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Dickens and Shakespeare's Household Words

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"'Familiar in their Mouths as HOUSEHOLD WORDS.'—SHAKESPEARE."

—Epigraph to Charles Dickens's weekly periodical, Household Words

In the nineteenth century, perhaps no writer earned more comparisons to Shakespeare than Dickens, and the comparison has endured to the present. We are familiar with the qualities they share: a remarkable range of memorable characterization, flights of verbal invention, the ability to mix tragedy and comedy, reinvigorating traditional genres and plots, and a highly performative, even meta-theatrical sensibility. Shakespearean characters, modes, and moments in Dickens's work spring easily to mind, from the actual stagings of Romeo and Juliet in Nicholas Nickleby and Hamlet in Great Expectations, to the domesticated Lear-Cordelia plots of The Old Curiosity Shop and Dombey and Son, to the phrases from Shakespeare that supplied titles for Dickens's periodicals, Household Words (from Henry V) and All the Year Round (from Othello), to the myriad allusions and quotations that spout from Dickens's Falstaffian figures of fun: Sam Weller, Dick Swiveller, and Wilkins Micawber, among many others. Dickens's own biographical investment with Shakespeare is also well known, from his earliest extant writing (a burlesque script for O'Thello, the Irish Moor of Venice), the productions of Richard III and Macbeth he attended as a youth, and the first volumes he requested from the British Library reading room (Singer's edition of Shakespeare), to his friendship and critical praise for the great Shakespearean actor William Macready, his championing of

the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, his own production of <u>The Merry Wives of Windsor</u>, his involvement in the 1864 Shakespeare Tercentennial celebrations, and his numerous Shakespearean references in public speeches and private letters. The Victorian proclamation of Dickens as "the living Shakespeare" set the agenda for a century and a half of subsequent criticism that seeks to specify the terms of this epithet.[1]

That criticism, rich and varied though it has become, tends to take the Shakespeare-Dickens comparison as a given, an ahistorical phenomenon that is self-evident from looking at the two authors' works. And though it allows Dickens to develop over the course of his career as a writer and cultural presence, it often takes "Shakespeare" as another given, a name that stands for more or less the same things to us as it did to Dickens and his contemporaries. Such criticism might ask how Dickens used Hamlet figures in his novels, or why he was drawn to stories that echoed <u>King Lear</u>, or whether his sense of tragedy resembled Shakespeare's.[2] But it seldom asks how Dickens constructed the terms of his comparison to Shakespeare by scripting the responses he received from the critics. Nor does it ask how Dickens helped to transform what we mean by "Shakespeare" at a time when the latter's reputation, texts, productions, and authorship were all in flux.

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[1] Philip Collins provides instances of Dickens being called "the living Shakespeare" in Collins, ed. <u>Dickens: The Critical Heritage</u> (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1971), 3-7. A useful summary of the young Dickens's Shakespearean involvement appears in Alfred Harbage, "Shakespeare and the Early Dickens," <u>Shakespeare: Aspects of Influence</u>, ed. G. B. Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 109-34.

[2] As examples of this type of criticism, see Juliet John, "Dickens and Hamlet," <u>Victorian Shakespeare</u>, eds. Gail Marshall and Adrian Poole, vol. 2 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 46-60; Alexander Welsh, <u>From Copyright to Copperfield: The Identity of Dickens</u> (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); William A. Wilson, "The Magic Circle of Genius: Dickens' Translations of Shakespearean Drama in Great Expectations," <u>Nineteenth-Century Fiction</u> 40.2 (1985): 154-74. Though my argument moves in a different direction from Valerie Gager's in <u>Dickens and Shakespeare: The Dynamics of Influence</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), I have relied on her valuable catalogue of Dickens's references to Shakespeare.

It is typical of Dickens, for example, that he would articulate his ambition to get everyone to talk Dickens by talking Shakespeare. King Henry V's famous line from the Saint Crispin's Day battle oration, promising his troops that their names would become familiar as "household words" in the mouths of Englishmen (4.3.52), gave Dickens a model of the domestic penetration he hoped to achieve through his novels' publication, as well as the title for the periodical, Household Words, in which his works would appear.[3] Contemporary journal reviews as well as Dickens's public presentations of his literary ambitions show how Dickens transformed Shakespearean imagery to make his characters into "household words" on the Shakespearean pattern. And, in turn, Dickens kept Shakespeare in his countrymen's mouths: it was only after Dickens used the phrase for his journal title that "household words" became a household word itself, quoted in Bartlett's Familiar Quotations and used in anthology titles like Shakespeare's Household Words: A Selection from the Wise Saws of the Immortal Bard.

Shakespearean scholars over the last twenty years have been exploring how successive eras reinvent their subject. Such scholarship unsettles a fixed notion of "Shakespeare" and reverses the traditional direction of influence studies to show later authors exerting force over their precursor.[4] Novelists like Dickens play little role in these studies, however, crowded out by Victorian actors, poets, and critics who made more

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[3] Quotations from Shakespeare refer to The Norton Shakespeare, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 1997). All references to this text are hereafter cited parenthetically by act, scene, and line number and abbreviated N.

[4] For high points in this burgeoning sub-field, see Gary Taylor, Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History, from the Restoration to the Present (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989); Jean I. Marsden, ed., The Appropriation of Shakespeare: Post-Renaissance Reconstructions of the Works and the Myth (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991); Michael Dobson, The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Stanley Wells, Shakespeare: For All Time (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer, eds. Shakespeare and Appropriation (London: Routledge, 1999); Jack Lynch, Becoming Shakespeare: The Unlikely Afterlife That Turned a Provincial Playwright into the Bard (New York: Walken), 2007; Marjorie Garber, Shakespeare and Modern Culture (New York: Pantheon, 2008).

explicit contributions to Shakespeare scholarship. But the process by which Shakespeare's phrases became household words, this essay will argue, is very much intertwined with Dickens's own quest to become a household word. Putting Shakespearean reception history in the context of novel criticism helps to show Shakespeareans how cultural quotation interacts with the genres of novels and their reviews that use quotation as a formal technique. It plays with the prevailing image of a moralizing, antiquarian Victorian Shakespeare, noting the stylistic gambits of novelists who helped make Shakespeare quotable. And it shows Dickensians how Shakespeare provided the model for Dickens's popularity, his means for achieving it, and the object of his ambivalence about worshipping any author. By denaturalizing the Shakespeare-Dickens comparison, I hope to convey how natural the pairing of Shakespeare criticism and Dickens criticism ought to be.

