

## ABSTRACT

Title: **“You Can Be Useful to Us in a Hundred Different Ways”:** A Study of Stage and Screen Adaptations of Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby*

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Charles Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby* has been adapted since 1839, when it was still in the midst of its initial serialized publication. It has since been adapted into plays, films, and television miniseries over 250 times, and the number continues to grow. This thesis investigates the history of *Nickleby* as adapted for stage and screen from 1838 to the present. While there has been much scholarly consideration of adapted Dickens, there has been little in the way of examination of any particular work across periods and genres; *Nickleby*, with its varied history on stage and screen, certainly merits such critical examination. Works discussed here range from Edward Stirling’s early farce *Nicholas Nickleby: or, Doings at Do-The-Boys Hall* (1838), through David Edgar’s marathon stage adaptation *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (Royal Shakespeare Company 1980), to David Innes Edwards’s and Joy Wilkinson’s *The Life and Adventures of Nick Nickleby* (a 2012 miniseries). This thesis explores the cultural uses and revisions of Dickens’s text. Key topics of discussion include the highly varied representation of the orphan Smike; the portrayal of physical, sexual, and financial violence; and the sociopolitical and economic themes of the novel that allow it to resonate with contemporary audiences down through the centuries. Using reviews, historical context, literary and film criticism, performance history, and gender theory, this thesis endeavors to explain the persistence of an early Victorian novel in popular culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Nicholas Nickleby*, Charles Dickens's third novel, was adapted for the stage even before its conclusion appeared during its serialization in 1838-1839. Philip Bolton in 1987 exhaustively catalogued the stage and screen adaptations of Dickens's works, coming up with 257 versions of *Nickleby*; the number only continues to grow. This work and its appearances on stage and screen are the subject of my thesis. My initial intention had been to compare adaptations of four Victorian novels; quickly, however, I realized there was more than sufficient material relating to this single text. Moreover, despite its persistent presence in film and drama, *Nicholas Nickleby* has only rarely been the focus of scholarly research. Much more attention is paid to adaptations of other Dickens novels (especially *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*) while *Nicholas Nickleby* often falls by the wayside. Scholarly attention needs to catch up to public interest.

My project is divided into three chapters: on *Nicholas Nickleby* on the Victorian stage; on the marathon (nine-hour) stage adaptation by David Edgar and the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1980; and on the screen adaptations, most notably the 2012 BBC 1 miniseries *The Life and Adventures of Nick Nickleby*, which is set in present-day England. The wide range of versions allows for the application of criticism and interpretations drawn from various disciplines to the treatment of *Nicholas Nickleby* over time and across genres: literary and film criticism, performance history, and gender theory are all essential to the discussion of why *Nickleby* and its adaptations endure and are significant. Primary resources in drama include nineteenth-century acting editions of three plays and, in one case, a manuscript source (located on microfilm) of a key early adaptation; a fine edition of David Edgar's mammoth 1980 version for the Royal Shakespeare Company will bring my reading of *Nickleby* plays into the late twentieth century.

Resources for *Nickleby* on screen include two feature films (1949 and 2002) and three miniseries (1977, 2001, and 2012).

A wide range of secondary sources has helped me to approach the topic from a number of angles; articles specifically dealing with Dickens on stage, most notably Regina Barreca's, have proven useful in grounding adaptations in theater history. The format and cultural function of the television miniseries have proven to be of particular interest, as this genre is the closest contemporary form to the serialized narrative through which the novel was originally published. Ultimately my thesis addresses the purpose of adaptation at any given moment, and, more precisely, the adaptation of this Dickens novel.

In examining the historical context of the novel and its adaptations, it becomes clear that key productions are associated with periods of economic crisis and cultural shift. The novel itself was written and published in the midst of the British Chartist movement of the 1830s-1840s, a time of social and economic upheaval as attempts were made to gain political rights and influence for the working class (the Reform Bill of 1832 had only recently expanded the franchise for the first time and acknowledged demographic changes by allowing greater political representation for urban areas). More recent adaptations on both stage and screen have taken a strong interest in the economic themes of the novel. Chapters Two and Three deal with versions that use Dickens's novel to illuminate very contemporary social and economic problems: the Royal Shakespeare Company's hugely successful marathon theatre performance, for instance, famously adapted *Nickleby* into something far more dark and depressing in a commentary on the economic convulsions and dislocations of Thatcherite Britain; the most recent miniseries, filmed in Northern Ireland in 2012, updates *Nickleby* for our new Gilded Age, turning Dickens's predatory aristocrat Hawk into the Russian oligarch Hawkovsky (a bitter comment on the influx

of Russian money into London's West End) and converting the very Victorian focus on abusive Yorkshire schools into a cold-eyed examination of the brutal effects of corporatization of elder care (the boy Smike here becomes an old woman).

*Nicholas Nickleby* has a range of compelling minor characters—most of whom are caricatures of the grotesque and eccentric—each of whom is somehow essential to the novel's plot; much of my thesis revolves around the endlessly fascinating, confusing, and useful character of Smike—a character who initially seems minor but grows steadily in importance. My thesis, in part, tracks the highly variable versions of this character, who from the start draws the focus of the adaptations. This puzzling boy—whose true name and origin are, at the start, a mystery—represents a popular trope of Victorian literature and theater: the suffering, mistreated orphan with no known background (Dickens's previous novel *Oliver Twist* had effectively mined this type). The nature of Smike's relationship with Nicholas is convoluted, and it is never quite possible to know what the two are to each other; Nicholas acts as a friend, a father, a brother, and a cousin to Smike. An additional complication arises from the Victorian trend of a cross-gender casting of Smike (this was also the case with *Oliver Twist*), a tactic that interestingly reemerges in David Innes Edwards's 2013 miniseries. The feminine (yet clearly adult) portrayal of Smike closes off certain interpretations, while also perhaps offering other readings to audiences. Theater historians J.S. Bratton, Martin Meisel, and Jim Davis provide useful analyses of this Victorian practice, which embodied the doomed boy who will never grow up in the form of an adult female performer.

The representation of violence is another significant variable in these adaptations, and, as in the depictions of Smike, gender variables matter greatly. Within the novel, a threat of sexual violence toward women looms, most notably over Nicholas's younger sister, Kate. Their uncle

Ralph uses her as bait for potential business partners in a key scene, bringing her into an all-male dinner party and allowing the guests to make both lewd remarks and uncomfortable advances. Sir Mulberry Hawk makes a vulgar bet about poor Kate at the dinner table, and proceeds to physically assault her when she attempts to evade him. Hardly any of the theatrical representations from the nineteenth century show the actual scene of Kate's sexual harassment (only W.T. Moncrieff's 1838 version—one Dickens loathed—staged the dinner scene), most likely due to the low tolerance of theatergoers for this particular flavor of female suffering. There is a striking shift in audience sensitivity from Edward Stirling's 1838 play to David Innes Edwards's 2012 television miniseries: while Stirling simply alludes to the event—perhaps working under the assumption that the audience is familiar with the story—Edwards bluntly shows the harasser pulling his pants down. Any adaptation here must deal with the role of the audience: in watching Kate's persecution we are, potentially, aligned with the men who baldly stare at her and enjoy her discomfort and humiliation. It is not only in the theater that such a connection can be made; in Alberto Cavalcanti's 1947 feature film, the camera lingers in tight close-up on Kate's face in this scene, raising a question of audience identification.

Other moments of violence are important to the development of Nicholas's character. His acts of violence, which again vary greatly in representation, are direct response to a threat against an apparently defenseless person for whom he cares. These are often turning points for Nicholas as a character, and signify important moments of growth; analyzing different portrayals and the degree and style of this violence (as well as the notion of 'honorable behavior') is key in understanding the changes of both audience and societal values over time.

There have been myriad adaptations of *Nicholas Nickleby*, though only a few scholars have written much about them. I am genuinely curious as to why this novel seems to have flown

under the academic radar; given the range of versions that I have procured, this is a topic proved worthy of investigation. There is no broad analysis of *Nicholas Nickleby* in popular culture available yet, and my thesis will serve to initiate conversation. Although *Nicholas Nickleby* has similar qualities to Dickens's more popular works—for instance, the centrality of an unfortunate, orphaned boy in the care of an abusive or emotionally unstable adult—it has not achieved the same level of recognition. The novel was especially admired when it was first in publication, seen in part as a scathing social commentary on the poor conditions of Northern England's boarding schools; many establishments of the kind went out of business just one year after the final installment was published. *Nicholas Nickleby* was so cherished in its first few years of publication that playwrights began to create multiple adaptations even before it had been finished, although *Oliver Twist* would ultimately become the more popular source-text.

Moreover, the notable lack of American attempts to adapt *Nicholas Nickleby* and the overall patterns of cultural exportation have not yet been widely discussed. Americans have not often endeavored to create their own versions of the novel, or of many Dickens works for that matter (exceptions include versions of *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*); the United Kingdom has dominated Dickens's adaptations, perhaps due to his intense connotation of "Britishness." The public taste for British television—specifically miniseries—around the globe has become a phenomenon. To the extent that Americans view adaptations of *Nickleby*, they do so as self-conscious consumers of British cultural exports. The third chapter of my thesis examines the role of the British Heritage industry and the taste for neo-Victorianism in the development of the miniseries form within Britain, its exportation to other countries, and its importance to the cultural endurance of Charles Dickens.

Dickens on stage and screen has become something of a hot topic in the last ten years. It is my intention to utilize a wide variety of sources in a case study of the adaptation of a Dickens novel over time. My thesis analyzes five dramatic texts, two feature films (and one short film), and two television miniseries. These cover a time span from 1838—when the novel was still in the process of being written and published—all the way to 2012. In addition to this array of primary sources, I have made use of secondary sources in the areas of history, criticism and theory. The particular historical context of the different times in which these adaptations were created is illuminated by a number of key works. Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux's *Charles Dickens in Context* has proven to be a highly useful resource for information regarding the social, political, economic, and artistic worlds in which Dickens worked whilst he wrote his novels. This background material informs the way that audiences may have received Dickens's novels when they were first published. Simon Joyce's study *The Victorians in the Rear-View Mirror* analyzes the manner in which people of the twentieth century reimagine and represent Victorian life through literature and film. The book specifically touches upon Victorian kitsch and the Neo-Dickensian novel, elements crucial to the reemergence of *Nicholas Nickleby* adaptations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Deborah Cartmell expands upon adaptation theory in "100+ Years of Adaptations, or, Adaptation as the Art Form of Democracy" by considering the supposed threat that film adaptation in particular has presented to literacy.

I have drawn on a number of essential works dealing specifically with Victorian adaptation and/or the adaptation of Dickens. H. Philip Bolton's *Dickens Dramatized* has been a tremendous resource; it is essentially a chronological list of productions of radio, film, television, and theatrical performances of each Dickens work (up until its 1987 publication). Some sections of his introduction have been most helpful: "The Contemporary Context" which deals with

Dickens through a modern lens, “Dickens’s Dramatic Fame and Posterity” which discusses the initial popularity of *Nicholas Nickleby*,” and “Historical Background,” which has a specific subsection about novels on stage. Martin Meisel’s *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* has been a particularly good resource on the importance of illustration: in the Victorian era, stage pictures were often inspired by the illustrations that were provided in the original novel. Anne Humpherys writes in “Victorian Stage Adaptations and Novel Appropriations” about Dickens’s relationship with the theater, and gives a brief overview of the most popular Dickens novels to make it to the stage. Regina Barreca’s ‘The Mimic Life of Theatre’: The 1838 Adaptation of *Oliver Twist*’ (from Carol Hanbery MacKay’s *Dramatic Dickens*) works as a model for the analysis of Victorian adaptation and the depiction of the foundling child.

Modern stage adaptations have come in for quite a bit of attention in recent years, perhaps due to the success of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production. Benjamin Poore’s *Heritage, Nostalgia, and Modern British Theatre: Staging the Victorians* has an entire chapter dedicated to putting Dickens on stage in the last three decades, specifically exploring the ways in which theatrical adaptations of Dickens in the modern era are forced to respond to the challenges posed by television. Poore actually cites the RSC version as a highly influential work, which I find intriguing—it is worth noting that the nine-hour-long production was indeed filmed for television audiences and broken up into smaller segments, with each installment taking a few minutes to recap what has happened since we left off. Leon Rubin’s *The Nicholas Nickleby Story: The Making of the Royal Shakespeare Company Production*, takes readers behind the scenes of every aspect of the production. The book gives an explanation for just about every choice that was made when adapting the 900-page novel into a nine-hour production, from the

reason that the directors chose *Nicholas Nickleby* in the first place (they agreed that the process of journey and adventure would be good for adaptation, it had a strong emotional center in Smike, and the theme of money was timely) to the cuts that were made mere hours before performance. This book is crucial to a reading of the larger construction of the piece.

There is a wealth of material on film adaptation, and the miniseries has recently come in for much critical discussion--the miniseries itself is a wonderful call-back to the serialization of fiction. Abigail Burnham Bloom and Mary Sanders Pollock's *Victorian Literature and Film Adaptation* has a primary emphasis on specific adaptations and what they reveal about the ways in which nineteenth-century British texts are received and understood. Iris Kleinecke-Bates's introduction, "Neo-Victorian Television: British Television Imagines the Nineteenth Century" and Michael Pointer's *Charles Dickens on the Screen: The Film, Television, and Video Adaptations* are key sources for Chapter Three. Pointer's book provides a catalog of movies and television presentations between 1897 and 1993, complete with cast lists and production credits.

