance: the rioters are literally centre-stage here. Another figure taking his own type of performance outside of its usual bounds is the Jewish prize-fighter Daniel Mendoza, who is shown trying to put down the rioters on the theatre manager Kemble's orders.

24 Meisel, p. 45.



Robert Cruikshank, 'Killing no Murder, as Performing at the Grand National Theatre' (1809)

Marc Baer also describes this participative trend in the theatre audience when the pit became 'the people's theatre' during the riots, as the crowds were 'prepared to answer the stage with dramatics of their own'.[25] For example, on the 23rd October 1809, during a pantomime containing gladiatorial combat, the audience staged mock fights of their own, thus destroying the "fourth wall" and making the entire auditorium a single playing space.

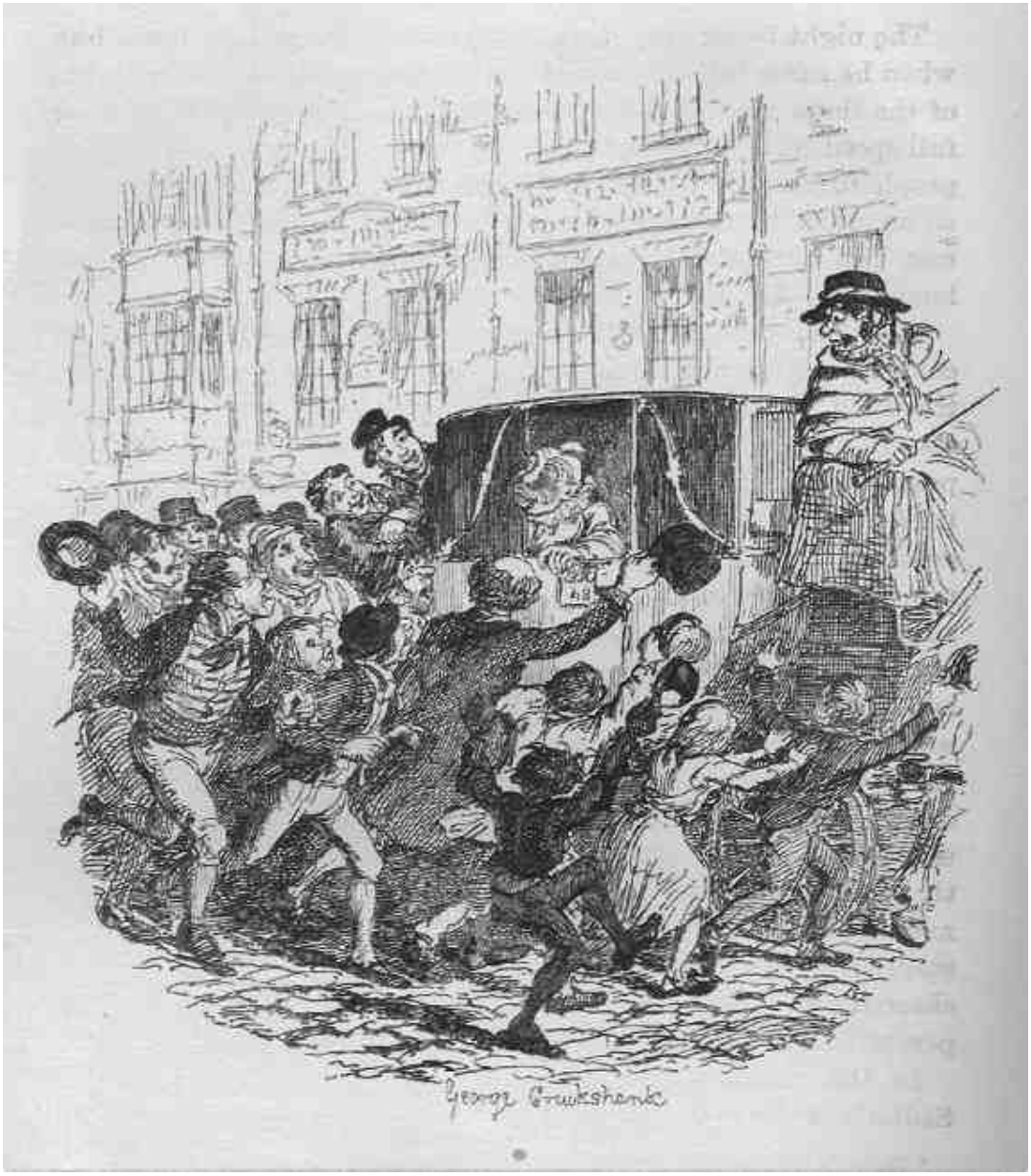
In the *Memoirs*, Dickens discusses the riots and shows how people in the audience used their own performances as an act of protest. Audience members take on new roles, such as the man who 'regaled himself and the company with a watchman's rattle', and another who rang 'a large dustman's bell […] with a perseverance and strength of arm quite astounding to all beholders'. Live pigs were brought into the playhouse and were 'pinched at the proper times', which 'added considerably to the effect of the performances' (*JG*, II, pp. 69-70). Moreover, as in Robert Cruikshank's print, the presence of the officially-designated performers was negated in other ways. In a parody of the usual theatrical etiquette, the theatre manager 'Kemble was constantly called for, constantly came on, and constantly went off again without being able to obtain a hearing'. The speeches usually heard from the