This essay begins with a brief analysis of one of Dickens's first published stories, which reveals the close connection he saw between the challenge of Shakespeare's authority and the challenge of quotation as a cultural and narrative device. Drawing on historical accounts of the typography of Shakespearean quotation, as well as theoretical models of quotation and intertextuality, I argue that Dickens's great early success, The Pickwick Papers, captivated its audience by modeling quotability through the characteristic phrases of its most Shakespearean character, Sam Weller. Pickwick and Weller tapped the contemporary vogue for Shakespeare proverbs, which subordinated originality to iterability. Analyzing contemporary reviews, I then interpret David Copperfield in light of the concurrent founding of Dickens's periodical, Household Words, and the circulation of Shakespearean quotations in which both participated. I also

suggest how Dickens parodied the quotability he sought through characters who misapply commonplaces and misattribute quotations. These readings demonstrate the simultaneous symbiosis and struggle of Dickens's engagement with Shakespeare, a relationship founded on quotation but suspicious of the travesties that quotability can engender.[5] The Shakespeare that Dickens gave us might spur critics to turn the Shakespeare-Dickens comparison on its head and start speaking of Shakespeare's Dickensian qualities—among them, his capacity to supply phrases at once universally applicable and always at odds with their context.

I. The Problem of Uncle Tom

Even in his earliest writings, Dickens was preoccupied by the twin fascination and absurdity of Shakespearean quotation. In the second story he ever published, "Mrs. Joseph Porter 'Over the Way,'" which appeared in the <u>Monthly Magazine</u> and was reprinted in <u>Sketches by Boz</u>, Dickens presented Shakespeare's language as an inescapable, haunting force that would fatigue even its most energetic admirers. When the Gattleton family plans a private theatrical performance of <u>Othello</u> in their home, a rival neighbor—Mrs. Joseph Porter, who lives "over the way,"—schemes to sabotage the production by ingratiating herself with the Gattletons' Uncle Tom, who has committed all of Shakespeare to memory and cannot bear to hear a line misquoted. In the performance, the inevitable line is flubbed, and at Mrs. Porter's malicious prompting, Uncle Tom becomes the unofficial prompter, shadowing every line from the stage with his own

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[5] For an account of Dickens's participation in the nineteenth-century culture of Shakespearean burlesque and travesty, see my "Dickens's Hamlet Burlesque," <u>Dickens Quarterly</u> 24.2 (2007): 103-10.

muttered correction, like a dogged editor fixing the spoken text. To Mrs. Porter's delight, the production falls apart, and the Gattletons soon lose their taste for theatricals and Shakespeare alike.[6]

Dickens writes knowingly about the ill-fitting costumes, creaky scenery, inept musicians, miscast supporting players, and heckling audience that the Gattletons' Othello must brave, for his own family mounted a similar production in his youth: a burlesque burletta, O'Thello, or The Irish Moor of Venice, which Dickens wrote for private performance, with his father in the role of "The Great Unpaid." (His is the only surviving part.)[7] And Dickens resembled the cheerily pedantic Uncle Tom as well, having much of Shakespeare in his memory locked, along with a similar desire to tell others how to speak the speech. Yet within "Mrs. Joseph Porter," Uncle Tom is a figure of affectionate ridicule in his reverence for the "Swan of Avon" (his phrase) and "quotations from the works of that immortal bard" (S 424, 430). The bardolater is figured as an unwitting killjoy who stops the play with his unsolicited line prompts; Shakespeare's text precludes Shakespeare's performance. "[H]aving mounted his hobby, nothing could induce [Uncle Tom] to dismount," the narrator laments, but this hobby-horse, unlike the one animating Hamlet's play-within-the-play, is not forgot (S 429). The audience, however, "were highly amused," even if the Gattletons cringed, and thus the gap between text and performance turns bedchamber tragedy into domestic comedy. The hapless Gattletons may be mounting a travesty, but Dickens's heart seems on the side of burlesque.

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[6] Charles Dickens, "Mrs. Joseph Porter," Sketches by Boz, 1836-37 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 421-30. All references to this text are hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated S.

[7] See Charles Haywood, "Charles Dickens and Shakespeare: Or the Irish Moor of Venice, O'Thello with Music," The Dickensian 73 (1977): 67-88.

Uncle Tom's quotation of Shakespeare raises a narrative problem as well as a performance obstacle. "It would be useless and tiresome to quote the number of instances in which Uncle Tom, now completely in his element, and instigated by the mischievous Mrs. Porter, corrected the mistakes of the performers," the narrator concedes, linking his audience to the Gattletons': just as Uncle Tom's interruptions fatigue the other characters, so quoting all of Uncle Tom's corrective quotations will fatigue the reader (S 429). Both audiences sour on Shakespeare by the story's end, when Uncle Tom is no longer invited to rehearse the immortal bard, and even his speech goes unquoted by the narrator. Uncle Tom "cannot refrain from sometimes expressing his surprise and regret at finding that his nephews and nieces appear to have lost the relish they once possessed for the beauties of Shakespeare," but his expression is rendered only through indirect speech, and no beauties are included, whereas before the disastrous performance the narrator had directly quoted Uncle Tom quoting Shakespeare's recitation set piece, Othello's "Most potent, grave, and reverend signors" (S 430, 428).

Thus, at the very start of his career in fiction, Dickens established the Shakespearean connection between narrative technique and cultural dissemination, between quoting characters' speech and quoting Shakespeare's lines. For a skilled caricaturist who knew Shakespeare by heart, the temptation toward both forms of quotation must have been as irresistible as the impulse for Uncle Tom to shout out lines in a play. "Mrs. Joseph Porter" registers the pleasure as well as the risk of such effusive quotation: amusement ensues, but portable beauties stop short. Misquotation is ridiculous, but accurate quotation without a dose of irreverence is absurd. Dickens needed a figure to unite his mnemonic faculty with his parodic instinct to fashion quotations that

an audience could laugh at and repeat—burlesque beauties ready for circulation. The stage was set for Sam Weller.

II. Wellerisms and Everyday Language

Sam Weller, one of Dickens's first great originals, speaks most memorably in clichés. The irrepressible servant, verbal magician, and erstwhile Cockney boot-black whose appearance in the fourth number of The Pickwick Papers caused sales to soar is a font of recycled phrases: "it's all for my own good"; "It's over, and can't be helped"; "Business first, pleasure arterwards"; "addin' insult to injury"; "the wery best intentions." His characteristic locutions, however, attribute these everyday expressions to outrageous sources: "It's over, and can't be helped, and that's one consolation, as they alvays says in Turkey, ven they cuts the wrong man's head off."[8] Or, "Business first, pleasure arterwards, as King Richard the Third said ven he stabbed the t'other king in the Tower, afore he smothered the babbies" (P 329). Take the latter instance: a recurrent, practical adage gets handcuffed to a uniquely horrifying event in British royal mythology—a mundane maxim suddenly recast as dialogue in a murderous drama. These arresting, puckish pairings became known as "Wellerisms," after their eponymous practitioner, and they adhered to a common formula: a commonplace phrase, as a surprisingly menacing figure said, when he performed a vile action completely at odds with the original context of the utterance. With over fifty instances in Pickwick, they became the novel's most quotable and portable phrases—excerpted in newspapers, imitated in spin-offs, collected

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[8] Charles Dickens, The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club, 1837, ed. Mark Wormwald (London: Penguin, 1999), 307. All references to this text are hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated P.

in joke books. They encapsulate the peculiar quality of everyday language in popular literature: a homely motto, defamiliarized by extraordinary attribution, itself becomes a familiar quotation.