Gender theory within the context of Dickens proves to be pertinent to the discussion of Smike, our pathetic orphaned adolescent. As mentioned earlier, almost all of the productions of *Nicholas Nickleby* in the 1800s had a female play the role of Smike—many are listed in Bolton's *Dickens Dramatized*; additionally, the 2012 miniseries reprises the female Smike, though this time as an elderly woman. Both Jacky Bratton and Jim Davis have written very helpful pieces on this concept of the grown woman in the role of a boy. Bratton's "Mirroring Men: the Actress in Drag" discusses the differences between a male dressing as a female and vice versa, as well as how women dressed as men challenge the ways in which an audience reads the hierarchy of the male. Davis's piece, entitled "Slap On! Slap Ever!: Victorian Pantomime, Gender Variance, and Cross-Dressing," delves into similar topics, discussing the gender representation in Victorian

pantomime through the lens of Victorian life and sexuality. Both Bratton and Davis touch upon the androgyny of the 'boy', and the idea of gendered and LGBT perspectives.

While these resources have helped illuminate the adaptations of *Nickleby*, my work has revealed lacunae in the study of these versions. My thesis shows how necessary it is to bring together and read side-by-side varied adaptations across periods. The treatment of the character of Smike, for instance, is so wide-ranging that it demands further detailed study (I think I make a case for such). The handling of gender roles and family structures is likewise a study in contrasts, and the possibilities for handling the novel's economic themes makes it an ever-tempting target for adaptation. I have found that there is much to say about *Nicholas Nickleby*, and to do with the novel that bears his name.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### *Nicholas Nickleby* on the Victorian Stage

The immediate adaptation of Charles Dickens's third novel *Nicholas Nickleby* into a stage play speaks to its multitude of appealing characteristics: malleable and packed with emotional moments, it has the clear moral template of melodrama, with a mix of comedic and tragic elements that lend themselves easily to dramatic representation. The work's continuing relevance derives from its thematic accessibility and generic flexibility. Edward Stirling's play *Nicholas Nickleby: or, Doings at Do-The-Boys Hall* was the first adaptation, opening at the Adelphi Theatre in London, on November 19, 1838, and running for almost 100 performances— at this time, only eight installments of *Nickleby* had been published. Stirling dedicates the play to Dickens himself, and also makes a show of apologizing for the attempt at bringing the novel to life on stage; strikingly, he decides to label the piece as a farce, despite the fact that the emphasis is almost exclusively on the anguish of the unfortunate Smike. Frederick Yates produced the play, and also acted the over-the-top, audience-pleasing role of Alfred Mantalini. Stirling later wrote a second play, entitled *The Fortunes of Smike; or, A Sequel to Nicholas Nickleby*—this, too, was performed at the Adelphi Theatre, opening on Monday, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1840. By the time that this dramatization was staged, the installments of *Nicholas Nickleby* had completed publication. Both of these plays were crucial to the exposure of Dickens to the larger public — many poorer people were either not able to afford the shilling monthly parts or were not able to read at all. They would become familiar with Dickens's work if they knew a literate person who could read aloud, and through these productions. This phenomenon of early adaptation made it clear that all levels of people were eager to immerse themselves in Dickens's work; he had managed to reach a huge and diverse audience through word of mouth and performance.

Dickens, however, did not take kindly to adaptations of unfinished work. He believed that these shows were “badly done and worse acted,” and were inclined to “vulgarize” the characters, contaminating his relationship with the readers, as they leave the audience less interested in the intended trajectory of the narrative (Bolton 154). He was extremely upset with the plot changes and invented endings that such works introduced. Compounding the problem was the fact that he never received money from the playwrights or managers in exchange for the rights to his works, and some of these people did not even credit him as a source. In Chapter 48 of *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens uses the title character as a mouthpiece to take a stab at those who so recklessly take it upon themselves to finish another’s work:

...you take the uncompleted books of living authors, fresh from their hands, wet from the press, cut, hack, and carve them to the powers and capacities of your actors, and the capability of your theatres, finish unfinished works, hastily and crudely vamp up ideas not yet worked out by their original projector, but which have doubtless cost him many thoughtful days and sleepless nights...all this without his permission, and against his will...now, show me the distinction between such pilfering as this, and picking a man’s pocket in the street. (Dickens 591)<sup>1</sup>

The particular target here was the dramatist W.T. Moncrieff, a prolific adapter of novels, whom Dickens considered little more than a hack.

Interestingly enough, Dickens actually enjoyed Stirling’s first play—he even saw it twice, because he liked the casting so much. In contrast to his fierce criticism of Moncrieff, a diary entry of his about Yates’s *Nickleby* claims: “no ... objections can exist where the thing is so admirably done as you have done it in this instance” (cited in Bolton 157). This same journal entry, dated November 21<sup>st</sup>, 1838, gives us some deeper insight into the aspects of the play that Dickens liked the most:

Yate’s *Nickleby* at the Adelphi is capital, specially the boys and the way they are dressed; all tableaus from Browne’s sketches are excellent; ditto the Smike of Mrs. Keeley; but

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<sup>1</sup> All subsequent references are to this edition of the text.

much sentimental rubbish put into his mouth by Stirling the adapter. Yates's glorious Mantalini is beyond all praises. (Cited in Bolton 157)

Audiences felt similarly—there seemed to have been an overwhelmingly positive response to the two plays. Stirling gave an amusing account of one of the performances: “When the treacle was administered, most of [the boys] cried. This delighted the audience, thinking it so natural (so it was)” (Wilstach 52). Due to this tremendous success, Stirling began to write his second Nickleby play, which, as noted above, came out after the final chapter of *Nicholas Nickleby* had been published.

Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* was understood to be a wholesome story that incorporated good, teachable lessons; it took place in a detailed, realistic world in which innocence suffers but goodness triumphs, making a happy tale out of deeply troubling material. Unlike other works responding to the social and economic changes of the period, it did not have any positive representation of thieves or other “Newgate” types, which was a matter of much concern in the late 1830s. An 1840 review of an adaptation of the controversial “Newgate” novel *Jack Sheppard* suggested that companies should produce *Nicholas Nickleby* and commended that work for its moral goodness: “...for in all the versions of this favorite work there was a virtuous finale, and the episodic incidents were full of genuine humor and lively equivoque” (“Surrey” 344). This air of virtue allowed the playwrights to concentrate more on the pure and emotional portions of the narrative. In her useful analysis of the adaptation of *Oliver Twist* for the stage, Regina Barreca observes that “the play focuses completely on the emotionally basic and intellectually simple aspects of Dickens's novel... [it] does narrow the moral and intellectual complexity of Dickens's text in so far as it appropriates only the most forceful and inherently interesting scenes from the novel for its own purposes” (90). In other words, the plot and characters are simplified to the extreme—often necessary when adapting a long book into a short

play—and these streamlined characters are meant to appeal to the most basic emotions. Anne Humpherys agrees, noting that while the novel is highly complex in terms of plot and characters, when stripped down, early adaptations “...cut the plot to the bone, seize on the most vivid characters, then present them in key scenes drawn directly from the novel” (42). Morality is the ethos of melodrama, the dominant mode on the Victorian stage: Jacky Bratton has described the attractions of the form, observing that “the intercutting of high morality and low humor is a central dynamic, and the outcome is the recognition and restoration of innocence” (Bratton 42).

While the novel itself contains melodramatic elements, the much more stark moral template of stage melodrama made for a number of interesting changes and ways of reading the novel; for instance, Harry Simms’s 1875 adaptation differs thematically from others (and from the source) in that it presents a providential order not entirely apparent in Dickens. It seems as though Simms has taken Dickens’s text and made it into an overtly Christian narrative—Smike, of course, is seen as a martyr figure. Simms’s adaptation in fact points up the absence of any overtly religious aspect to the novel. Rather than keep his faith in the humanity and in the kindness of the Nickleby family, Smike has someone else to look to: “The good teacher told me to trust in Him above, to ask His help, and He would not desert even poor Smike” (Simms 15). Historical context must be taken into account when discussing adaptations; here, the focus on God and redemption is likely a result of the trickle-down effect of the popularity of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 blockbuster *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, endlessly adapted and staged in the decades before Simms’s play appeared. Simms keeps the play focused on Smike’s journey of self-realization and fulfillment, concluding with the boy finding himself through finding his family. Smike effectively becomes the equivalent of the Little Eva character of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—young, innocent, pious, and terminally ill. Smike’s death scene here is an obvious nod

to the hugely popular stage adaptations of Beecher Stowe's work, which made audiences weep at Little Eva's protracted demise.

In considering these early adaptations of *Nicholas Nickleby* we must conclude that it is a particularly portable story, a feature absolutely imperative to its persistence in mass culture. A kind of template is established, by which certain elements of the novel provide focus and are endlessly shuffled and reshuffled in adaptations down to the present. Take, for example, the theme of economic injustice and its remediation; this theme, unlike Christian martyrdom, remains appealing to adapters of *Nickleby* up to the present day. In these earlier plays, though the Nickleby family has been impoverished due to the failings of Nicholas Nickleby Sr., they've not led nearly as traumatic a life as poor Smike: a boy dropped off at the boarding school at a mere six years old, he remembers nothing of his old life other than a frightening attic with the hook hanging from its ceiling. The Squeers family that runs the school treats him with special malice, as nobody is paying them to keep him around, and he has never known what it means to be loved. Eventually Smike falls ill and dies without ever finding out about his family (he may love the Nicklebys but never knows that he is a near relative). Dickens's powerful use of social commentary to bring attention to the abuses at the Yorkshire schools was moving, particularly for the original Victorian audiences, as the problem had not yet been dealt with (those who ran such schools would often pocket money and starve pupils). Even after many of these boarding schools were officially closed down, *Nicholas Nickleby* continued to have a persistent presence on stage. The novel's interest in poverty and exploitation was thus general rather than merely specific. Injustice in the form of economic subjection is a topic that will never cease to be relevant—the audience feels as if it is their duty to watch the underdog character escape whatever unfortunate situation he may be in. Additionally, the novel emphasizes the importance

of the ties between rich and poor; with Nicholas and Smike as mediating characters, it demonstrates that the gap between classes will inevitably be bridged. Much of *Nicholas Nickleby*'s continuing relevance is due to its economic focus. The Royal Shakespeare Company's marathon theatre production of 1980, discussed below, was conceived during times of economic crisis, and was noted for its obvious commentary on Thatcherism. For these earliest adaptations, the power of the story remained in its melodramatic emotionality conjoined with economic themes.

A problem arises for playwrights adapting the novel: key to any social commentary was of course the voice of Dickens himself. Neither Stirling nor Simms makes any use of narrative voice in their versions, as it is not at all a Victorian convention. With the loss of the omnipresent voice of Dickens (ironic and extraordinarily discerning), the tone changes significantly. His narration throughout the novel is sometimes used to make jokes about or give insight into certain characters, and provide the audience with a detailed description of the setting. It also is often used to make generalizations about the human condition. Take, for instance, the first description of the children at Dotheboys Hall:

There were little faces which should have been handsome, darkened with the scowl of sullen, dogged suffering; there was childhood with the light of its eye quenched, its beauty gone, and its helplessness alone remaining; there were vicious faced boys, brooding, with leaden eyes, like malefactors in a jail; and there were young creatures on whom the sins of their frail parents had descended, weeping even for the mercenary nurses they had known, and lonesome even in their loneliness. With every kindly sympathy and affection blasted in its birth, with every young and healthy feeling flogged and starved down, with every revengeful passion that can fester in swollen hearts, eating its evil way to their core in silence, what an incipient Hell was breeding here! (Dickens 89)

This highly detailed description is full of imagery and emotion, allowing readers insight into what the characters as a collective are feeling—even if they are unaware themselves. As involved as he is, Dickens's narrator is also far enough removed that he can add in the little voice

at the end offering his two cents. In Chapter 7, Dickens merely *suggests* what Smike is thinking by detailing his facial expression: “The boy glanced, with an anxious and timid expression, at the papers, as if with a sickly hope that one among them might relate to him” (82). Such distance from the action allows for wit and even sarcasm, and is also used to sway readers’ emotions—without a narrator, the plot and dialogue can shift into something generic, and on-the-nose. As Barreca points out, “there is no place for irony in melodrama; this is one reason Dickens’s novels lose a dimension when translated into this form” (92).

A noticeable difference between the novel and the plays is this emphasis on telling, rather than showing. In the novel, Dickens’s narration makes it possible to imagine exactly what is happening and what characters are thinking about, without the need for too much explication. In Simms’s play especially, there is a lot of dialogue explaining events that have previously occurred, or the thoughts that a character is currently having—so much of it is over-obvious that to modern audiences may seem more comedic than dramatic. For instance, when we are first introduced to Mr. Squeers, he is talking to Mr. Snawley about taking care of children at Dotheboys: “...we don’t consider the boys’ appetites at our establishment. (*Aside.*) That’s true, we don’t...” (6). Brooker, meant to be a rather mysterious character until the very end of the narrative, gives himself quite an introduction, in which he helpfully explains that he was the person to drop Smike off at Dotheboys: “Well, here I am, after a long and weary journey on foot from London to Yorkshire, at last arrived at my destination. I wonder if the boy is still at the school at which I left him” (15).