25 Marc Baer, *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 63.

officially designated stage were replaced with soliloquies from other parts of the theatre; 'scarce an evening passed', we are told, 'without flaming speeches being made from the pit, boxes and gallery' (*JG*, II, p. 70). The observers had become the observed and *vice versa*.

Throughout the narrative of the *Memoirs*, Grimaldi is revealed to be dependent on this audience-mob and their variable interpretations. In another episode, he is late for a show and runs through the streets in full costume and make-up. As soon as he is recognised as the famous Clown, 'on came the mob, shouting, huzzaing, screaming out his name, throwing up their caps and hats, and exhibiting every manifestation of delight'. He is eventually cornered in a carriage, and is only able to placate the mob by performing for them, even though he is outside the theatre and the official show is not scheduled to start yet he 'suddenly poking his head out of the window, he gave one of his famous and well-known laughs' (*JG*, II, p. 76). Because Grimaldi had performed his expected role to their satisfaction, the mob and audience show their approval through laughter and applause before helping him reach his destination.

The accompanying illustration, 'Appearing in public', contains the idea of the stage figure within its very title. Celebrities and professional performers often make public appearances that are seen as quite separate to their onstage performances, which are circumscribed within the conventional performing spaces of the stage and screen. To further develop the themes of the text, the audience for a performance and the crowd in the street are conflated into a single group, occupying both positions simultaneously. Within his stage-coach, Joe himself is once again framed upon a kind of stage as his head is framed by the window from which he leans out. This point is the focus of attention for every other figure in the picture, from the groundlings running alongside the coach, to the more privileged members of the audience seated on the coach at either side of him. Even if we disregard his incriminating slap and motley, this is clearly marked as a public performance by Grimaldi.



George Cruikshank, 'Appearing in Public' ('Memoirs', Book II)

To underline the relationship between the crowd outside and the audience inside, Dickens tells us that 'such of them as had money rushed round to the gallery-doors, and [made] their appearance in the front just as he came on stage, set[ting] up a boisterous shout of 'Here he is again!" (*JG*, II, 77). In their minds, there was no difference between the person on stage and the person they saw on the streets.

Furthermore, alongside these larger mobs there are many examples of Joe being asked to "perform" offstage for the benefit of smaller groups, even for just a handful of people: from the Earl of Derby asking the infant Joey to grimace and throw his wig into the green room fire, to a dinner at the house of a reverend

gentleman in Bath who only invites Joe in order for him to perform at the dinner table. One such domestic scene in which Grimaldi seems almost trapped into performing outside of the theatre is the barber-shop scene. Indeed, its suitability for the stage is underlined by Dickens when he indicates that Grimaldi was so amused by the episode that he wanted to develop it into a scene for one of his pantomimes. This telling detail of taking it off the street and onto the stage also represents an attempt to limit and contain its performance. But as we have seen, such containment is impossible; performance, and the interpretation of one's actions as performance, cannot be confined within the walls of the playhouse.