Book-historical evidence reinforces the significance of Sam Weller in making Dickens quotable. As Kathryn Chittick has argued, the nineteenth-century journalistic practice of reprinting excerpts from novels favored the sayings of characters like Sam that could be lifted out of their narrative context; "Sam Weller was eminently quotable and therefore reviewable."[9] The Boston Morning Post printed a collection of Wellerisms in 1839; the Manchester Times started listing Wellerisms among its "Cuttings from the Comic Papers"; and Charles Kent edited a master compendium called Wellerisms from "Pickwick" and "Master Humphrey's Clock" in 1886.[10] In addition to representing Pickwick in newspapers and periodicals, Sam was credited with selecting the novel's most memorable passages. The first published collection of Dickens's phrases, The Beauties of Pickwick in 1838—on the model of William Dodd's enormously popular The Beauties of Shakspeare [sic]—was presented, cheekily, as "Collected and Arranged by Sam Weller."[11] Thus, Sam ensured the quotability of Pickwick not only by uttering the memorable speech that many of the beauties excerpted (Sam's remarks are reprinted under such headings as "Filial Affection," "Silence," "Hiring Servants," and, ominously,

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[9] Kathryn Chittick, Dickens and the 1830s (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 61-91. Leah Price also discusses how a reviewing culture of excerpts created an incentive for writers "to produce self-contained passages that could be appreciated (or even, more simply, understood) outside of their narrative context" in The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 139-40.

[10] For the afterlife and antecedents of Wellerisms, see Wolfgang Mieder and Stewart A. Kingsbury, A Dictionary of Wellerisms (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[11] The Beauties of Pickwick, Collected and Arranged by Sam Weller (London: W. Morgan, 1838); reprinted in the pamphlet On the Origin of Sam Weller, and the Real Cause of the Success of the Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club (London: J. W. Jarvis, 1883).

"Pies"), but by appearing as editor, thereby turning all the beauties into a form of Wellerism: a quotation lifted from its original context and made newly applicable. Wellerisms themselves enacted the portability of quotation that they subsequently experienced.

Wellerisms reveal both Dickens's susceptibility to everyday language and his capacity to transform it. For the <u>North British Review</u> critic in 1851, a fault of Dickens's style was its "dangerous resemblance to common talk," as opposed to the strong, independent sense of a writer like Thackeray; the <u>Review</u> argued that Dickens "ought not to devote a whole page to the repetition of what everybody says, in very nearly the same words that everybody uses."[12] But for a contemporary article in <u>Fraser's Magazine</u>, the words that everybody uses were the words that Dickens gave them. <u>Fraser's</u> contended that Dickens himself had helped to create common talk through the figure of Sam Weller: "Upon our every-day language his influence has been immense—for better or worse. We began by using <u>Wellerisms</u>...in fun, till they have got blended insensibly with our stock of conversational phrases; and now in our most serious moments we talk <u>slang</u> unwittingly."[13] Dickens not only incorporated conversational phrases into his writing; he put his own into circulation.

Wellerisms also reflect upon the process of linguistic imitation that they engender. Sam Weller notes a double slight to his master, "vich I call addin' insult to injury, as the parrot said ven they not only took him from his native land, but made him talk the English langvidge artervards" (P 472). The parrot's journey is the trajectory of a

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[12] [David Masson], "<u>Pendennis</u> and <u>Copperfield</u>: Thackeray and Dickens," <u>North British Review</u>, May 1851; reprinted in <u>Dickens: The Critical Heritage</u>, 252.

[13] Unsigned article, "Charles Dickens and <u>David Copperfield</u>," <u>Fraser's Magazine</u>, December 1850; reprinted in <u>Dickens: The Critical Heritage</u>, 244.

Wellerism: plucked from its customary environment, a parroted phrase ("addin' insult to injury") becomes a curiosity when it is thrust into Sam's English, here rendered edgy and unfamiliar by the Cockney dropped consonants and transposed "v"s. Dickens marks Sam phonetically as both exotic and demotic, a <u>rara avis</u> enlivening the popular tongue through elevated street speech. Performative and iterable, Wellerisms enabled Dickens to make the everyday original and turn the exceptional into the everyday.[14]

III. Quotation and Quotability

In an episode of the British TV mockumentary, <u>The Office</u>, the blithely obnoxious office boss, David Brent, conducts a performance review of Tim Canterbury, his bemused sales rep. "Tim Canterbury, good man," David observes, smiling to the camera. Then he has a thought. "<u>The Canterbury Tales</u>…Chaucer." He turns to Tim, then back to the camera for another thought. "Shakespeare." This banal chain of association, which David intends to show his cultural sophistication, of course points out the opposite: the paucity of David's understanding, in which British literature is metonymically reduced to a series of last names. David, however, seems to view himself as part of a cultural tradition, for he peppers his evaluation of Tim with anodyne quotations from classical authors, passed off as his own: Confucius's "Our greatest glory is not in never falling but in rising every time we fall," for example. After the third or fourth bromide, Tim asks David if he is just reading quotations aloud, and as David tries to conceal his crib sheet,

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[14] For an analysis of Wellerisms in light of Derrida's challenge to Austin's speech-act theory, see J. Hillis Miller, "Sam Weller's Valentine," <u>Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices</u>, eds. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 93-122.

he defends his practice: "It doesn't matter who said them first. I am passing on my wisdom."[15]

Intellectual charlatan though he may be, David is actually channeling a tradition of Shakespeare quotation in which originality matters less than applicability. As Margreta de Grazia points out in "Shakespeare in Quotation Marks," inverted commas were first used in the margins of Renaissance texts to indicate maxims suitable for memorizing. These would not be an individual's distinctive words, but inherited commonplaces, with marks signaling not quotation but quotability. "Quotation marks reproduced this long-standing association of commonplaces and memory," de Grazia explains; "they signaled what was memorable or worth commemorating, what deserved to be inscribed, or reinscribed, on those two writing surfaces or tablets: the memory or the commonplace book."[16] The rise of quotation marks as fences around an author's private property in the late eighteenth century coincides with the rise of copyright and the Romantic conception of an author as an original genius. In the pre-Romantic era, David Brent would be quite right about quotations. It did not matter who said them first; what mattered was whether others should repeat them.

Post-modern literary theory also challenges notions of the author as an original, proprietary figure. "The text is a fabric of quotations," Roland Barthes posits in "The Death of the Author," and for Jacques Derrida in "Signature Event Context," quotability renders the restrictive force of an author's intention meaningless: "Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or

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[15] The Office, Series Two, Episode Two, dir. Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, BBC, 2002.