The hazy distinction between genres—along with the novel’s sheer generic adaptability—is a key reason for *Nicholas Nickleby*’s longevity. Dickens was a master at riding the line between comedic and dramatic; the novel itself provides a number of moments that

allow for humor to overshadow everything else, no matter how serious. Take, for instance, almost every scene with the Crummles family—as overdramatic as ever—or the Mantalinis, who are arguably more dramatic than the troupe of actors. However, the novel is just as full of darker moments and plotlines; the sexual threat posed to Kate Nickleby, the physical and mental abuse of the pupils at Dotheboys, and Ralph’s suicide are among the most disturbing and important parts of the narrative. The critic Robert Heilman lists a number of narrative conventions expected in melodrama, and each applies to *Nicholas Nickleby*: pursuit and capture, imprisonment and escape, a cold-blooded villain, innocence beleaguered, a mystery of identity, and the revelation of fraud (Heilman 46). An inherently paranoid genre, melodrama requires that its audience watch good people suffer, though with the promise of eventual resolution: a morally chaotic world reaches a state of order by the end. Dickens himself, an inveterate theatre-goer, digresses in chapter 17 of *Oliver Twist* as he contemplates this genre, makes a startling claim for the realism of its mix of the comic and the serious, the ordinary and the sensational:

It is the custom on the stage, in all good murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and comic scenes, in as regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky bacon. The hero sinks upon his straw bed, weighed down by fetters and misfortunes; in the next scene, his faithful but unconscious squire regales the audience with a comic song. We behold, with throbbing bosoms, the heroine in the grasp of a proud and ruthless baron her, virtue and her life alike in danger, drawing forth her dagger to preserve the one at the cost of the other; and just as our expectations are wrought up to the highest pitch, a whistle is heard, and we are straightway transported to the great hall of the castle: where a greyheaded seneschal sings a funny chorus with a funnier body of vassals, who are free of all sorts of places, from church vaults to palaces, and roam about in company, caroling perpetually.

Such changes appear absurd; but they are not so unnatural as they would seem at first sight. The transitions in real life from well-spread boards to death-beds, and from mourning-weeds to holiday garments, are not a whit less startling; only, there, we are busy actors, instead of passive lookers-on, which makes a vast difference. The actors in the mimic life of the theatre are blind to violent transitions and abrupt impulses of passion or feeling, which, presented before the eyes of mere spectators, are at once condemned as outrageous and preposterous. (Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 118).

Dickens's ability to incite laughter, outrage, and all of the emotions in between makes for melodramatic narratives that are astonishingly flexible. Melodrama, though it may have a bad reputation with more modern audiences, was the most popular genre of the Victorian era; the exaggerated characters and sensational events of both the tragic and comedic portions of *Nicholas Nickleby* lent themselves very well to melodramatic staging.

Humpherys argues that “adaptations [of Dickens] for the most part focused on the comic, pathetic, or villainous characters”; in her view, the chief comic character tends to be the most important in Victorian adaptations of Dickens's works (42). It is true that the earliest adaptations of *Nicholas Nickleby* were more interested in the comedy of the situation: recall that Stirling, who wrote two plays based on the novel, listed his first as “a farce.” For an example of this tilt toward comedy in the early adaptations (more than balanced by an emphasis on darkness and cruelty in later versions) let us turn to Madame and Mr. Mantalini, the milliner and her parasitical and overly dramatic husband. Their characterization in the novel is seemingly designed for the stage: they wear flamboyant and overwhelming costumes, speak in a humorous way, and are always fighting and passionately making up. By running around yelling “Demmit!” and threatening suicide in every other chapter, Mr. Mantalini's role emerged as notable in the first section of the novel—he was subsequently given a larger presence in Stirling's first play. His vocabulary is outrageous, he refers to his wife with a parade of extravagant pet names, and his excessively grand gestures make him the center of attention: “I'm not fit to live, to breathe the same air with my angel wife, I am too dem'd bad---let me die---fall a dem'd bleeding object at your pretty little feet” (Stirling 62). It could be argued that Mantalini had so much time dedicated to him in this version because the actor who played him was also the theatre manager—but it is most likely due to the melodramatic comedy that he brings to the stage with

him. He is also brought back for Stirling's second adaptation, even though the resolution of his story has nothing to do with the rest of the plot, and could be considered extraneous. The deployment of the Mantalini to comic effect in the plays requires that their links to the economic themes be downplayed: Mr. Mantalini has in fact been digging himself and his wife into debt (with Ralph's help) and destroying her business. The Mantalini on stage are almost as dramatic as the Crummles family, who are in fact part of a travelling theater company. Stirling's second play begins with Nicholas working for the Crummles company (which is not where the first play left off). This troupe, full of personality and lofty notions of the theater, are also given by Stirling a good deal of time on stage, as viewers are shown the connection that Nicholas and the players come to have.

If we follow Humpherys' reading, with its emphasis on clear types, the treatment of Mrs. Nickleby is revealing. Nicholas's mother has enormous comic potential. She is oblivious to what is going on around her, and talks far too much; however, in this character the line between comic and serious is harder to distinguish, since she has no idea she is happily putting her own children—especially her daughter—in danger. She is not much of a presence in the early adaptations: aside from the first scene in which she introduces her children to Ralph, Simms gives Mrs. Nickleby about three distinct lines for the rest of the play. Admittedly, she is fairly easy to portray on stage, as she is so easily characterized by her absent-mindedness and ability to jabber on endlessly (much like Mrs. Bennett in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*); however, she does nothing to forward the action of the play. The decision to give Kate a role just as small as her mother is a more revealing one. Unlike her mother, Kate has her own serious plotline in the novel, one tied to major turns within the narrative; her imminent danger at the hands of Ralph, for instance, is the reason that Nicholas quits his job with the Crummles family. In all of

the nineteenth-century plays, her character is surprisingly limited. This might, perhaps, be due to reluctance to put her situation, with its element of sexual threat, on stage. Kate's suffering threatens the "regular alteration' of comic and tragic scenes," that Dickens saw in the melodrama and Barreca sees as crucial to the success of the melodramatic versions of Dickens's novels—it's just too grim. This decision means that the audience loses sight of a key theme: the family's failure and peril throughout the narrative. The Nickleby family dynamics are a crucial part of the novel: the first two chapters go into depth about earlier generations, and spend time fleshing out some of the relationships within the family. Nicholas Nickleby Sr. failed financially, then gave up and died, and now his family is in danger of similarly failing to pull themselves together and solve their problems—a concept that is almost entirely glossed over when the whole play is turned towards the plight of the put-upon orphan Smike. In *The Fortunes of Smike*, the audience does indeed see Kate take a stand against her uncle, who has subjected her to humiliation and degradation—however; certain highly important moments, such as the dinner party scene at which Ralph's male guests insult Kate, are not shown on stage, perhaps due to their crude and disturbing nature. The multiplicity of characters involved in the plot allows for a something of a puzzle—adapters can rearrange characters, giving some more attention than others, in order to present a shift in narrative interpretation.

These elements—generic conventions, selective use of characters, economic motif—will find a focus in the character of the boy Smike, who becomes the most important figure in these adaptations. While he turns out to be a member of the Nickleby family, this is not known until the end of the novel. The question then remains: why does this character get so much stage time? He is not outright funny (though sometimes we find humor in what he says), nor is he heroic or villainous; he does not *do* much in terms of the plot; rather, it revolves *around* him,

rendering him the emotional and dramatic center of all of these versions (and in those to follow). Smike is one of the most complex characters, in terms of staging. He is a center of physical action. Journeys, fights, rescues, and physical abuse are all key points of the narrative, and more often than not, Smike is involved. He is a linchpin to any adaptation, as well as a problem: the treatment and representation of Smike's character is what determines the rest of the play. Stirling's adaptations were among the first of a multiplicity of plays based on *Nicholas Nickleby* in the nineteenth century, each altering the narrative in its own unique way, though a clear thread uniting these works is the fact that even though audiences are set up to adore him, it's clear that Smike needs to die to complete the story.

The central performer in the two Stirling adaptations, as mentioned earlier, was Mrs. Mary Anne Keeley, who performed as Smike. This choice, to have a young boy played by a woman, was not uncommon in the Victorian era. H. Philip Bolton's book *Dickens Dramatized* contains a complete list of every recorded adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby* up to 1987; in it, he has a paragraph listing of the actors of the nineteenth Century who played the lead roles, and every single person listed for Smike is a woman.<sup>2</sup> A review of Mrs. Keeley's performance from *The Literary Gazette* of 1840 is proof of her popularity and influence: "...it is so true, so natural, and yet unforced and unexaggerated, that the painful emotions are kept under, and both the judicious and the unskillful can only weep their admiration." Mrs. Keeley herself acknowledged the audience's confused emotional response to her performance:

I couldn't make it out. I had to rise from where I was and crawl my way down to the footlights without speaking. The gloom at the back of the stage was so dense that I don't think the audience had seen me at first. As I came stealthily forward, they did not quite understand the situation. My costume was certainly very odd, and as I had recently been playing in many comic parts, I suppose they expected something funny from me...when I

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<sup>2</sup> This will be talked about more at length later on, but it is interesting to note that the most recent adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby*, a 2012 miniseries, cast Smike as an older woman.

spoke the first lines of my part the laughter ceased, and there was a dead silence. Then a stifled sob reached my ear... . (cited in Goodman 80)

It is essential here to turn to the question of gender in the Victorian era. Until the ages of about six or seven years old, Victorian boys and girls wore very similar clothing, and the line between boy and girl was not so sharply drawn; in a play such as *Nicholas Nickleby*, a character like Smike never grows up (he will die before he gets the chance), and effectively remains a child forever. The lack of a strict gender binary in early childhood is complicated by the Victorian tradition of cross-dressing on stage. J.S. Bratton argues, “Female to male cross-dressing became important in offering an on-stage exploration of the meanings, not of being a man or a woman, but of being a boy” (Bratton 220). There are a number of reasons why an adult woman might be cast in this role of a young boy; at the most basic level, it mitigates the audience’s sense of discomfort to have an adult, rather than a child, be tormented. Additionally, casting Smike as a *woman* creates a kind of theatrical frame for the audience—if they are reminded of the fact that Smike is a fictional character, perhaps the terrible things that he goes through will hurt a little less. This framing technique dovetails neatly with the process of emotional simplification presented by Barreca and Humpherys. Bratton’s work on melodrama corroborates this detachment by suggesting that the genre has something to do with it: “[the audience’s] enjoyment of being made to cry horribly must have been considerably facilitated by the distancing of the story of desperate poverty within a comic frame” (Bratton 41). In Stirling’s second play, Smike is always treated as a child, constantly being patted on the head by his “superiors.” A short monologue emphasizes his own fragility, and simultaneously makes audiences aware of the duality of melodrama: “I’m sure I’ve lost my way, the streets are so much alike, and my poor head is so very weak. If I ask the strange people, they only laugh, and send me wrong” (Stirling, “*Fortunes of Smike*”, 32). The sad and abused boy is even more emotional

when a female plays him—Smike is constantly endangered and threatened, and, as Bratton points out, “these roles did not demand masculinity of face or broadness of shoulder, the audience’s pity being intensified by the waif-fragility of Jennie Lee as Jo in *Bleak House* or of Mrs. Keeley as a white-faced, shivering Smike” (Bratton 28).

Complicating matters further, however, is the inevitably sexual component of cross-dressing in this period. Acting a male role was one of the only ways that women were able to show the shape of their legs, as cross-dressed female performers customarily wore close-fitting trousers (or even tights). At the time Stirling’s plays were staged, Madame Eliza Vestris had become famous for her breeches roles (including Oberon in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Don Giovanni) and the “Principal Boy,” played by a woman, was slowly becoming an established figure in holiday pantomimes (the type can still be seen on the English stage every Christmas season). Jim Davis quotes E. H. Shepard in order to emphasize the suggestive allure to Victorian audiences of the woman in male clothing:

I did not think it possible that such feminine charms existed as were displayed by the Principal Boy. Ample-bosomed, small waisted, and with thighs—oh, such thighs!—thighs that shone and glittered in the different coloured silk tights in which she continually appeared. How she strode about the stage, proud and dominant, smacking those rounded limbs with a riding crop! (Davis 224)

The sexualization of the character seems to implicitly undermine—and even contradict—the increase in pathos evoked when the young boy is played by a woman. The highly varied potential readings of the cross-dressed performance of Smike would seem to collide with the tendency to simplify seen in Victorian stage adaptations of the novel. Keeley as Smike can be, alternately, *less* disturbing, *more* pathetic, even somewhat *attractive*—we are dealing with

contradictory qualities and effects. As we shall see, in the history of the novel's adaptations, the presentation of Smike has been all over the place. Smike has been played by a female, Smike has been (as a character) elderly *and* female, and Smike has been portrayed as grotesquely damaged—to the point of mental and physical handicap. With his multiplicity of identities, informs the shape and tone of the adaptation.

The elements discussed thus far—melodramatic emotion, characterization, the economic theme—are tightly connected to the representation of violence, which is always more difficult on the stage. Key moments of violence in the novel are almost completely eradicated in all early adaptations. For example, neither Stirling nor Simms found it necessary to include the scene in which young Kate is verbally and physically assaulted by Sir Mulberry Hawk and his comrades. Ralph has brought Kate to a dinner—with no other females in attendance—in order to use her as bait for the naïve Lord Verisopht to make a deal with him. Hawk, an older man with his own hefty sum of money, takes a liking to Kate, and humiliates her by placing bets on her at the dinner table (she must *tell* him that she does not wish to be “made love to”); after she runs away in embarrassment, Hawk attempts to force himself on her until Ralph walks in and stops the attack. Each play presents Kate confronting her uncle about the situation but neither actually shows the events that occurred. As is true with many of the plays from the nineteenth Century, we find out major plot points through telling rather than showing. Perhaps the violence towards Kate in the novel was considered too disconcerting for audiences to watch. It is interesting to see this specific scene develop through the centuries, as audiences come at the scene with a different perspectives. For example, Cavalcanti's 1947 version shows Hawk pushing Kate into a corner at the opera; the 2013 miniseries has the pedophilic ‘Hawkovsky’ rip his pants off and reveal his underwear to the young Kate. Victorian theatre was especially drawn to comedy and

sentimentality, so another reason to tone down the violence might have been that it would be out of place in melodrama.