The episode itself is told in a very straightforward narrative that often reads as a series of stage directions, and the accompanying dialogue is equally stylised. For example, when Grimaldi returns to the barber's a third time to see if the proprietor had returned:

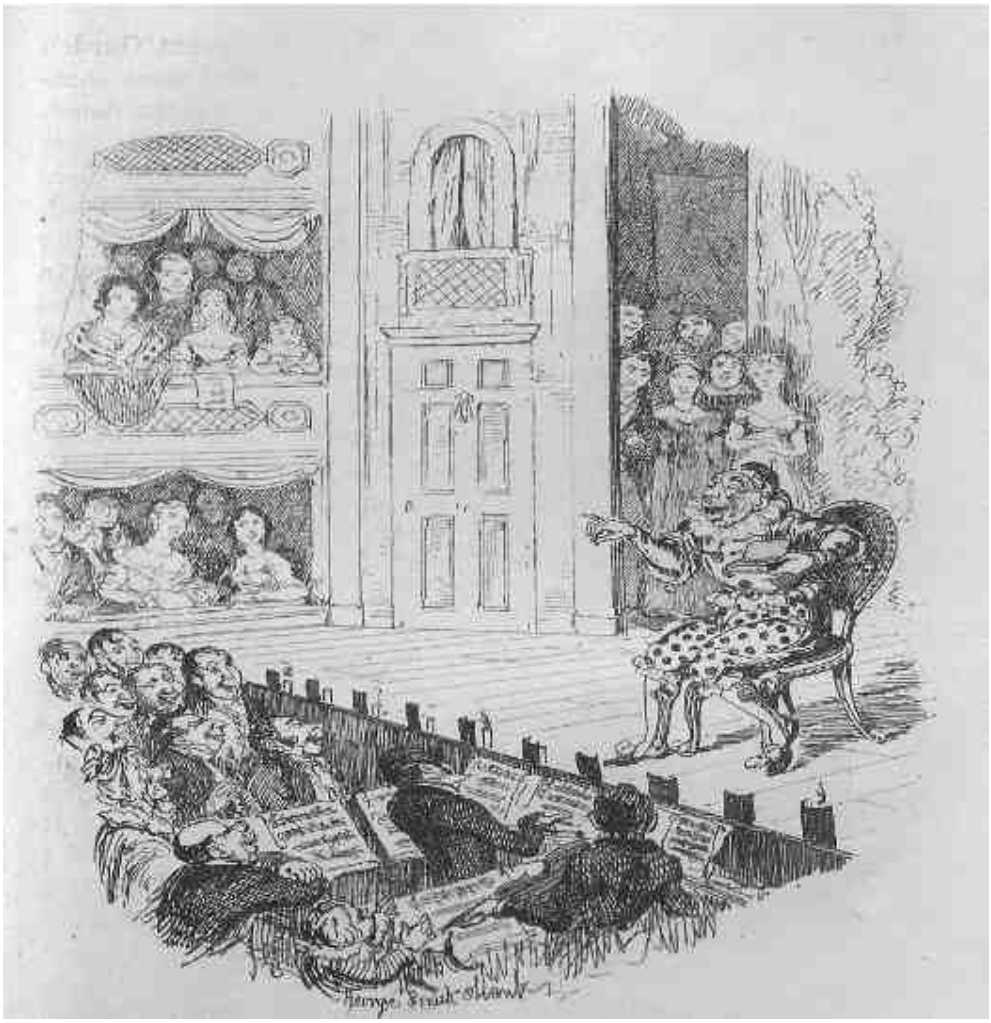
> The girl was still sitting at work; but she laid it aside when the visitors entered, and said she really was very sorry, but her father had not come in yet.
> "That's very provoking", said Grimaldi, "considering that I have called here three times already"
> The girl agreed that it was, and, stepping to the door, looked anxiously up the street and down the street, but there was no barber in sight.
> "Do you want to see him on any particular business?", inquired Howard [Grimaldi's companion].
> "Bless my heart! No, not I", said Grimaldi: "I only want to be shaved".
> "Shaved, sir!", cried the girl. "Oh, dear me! What a pity it is that you did not say so before! For I do most of the shaving for father when he's at home, and all when he's out".

Everything here is entirely on the level of surface and the conversation is unnatural for a real exchange, and yet quite suitable for the dialogue of a play. While in the barber's chair, being shaved by this young girl, the comic nature of the scene appeals to Grimaldi's compulsive desire to perform: we are told that he felt 'an irresistible tendency to laugh at the oddity of the operation' (*JG*, II, p. 117). Grimaldi finally succumbs to his performative side, and when the real barber returns, he discovers Joe 'with a soapy face and a gigantic mouth making the most extravagant faces over a white towel', and comments that 'that gentleman as was being shaved, was out of sight the funniest gentleman he had ever seen' (*JG*, II, p. 118).

This scene is illustrated in Cruikshank's plate 'The Barber's Shop', which once again reinforces the idea of an "offstage" Grimaldi performing for an audience. Here he is the focus of his audience's attention, and the whole scene is shown in a cut-away view resembling a stage set, with a subtle proscenium arch across the top that foregrounds its theatricality further.

