



The Pickwick Papers and the Rise of the Serial

The illustrations are, as usual, full of excellent character. The ease and skill with which they are drawn are among the least of their merits; they have an artistical feeling and arrangement, most rare in things of this kind. But it is enough to say of them that they are scarcely unequal to the subjects they illustrate—we feel this to be extraordinary praise.

Unsigned review of *The Pickwick Papers*, *Examiner*, 1837

proof

Beginning in April 1836 and concluding with a double number in November 1837, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (*P*) came out in nineteen illustrated part issues in decorative green wrappers for the cost of a shilling each.¹ An unprecedented publishing phenomenon, *Pickwick* attracted fans across the social classes, generated a host of *Pickwick*-related products, and earned glowing reviews. In his above (unsigned) *Examiner* review, Dickens's first biographer, John Forster, devotes a full paragraph to the illustrations "full of excellent character." Four decades later in his biography of Dickens, Forster describes a snowball effect in the admiration of this illustrated Victorian blockbuster far better appreciated in its time than today. *Pickwick*

sprang into a popularity that each part carried higher and higher, until people at this time talked of nothing else, tradesmen recommended their goods by using its name, and its sale, outstripping at a bound that of all the most famous books of the century, had reached to an almost fabulous number. (*Life* 1: 129).

To Forster, "Judges on the bench and boys in the street, gravity and folly, the young and the old, those who were entering life and those who were quitting it, alike found [*Pickwick*] to be irresistible" (130). As the author of *The Life*

of Charles Dickens (1872–74) and Dickens’s close friend, Forster had a vested interest in promoting Dickens and his reputation for posterity. But William Makepeace Thackeray, who was never a fan of Dickens, likewise singled out *Pickwick’s* importance to Victorian publishing, noting: “I am sure that a man who, a hundred years hence, should sit down and write the history of our time, would do wrong to put that great contemporary history of ‘Pickwick’ aside as a frivolous work” (*Paris Sketch Book* 119).

I place *The Pickwick Papers* at the beginning of the arc of the Victorian illustrated book because this quintessential Victorian “commodity-text . . . could reach, as it produced, a mass audience” (Feltes 13). This chapter examines interwoven factors that contributed to *Pickwick’s* popularity, including the growth of commodity culture, a rise in literacy, new printing technologies, serialization, and the appeal of reading pictures, particularly humorous ones. *Pickwick’s* blend of comedy, theatricality, and social commentary led to the serial’s success and, in the process, created a mass market for new fiction with illustrations.

Pickwick was not the first popular illustrated serial in nineteenth-century England. Pierce Egan’s *Life in London* (1821), illustrated by George and Robert Cruikshank, first appeared in monthly parts at a shilling per issue and had a large Regency fan base. *Life in London* follows Tom, a fashionable London rake, and Jerry, his country cousin, as they experience the high and low pleasures of London life. Some Victorians including Thackeray found *Life in London* vulgar, and present-day scholars have lamented how “the plates and the text proper often have absolutely nothing to do with each other” (Meisel 54). *Life in London* entered the Regency marketplace through an array of material forms, merchandise, and productions—broadsides, chapbooks, pottery, souvenir programs, and performances—and its commodification could be seen as an anticipation of *Pickwick* mania. In *Picturing Scotland Through the Waverley Novels* (2010), Richard Hill alternately argues that Sir Walter Scott’s early nineteenth-century novels impacted the market for illustrated books well before “the more celebrated Victorian illustrated novels of Dickens and Thackeray” (4). To Hill, “The illustration of novels by a living author was an innovation in publishing at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Constable, Cadell, and Scott together created something new for a developing middle-class readership: the affordable, popular, illustrated novel” (2).²

Alternately, critics including Richard Maxwell claim that Scott was indifferent to illustration or only interested in book illustration for commercial reasons.³ The illustrated editions of Scott’s *Waverley* novels do not follow the definition of the Victorian illustrated book that guides this examination:

“The novelist wrote in collaboration with an artist he had worked with often before; he wrote knowing he must have illustrations” and often determined which scenes should be illustrated while writing the monthly parts (Harvey 180). Whereas the first illustrations for the Waverley novels came out in 1820 in a separate supplement to accompany preexisting editions of Scott, Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers* came out in monthly parts with illustrations that were integral to the serial’s success.

Serendipity

In the early to mid-1830s, Charles Dickens was an energetic but relatively unknown author. Working as a journalist, Dickens covered election campaigns for the *Morning Chronicle* and, between 1833–36, published dozens of literary “sketches” of London life in periodicals and newspapers, such as the *Evening Chronicle*, the *Monthly Magazine*, *Bell’s Life in London*, and the *Morning Chronicle*. Publisher John Macrone collected fifty-six of Dickens’s nonfiction sketches and printed them in two volumes under the title *Sketches by Boz* (1836) with illustrations by George Cruikshank. Already well established as a caricaturist and satirist, Cruikshank drew an audience to Dickens’s vignettes of character types that Dickens developed into memorable characters in his best-known novels: a parish beadle from *Sketches by Boz* forms the basis for Mr. Bumble in *Oliver Twist* (*OT*, 1838); a schoolmaster from *Sketches* reappears first in *Hard Times* (1854) as the exacting Mr. Thomas Gradgrind and later in *Our Mutual Friend* (*OMF*, 1865) as the mentally unbalanced Bradley Headstone; a pick-pocket from *Sketches* transforms into the Artful Dodger in Fagin’s merry band in *Oliver Twist*.