[16] Margreta de Grazia, "Shakespeare in Quotation Marks," Appropriating Shakespeare: Post Renaissance Reconstructions of the Works and the Myth, ed. Jean I. Marsden (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 59.

large unit, can be <u>cited</u>, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable."[17] What could comprise David's performance evaluation, his Barthesian text, except quotations? And what is language for, in Derrida's sense, except to be quoted? "Chaucer" and "Shakespeare" are indeed, as David's invocations suggest, just floating signifiers that we attach to texts in order to authorize their meaning.[18]

What would David have to say about a Wellerism? Take Sam Weller's remark upon surveying the Christmas spread at Dingley Dell: "now ve look compact and comfortable, as the father said ven he cut his little boy's head off, to cure him o' squintin'" (<u>P</u> 370). This one is actually rather Davidesque: a cheerily awkward justification for outrageous executive action, completely ill-suited to the original problem. Decapitation pops up in a number of Wellerisms (Remember: "It's over, and can't be helped, and that's one consolation, as they alvays says in Turkey, ven they cuts the wrong man's head off" [<u>P</u> 307]), and, as John Bowen points out in *Other Dickens*, is associated with castration by Freud and with dissemination by Derrida—the problem of authority and the problem of citation.[19] The loss of the head is like the death of the author; there is no affixed intelligence remaining to control the movement of a textual corpus. And so Wellerisms disseminate commonplaces, plucking them out of their headwaters and dropping them into an infinity of new contexts. If never exactly

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[17] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," <u>The Rustle of Language</u>, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 39-55; Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," <u>Limited Inc</u>, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1-23.

[18] For a discussion of how quotation marks both claim and disclaim authority, see Marjorie Garber, <u>Quotation Marks</u> (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[19] John Bowen, <u>Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit</u>, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 64-67.

comfortable in their new surroundings, they remain compact in their portability. Original and repeatable, they demonstrate quotability by quotation.

IV. Proverbial Shakespeare in The Pickwick Papers

The typical Wellerian twist on an old proverb characterizes Shakespeare's appearances in The Pickwick Papers as well. Two chapter titles, for example, play with familiar Shakespearean phrases: Chapter 8 on romantic mishaps at Dingley Dell, "Strongly illustrative of the Position, that the course of true love is not a Railway," reroutes Lysander's lament from A Midsummer Night's Dream, "The course of true love never did run smooth" (N 1.1.132-4); and Chapter 41 on Pickwick's cellmates in the Fleet, "Illustrative, like the preceding one, of the old Proverb, that Adversity brings a Man acquainted with strange Bed-fellows," repeats Trinculo's admission in The Tempest that "Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows" (N 2.2.38-9). Despite the clarity of these echoes, however, Dickens does not directly attribute them to Shakespeare; rather, the titles refer to an established "Position" or a well-known "old Proverb." Was Dickens referring, then, to Shakespeare's lines, or to the extant proverbs that Shakespeare took for his lines (both "the course…" and "misery…" were already proverbial in the Renaissance), or, perhaps, to Shakespeare's status in English as a source of proverbial speech?[20]

The same ambiguity runs through a pocket-sized collection of Shakespeare Proverbs assembled eleven years after Pickwick by Mary Cowden Clarke, the editor of

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[20] See R. W. Dent, Shakespeare's Proverbial Language: An Index (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 56, 80.

the first Shakespeare concordance and the author of the <u>Girlhood of Shakespeare's</u> <u>Heroines</u>. Clarke explains in her preface that:

> Among these Proverbs will be found some of the axioms of Shakespeare which have actually become proverbial; and this may account for some sentences appearing here, which, strictly speaking, come rather under the latter than the former denomination. It is curious to notice how Shakespeare has paraphrased some of our commonest proverbs in his own choice and elegant diction....and some old proverbs he has even given verbatim.[21]

This tripartite classification—some born proverbs, some achieved proverbs, and some with proverbial status thrust upon them—introduces a capacious alphabetical list that includes the two <u>Pickwick</u> title lines (one under "L" for "Love," the other under "M" for "Misery"), though Clarke does not specify whether she considers them old proverbs given verbatim, paraphrased proverbs, or Shakespearean axioms that have become proverbial.

    If one pole of Shakespeare in <u>Pickwick</u>, then, comprises unattributed allusions, another pole would mark their opposite: oddly attributed quotations. This, of course, is Sam Weller's game; he takes everyday language and transforms it into a quotation from a bizarre source. But Weller also engages in the comedy of unattributed allusion. Weller's

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[21] Mary Cowden Clarke, <u>Shakespeare Proverbs</u> (London: Chapman and Hall, 1848), 5-6.

own words were Shakespearean in form and content: a characteristically ludicrous juxtaposition of the cheerily proverbial with the grimly specific. The Wellerism discussed above, "Business first, pleasure arterwards, as King Richard the Third said wen he stabbed t'other king in the Tower, afore he smothered the babbies," takes its ostensible origin from Shakespeare's history play ("I like you, lads; about your business straight," Richard III tells the murderers [N 1.3.353]). And its set-up derives from the ridiculously attributed quotation of another king's fool. When King Lear is overwhelmed with his daughters' ingratitude, he commands his rising heart to go "down," and his Fool replies: "Cry to it, nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels when she put 'em i'th' paste alive. She knapped 'em o'th' coxcombs with a stick, and cried 'Down, wantons, down!'" (N 2.2.286). The syntax of the Wellerism is evident in the Fool's retort: quotation, as someone said, when she did something violent and inapposite. ("Down, wantons, down!" as the cockney cried to the eels when she put them in the paste alive.) The Fool's cockney cook becomes Dickens's cockney boot, ready to correct his master's excesses of the heart with playful twists on proverbial wisdom, soon to be familiar in everyone's mouth. (And a little tastier than another cook's pastry, in a later Wellerism: "this is rayther too rich, as the young lady said ven she remonstrated with the pastry-cook, arter he'd sold her a pork-pie as had got nothin' but fat inside" [P 517].)[22] There is biographical evidence for the Shakespearean Wellerism as well: when Dickens turned 18 and was admitted to the library at the British Museum, one of the first books he requested was a multi-volume

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[22] The argument that Dickens based Sam Weller on Lear's Fool also appears in Garret Stewart, Dickens and the Trials of Imagination (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 74; and Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, "Shakespeare's King Lear and Dickens's The Pickwick Papers," Explicator 60.1 (2001): 5-6.

edition of Shakespeare, edited by one Samuel Weller Singer.[23]

As we have seen, Wellerisms became extremely popular—compiled in dictionaries of Wellerisms, parroted in stage adaptation, introduced into everyday speech—as the first instance of the phenomenon by which Dickens became a "household word," in the phrase he borrowed from Shakespeare's Henry V for the title of his weekly journal. A variant of that phrase appeared in one of the very first reviews of Pickwick, which noted that "in less than six months from the appearance of the first number of the Pickwick Papers, the whole reading public were talking about them—the names of Winkle, Wardell, Weller, Snodgrass, Dodson and Fogg, have become familiar in our mouths as household terms."[24] When Anthony Trollope eulogized Dickens in 1870, it was difficult to tell whose words he was quoting: "No other writer of English language except Shakespeare has left so many types of character as Dickens has done, characters which are known by their names familiarly as household words."[25] Was Trollope using "household words" as a Shakespearean coinage, a Dickensian brand, or simply now a proverbial expression? Dickens's achievement would seem to be that the three had become indistinguishable.