Other important moments of violence are omitted—in no play does Nicholas confront Hawk, after overhearing him say offensive things about his sister in public. This scene is meant to be very powerful—Nicholas stands up for his sister when demanding to know who Hawk is, and then proceeds to throw him off of his horse and buggy when he keeps his identity a secret. It is arguably the most physically violent scene of the novel, as Nicholas hangs onto the carriage as long as possible in order to give Hawk the beating that he deserves. Both plays make mention of the fight between Nicholas and Squeers, though they understate it, making it look more like a tussle than a beating. In the novel, after the Squeers family catches a runaway Smike and decides to beat him brutally in front of all the schoolchildren, Nicholas steps in right before the whipping and slashes Mr. Squeers with his own weapon. This weakening of violence suggests a difference in Nicholas's character as realized on stage; he is meant to be young, impulsive, and unable to contain himself when in certain situations. Nicholas is not supposed to know how the world works just yet, and one could even argue that Nicholas actually grows up *through* these acts of violence. There are two moments where personal violence disrupts and redirects the narrative: when he first stands up to Squeers about the abuse at Dotheboys, and when he beats up Hawk on the carriage. At the end of the novel, we see Nicholas as a much more responsible young man—or, at least, a person a little more in control of his impulses—as he raises a fist to punch his uncle, but knows better than to act upon it. This restraint can be seen, perhaps, as a point at which Nicholas has made serious headway in becoming the most powerful person in his family, though he may not yet know it. It is essential to the novel's representation of economic subjection and its correction that we see Nicholas fight representatives of institutionalized

violence (Hawk as an upper-class predator, Squeers as an abusive schoolmaster) with his own form of personal violence; this theme, however, is nearly abandoned in the Victorian adaptations.

Barreca makes an important point in her discussion of *Oliver Twist* on stage: “What *Oliver Twist* provides, above all else, is an inoculation against evil” (90). This idea of keeping the audience safe from danger is very much apparent in *Nicholas Nickleby*, as well; audiences notably experience the more insidious acts of violence from a secure outside perspective. The casting of an adult female as Smike is a way of both increasing pathos and mitigating the sense of danger. The treatment of Kate Nickleby’s frightening situation is another perfect example of this distance. She is meant to be quite brutally harassed—by keeping the actual violence off of the stage, the viewers, from their voyeuristic vantage, feel a lot more comfortable with the harsh plot points. Barreca continues in her analysis of how such “inoculation” works: “the dramatic versions absorb the horror and transform the scene” (91). In effect, she is claiming that the terrors of the novel are molded in such a way that they are more tolerable for audiences to watch live. Not only is Kate getting sexually harassed displeasing, but it also takes the attention away from those Simms and Stirling deem the more important characters; the easiest way to deal with such violence, therefore, is to assume that the viewers can infer the events of the past and essentially gloss over this distressing plot line.

Of course, lurking behind these moments of personal threat and individual acts of violence is the financial violence that Ralph inflicts upon just about everyone with whom he comes into contact. In some adaptations, Ralph’s evil comes from his desire to keep Smike from the money that he is meant to inherit—in the novel, Ralph seeks to gain financially from literally every relationship that he makes with people, and discards them once they are not of use. Take, for example, a confrontation between Ralph and his former clerk, Mr. Brooker. Brooker, having

been released from a twenty-year prison sentence, returns to Ralph in the hopes of getting a job, and reminds him of the way in which he was wronged:

“You remember that? I claimed a share in the profits of some business I brought to you, and, as I persisted, you arrested me for an old advance of ten pounds, odd shillings, including interest at fifty percent, or so.”

“I remember something of it,” replied Ralph, carelessly. (Dickens 268)

Ralph does not care about the life of this man, with whom he had seemingly forged a positive working relationship in the past: he believed that he had found a way of permanently removing this small threat to his financial gain by sending him to prison. He refuses to give Brooker a job despite an old promise to take him back, while acknowledging that perhaps he was interested in taking him back twenty years ago, but only because “[he was] useful; not too honest, not too delicate, not too nice of hand or heart; but useful” (269). In a dramatically ironic twist, Brooker is the keeper of the secrets that help bring Ralph to his ultimate end: the old clerk was the one who left Smike at Dotheboys Hall. Though Ralph’s greed is represented to some extent in Simms’s play, it is extremely understated, despite its arguably providing the foundation of the book’s narrative. Part of the reason that Ralph is so stricken at the end of the novel is because he has lost so much money in a short amount of time—that every judgment he has made has been utterly incorrect. In this play, it seems that the only trouble plaguing Ralph at the end of the narrative is the death of Smike; we effectively lose the way in which the financial dealings of Ralph and his acquaintances intersect with the family narrative.

This matter of money is the most noticeable difference between Stirling and Simms: the play of the latter concludes with Smike’s death. Stirling’s first play concludes with Smike inheriting a huge sum of money—though it happens so improbably that no educated playgoer could have mistaken this ending for something that Dickens would have written. Stirling here

provides a perfect example of the ways in which the larger shape of a narrative is revealed in endings; when the writer decides to end the narrative, it more often than not exposes precisely what they believed was the most important portion of the story. Stirling's play forces Ralph to become a person whose cruel ulterior motive is to steal money (Smike's father wrote a will that bequeathed the money and property unto Ralph in the event of the boy's death). When Noggs brings these papers to light, Ralph gets extremely uncomfortable and runs away, declaring that the law will protect him in the end. In this version, Ralph and Smike are not related—which makes sense, considering the novel was not even halfway through publication, and there was no way to infer that they would be father and son. At the very close of the play, Smike requests that the audience continue to keep up their interest in the future careers of the characters.

In the *Fortunes of Smike*, which must be taken as its own, individual play (and not as a sequel to *Doings at Do-The-Boys Hall*), Smike dies as he is meant to, albeit in an overdramatic way. There is never an explicit statement—or explanation, for that matter—about Smike falling ill, and his deterioration happens at a relatively quick, even mysterious pace. Smike's final moments feel far more melodramatic than they were originally written; much as in the novel, he explains how much he loved Kate, and how he was too embarrassed to tell anyone. In the novel, this is where it ends—he feels content, happy with the fact that his best friend now knows his secret. In Stirling's adaptation, however, Smike recites a rather lengthy monologue, in which he says that he sees angels and beautiful gardens, and feels the coldness of death...and his final breath is spent saying "Dear Kate." *Fortunes of Smike* also heavily deviates from the novel in constructing a suitable ending for the evil Ralph. When it is revealed to Ralph that his son has died in the arms of Nicholas, he simply falls into Noggs's arms, and Noggs proceeds to take him off-stage, stating: "his heart is broke---he'll never speak again" (Stirling 69). That is his entire

resolution; he does not die or express fury at Nicholas's presence in Smike's life, nor does he seem to be very upset about his loss of money. With this ending, Stirling has made it clear that he is more interested in what happens to Smike than in any other aspect of the narrative—suggesting that he was not tuned into the larger structure of the work—and that the concept of the poor orphan boy is more interesting and important than the theme of money and deception. Humpherys's claim about the assigning of importance to characters is a particularly useful concept here, as none of the Victorian adaptations looked at in this study seems explicitly interested in the narrative purpose or villainous methods of Ralph Nickleby.

Ending the play with the death of Smike makes it obvious that Simms had no desire to wrap up any plot points for the Nickleby family, nor have any kind of reconciliation for the boys of Dotheboys Hall. Once the most important character dies, it seems that there is no point in continuing the narrative any farther. Smike, having finally figured out that he has a family, gets very nervous for a brief moment before imagining his mother smiling over him—with this happy thought, he dies. The last time the audience sees Ralph, he is kneeling towards Smike in agony; it seems as though his only feeling is remorse, and that he is far more upset with Noggs for keeping Smike a secret than he is with Nicholas for being Smike's friend and confidant. There is little to no character development for Ralph within this narrative—his story ends abruptly, much like that of everyone else in this adaptation. Simms's play ends with Squeers leaving—and swearing that he'll get revenge, one day—to go back to the Hall and take out his anger on the boys: an interesting choice, as the novel has an important scene about the breakup of the Yorkshire school. Everyone else in the last scene of the play ends up losing their own plot lines to make way for Smike's; we last see Nicholas holding the dead boy in his arms. "All is brightness now, and poor Smike rests in peace!" is the last line of the play, suggesting that once

Smike has found repose, all is good and right within the narrative world of the *Nicklebys* (Simms 29). Nicholas, the title character, has relatively little to do, and spends the majority of his time befriending and being protective of Smike. No other plotlines are resolved, other than that of Smike's lost family—Kate gets no justice for her unfortunate encounters with Hawk, Ralph is left mourning, and, as mentioned earlier, none of the children at Dotheboys are saved. Such choices reflect the sentimentality and audience ideals of the Victorian era—they liked it best when one pitiful character was chosen and followed for the entire narrative. In this particular play, the mystery of Smike's identity is basically resolved—henceforth, there are no other plotlines that were built up enough to pursue with interest after his death. Perhaps this persistence of focus also connects to the casting of a female as Smike; in both Simms's and Stirling's plays, it is quite clear that actress in Smike's role is both the fan favorite and arguably the most talented performer. It is possible that once the most beloved actor has left the scene, the playwrights felt it unnecessary to go on for much longer afterwards, as there is a far smaller chance for the audience's attention to be held.

The process of adapting any work from page to screen results in a number of limitations. In the early years of *Nickleby* adaptations, we lose a few key elements from the text. In the novel Smike is important not as an isolated characters but in relation to Nicholas, especially to the latter's evolution into "the man of the family"—the attack on Squeers foreshadows the fight scene with Hawk. The sense of impending danger (and more specifically, its threat to Kate) is also crucial, as it is part of the pattern of violence that requires Nicholas to take matters into his own hands. Most notably, in these early plays we lose sight of Ralph, whom Nicholas must replace as head of the family, and whose financial dominance must ultimately be undone by the ascendance of the Cheerybles. As we shall see, the key twentieth-century stage version restores

all of these elements, while taking great liberties of its own in the representation of Smike, who is once again at the heart of the play.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### The Royal Shakespeare Company's *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*

In 1980, the Royal Shakespeare Company produced a nine-hour long stage adaptation of the Dickens novel under the full title *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. The choice to produce one major creation rather than a few smaller shows was daring for its time—a result of the financial constraints facing the group. With a predicted deficit of over £450,000, the company could not afford to tour on their standard two-year cycle: the usual London season would not be sustainable. Hence, the best way to cut costs and continue their season at London's Aldwych Theatre would be to cut the number of new shows. The Shakespeare productions would not be expensive, as the sets had been already built; it then became a matter of finding what the Assistant Director Leon Rubin referred to as “a single piece of work that would provide a challenging acting opportunity for the entire company” (Rubin 14). It was at this point that the three co-directors decided that an adaptation of Dickens would be the best way to take advantage of both the actors' talents and the numerous resources of the theatre company.

*Nicholas Nickleby* was one of the few Dickens novels considered for the epic performance—the more the directors looked into it, the more that they felt it would be the perfect play to produce. *Nickleby* was an interesting choice: its relative obscurity in contemporary culture contrasts with the rich adaptation histories of Dickens's more famous works. Trevor Nunn was attracted to the story because of its picaresque form: Nicholas and his relatives and associates are taken on a long journey that weaves through myriad environments and situations well-suited for the stage. Different sections of British society are reflected in the disparate characters that Nicholas meets, and the variety of roles became essential in showcasing the cast's talent. Much like the earlier adapters Stirling, Simms, and Moncrieff, the RSC directors were

attracted to the strong emotional center presented in Smike. Though Smike would not be considered *the* most important character, his personal journey (and the ways in which others treat him) contributes to a valuable examination of human nature. Smike is a foundling—an essential Victorian type—and in most adaptations, his attempt to find a place in life (and death) creates direction for the rest of the story. The problem of Smike is the problem of his environment: society broke him as a child, and never let him grow up. Representations of Smike and his hardships are the best way to critique his surroundings. In earlier works, Smike’s discovery of a place and a home with the Nicklebys leads to a restoration of order, and consequently the world is righted: Stirling’s first play, for instance, ends with Smike acquiring all of Ralph’s riches. Smike’s final monologue in Simms’ adaptation also points to this triumph of goodness and stability, when he has a vision of his mother (who in fact abandoned him in the novel):

...and again that cold, cruel face glares upon me!—but now it fades away, and another takes its place! Oh, how kind and good; it smiles upon me and beckons to me! It is my mother! ... All is brightness now, and poor Smike rests in peace! (Simms 29)

These adaptations were also strongly reliant upon the Mantalini, the Crummles troupe, and the Squeers family; presenting the most highly theatrical characters, each of these groups was played up for comic relief, and their portrayals affected audience response. Moncrieff’s version, for instance, had Mr. Mantalini as part of the diabolical plotting between the Squeers family and Ralph Nickleby—even though his actions are often humorous, this change in character is difficult to overlook. The Royal Shakespeare Company’s method of writing its adaptation (weeks of research, character exploration, and workshops) enabled the stage play to be far more true to the novel, and therefore presented audiences with a more complete perspective. This production seamlessly intertwines political economics, violence, and emotionality to create a comprehensive—and very well received—adaptation of Dickens’s third

novel. This early marathon theatre event transformed itself into a phenomenon, selling out almost every performance and ultimately touring in America with a limited run on Broadway: it provided a model for a successful event-style production, and changed the relationship between theater and its audiences by fostering a sense of inclusion and camaraderie. Bernard Levin, critic for *The Times*, gave the show a rave review, citing its intense impact on viewers:

It is a celebration of love and justice that is true to the spirit of Dickens' belief that those are the fulcrums on which the universe is moved, and the consequence is that we come out not merely delighted but strengthened, not just entertained but uplifted, not only affected but changed. (Rubin 179)

The RSC adaptation, by the playwright David Edgar, maintained a strong focus on money as both a corrupting power and a means of doing good. Through the portrayal of different characters from a variety of social classes, Dickens's novel permits a study of the ways in which people value money. He was known for works containing social critique, and his novels resurface during periods of economic and social stress. The narrative was a significant opportunity for the actors, as its dramatic possibilities were seemingly endless: one moment, it could feel like a tragedy; the next, audiences might be laughing to the point of tears. The Crummles theatre company subplot, for instance, seemed too good to be true—a product of Dickens's own love for theatre, it lent itself to the stage quite well, and involved the actors, acting as actors, acting in their own plays. For a small group of performers to embody a wide range of characters would be a challenge, but one they were willing to accept. This sharing of roles and the text is crucial to the communal effect of the play: even Roger Rees and David Threlfall, who played the dominant roles of Nicholas and Smike respectively, were given a few lines of narration each. No one individual involved in the production carried the show by themselves: each small role was integral, and this was a main factor in the play's success.