The positive reception of *Sketches by Boz* led Edward Chapman and William Hall to approach Dickens with the idea of providing letterpress for a series of engravings by Robert Seymour to be published in monthly parts. Chapman and Hall specifically hired Dickens in “the secondary role of script-writer” (Kinsley vii) to enhance Seymour’s pictures. This contractual arrangement recalls a pre-1820s definition of illustration, which meant verbal explanation, enrichment, or annotation (Meisel 30–31),⁴ not an “illustrative picture; a drawing, plate, engraving, cut, or the like, illustrating or embellishing a literary article, a book, etc.” (*OED*) as we take for granted today; the insertion of a well-known artist’s name or a term like “engraved” in the book’s title was essential to convey that a picture illustrated the text and not vice versa. Only after the 1820s, when technological innovations expanded the production of illustrated books, did

the meaning of illustration begin to shift from verbal enrichment or annotation to a Victorian conception of illustration meaning pictorial re-creation and/or enhancement, an image shedding light on a written text.⁵

There are Regency precedents for Chapman and Hall's proposed arrangement of contracting an author, in this case Dickens, to illustrate by writing up an artist's pictures. William Combe provided comical verse to accompany Thomas Rowlandson's caricatures for *The Tour of Doctor Syntax, in Search of the Picturesque: A Poem* (1812) and its two sequels published in 1820 and 1821.⁶ These parodies of books from the popular picturesque movement, particularly those by William Gilpin, follow Dr. Syntax, a comical clergyman and schoolmaster, who sets out on his horse to make a tour with the intention of writing about his rambles, which are filled with silly misfortunes. Rowlandson's enormously popular hand-colored caricature-style illustrations grant the hapless character a decidedly long chin that did not escape the attention of Jane Austen, who told her beloved sister, Cassandra, in a letter dated 2–3 March 1814: "I have seen nobody in London yet with such a long chin as Dr Syntax."⁷

Dr. Syntax—a genteel and good-natured figure of folly who visually anticipates the character of Samuel Pickwick in inviting viewers to laugh at him—has an excessively long jaw in Rowlandson's "Doctor Syntax & The Bees" (see fig. 1) for *The Second Tour of Doctor Syntax, in Search of Consolation: A Poem*. Combe's comic verse magnifies the plate's broad humor:

Talk'd o'er in terms of frolic ease
His curious battle with the bees,
And made his tumble in the water
A source of fun and gen'ral laughter. (221)

At war with a swarm of bees attacking his white wig, Dr. Syntax in this plate rises out of his chair and "tumbles" toward a large sarcophagus of water to escape the bees' stings.⁸ The pointed configuration of insects above Syntax's head exaggerates the conical shape of his wig and his exquisitely pointed nose and chin, which juts out far beyond his nose. Combe's verse narrative also draws the reader-viewer's attention to the crowd of amused onlookers, who view Dr. Syntax's mishap as a "source of fun and gen'ral laughter." One woman to the left of the picture plane leans over a parapet to get a better look at the humorous spectacle of bees pursuing Dr. Syntax, whose hat is literally tipping off his head; six additional onlookers armed with pots and pans to scare away the insects reveal in their facial expressions that they are enjoying watching Dr. Syntax's battle with the bees.⁹



Figure 1. “Doctor Syntax & The Bees.” Illustration by Thomas Rowlandson for William Combe’s *The Second Tour of Dr Syntax, in Search of Consolation: A Poem*, 1820. From the Norman M. Fox Collection, Scribner Library, Skidmore College.

In 1820, Pierce Egan also provided letterpress to annotate illustrations by George and Robert Cruickshank for *Life in London; or, The Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn, Esq. and his elegant friend Corinthian Tom, accompanied by Bob Logic, The Oxonian, in their Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis*. In serial and volume form, *Life in London* captured a large audience because of George and Robert Cruickshank’s illustrations. In the first chapter, which Egan calls a “preface, or a prelude to the work” (1), the author pays lavish tribute to the Cruickshanks for their lead role in this picture-word collaboration:

In all thy varied portraiture of the interesting scenes of Life, let me invoke thy superior talents, BOB AND GEORGE CRUICKSHANK (thou *Gilray* of the day, and of *Don Saltero* greatness), to my anxious aid. Indeed, I have need of all thy illustrative touches; and may we be hand and glove together in depicting the richness of nature, which so wantonly, at times, plays off her freaks upon the half-finished bone-rakers and cinder-sifters round the dust-hill. (11–12)¹⁰