George Cruikshank, 'The Barber Shop' ('Memoirs', Book II)

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



George Cruikshank, 'The Last Song' (*'Memoirs', Book II)*

This relentless presence of an audience follows Grimaldi almost to the end of his life. Even after his final farewell benefit at Drury Lane, an event which by its very nature is supposed to signify a closure for the performative side of Joe's identity, he is followed back to his home by a mob-audience. They still refuse to make a distinction between inside and outside the theatre, and could not 'be prevailed upon to disperse until he had appeared on the top of the steps, and made his farewell bow' (*JG*, II, p. 194), indulging them with one more theatrical gesture.

It is significant, then, that the only time Joe was without an audience was on his death-bed. Rather than the public, dramatic end reserved for great heroes, Joe Grimaldi slipped quietly away, alone in his bedroom: it was a few hours later that his housekeeper 'found him dead' (*JG*, II, p. 207). Dickens notes the significance of this in the final line of his 'Concluding Chapter', when he instructs his readers to remember that 'the light and life of a brilliant theatre were exchanged in an instant for the gloom and sadness of a dull sick room' (*JG*, II, p. 211). But it is only for an

instant. For the majority of his life, Joe was defined by an ever-present audience, and in the act of writing his memoirs, sought one even after his death.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the *Memoirs* can, to some extent, be seen as a rare false stroke for Dickens. Although he excitedly told Forster soon after its publication that 'Seventeen hundred *Grimaldis* have already been sold and the demand increases daily!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!' (with 29 exclamation marks), the remaining thirteen hundred of the initial run remained unsold.[26] Subsequent editions have been produced, most notably Charles Whitehead's in 1846 and Richard Findlater's in 1968, but neither provoked any substantial revival in critical interest. It is probably not surprising, therefore, that when Tom Ellar approached him with a similar biographical project, Dickens declined, feeling that all Ellar could hope to gain from 'such a proceeding' was 'disappointment and vexation'.[27] However, in this article I have demonstrated that a case can be made for its value in other terms. Although it certainly failed as a stand-alone commercial biography, the *Memoirs* is better seen as part of one of Dickens's early projects in characterisation, in which life was refigured as a pantomime performance. This project began in *Sketches by Boz*, was formulated into a central thesis in 'The Pantomime of Life', and was also worked through both *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, principally revolving around a central dynamic of the player and their audience.

Andrew McConnell Stott's recent biography, *The Pantomime Life of Joseph Grimaldi* (2009), interprets the offstage life of its subject through the art he practised on it, and in the *Memoirs*, Dickens similarly demonstrates how the world of the playhouse and the world outside of it cannot be separated in any comfortable and neat way. In his own memoirs, Tate Wilkinson observed of David Garrick that 'Mr Garrick was the actor on the stage of life; and on the stage itself he was not the actor, but the life's exact mirror he held to public view'.[28] It is through this clever inversion that Dickens's life of Grimaldi can be best understood.

In fact, this idea never really left Dickens. Throughout his career, he would populate his novels with other show-stealing characters whose very sense of self depended on both their skills at role-playing and the presence of audience who would be complicit in their performance. For example, the hypocrite Seth Pecksniff is constantly engaged in the manipulation of those around him through his exaggerated gestures, the management of his public appearances and his careful staging of supposedly spontaneous encounters with others. Similarly, as Stephen Wall notes, William Dorrit 'can only sustain his life as a prisoner by fictions and pretence', which

26 Letter to John Forster (?Late March 1838), *Letters*, I, 391.
27 Letter to Thomas Ellar (27 September 1839), *Letters*, I, 586.
28 Tate Wilkinson, *Memoirs of his own life*, 3 vols, (Dublin, 1791), II, p. 37.

includes his performance of the roles of 'Father of the Marshalsea' and 'William Dorrit, Esquire', as well as careful attention to the response of the 'audience' members of Marshalsea 'College' and a London social scene which is itself based on pretence.[29]

In his 'Concluding Chapter' to the *Memoirs*, Dickens claims that 'the genuine droll, [...] grimacing [...] filching, irresistible Clown left the stage with Grimaldi, and though often heard of, has never since been seen' (*JG*, II, p. 209). Yet as I have shown, this is not entirely true; it is perhaps more accurate to suggest that he stepped off the stage and into the pages of Dickens's novels, where he would be endlessly revived for generations to come.

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