David Edgar began adapting the play in mid-1979, at a crucial moment in British politics: Margaret Thatcher's ascendance as Prime Minister. Thatcherism—the policies that she implemented during her time in office (1979 to 1990)—completely changed the economic landscape of the United Kingdom, and not always in the best interest of all its citizens. Thatcher championed the privatization of key national industries, deregulation, and marginalization of trade unions, amongst other policies. Urban decay, industrial decline, and labor unrest were characteristic of this period in Britain—the recession of the early 1980s saw unemployment rise above three million people, and structural unemployment would become normalized after a number of inefficient factories, shipyards, and coal pits closed down. The United Kingdom had recently suffered through the Winter of Discontent: in 1978-1979, a movement of widespread strikes were staged by public sector trade unions demanding larger pay raises after the Labour Party had implemented pay caps in order to control inflation.

So why bring this specific novel back into the spotlight? Edgar, devoutly political in his writing, found an opportunity in *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* to comment on the politics and economics of the time. While the story centers on the life and adventures of young Nicholas, who must support his mother and sister after the death of his father, a deeper investigation reveals its harsh social critique of the capitalist economy of 1830s Britain. *Nicholas Nickleby*'s financial features lend themselves well to adaptations during times of economic stress—most recently, a miniseries was produced in the U.K. in 2012 as a response to the Great Recession.<sup>3</sup> The near obsession that the story has with money ties directly into the origin of the RSC production: lack of funding forced them into a singular epic performance, and, ultimately, the financial theme became a core part of its foundation. The irony, of course, is that

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<sup>3</sup> This adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby* will be discussed at length in the third chapter.

with the huge success of this particular work, ticket prices skyrocketed, making it difficult for those without disposable income to attend.

Whereas other adaptations worked to make the story more pleasant (neither of the film adaptations being overly realistic in terms of grime and grit), Edgar's version of *Nickleby* is much more dark, dismal, and angry than the original novel. This shift makes for a noteworthy change from its forerunners; while Stirling's first play was publicized as "a farce," the RSC version turned *Nicholas Nickleby* into an angry social critique. Such a prominent choice was likely due to the decision to stick as closely to the book as possible and to Edgar's desire to criticize the current economic state of England; rather than keeping the focus on Smike, Edgar found the more compelling character to be the wicked and wealthy Ralph Nickleby. The staging of Ralph is arguably the play's most notable feature—his twisted character is finally given space to come into its own. Smike may be the emotional center of the story, but Ralph's arrogance and selfishness are the reasons for almost all of the plot points. In the comprehensiveness of this production, Edgar had the leisure to stay close to the book. He was able to intertwine the more intricate plot points together and portray the multiplicity of narratives often reduced—or completely missing—in shorter adaptations.

This is to date the adaptation closest to Dickens's text, but it is nonetheless heavily filtered through Edgar's sensibility. Taking the novel's descriptive passages into consideration, his own portrayals of London and beyond often zeroed in on the difficulties of poverty. This emphasis on the social conditions of Britain in the 1830s was perhaps meant to promote Edgar's own agenda, and parallel the political climate of the United Kingdom in the 1980s: rife with selfishness, single-mindedness, and greed. Edgar described how he had wanted to draw on the manner in which "the book presents, in a wonderfully rich and vivid way, the social conflicts of

a time, the 1830s, that are in many ways comparable to our own” (cited in Peacock 90). This gloomier, more twisted version of the storyline puts emphasis on Dickens’s attraction to the grotesque, clearly going for disgust rather than humor. The city is grimmer and the characters far dirtier than any previous adaptation had allowed them to be—the Squeers family looks unkempt (with brown teeth, messy hair, and dirt all over their faces), Sir Mulberry Hawk’s hair is plastered to his head with grease, and the commoners of London look, well, common. This dinginess was met with mixed reactions. While critics like John Elsom admired the performance’s “shock-horror-probe,” others, such as Benedict Nightingale, asserted that the RSC had not gone far enough: “it is easier to imagine a tougher, harsher, angrier production, one that ventured more often and whole-heartedly into the ugly grotesque...” (cited in Rubin 175-177). It is worth noting, however, that Nightingale praised Threlfall’s performance of Smike above all else.

The RSC’s stage play introduces the inmates of the boarding school as dismal characters: “...through the darkness at the back of the stage, we see, approaching us, the boys of Dotheboys Hall. They are dressed in ragged remains of what were once school uniforms. They move slowly, through lameness and sullenness and fear” (Edgar, *LANN*, 29).<sup>4</sup> Smike’s portrayal, in particular, is disturbing and very far indeed from Keeley’s representation. Threlfall’s characterization of Smike is immensely difficult to look at: a contorted face—consistently mouthing the shape of an “O”—with a misshapen body to match. His hunched back and bowed legs make it near impossible to walk; he stutters in a voice as shaky as his body, and it is easy to construe his mannerisms and slow speech as that of a person who is mentally underdeveloped or damaged. His first real interaction with Nicholas in this version is painful; Nicholas greets him

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<sup>4</sup> All references to Edgar’s play, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, will be referred to parenthetically as *LANN*).

in the dormitory, and Smike “looks up, scared, and flinches a little” (36). It makes sense—he has been abused and presumably malnourished all his life, and not given much education. The Royal Shakespeare Company’s Smike is the most well-developed characterization of the boy so far, both in physicality and character progression; in contrast with its nineteenth-century predecessors, the RSC’s fidelity to the text allows for Smike to grow into a rich character, full of compassion and a desire for human connection.

This Smike is embodied in a totally new way: he is played by a full-grown man, neither youthful nor feminine, and the implications of this casting change the way in which Nicholas’ and Smike’s relationship might be perceived.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps even more interesting was the choice not to cast any children, and to allow older actors to play the roles of the boys of Dotheboys. Leon Rubin gives some insight into this decision: “it was only a matter of moments before the actual age of the actors became immaterial. The shock and disturbance caused by the scene could work as well with mature actors, if we approached it in a dangerous enough way” (56). What Rubin and his directorial team had come to realize was that the actors and actresses were entirely committed to becoming the “pale and haggard” children that Dickens described, so their age did not matter (though of course, no cast members were to have beards). Stage directions for scene ten of the play’s script, for instance, detail the morning routine of the Hall, where the boys’ individuality clearly does not matter: “each boy gives his number, name, age, and reason for being at the school before receiving his dose” (29). The play’s final scene would use these “children” to particular effect: while most of the cast crowds around the stage singing “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen”—an homage to Dickens’s popular Christmas narratives—Nicholas walks

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<sup>5</sup> Here, it is worth recalling the previous conversation about cross-gender casting. Though Smike is played by a male, over 150 parts were divided up between about 42 actors, which inevitably requires one or two cast members to portray a character of another gender. A few of the boys at Dotheboys Hall, for instance, are listed in the original casting as played by women—however, it is worth noting that all of the major characters are kept to their assigned gender, perhaps as an attempt to stay as closely to the novel as possible.

to the front of the stage to pick up a Dotheboy's Hall child (played, obviously, by one of the smaller men in the cast), who has been cowering in the snow. He holds the boy out towards the audience, Edgar contends, "as a reminder that for every Smike you save there are still thousands out there, in the cold" (*LANN* 29).

Nicholas acts as a mentor for this child-like person that he has saved. The scene in which the two leave for Portsmouth continues to suggest this filial connection; as they leave the premises after denouncing Ralph, Nicholas puts Smike on his back, and runs carelessly about the stage. It is a touching moment, soon to be darkened by a recounting of Smike's past. Throughout the play, Nicholas exerts much effort in making Smike as comfortable as possible after their escape from Dotheboys; amongst other things, he takes the time to teach Smike how to learn his lines for the Crummles performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, and he brings him to the Nicklebys' old farmhouse to keep him company in his final days. The poor boy, however, does not fully recover from his miserable past and ultimately dies without learning about his family. After recognizing that Smike is the product of the world around him, Peacock further suggests that audiences at the RSC version are meant to "reject the monstrosity of the system rather than the monstrous individual" (Peacock 91). This may perhaps be the first performance of *Nicholas Nickleby* to treat Smike as a character in an ensemble, and not as the star, the end-all-be-all of the narrative. Again emphasizing the communal aspect of the performance, the use of Smike as an ensemble member implies that no one character can hold the story alone, and that each person has a story that can add to another's. Additionally, his relationships with other characters are here fleshed out—more specifically, his connection with Nicholas becomes far more comprehensive than it is in any other adaptation. This production, in focusing more on the

grotesque, does not take the “streaky bacon” approach to genre of Dickens’s novel; it adopts, however, another crucial strategy from the original text.

Key to the representation of this corrupt system in the novel is the voice of the narrator. Rather than giving the audience merely a filtered perspective, the voice is crucial to the development of an entire panorama of each scene, and provides in the adaptation an example of a collective voice. No single person acted as narrator—lines were split up among different actors based on the section, and were necessary for scene transitions. Characters would sometimes step outside of themselves to narrate a scene, this often occurring when no other actors shared the stage; the Nickleby family, for instance, first introduces themselves to the audience through a third-person narration of their life stories. Observers in smaller groups could act as narrators, portraying to the audience what they were sensing and feeling from another character’s situation. With large groups of people, narration was frequently dissected into single lines that would be spoken from all different parts of the stage—by allowing the commoners of London to narrate portions of the story, Edgar and his colleagues suggest that London itself is one of the most important characters in the novel. This technique allows the audience to hear the story through the lens of the community experiencing it. The collective voice proves a crucial aspect of this revision, as it is an adaptation of Dickens’s own voice as narrator. Edgar discusses this decision in his article “Adapting Nickleby”:

Nor was our collective story-teller to be viewed as a 40-strong embodiment of the Great Man. Because what they were was a group of late twentieth-century actors, who sympathized profoundly with what Dickens wrote, and his aspirations for society and the human beings within it, but who were telling his story six generations later, and who knew 150 years’ worth of things about men and women and their affairs that Charles Dickens did not know. (Edgar, “Adapting Nickleby” 29)

There are, of course, political implications behind the communitarian aspects of the show: Edgar and his colleagues had partly produced this play in response to the culture of

individualism that had been championed by the new Prime Minister. Through persistent collaboration and dedication to the story, the company had created what critic J.C. Trewin called “a splendid phantasmagoria” for its audiences (cited in Rubin 178). Rubin further expands upon the directorial thought process in his account of the production in *The Nicholas Nickleby Story*: by allowing the characters themselves to describe events, it was recognized that narration “need not necessarily intrude and could, indeed, enhance the dramatic impact of the story” (56). So often, internal thoughts of characters (as well as description and authorial commentary) are left aside in shorter, more plot-focused productions, and excessively obvious dialogue becomes the common mode of storytelling. By incorporating this communal narration—and allowing it to be subjective rather than emotionally removed—Nunn and his team created a story that was, quite literally, the minor characters’ responsibility to continue.

A notable example of this collective narration appears at the very end of Act Two:

*...five narrators, dressed in dark costumes, emerge from the darkness at the back of the stage. They walk forward together, obscuring Smike....*

NARRATORS: There is a dread disease which so prepares its victim, as it were for death

In which the struggle between soul and body is so gradual, quiet, and solemn,  
That day by day

And grain by grain

The mortal part wastes and withers, and the spirit part grows light and sanguine  
with its lightening load,

A disease which medicine never cured, wealth warded off, or poverty could boast  
exemption from—which sometimes moves in giant’s strides, and sometimes at a  
tardy, sluggish pace, but slow or quick

Is ever sure and certain. (*LANN* 240-41)

As mentioned earlier, the story becomes the minor characters' responsibility to continue the story. In this particular case, the narrators obfuscate the audience's view of Smike and then relay the passage of time and his bodily decay through their words. Their dark clothes and emergence from the depths of the unknown insinuate a looming sense of danger and destruction. Though Smike simply states that he feels ill before this passage, we are to assume that by the time the narrators are finished speaking—by the time he has finished packing for his trip to the countryside—his body has turned fully against him. These narrators also act as a foreshadowing presence: it is impossible to believe that Smike will live long after we are told that medicine never cured his affliction. Edgar (and Dickens, for that matter) could have easily introduced a doctor to explain in obvious dialogue that Smike [probably] has contracted consumption. The playwright instead chooses to use various narrators to present an evocative, more complete image to their audience.