V. Universal Applicability in David Copperfield

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[23] Alfred Harbage notes that the Shakespeare edition Dickens requested from the British Library was "published in twelve volumes in 1826, edited by the suggestively named Samuel Weller Singer, with a life by Charles Symmons, D.D" in "Shakespeare and the Early Dickens," 112.

[24] [Abraham Hayward?], "Unsigned Review of Pickwick, Nos. I-XVII, and Sketches by Boz," Quarterly Review 59 (October 1837): 484-518; reprinted in Dickens: The Critical Heritage, 56-62.

[25] Anthony Trollope, "Charles Dickens," St Paul's Magazine, July 1870; reprinted in Dickens: The Critical Heritage, 324.

Dickens's most sustained exploration of the promise and peril of quotation came in the novel he called his "favorite child," <u>David Copperfield</u>. Everyone remembers the speech tags in <u>David Copperfield</u>, those identifying refrains that signal a familiar character, like the oboe motif for the duck in <u>Peter and the Wolf</u>: "I never will desert Mr Micawber"; "Barkis is willin'"; "I am a lone, lorn creature"; "Something will turn up." For E. M. Forster, Mrs. Micawber's fidelity to her phrase offered the quintessence of a flat character: she is sentenced to her one sentence, and knowing it, we know her.[26] What is less often remembered about <u>David Copperfield</u> is how well the characters themselves remember one another's tag lines and quote them at every opportunity. As though their speech constituted a sort of circulating library to which they had all been issued memberships, characters swap characteristic phrases with all the relish of a real reader who had checked out the volume that contained them and been delighted by its exportable contents—for indeed the novel both models and critiques the reception Dickens hoped to enjoy from his actual audience.

First the fantasy of universal applicability: anyone's phrase can go anywhere. Announcing his move into Uriah Heep's old quarters, Mr. Micawber checks out Uriah Heep's old phrase: "'It is humble,' said Mr Micawber, '—to quote a favorite expression of my friend Heep; but it may prove the stepping-stone to more ambitious domiciliary accommodation.'"[27] Micawber can't stay in Heep's register for long, as he rises on the stepping-stones of this humble phrase to more ambitious diction, and he must affix the initial fricative that Heep, in his humility, invariably drops, but even that "h" alliteratively

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[26] E. M. Forster, <u>Aspects of the Novel</u> (London: Harcourt, 1927), 68.

[27] Charles Dickens, <u>David Copperfield</u>, ed. Jeremy Tambling, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 2004), 571. All references to this text are hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated <u>D</u>.

anticipates the source of Micawber's quotation: he tags it, phonetically and explicitly, as Heep's, even as he appropriates it for his own situation. Not to be outdone, Heep, too, can borrow a tag line. If Micawber takes over Heep's phrase when he assumes his position, then Heep will rise a stepping-stone further to take Mr. Wickfield's tag: "I've got a motive, as my fellow-partner used to say," he tells David; "and I go at it tooth and nail. I mustn't be put upon, as a numble person, too much" (D 615). Like Micawber, Heep quickly slides back into his familiar register, sounding his own refrain as if to reaffirm his customary identity after temporarily ceding it to Wickfield. But also like Micawber, Heep provides an attribution for the phrase he has kept in circulation.

Characters in David Copperfield are certainly not above quoting themselves, whether or not their line suits the occasion. Writing an angry letter to David after Peggotty has assumed the housekeeping duties she neglected, Mrs. Crupp employs her maternal motto as a self-referential letterhead, framing, however shakily, the sentiments that follow:

> Beginning it with that statement of universal application, which fitted every occurrence of her life, namely, that she was a mother herself, she went on to inform me that she had once seen very different days, but that at all periods of her existence she had had a constitutional objection to spies, intruders, and informers. She named no names, she said; let them the cap fitted, wear it (D 497).

There are really two statements of universal application in this reported letter: first, Mrs. Crupp's motif, "I'm a mother myself"; and second, the hat trick of "spies, intruders, and informers," which it is up to the reader—or the reader's housekeeper—to apply. Micawber, another inveterate self-quoter, also depends on his audience to recognize the application of a recurring phrase; in one of many letters to David, he alludes to one of many others: "You may possibly not be unprepared to receive the intimation that something has turned up. I may have mentioned to you on a former occasion that I was in expectation of such an event" (D 535). Whether Micawber's litotes shows him abashed at the acknowledgement that he is something of a broken record or proud that the long-anticipated song has finally started to play, he can count on his reader humming the tune.

The peak of this circulating fantasy plays out in the novel's climax of grandiloquence: Micawber's denunciation of Heep. A lovingly scripted performance in epistolary form, its own high point—or at least the one Micawber contrives to perform twice over—arrives in a self-conscious quotation:

> '[Heep's hypocrisy] was bad enough; but, as the philosophic Dane observes, with that universal applicability which distinguishes the illustrious ornament of the Elizabethan Era, worse remains behind!'
>
> Mr Micawber was so very much struck by this happy rounding off with a quotation, that he indulged himself, and us, with a second reading of the sentence, under pretence of having lost his place (D 756).

Striking the same mixed note of pride and abashment as he did in his earlier delight that something had turned up to prove his phrase true, the ultimate ham quotes himself quoting Hamlet ("Thus bad begins, and worse remains behind" [N 3.4.163]). We might think as well of the more modestly theatrical Mr. Boffin, in Our Mutual Friend, who repeats his own performative denunciation of another ambitious secretary when he recalls "the celebrated day when I made what has since been agreed upon to be my grandest demonstration—I allude to Mew says the cat, Quack quack says the duck, and Bow-wow-wow says the dog."[28] But whereas Boffin's quotation comes from a doggerel nursery rhyme, Micawber's comes from "the illustrious ornament of the Elizabethan Era," whose "universal applicability" defies his specific historical provenance—in short, the Bard. Through Sam Weller, Dickens turned Shakespearean syntax into his own form of portable quotation; through Micawber, Dickens fit Shakespearean quotation into the portable form of a Wellerism ("worse remains behind," as the philosophic Dane observes…). And ridiculously bland though Micawber's illustration of Shakespeare's applicability may be, it was precisely that universality that Dickens wanted to achieve through Micawber's words.

VI. Household Words

Two years before Dickens began writing David Copperfield, he had already articulated his dream of universal applicability. His 1847 prospectus to a reissuing of his

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[28] Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, ed. Adrian Poole (London: Penguin, 1997), 756. For a more extensive analysis of Boffin and performativity, see my article, "Reading and Repeating Our Mutual Friend," Dickens Studies Annual 39 (2008): 261-79.

early novels in cheap editions envisioned them transcending hierarchies to become "accessible as a possession by all classes of society," even to flow into the nation's bloodstream or click along the ever-expanding railroad lines, as they would "continue to circulate" and reach "their widest diffusion." Through a metonymic substitution of the writer for the book, Dickens confessed "the hopes of a living author": to become "a permanent inmate of many English homes...and to lie about in libraries like any familiar piece of household stuff."[29] When David Copperfield recalls that Annie Strong's words, "The first mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart," were "constantly recurring" to him, and that he "read them, in dreams, inscribed upon the walls of houses" (D 704), he reflects Dickens's desire to write himself into every English home; by ceaselessly circulating such phrases, the novel he narrates enacts the hospitable reading practice that Dickens hoped to enjoy inside the walls of real readers' houses.