The unusually long running time for this adaptation revealed the intricate ties between characters and plot points; rather than cutting characters with few lines, the RSC was aware of the important role that these minor individuals play—specifically, their contribution to the slow undoing of Ralph—and worked hard to keep the integrity of the novel's extensive cast. Despite their attempt to include every plot point and minor character, a few scenes still needed to be cut in order to keep the length of the show bearable (otherwise, both the audience and the performers would be affected). Possibly the least important character in the entire novel is the Nickleby family's mad neighbor, who often throws vegetables over the backyard wall as an attempt to woo Mrs. Nickleby. Though he acts as comic relief within the text, he ultimately does nothing for the plot, and serves only to develop the one character in the play who is too clueless to comprehend her surroundings. The RSC had actually kept his scenes in up until the first night of the

performance, when it was determined that it would be necessary to cut out about fifteen minutes for the audience's sake. The decision to keep true to the novel, in fact, allowed Edgar to reinstate the (often cut) romantic subplots of the novel's three couples: Frank Cheeryble and Kate, Nicholas and Madeline Bray, and Tim Linkinwater and Miss LaCreevy. Neither Simms nor Stirling seemed to believe that any of these characters (other than members of the Nickleby family) were worth keeping in their adaptations—Stirling's first play undoubtedly did not have the ability to supplement its narrative with these characters, as some had yet to have been created or developed by Dickens. Most importantly, perhaps, Edgar's script permitted Smike's emotional evolution as he learns to love humankind; he is an embedded character, of sorts, and becomes more complex as the audience learns the ways in which he is connected to everyone else. For instance, Smike's intense infatuation with Kate is hampered by her admiration of Frank Cheeryble—in shorter adaptations, this unrequited love is simplified to the extreme. Almost all of the notable romances progress *after* Smike's death, which is perhaps the reason why the earliest adaptations showed little interest in them.

Ralph's eventual and satisfying demise is almost unintentionally orchestrated by the minor characters in the text—in most adaptations, the run time is far too short to elaborate on the complex web of characters. Audience expectations play a crucial part in the inability to introduce newer, smaller characters—viewers might react badly when a character is introduced near the end of a performance only to act as the catalyst for big changes (despite the fact that an individual randomly appearing might be realistic). Though this concept of melodramatic, almost providential coincidence may not be particularly in line with modern tastes, it is a distinctly Victorian ideal (as demonstrated in earlier, less realistic adaptations). The detail and length of Dickens's novel allows for characters to weave in and out without becoming too confusing; in

fact, the smallest characters can play an important role; with Nicholas and Smike, they are a combined force that has the ability to ruin the one person that they all have in common. It is almost as if there really is some kind of God-given order in place—these minor characters, each dealing with their own affairs for their own purposes, end up destroying Ralph.

Arthur Gride, for instance, an elderly associate of Ralph, works with him to pay off Walter Bray's debt; Gride attempts to force Bray's daughter Madeline—Nicholas's future betrothed—into marriage with himself, in order to inherit the sick man's fortune. He is the only one of Ralph's co-conspirators to escape legal punishment, though he is ultimately murdered for his money. Peg Sliderskew, Gride's aging housekeeper, steals a number of important papers from her master for her own benefit, including the will that was to give him Bray's money:

...what's of no use we'll burn; what we can get any money by, we'll keep; and if there's anything we could get him into trouble by, and fret and waste away his heart to shreds, those we'll take particular care of; for that's what I want to do, and what I hoped to do when I left him (Dickens 707).

Peg plays a fundamental role in the denouement, as this action allows Noggs and Frank to have Mr. Squeers arrested; consequently, the Cheeryble brothers can confront Ralph. Mr. Snawley, another of Ralph's cohorts (one often slighted by adapters), sends his stepchildren to Dotheboys in order to get rid of them; partway through the narrative, he pretends to be Smike's father in order to help Squeers get revenge on Nicholas. Of course, Snawley ends up cracking under pressure, revealing myriad devious plots. Mr. Brooker, as discussed in Chapter One, is the man who brought Smike out to Dotheboys in the first place: he uses this information as leverage against his former boss. These are just a few of the characters that may not have an overwhelming stage presence, but retain an imperative role in the overall narrative: the types of characters that are often elided—or simply removed—from an adaptation.

Perhaps it is the treatment of the Cheeryble brothers in Edgar's adaptation that provides the best example of its focus on structure and system in adapting Dickens's text. Like something out of folklore, the two men act as the physical manifestation of goodness, and are the primary reason for a positive change in Nicholas's fortune. The identical twins are irrevocably intertwined with the concept of money—they accumulate wealth by trading internationally, and spend much of their time and funds helping people in need (unlike Ralph, the other financial power). We are not meant to question whether or not the Cheerybles could exist in reality; they represent the divine good, having risen from poverty to become an unstoppable force of love and charity. Badna Raina suggests that “the point about the Cheerybles is that Dickens, given his continuing need, must still believe in the possibility of [them]” (Raina 44).<sup>6</sup> The dark side was not so dark in earlier adaptations, and therefore there was a lesser need for these benevolently good brothers to help revive our hope for humanity. The length of the RSC version commands a heavy reliance upon bleaker aspects of the novel's plot, and allows the Cheerybles to take their place as crucial game-changers. Rubin argues that Dickens in fact needed the Cheerybles to be perfect—perhaps they show that Dickens favors of the pursuit of wealth, as long as honesty and compassion are closely associated with it. Edgar corroborates this with his own take on the brothers: “Of course the Cheerybles are impossible—they dole out largesse to the needy with a gay abandon which in the real world would drive their business into bankruptcy in an afternoon” (Edgar, “Adapting *Nickleby*” 28).

This fantastic generosity is perhaps best exhibited (apart from the hiring of Nicholas) in the Cheerybles' attempt to liberate Miss Bray from her unfortunate financial and family situation. Madeline's father is on his deathbed, and she is therefore the only person in her

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<sup>6</sup> Note that they are set of twins—perhaps insinuating that the benevolent good cannot come from a single individual.

household who is capable of making an income. Here, in a scene from Edgar's adaptation, the twins delineate their master plan to get Madeline the funds that she so desperately needs:

MR. NED: And so, good brother Charles and I considered, and debated, and resolved, that we must undertake a harmless subterfuge.

MR. CHARLES: That someone, feigning to be dealing in small ornaments and drawings and the like, should go to her and purchase what she makes for cash. (209)

The Cheerybles represent philanthropy and clean business, and Nicholas, still trying to find a purpose, discovers that he fits into the world of the office. Even his most minute details are exact—Tim Linkinwater, the trusty office clerk, exclaims in a fit of triumph that “[Nicholas’s] capital B’s and D’s are exactly like mine; he dots all his small i’s and crosses every t as he writes it” (Dickens 449). Nicholas is taken under the Cheerybles’ wing, and as such, procures a job that will provide for his family. A man who came from humble beginnings, Dickens might have wanted to believe in an industrial society that is both affluent *and* humane, unlike the world that Ralph symbolizes. This stage representation of Ralph’s brutal capitalist system engenders a portrayal of violence completely different from those of earlier adaptations.

Throughout this dark and dismal performance, both characters and audiences alike sense a lurking imminent danger. One is the relentless threat of sexual violence towards women, which most notably jeopardizes Nicholas’s younger sister, Kate. As opposed to the modesty of earlier performances, the Royal Shakespeare Company was adamant on keeping as true to the story as possible—even if it meant making some people in the audience uncomfortable. The environment on stage becomes tense when all of the men crowd around Kate at dinner, and Hawk places the cruel bet on whether or not she will admit that she wants him to ‘make love’ to her within a minute; the whole minute on stage is filled with silence as each of the men stares down upon Kate (except for Ralph, who stands rigidly off to the side). The man keeping the

time literally counts down from six seconds, forcing the audience to be acutely aware of how long they've been passively watching. Moments later, Kate is shown sitting by herself, only to be approached by Hawk, who proceeds to sit next to her, grab her chin, and shove his arm around her; when she recoils from his touch, he immediately clutches her arm and thrusts her back onto the cushion, insisting that she must "be more natural, Miss Nickleby, more natural" until Ralph enters the room and stops him (Edgar, *LANN* 125).<sup>7</sup> Though audiences do not literally see Hawk attempt any kind of sexual act, the force that he uses—as well as the conversation that precedes it—makes his intentions abundantly clear. In this performance, the scene is actually intercut with a scene from the Crummies' *Romeo and Juliet* in which the Capulets disown their young daughter. Compare this to Stirling's plays, in which the audience must either know the plot beforehand or make an assumption about the events surrounding Kate, since they are but quickly referenced. Perhaps the ability to perform such a scene was more acceptable in the 1980s due to a higher audience tolerance for such uncomfortable or painful scenarios. The more recent the adaptation, the more agonizing the scene becomes; in David Innes Edward's 2012 miniseries, Russian big-shot Hawkovsky offers young Kat a drink before pulling his pants down completely.

The Nicholas we meet in Dickens's novel cannot be upheld as the picture of innocence, either; he often perpetrates acts of physical violence in direct response to those who threaten characters who are less able to defend themselves. However, Nicholas never initiates these fights: he strikes back only when someone strikes him first. Dickens defends the character in his 1848 preface to the text, stating: "if Nicholas be not always found to be a blameless or agreeable, he is not always intended to appear so. He is a young man of an impetuous temper and of little

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<sup>7</sup> This scene is almost verbatim from the novel's text, found on page 237.

or no experience and I saw no reason why such a hero should be lifted out of nature” (Dickens 9). The RSC adaptation includes these key instances for Nicholas, and accurately presents the careful way in which Dickens arranged the violence in the novel. Edgar continues to take the darkness to a new level, calling, for instance, for Squeers actually to tie Smike to a ladder in order to receive his whipping. Nicholas looks more disturbed and upset than angry, and interjects with a fairly calm “Stop!” before explaining to Squeers, in a shaky and almost timid voice, that he cannot let this continue; he looks as though he is about to cry before he steps in front of the ladder to signify his solidarity with the boy. We can see the minute changes in his countenance thanks, in part, to a few well-timed close ups; it is perhaps worth noting here that within this section, I will be commenting on a few of these scenes based on the filmed version of the play, which will be discussed in more detail below. Squeers yells and then strikes Nicholas in the face, which becomes the final straw—Nicholas flips him around and punches him, and in a reversal of power, grabs the whip. He flogs Squeers until the master hits the floor, and the other boys untie Smike. Nicholas’s dialogue before his outburst reflects the motivation behind his quick change in temperament: “I have begged forgiveness for the boy. You have not listened. You have brought this on yourself” (Edgar 59).

Roger Rees’ sympathetic portrayal of Nicholas emphasizes the fact that he only committed this violent act because he was pushed to his very limits—he reacts in this way only when the response is warranted. This representation of Nicholas is far less bold and impulsive than Dickens’ original description of the boy. In the novel, his first attempt at stopping Squeers reveals not timidity, but confidence, for he speaks “in a voice that made the rafters ring” (Dickens 156). Though in the RSC version, it seems as if Nicholas snaps quickly, Dickens’s dialogue acknowledges the pent up anger that caused this outburst:

“Wretch,” rejoined Nicholas fiercely, “touch him at your peril! I will not stand by and see it done. My blood is up, and I have the strength of ten such men as you...I have a long series of insults to avenge,” said Nicholas, flushed with passion; “and my indignation is aggravated by the dastardly cruelties practiced upon helpless infancy in this foul den.” (157)

Perhaps Edgar found it would be easier for Nicholas to garner support from the audience if he depicted the boy as someone who was *not* impulsive and resentful, but became violent and angry only when pushed to his maximum limits. At this intense moment—in the filmed version of the play—the camera actually pans back to the audience in the theater; they cheer so loudly that their excitement blends in with that of the boys in the hall. For a brief instant the distance between the two groups shrinks, strengthening the performance as a communal experience while the audience becomes a part of the story. As noted earlier, Edgar’s Nicholas is noticeably less forceful than his Dickensian counterpart. Perhaps, then, the audience feels almost an obligation to get involved in the scene—they, as voyeurs, know more than Nicholas does about the cruelty of Squeers. With this knowledge, they might feel the need to take on some of Nicholas’s anger and forcefulness, in order to provide the Squeers family a more proper defeat. Or perhaps they do not believe that they have a duty to uphold: they may just be extraordinarily excited at the prospect of a villain getting his due punishment. Critics such as *The New York Times*’ Mel Gussow acknowledged the satisfaction that the collaboration brings: “this is one environmental production that really profits from that approach...during the performance, there is direct, spontaneous reaction from theatergoers” (Gussow 2). Demonstrative audience interaction harkens back to the Victorian era, when viewers would hiss the villain or cheer loudly during action scenes: this duality is part of the communitarian ethos that Edgar was aiming to represent.

Later on in the play, Nicholas will commit another act of violence: he confronts Sir Mulberry Hawk after overhearing the wealthy man talk disrespectfully about Kate. When

Nicholas addresses Hawk and his associates at their dinner table, every comment that he makes is met with taunts and derisive laughter. Hawk's companions, such as Lord Verisopht, leave him at Nicholas's mercy, for they have finally realized the gravity of the situation when Hawk claims that he has "nothing serious to say to a boy of his station" (174). Nicholas is again calm for a brief moment, until Hawk, out of spite, soundlessly dismisses himself from the table to move to a different one. Silence continues as Hawk pours himself multiple glasses of wine, and signals 'cheers' at Nicholas each time takes a sip—a role reversal is suggested in the stage play, as here, the stage direction states: "*Nicholas is watching Hawk like a hawk*" (175). As Hawk prepares to leave, he scornfully tells Nicholas that he will not reveal his identity. The waiters—who, until now, have been passive characters on stage—briefly introduce the forthcoming events, and in moments the scene has changed: lightening, fog, and hail envelop the stage as the scene is announced.

WILBUR: And there was a private cabriolet in waiting,

WANDA: And the groom opened the apron,

WALTER: And jumped out to the horse's head,

WILBUR: Who was a thoroughbred,

WANDA: And consequently Very Highly Strung. (*Now we can see the cabriolet. It is a small, private carriage, represented by a chair, carried by four actors and pointing upstage, on which Hawk sits with his whip. Upstage of that are more actors, covered with a long black cloth, to represent the horse, as, in a moment, it rears and bolts. This effect relies on careful lighting, so that we hardly see the other actors, but only Hawk, Nicholas, and the head of the horse.*)

WALTER: And the young man walked up to the older gentleman,

WILBUR: And grasped his arm, and spoke: (*Nicholas, held up by actors, as if on the footboard of the carriage*)

NICHOLAS: So, will you make yourself known to me? (175)

Hawk continues to be dismissive of Nicholas, and this prompts a fistfight at the top of the carriage (much of which is obfuscated by fog and background characters). The stage directions again make a notable allusion to the earlier role reversal: "*Hawk strikes Nicholas with his whip.*

*Nicholas grabs the whip and strikes Hawk*” (176). Thus far, this is the only adaptation that portrays Nicholas and Hawk’s confrontation, though it is significant that the fight is not completely visible.

When the focus of an adaptation is *Smike*, a crucial player of the text lacks adequate representation. The RSC presents audiences with a politicized play that ends with the deserved death of a human manifestation of the capitalist monster: Ralph Nickleby. Ralph, the brains behind numerous plots to ruin the lives of others and profit from them, is an embodiment of fiscal violence. He is the novel’s principal antagonist; his actions and schemes are the cause for the constant feeling of imminent danger. Edgar notably decided that it would be crucial not only to keep the muffin-company scheme by which we are introduced to Ralph but also to make it in effect the starting point of the action of the play, because “the plot is about money, and the main plot of the book is almost all about money and relations between people and their money and I wanted to start with a scene about money” (Edgar, “Adapting *Nickleby*” 83-85). Framed in this way, it is no wonder that despite his lack of physically violent actions, Ralph’s greed and inability to connect with people make him the most harmful character. The man has enormous influence, though his verbal and physical restraint make him difficult to put on stage. For instance, while Hawk and his colleagues place derisive bets on Kate at dinner, her uncle steps to the side and says but three lines; though Kate pleads for help, Ralph’s response—“it’s done in a moment, and there’s nothing in it...if the gentlemen insist...”—is perhaps the most shocking line of the scene (123). Ralph has clearly weighed the pros and cons of putting his own family in danger, and knowingly gives the men a free pass to continue their mockery.

There is a satisfying quality to the conclusion of his character arc: after a few extremely emotional events signifying his rapid fall, Ralph commits suicide. The novel dedicates an entire

chapter to his death; it is a dreary tale, with almost every line foreshadowing his final course of action. He has just found out that his son, who he had believed died as a child, had been the poor soul following Nicholas around devotedly for the past year. Smike had died loving Nicholas more than anyone else, having never known the real father who had actively mistreated him. What's worse: he has driven his own son to death as a way of exacting revenge upon his nephew. On the way home from learning this news, Ralph becomes completely paranoid—the first time we see him evince any sort of human emotion—and feels as though a dark mass follows him home “like a shadowy funeral train” (Dickens 749). He passes a graveyard in which a man who had killed himself was buried: a man on whose jury Ralph had sat years ago. A bunch of drunkards dance cheerfully past him, and for a moment Ralph joins in on the fun, before reaching his house and shutting out the world forever. Dickens pointedly acknowledges that the room is too dark to see anything other than Ralph's body—an exciting moment in which his inner dramatist emerges.

One of the most crucial characteristics of this chapter is its description of Ralph's internal thoughts; he is overwhelmingly full of anger. He dwells upon the fact that Smike loved Nicholas like the father he never had, and that his own child had died beside the nephew that he hated; he acknowledges the foiled financial schemes, but it all reverts back to his anger towards Nicholas:

But one tender thought, or one of natural regret, in his whirlwind of passion and remorse, was as a drop of calm water in a stormy maddened sea. His hatred of Nicholas had been fed upon his own defeat, nourished on his interference with his schemes, fattened upon his old defiance and success. There were reasons for its increase; it had grown and strengthened gradually. Now it attained a height which was sheer wild lunacy...[he lists off the reasons why he is angry]...The dead boy's love for Nicholas, and the attachment of Nicholas to him, was insupportable agony. (750-751)

This interior monologue is pivotal, because it is an intense characterization of Ralph. As expected, the man is full of passionate hatred. He goes up into the attic—where Smike was kept

for the few years that he lived there—and, for the first time, he notices the iron hook in the ceiling. When people call for him outside, they do not recognize his voice, perhaps because he has already resigned himself to death. It starts to rain and the church bell chimes. Ralph becomes wild and frenzied, and yells into the air that he should be left on a dunghill to rot and infect the air. His body is not found until the next morning: he had hung himself on the hook below the trap door, the precise spot that Smike stared at in fear fourteen years earlier.

This scene in the RSC production is narrated by the ensemble of actors who enter and leave in their own ghostly fashion. Dickens's words are kept nearly verbatim, and the cast performs them in an almost expressionistic scene; the bodies of the ensemble build the walls that Ralph uses to hold himself up as he stumbles through the streets of London. Ralph's journey back home is a troubling one, and the collective narration serves to emphasize this:

NARRATORS: And there was one black, gloomy mass that seemed to follow him,  
Not hurrying in the wild chase with the others,  
But lingering, sullenly, behind, and following him. (261)

The stage directions in the written script also suggest a deeply haunting scene: "*at the back, a line of people, at crazy angles, like bent and broken iron railings; in front, a pile of bodies, forming hideous shapes*" (Edgar 261). Though there is no mention of his history as a jury member, Ralph still passes a graveyard and "a little, weazen, humpbacked man" that begins to dance as he stumbles and gropes his way back home (261). The narration here also acts as a brief internal monologue; audiences are told that "he felt as if he had shut out the world" (261). All of the narrators then disappear from the stage, leaving Ralph, quite literally, alone.

As opposed to showing anger and hatred towards Nicholas, however, this version of Ralph Nickleby laments the fact that his own son was taught to hate his name. His blame is self directed—in fact, rather than condemning Nicholas, he alludes to the boy's goodness: [*referring*

to Smike] “If he’d grown up here. Might we have been—a comfort to each other. And might I—have been a different man. A man more like my nephew” (262). Tim Linkinwater comes to the door to request a visitation for the next day, though the title of the book’s chapter suggests otherwise: “Ralph makes one last appointment—and keeps it” (Dickens 749). In the play, before he kills himself, Ralph spells and defines the word “outcast,” recalling the previous moment in which Smike cowered in a corner, repeating this very word in fear. This moment is *not* one from the novel, and perhaps Edgar added this scene in order to develop his character one final time—it may make audiences oddly sympathetic to him when they finally see him as he sees himself. In a sense, this scene may symbolize a rebounding of Ralph’s destructive powers: he has become what he had made of his own son. Ultimately, the Cheerybles find Ralph’s body—perhaps an obvious metaphor for the triumph of good over evil. An important note: the novel is oddly unspecific about the group of men who finds his body. Though we are to presume that Nicholas and the Cheerybles are a part of it, the only description of the collective is that “they were a little knot of men” (754). This conceivably insinuates that it does not matter in the end who finds Ralph—there was no person whom he had *not* wronged, and therefore no person who would be truly affected by his death. The RSC performance conveys a different shade of darkness than the text: it introduces a totally opposite emotional palette, as the suicide is painted as more out of sadness than anger. Ralph dies unreconciled; he has resigned himself to the fact that he had been morally corrupt and outright wrong, and that by hurting other people, he hurt himself the most. In his greed and selfishness, he deprived himself of family. In Edgar’s deeply communitarian play, he is damned to isolation.

So why was Ralph often overlooked in the other narratives? He is not Smike. The Royal Shakespeare Company returns Ralph to the center of the plot; earlier adaptations allowed him a

portion of the narrative, but his character was not nearly as evil, psychologically harmful, or damaged as the novel presents. There is nothing remotely sympathetic about Ralph's character—he gains wealth through shady actions, keeps everything for himself, and shows no compassion. The RSC is the only adaptation in which the aforementioned suicide scene fulfills Ralph's written destiny. Other adaptations were much softer; Simms, for instance, ends his play with Ralph finding out that Smike is his son, and then collapsing in grief and shame next to the sofa upon which the (barely) living boy rests. In this depiction, Smike had been taken from Ralph and sent to Dotheboys as part of a revenge plot—and, since the relationship between Smike and Nicholas had not been as strongly established, Ralph had no particular need to be infuriated at his nephew. Ralph's narrative ends here, with him sobbing at the feet of his son, for he feels nothing other than sadness for himself and for his boy. Stirling's second play provided another ending for Ralph; he is so upset that he must leave the room, and Noggs states that "he'll never speak again" (Stirling 69). Ralph is rendered mute by his own self-loathing and grief, but in neither play is there anger towards Nicholas, nor any explanation as to what happens to Ralph's money. In fact, since the main focus of these earlier plays was the identification of Smike and not Ralph's schemes, audiences did not *care* to hear about what happened to the sizable accumulation of cash and property in his possession. The Royal Shakespeare Company, in keeping true to Ralph's character, gives the audience enough background information to know *why* this man is so tormented on the inside, and its consequences. Edgar's focus on the financial aspects of the narrative—as well as his desire to make it parallel the current state of affairs in Britain—lets Ralph become the important character that he was meant to be. The audience is given his characters in full effect: he is the personification of a corrupt economic system, and manipulates everyone else in order to get what he wants.

When it was suggested that *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* should be filmed, many company members felt a strong desire to resist. Actors were concerned that they would present themselves differently in rehearsals, because they were to have a whole new crowd to impress. In the end, all nine hours of the performance were filmed, and shown on the BBC's Channel 4 and Mobile Showcase Theatre as a four-part miniseries; this televised format imposed a number of limitations and opportunities for the audience and the people involved in the production. Colin Callender, managing director of the British production company called Primetime, expressed his concerns about filming the production in an interview with *The New York Times*' writer Benedict Nightingale: "We had to make the television viewer react to the R.S.C. on the stage, establish the same relationship in terms of meaning, emotion and total involvement in the story" (Nightingale 1). Perhaps among the more obvious restraints is the setting—due to the fact that it is a filmed version of a theatrical production, the setting is forcibly confined to the physical stage on which it is performed. Unlike movies and television shows, this production had no need to scout for locations or spend money on destination filming, and audiences were aware before watching it that those vast landscapes and crowded cities will not be part of the performance. The setting of the theatre, however, is beneficial in a different way, because the camera allows for the viewers to see both the stage and its live audience: a nod to the collaborative and communitarian background of the performance. On the day of their technical rehearsal for the second portion of the play, cast and crew were still getting new lines, practicing new scenes, and working out kinks—because of this unfinished state, director Trevor Nunn asked the cast to roam around the audience before the curtain (in costume, but out of character) so that they could explain the situation. This interaction between spectators and cast members was filmed, and used as the introduction to each installation of the video version.

The addition of a film camera also affects the format and space of the show. The performance itself, shot with multiple cameras, must consequently be adapted to television—this includes limitations such as screen ratio (1.33:1) and television audience expectations, which are different than those of a theatergoer. With film, there is an inherent need for a change in perspective—literally—because viewers become bored when a scene is shot with a single, static camera. The necessity to cut in closer or show different parts of the stage is both a blessing and a curse for a theatrical production; most notably, camera movements (cutting, zooming, etc.) often withhold audiences at home from seeing the entirety of the stage. While someone sitting in the audience would conceivably be able to watch every actor's motion simultaneously, the small aspect ratio and shorter attention spans of people sitting at home demands a more focused approach. The need for emphasis is yet another form of condensing the narrative; although something else may be occurring on stage, a studio director must choose at that moment what is the most important part of the story. Despite this, there are still some valuable aspects to the smaller, more concentrated approach—with cameras, there are the possibilities for close-ups of actors and props, allowing for the audience to get a much clearer picture of a character (and his countenance) than they might not have sitting in the back of the theater.

The format of the play—divided into acts and then subsections—lends itself well to the miniseries genre, the company's need to recap the story for the audience playing the same role as the recap sequence of a television episode. This arrangement hearkens back to the original serialized production of the novel. Serialized fiction was extremely popular during the Victorian era for multiple reasons: printing technology had advanced, the economics of distribution had improved, and a surge in literacy had begun. Each part of the novel cost about a shilling, and the final installment cost two; with these changes, more people were able to afford individual

installments, and publishers increased both sales and advertising. *Nicholas Nickleby* was published in 20 standalone monthly parts, each part consisting of 32 pages, two engraved illustrations, and about 16 or so pages of advertisements. Adapting to the format of a television miniseries permits the story to again separate into smaller portions, closer to the way that it was first presented: Gussow thought of the performance as “a kind of live ‘*Masterpiece Theater*’ mini-series—and something more” (Gussow 1).

The availability of these segments on DVD and (later) for free on the Internet via YouTube suggests an additional caveat. With both discs and the Internet, viewers are able to leave and come back to the show whenever they desire. They can fast forward through less pleasing scenes, or rewind to watch something remarkable again; overall, the experience is significantly less time consuming. This widespread user-friendly format also gives access to a population that might not have been able to see the performance when it was on stage (such as those who were not able to afford it or to travel to see it, or to those who were born long-after the show ended touring). Perhaps the fact that the RSC version is now free and available to everyone through the Internet means that the narrative journey of Edgar’s adaptation has come full circle; those who do not necessarily have money still have the ability to watch and interact with the show, be it through actively pausing and making time jumps, or simply getting a group of people together to watch the event at their own home. As Frank Rich notes in his *New York Times* review, the Royal Shakespeare Company has “miraculously staged the show to match Dickens’s narrative technique—a technique that in many ways anticipated the story-telling fluidity of movies” (Rich 1).