The language of domestic penetration in the 1847 prospectus continued in Household Words, the weekly variety journal Dickens founded while David Copperfield was being serialized. Here, Dickens merged domestic imagery with the vision of Shakespeare's universality invoked by Micawber's rhetoric. In his signed "Preliminary Word" in the first issue, Dickens repeated his wish to circulate through his audience's homes: "We aspire to live in the Household affections, and to be numbered among the Household thoughts, of our readers." The destination was homely and familiar, and the origin appeared to be as well, for what could be more comfortable and ordinary than household words themselves? But the very first words of the first issue presented that

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[29] Charles Dickens, "Prospectus" inserted in Dombey and Son, March 1847. For a realization of his hope, see Charles Eliot Norton's originally anonymous article, "Charles Dickens," North American Review 106 (April 1868): 671: "He is not so much the guest as the inmate of our homes." Reprinted in Dickens: The Critical Heritage, 1.

conventional phrase as a quotation from <u>Henry V</u>, printed as a banner above the journal's title: "'Familiar in their Mouths as HOUSEHOLD WORDS.'—SHAKESPEARE." Everyday speech reveals its Shakespearean origin in the famous line from the Crispin's Day battle oration, when King Henry promises his soldiers that their story will be passed down through the generations and their names will be remembered every year on this date (<u>N</u> 4.3.52; Dickens followed the expansive reception of the Quarto's "their mouths" rather than the Folio's singular "his mouth.") That promise echoed in Dickens's hope, in "A Preliminary Word," that the author's "name may be remembered in his race in time to come."[30] The quotation as masthead epigraph activates a shorter time frame as well: the annual periodicity of recalling British battle heroes becomes the weekly reminder of the periodical, staying familiar in its reader's mouths through its regular circulation. To become a household word is, in addition to becoming a familiar phrase, to gain Shakespearean status.[31]

In fact, many of the preliminary words with which Dickens introduced <u>Household Words</u> came from Shakespeare. Besides allusions to <u>The Tempest</u> and <u>A Midsummer Night's Dream</u>, as well as the opening line from <u>Henry V</u>, Dickens drew his peroration from Duke Senior's pastoral fancy in <u>As You Like It</u> that a new life outside the court "Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in

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[30] Charles Dickens, "A Preliminary Word," <u>Household Words,</u> 30 March 1850. Dickens also took the title of <u>All the Year Round,</u> the magazine that succeeded <u>Household Words,</u> from Shakespeare (Othello this time), with the banner quotation appearing above the title: "'The story of our lives, from year to year.'—<u>Shakespeare.</u>" As with "their mouths" in <u>Henry V</u>, Dickens preferred the inclusive pronoun of "our lives" rather than Othello's singular narrative: "Her father…questioned me the story of my life / From year to year" (<u>N</u> 1.3.127-29).

[31] Even Dickens's first identity as a professional writer may have come from Shakespeare. In his Preface to the Cheap Edition of <u>The Pickwick Papers</u> in 1847, Dickens remembered that his pen name, "Boz," was "a very familiar household word to me, long before I was an author, and so I came to adopt it." And it was particularly in Dickens's mouth that the word became familiar: by pronouncing his brother's pet name, Moses, sardonically, it came out as "Boz" instead (<u>P</u> 761).

everything" (<u>N</u> 2.1.16-17). In <u>Household Words</u>, these varied tongues became an

incitement to publication:

> Thus, we begin our career! The adventurer in the old fairy story,
> climbing towards the summit of a steep eminence on which the
> object of his search was stationed, was surrounded by a roar of
> voices, crying to him, from the stones in the way, to turn back. All
> the voices *we* hear, cry Go on! The stones that call to us have
> sermons in them, as the trees have tongues, as there are books in
> the running brooks, as there is good in everything! They, and the
> Time, cry out to us Go on![32]

Dickens has infused Shakespeare into the fairy-tale landscape that cheers him onward

toward the utopia of <u>Henry V</u> and <u>As You Like It</u>, where the author's words are familiar

in everyone's mouth and even the natural world quotes them back. The diffusion of

Shakespeare's household words provided a model for the way Dickens hoped his words

would reach their "widest diffusion": as ubiquitous as tongues in trees and books in the

running brooks. <u>Household Words</u> simultaneously domesticates this image from the field

to the fireside and expands it to include the entire terrain of England as a mouth in which

Dickens's name would become as familiar as Shakespeare's. (Since the articles in

<u>Household Words</u> were anonymous, Dickens's and Shakespeare's were the only names

that appeared on the masthead.)

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[32] Dickens, "A Preliminary Word."

To judge by his obituaries, at least, Dickens's hope was largely realized. Many of the laudatory articles that appeared after his death in June 1870 followed his script precisely, emphasizing his domestic diffusion and universal application. This notice in the <u>Daily News</u> was typical:

> Mr Dickens was the one writer everybody read and everybody liked. His writings had become classics even during his lifetime. They are suited alike to all classes, and have been as welcome in the cottage as in the country house, in the Far West of America, and in the Australian bush as in our English homes. More than any other writer he has been the home favourite. People who never read any other novels, read Mr Dickens's; many of his favourite characters are household words among us.[33]

Both the prospectus to the cheap edition and the "Preliminary Word" echo through this eulogy: Dickens had become a possession of all classes and an inmate of all homes, and he had fulfilled King Henry's prophecy of being familiar in his countrymen's mouths. Whether the <u>Daily News</u> author thought "household words" referred to the Crispin's Day speech or to the title of Dickens's journal, Anthony Trollope's remembrance in <u>St Paul's Magazine</u> made the allusion explicit:

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[33] Unsigned article, "The Death of Mr Charles Dickens," <u>Daily News</u>, 10 June 1870; reprinted in <u>Dickens: The Critical Heritage</u>, 504.

No other writer of English language except Shakespeare has left so many types of character as Dickens has done, characters which are known by their names familiarly as household words, and which bring to our minds vividly and at once, a certain well-understood set of ideas, habits, phrases and costumes, making together a man, or woman, or child.[34]

The character-type is the most easily circulated and applied form, and Trollope left no doubt that Dickens had entered the Shakespearean plane of familiarity with, as Micawber might have put it, that universal applicability which distinguished the illustrious ornament of the Victorian Era.

Even earlier reviews of David Copperfield noted that Dickens had introduced his characters' phrases into British conversation, spurring the circulation of speech tags that his novel depicts. As the Fraser's review quoted above noted, Wellerisms and Gampisms entered the "stock of conversational phrases" until people began to speak his slang unwittingly. The world of Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton—where footnotes to working-class characters' homely dialects show their literary pedigree in respected writers' diction—had come to life in Dickens: according to Fraser's, everyone was talking Dickens without knowing it. The comic favorites of The Pickwick Papers and Martin Chuzzlewit had become quite literal household words, with not only their names rolling around in Englishmen's mouths, but their tag lines as well. An obituary in the Saturday Review connected this phenomenon to Dickens's narrative technique:

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[34] Anthony Trollope, "Charles Dickens"; reprinted in Dickens: The Critical Heritage, 324.

> The characters of MR DICKENS exist almost entirely in what they say....It is this peculiarity which perhaps has made the writings of MR DICKENS so popular with persons of all classes, and all types and degrees of education. The sayings of the characters in them are recollected, but these sayings are themselves the constituent elements of the characters, and thus the characters of themselves become to the public a part of the public itself.[35]

This account of Dickens's popularity anticipates E. M. Forster's insight about flat characters: to recollect "I never will desert Mr Micawber" is to recollect Mrs. Micawber in her entirety. But even if this tag reduces Mrs. Micawber's dimensionality within the novel, the Saturday Review obituary suggests that it expands her scope outside the novel to the point that she can merge with the world of her readers. The "sayings" that ensure the afterlife of Dickens's characters parallel the quotations and beauties that made Shakespeare familiar in his countrymen's mouths; the close relationship between the categories is evident in a title such as the popular "Benham's Book of Quotations, Proverbs and Household Words; a collection of quotations from British and American authors, ancient and modern; with many thousands of proverbs, familiar phrases and sayings." Circulating lines seemed to ensure that Dickens would be able, as he had hoped, "to lie about in libraries like any familiar piece of household stuff."

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[35] Unsigned article, "The Death of Mr Dickens," Saturday Review, 11 June 1870; reprinted in Dickens: The Critical Heritage, 510.

VII. The Problem of Mr. Micawber

And yet, as carefully as Dickens constructed the lines that would keep his phrases in circulation, he also took care to show in David Copperfield the flaws of a one-phrase-fits-all policy. Even as the novel represents the production of household words, it repeatedly satirizes that process as a misguided, even cruel failure. Literary quotations shoot wide of their mark; conventional phrases misfire; and speech tags blow up in their speakers' faces. In its most genial mode, this satire merely generates laughter at the speaker's expense, as when Peggotty recycles Barkis's self-satisfied line ("*Are* you pretty comfortable?" [D 148]) to admit that it would be her fault if, upon marrying him, she "wasn't pretty comfortable," and David recounts that the "quotation from Mr Barkis was so appropriate, and tickled us both so much, that we laughed again and again..." (D 150). But Steerforth, ever keen to the edge beneath merriment, seems a bit more mocking in his appropriation of Miss Mowcher's distinctive valediction when he calls "Bob swore!" to David as they part for the night (D 344). (Miss Mowcher explains her variation on Bon soir in the form of a Wellerism: "'Bob swore!'—as the Englishman said for 'Good night,' when he first learnt French, and thought it so like English. 'Bob swore,' my ducks!" [D 343]. Following the pattern we have seen thus far, this enactment of quotability engenders Steerforth's quotation.) Since Mikhail Bakhtin drew on Dickens's novels to develop his theories, it is not surprising that Dickens appears to anticipate Bakhtin's challenge to universality: that quotation inevitably ironizes its sources, for "the speech of another, once enclosed in a context, is—no matter how accurately transmitted—always subject to certain semantic changes...thus it is, for instance, very easy to make even the

most serious utterance comical."[36] Quotation distances the speaker from his origin even as he identifies it; for both Heep and Micawber, as we saw above, to invoke their partners' registers was to subvert their speaking style.

The "conversational phrases," whose stock Fraser's granted that Dickens had enriched, fare no better in David Copperfield, where their kissing cousins—clichés, jargon, ready-made formulations—come in for a story-stopping denunciation from the narrator: "I had (and have all my life) observed that conventional phrases are a sort of fireworks, easily let off, and liable to take a great variety of shapes and colors not at all suggested by their original form" (D 596). The phrase at issue is "with a view to the happiness of both parties," which Dora's aunts slip inauspiciously into a letter evaluating David's prospects, but it might equally well have been "as between man and man," that forthright business phrase that Micawber ludicrously applies to his dealings with the admittedly masculine Betsy Trotwood—"I don't know that Mr Micawber attached any meaning to this last phrase; I don't know that anybody ever does, or did; but he appeared to relish it uncommonly, and repeated, with an impressive cough," David observes (D 777)—; or David's own empty response to Dora's aunts' social situation with the conventional platitude that "it was highly creditable to all concerned" ("I don't in the least know what I meant," he confesses [D 603]). Such a phrase, which achieves applicability by emptying itself of meaning, is one problem; another problem is a phrase whose idiomatic reach has exceeded its literal grasp. It is up to the naive Mr. Dick, unaware of the cultural expectation that these phrases will stay in circulation, to point out the latter's irrelevance: when David warns him that his new lodgings lack even room to

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[36] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," The Dialogic Imagination, ed. and trans. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 340.

swing a cat, as the saying goes, he rightly responds: "You know, Trotwood, I don't want to swing a cat. I never do swing a cat. Therefore, what does that signify to <u>me</u>!" (<u>D</u> 506). There is no room in Mr. Dick's household for such meaningless words, so he checks their universality in mid-swing.

Even Shakespeare, that illustrious ornament, loses some of his luster as he fails to ornament the interiors where he is most required. Latching onto another "common phrase of words which had a fair and promising sound," David resolves to "form Dora's mind" by reading her Shakespeare, and succeeds in nothing more than tiring her out and revealing that "she thought Shakespeare a terrible fellow" (<u>D</u> 700-01). Julia Mills, the absurd mock-poetic stylist whose journal entries take over several pages of the novel, has no better luck applying Shakespeare to Dora's doldrums. Neither a passage from Thomas Moore's <u>Lalla Rookh</u> on the inevitable death of a love-object (a "dear gazelle") nor Viola's portrait from <u>Twelfth Night</u> of a lover's silent suffering "like Patience on a monument" (<u>N</u> 2.4.113)—no surprise—can curb Dora's sobs: "Quoted verses respecting self and young Gazelle. Ineffectually. Also referred to Patience on Monument. (Qy. Why on Monument? J. M.)... Renewed reference to young Gazelle. Appropriate, but unavailing" (<u>D</u> 567). "What does that signify to <u>me</u>!" we can imagine Dora wailing, especially as her literary consoler has no more sense of what Shakespeare's metaphors mean than Micawber knows what the "gowans" may be that he and David undoubtedly pulled together in days of auld lang syne (<u>D</u> 424). Dickens exposes these common phrases as stale literary conventions, fatiguing, ineffectual, ludicrous, unavailing, stopped in their tracks.

It takes more than exposure, however, to defeat a verbal artist as inexhaustible as Micawber, or the real pen behind him. The tension between artifice and applicability was one Dickens's characters were accustomed to ride, and one in which they drew their momentum, yet again, from Shakespeare. "There never was a real Mr Pickwick, a real Sam Weller, a real Mrs Nickleby, a real Quilp, a real Micawber, a real Uriah Heep," wrote the North British Review critic, yet he granted that

> having once added such characters to our gallery of fictitious portraits, we cannot move a step in actual life without stumbling upon individuals to whom they will apply most aptly as nicknames—good-humored bald-headed old gentlemen, who remind us of Pickwick; careless, easy spendthrifts of the Micawber type; fawning rascals of the Heep species; or bashful young gentlemen like Toots.[37]

This combination of unreality and universality the critic located as well in Shakespeare, whose characters he thought "not, in any common sense, life-like," but still "splendid specimens" of actual men and women. Trollope had also noted Dickens's Shakespearean capacity for creating types; likewise, the Saturday Review insisted that the great Dickens characters "are to us not only types of English life, but types actually existing."[38] Even if Micawber is "tossed in all directions by the elephants," in his own fantastic idiom,

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[37] [Masson], "Pendennis and Copperfield: Thackeray and Dickens"; reprinted in Dickens: The Critical Heritage, 256.

[38] "The Death of Mr Dickens"; reprinted in Dickens: The Critical Heritage, 509.

something persists to tether him to the elements (D 714). He may be unreal, but he

creates our perception of the real, achieving the universal applicability he ascribes to the

philosophic Dane.

There is a curious economic coda, however, to Micawber's diffusion into the

world where reviewers can stumble over him. For writers like Dickens who bank on the

exchange value of words, Micawber is a liability: he floods the market with his verbal

product, putting so many meaningless phrases into circulation that he drives down their

value. The analogy may appear strained, but the narrator is quite explicit that writing

serves as money for Micawber; when he hands Traddles a lovingly prepared I. O. U.,

David was "persuaded, not only that this was quite the same to Mr Micawber as paying

the money, but that Traddles himself hardly knew the difference until he had had time to

think about it" (D 542). Micawber's capacity to diminish the economic value of words is

so striking that Mrs. Micawber believes her whole family to be "apprehensive that Mr

Micawber would solicit them for their names.—I do not mean to be conferred in Baptism

upon our children, but to be inscribed on Bills of Exchange, and negotiated in the Money

Market" (D 779). In one of the narrator's most essayistic interruptions of the story, he

portrays Micawber's "relish in this formal piling up of words" as representative of an

entire economic system, whereby

> we are fond of having a large superfluous establishment of words
>
> to wait upon us on great occasions; we think it looks important,
>
> and sounds well...so the meaning or necessity of our words is a

secondary consideration, if there be but a great parade of them (<u>D</u> 758-59).

David even anticipates the possibility of a revolution from this system, with tyrannized words rebelling "as slaves when they are too numerous rise against their masters" (<u>D</u> 759). But the key to this passage lies in the narrator's first-person plural pronoun: although there is a long tradition of casting Micawber as a rival author to Dickens or David, in his fiercest indictment of Micawber's style, the narrator does not exclude himself.[39] When the household of words strikes back, Dickens—no sparing stylist himself—will be the target as much as Micawber, whose deflated verbal currency kept the author's rolling in. If Dickens, as the <u>Daily News</u> obituary suggested, could circulate his words "in the Australian bush as in our English homes," it may have been Micawber, the Magistrate of Port Middlebay, who took them there.

And Shakespeare, the third partner in this linguistic set-up, posthumously profited from the association as well. Although Henry V's speech to the troops at Agincourt was a set-piece, excerpted as early as 1752 in William Dodd's oft-reprinted <u>Beauties of Shakspeare</u> [sic], the phrase "household words" did not itself become a household word until Dickens set it up as one.[40] Despite the comprehensive claim of Thomas Dolby's 1832 <u>Shakespearean Dictionary; Forming a General Index to All the Popular Expressions and Most Striking Passages in the Works of Shakespeare</u>, "familiar in their mouths as

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[39] For the rivalry position, see Garrett Stewart, <u>Dickens and the Trials of Imagination</u>, which portrays Micawber as the chief threat to David's style; Mark Lambert, <u>Dickens and the Suspended Quotation</u> (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), which sees Dickens in direct competition with his loquacious characters for his readers' affection; and Jeremy Tambling, "Introduction," <u>David Copperfield</u>, by Charles Dickens (London: Penguin, 2004), which judges Micawber's writing to have surpassed David's.

[40] See, for example, William Dodd, <u>The Beauties of Shakspeare</u> (Boston: T. Bedlington, 1827), 140.

household words" was not popular or striking enough to be included, nor was it listed in Mary Cowden Clarke's <u>Shakespeare Proverbs</u> compendium of 1848.[41] Dickens apparently felt that the phrase was sufficiently unfamiliar that he had to provide a citation for it when he borrowed it as the title for his weekly journal in 1850, with "'Familiar in their Mouths as HOUSEHOLD WORDS.'—SHAKESPEARE." appearing on the masthead. Yet a mere five years after <u>Household Words</u> had begun to appear, its title had become the proverbial expression of a familiar quotation. The preface to the first edition of John Bartlett's <u>Familiar Quotations</u>, in 1855, declared its intent to reveal "the obligations our language owes to various authors for numerous phrases and familiar quotations which have become 'household words.'" In the case of the latter quotation, the obligation was doubly owed to Shakespeare and to Dickens.[42]

Many subsequent critics have reiterated Dickens's Shakespearean qualities, but few have articulated what Victorian critics did: that the terms of Dickens's popularity were themselves Shakespearean, and that it was Dickens who propagated the Shakespearean term. When <u>Shakespeare's Household Words: A Selection from the Wise Saws of the Immortal Bard</u> was published in 1859, Sam Weller and Wilkins Micawber should have been credited as co-editors.[43] From Uncle Tom to Mr. Micawber, Dickens represents talking Shakespeare as ludicrous, disruptive, self-important, and out of place,

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[41] Thomas Dolby, <u>The Shakespearean Dictionary</u> (London: Smith, Elder, & Co.), 1832.

[42] John Bartlett, "Preface," <u>A Collection of Familiar Quotations</u> (Cambridge: John Bartlett, 1855). For a further discussion of Bartlett's transformation of Shakespeare through decontextualized quotation, see Marjorie Garber, "Bartlett's Familiar Shakespeare," <u>Profiling Shakespeare</u> (New York: Routledge, 2008). See also a Shakespearean's nod to Dickens in the Arden Shakespeare edition to <u>King Henry V</u>, which annotates "household words" in 4.3.52: "The phrase, originating here, has become proverbial, e.g. as the title of the weekly periodical started by Dickens in 1849 [sic]." T. W. Craik, ed., <u>King Henry V</u> (London: Arden Shakespeare Third Series, 1995), 290.

[43] William Shakespeare and Samuel Stanesby, <u>Shakespeare's Household Words: A Selection from the Wise Saws of the Immortal Bard</u> (London: Griffith & Farran, 1859).

yet he also returns inescapably to Shakespeare as the model for the way he would like to

be spoken and spoken of. If Shakespeare helped make Dickens a household word,

Dickens returned the favor, even as he questioned the stability of a house built on words

alone.

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