## CHAPTER THREE:

### *Nicholas Nickleby* on the Screen

In “Reframing the Victorians,” Thomas Leitch discusses the fruitful and extensive relationship between Victorian novels and the movies. Leitch argues that silent film has obvious roots in Victorian fiction, and makes reference to a legendary Russian filmmaker to further his point: “according to Sergei Eisenstein, [the filmmakers] were especially indebted to the work of Charles Dickens, which ‘bore the same relation to [his readers] that the film bears to the same strata in our time’” (Leitch 2). There are in fact extant two short silent versions of *Nicholas Nickleby*, filmed in 1903 and 1912. Not much is known about the 1903 film, which is listed as a comedy and has simply one line of summary on the Internet Movie Database: “An ignorant teacher beats a pupil and is caned by his new assistant” (*IMDb.com*). The 1912 version, lasting about 31 minutes, is listed as a drama: a bold endeavor for such a long novel, it mainly focuses for the first 18 minutes on the doings at Dotheboys Hall, and then wraps up other important plot points (Ralph using Kate for business, Nicholas working for the Cheerybles, and Nicholas’s marriage to Madeline). The film notably emphasizes Nicholas as an active figure—the beatings of Squeers and Hawk are shown not even fifteen minutes apart.

Films and novels share a desire to help their audiences thoroughly imagine fictional worlds; Victorian novels are long, dense, often psychological, but their stories—rich with eccentric characters and elaborate plot structure—are frequently set against some kind of detailed social background, making them therefore the perfect candidates for the screen. Silent film is strongly based on stage melodrama and its visual qualities; the pictorialism of Dickens’ works contributes to his popularity as a source for adaptation. Leitch also notes that the concept of the “Victorian” era is still somewhat contested, making it difficult to pinpoint exactly what

constitutes a Victorian novel: in the so-called long nineteenth century, we move from Austen and Shelley to Conrad and onwards to H.G. Wells and other Edwardians.

This era also tends to elicit confusion from modern audiences: in her study of Victorians on television, Iris Kleinecke-Bates argues that the period “evokes both pleasure in art and literary achievements, yet outrage at its social conventions and prejudices” (2). It is a period that is distant, but can also be easily perceived as modern, as connected to us: the period brought about social and political change through the challenging of old ideas, and offers the possibility of a distinct interplay between sameness and difference for audiences, since it can deal with contemporary issues in a historicized context. Though Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes had the most silent film adaptations, Dickens’s novels could lay claim to about 79 different productions: Leitch attributes his popularity to the sentimentality, emotionality, and pitiful characters that can come across even without dialogue. Dickens tends to be one of—if not the most—popular authors adapted from the Victorian era in both silent and sound films, thanks in part to his unparalleled ability to present cinematic images within his novels. As John Glavin writes: “Like the great man himself, screened Dickens is inexhaustible in the fecundity, the variety, the sheer inventedness of its infinitely expanding range of acknowledged and covert performance” (Glavin 7).

In the late 1950s, television started to become a more prominent vehicle for adaptation — the thought being that, as Victorian novels are so long, a lengthier time, via serialization, is necessary to portray a more complete adaptation. The miniseries genre has become a key part of so-called heritage culture, as it allows “ample time for [Victorian literature’s] multiplicity of characters, its digressions, and its absurdities” (Pointer 94). Besides the two silent films, there have been three feature length film adaptation versions of *Nicholas Nickleby*, two of which are

still available today: Alberto Cavalcanti's 1947 black and white film, and a 2002 film by Douglas McGrath.<sup>8</sup> Television has come to dominate: there have been five miniseries (1957, 1968, 1977, 2001, and 2012) based on the novel, though the two earliest of these are lost. Until David Innes Edwards' 2012 miniseries *Nick Nickleby*, the adaptations had striven to emphasize the setting of the period; audiences still have an enormous appetite for this kind of entertainment, as we can still see with the popularity of contemporary productions such as *Downton Abbey*. The contrast with the RSC telecast of 1980 is striking—almost immediately following the 1977 full-on classic adaptation, Edgar's script is a far cry from the romanticized past that its predecessor offers.

Michael Pointer argues that the BBC is so adept at translating Victorian novels (more specifically Dickens) that “it could do it in its corporate sleep...the attitude appears to be: ‘We’ve always done it so well this way in the past; why change a winning style?’” (Pointer 92). The 1977 *Nickleby* is a perfect example of this—the actors of the cast are all very talented, the *mise-en-scène* is impeccably accurate (though assuredly a bit unrealistically clean), and the plot encompasses an impressive amount of the novel with precision. However, in a review for *The Globe and Mail*, Donn Downey writes that the production “fails to break fresh ground, relying instead on the conventions...while they instantly evoke Dickens’ England, they also betray a lack of imagination” (Downey 1). This is an unmistakable contrast to Edgar’s method of adaptation; no longer character-driven, Edgar is less interested in the physical environment of a romanticized Victorian England and focuses more on the economic, social, and political structure of the novel and its surroundings. In a classic miniseries, the emphasis on overall environment

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<sup>8</sup> Cavalcanti's adaptation was born out of the post-WWII era of film; in an interview, he admits that he had no interest in directing the piece—or anything by Dickens, for that matter. *Nicholas Nickleby*, he says, “had been chosen because the British Propaganda Services thought that people had had enough of war subjects and they needed distraction.”

directs a viewer's attentions away from the more profound elements of the work—Edgar's sharper consideration of dialogue and interactions between characters is a new and welcome change from the expected norm. The BBC's quasi-monopoly on adapting the classics surely calls for a bit more analysis, as it is one of the biggest proponents of "heritage cinema." This phrase, as defined by Thomas Leitch, refers to films that want to "depict the past, but by celebrating rather than investigating it" (Leitch 6). Kleinecke-Bates offers a similar definition: a film that commodifies "a simplistic version of history; packaging a nostalgic desire for early days of aristocratic ease and imperial largesse" (8). These screen adaptations focus mostly on the visual presentation of Victorian England and its material aspects, often displaying a distinct sense of longing for society of the past (McGrath's film version in particular is marked by such a quality).

Ironically, the formation of the Department of National Heritage occurred at the behest of the government of the RSC's chief target, Margaret Thatcher. The department's explicit agenda for filmmakers involved the promotion of "our country, our cultural heritage and our tourist trade" (Joyce 75). British adaptation miniseries, by this time, had become a massive cultural export; with productions like 1974's *The Pallisers* series, 1980's *Pride and Prejudice*, and 1981's *Brideshead Revisited*, anyone with access to certain channels on television could find themselves engrossed in romantic—not grotesque—images of old England. These successful serializations were intended to represent positively some of Thatcherism's ideals: hard work, self-reliance, and national pride being among the list. Glavin notes that "although Dickens's novels are indisputably British, the *Dickens film* must be, largely, an American topic, since film is, largely, an American topic" (7). The 1977 adaptation, for instance, seems altogether innocent in its intentions, though this nationalist agenda is behind it. In stark contrast to the RSC's play

about structure and system, Hugh Leonard's teleplay emphasizes the fleshed-out Victorian environment more than anything else. This interplay between connection and distance is what makes the time period so popular; modern audiences find ways in which to relate to—or even simply appreciate—the sentiment behind it. Simon Joyce notes that the texts that tend to be chosen by heritage filmmakers are characterized by “a critique of social pretension, of the fetishizing of wealth and possessions, and of the reification objects as the bears of value,” which seems contradictory to the goals of the department. It is no wonder, then, that Victorian novels are the most oft adapted.

Heritage cinema tends to compromise its narrative logic, character development, and dialogue for the sake of a more conspicuously cherished *mise-en-scène*. One of the most common characteristics of British Heritage cinema has become the fetishization of the Victorian author. Certain writers, such as the RSC's David Edgar, found the concept of personifying the voice of Dickens as narrator to be utterly unappealing:

Often, in radio adaptations, there is actually a character called Charles Dickens, who reads selective pieces of narrative. We decided really rather early that no-one was going to don a frock coat, beard and moustache, and stand at the side of the stage with a big book. Nor was our collective story-teller to be viewed as a 40-strong embodiment of the Great Man. (Edgar 29)

Others prefer to keep Dickens—and what he stands for—as an omnipotent voice that frames their work. Leitch argues that the fetishization of authors reaches a peak in heritage adaptations, but “it is common to all adaptations of nineteenth-century novels because the authors who stand behind them...are so readily available to be fetishized” (Leitch 7). They simultaneously idealize the “intellectualism that scholarly attention to adaptation valorizes”; henceforth, the Victorian

author himself becomes one of the most important parts of any adaptation (7). As with the RSC play, however, the voice is not necessarily that of Dickens—more often than not, Dickens’ own voice seems to be adapted to fit better within the production. Douglas McGrath’s 2002 *Nickleby* adaptation offers a perfect example of this romanticizing of “Dickens”; the film actually begins with a puppet show, presenting small tableaux of different scenes and characters that will be presently appearing. Immediately after the curtain falls, a narrator begins to explain the cycle of life and Nicholas’s childhood, directing the audience to a montage of Nicholas and his father and their seemingly transcendent relationship. The narration is voiced by Nathan Lane, the actor who plays Vincent Crummies. In stark contrast to the RSC’s collaborative voice, films such as this rely on just one person (whom the audience has never met) to fill in plot gaps for the audience. Puppet shows, dramatic omnipotent narrators, and pretty landscapes make for an effective packaging of the image of “Dickens” that heritage cinema is so often keen to present.

Yet other adaptations still treat the narrator in a completely different manner. *Nick Nickleby* (2012) begins with a narrator as well, though we find out in the first episode that the narrator is in fact Ralph’s secretary Newman Noggs. The decision to make Noggs the narrator is a bold one—he is one of the few, if not the only, character who knows information about all parties involved in the story. It is also something of a symbolic choice: Noggs, in his time with Ralph, tends to be silenced more often than not. This role of narrator finally gives him a voice—even when the audience is led to believe for a few minutes that he is speaking from the dead (“Me, I got what I deserved,” he says, after we are led to believe that he has shot himself). In contrast, the BBC’s *Nicholas Nickleby* of 1977, a work that is substantially truer to the novel than other adaptations, has no narrator at all.

Nicholas's dead father, who is the starting point of the narrative, does not carry much weight in early adaptations, for he is a symbol of the financial failure that triggers the novel's plot. In at least one of the recent adaptations, however, he is ascribed an almost mythical quality: he becomes a guiding voice for his son. Nicholas Nickleby Sr., in the novel, "lived as a single man on the patrimonial estate until he grew tired of living alone," when he decided to marry Mrs. Nickleby and acquired a dowry of one thousand pounds (Dickens 20). This money begins to dwindle quickly as they have two children together, whose upbringing and education requires increasing amounts of expenditures. Soon, Nickleby Sr. is at a loss for how to make money: his wife, who is just as guilty in the matter of the family's financial deterioration, orders him to "speculate with it" (20). After he makes a few poor financial decisions, the rest of the money is lost, and he dies (apparently of depression and shame). Ironically, it is his decision to send his family in the direction of "the generosity and goodness of his brother," Ralph (21). Young Nicholas's relationship with his father is not particularly touched upon in the novel—however, some modern adaptations use the father/son relationship to shape the narrative. This intense focus on Nicholas Nickleby Sr. is taken to its full extreme in Douglas McGrath's 2002 film: every decision Nicholas makes is in relation to his father's vague advice about the future. McGrath therefore takes this classic novel and changes entirely the motivations of its chief character, in an attempt to appeal to fans of Heritage films emphasizing family- and love-plots.

Kleinecke-Bates points us toward a particular issue: "the appropriation of the Victorian age by conservative politics during the Thatcher years signifies only one of the many instances when the period is constructed as a reference point for the present" (8). If that is the case, why haven't there been more attempts to modernize Dickens? In the shadow of Thatcherism, it seems as though more adaptations are less concerned with the economic themes of novels, and more

interested in the cultural material. 2012 witnessed the most recent adaptation of *Nickleby* (directed by David Innes Edwards), but with a particular twist. Critic Harry Venning states in his review for *The Stage* that “[*The Life and Adventures of*] *Nick Nickleby* is, as far as I am aware, the first to take the bold step of updating one of the author’s novels to a modern-day setting” (Venning 1). A very small number of daring directors have in fact attempted to bring Dickens into an updated setting, but none of them have been considered overly successful.<sup>9</sup> Unlike Shakespeare—whose work has frequently been given contemporary settings—Victorian authors (such as Dickens, the Brontë sisters, and even, to an extent, Jane Austen) have been relentlessly adapted with minimal shifts in time period. Unsurprisingly, then, screenwriter Joy Wilkinson’s script for *The Life and Adventures of Nick Nickleby* generated a certain amount of confusion.<sup>10</sup> Rachel Cooke, reviewer for *The New Statesman*, wrote, “I didn’t like it much. On the other hand, I couldn’t really hate it, either” (Cooke 1). Both Cooke and *The Independent*’s Thomas Sutcliffe were perplexed by the question of the series’ intended audience:

I’m not exactly sure who *Nick Nickleby*—a stripped daytime Dickens adaptation that for once hasn’t had the set builders ransacking the warehouses for stick-on cobbles—is aimed at. It’s certainly an experiment worth conducting, though, to see whether one of television’s more posthumous screenwriters will actually work in a more contemporary setting. (Sutcliffe 1)

Critics appeared puzzled by the distinct lack of the traditional miniseries “Dickensian” ideal. Despite the criticism, however, all three reviewers acknowledged the courageous decision to bring *Nickleby* into the modern day.

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<sup>9</sup> “Attempts by film-makers to update this cozy ritual have rarely been successful...it has produced some memorably awful films, most recently Alfonso Cuarón’s 1998 *Great Expectations*, which not only turned Pip (Ethan Hawke) into a struggling artist named Finn and renamed Satis House “Paradis Perduto”, but was re-edited after some disappointing test screenings to make Estella (Gwenyth Paltrow) more likeable, which is to say less like Estella and more like a movie.” (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/23/dickens-on-screen-highs-lows>)

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted here that the two screenwriters for the 1977 and 2012 miniseries, Hugh Leonard and Joy Wilkinson respectively, are both well-established playwrights.

The point of the series, as Sutcliffe would note, is to revive Dickens's social conscience in relation to the scandals and institutional failings of contemporary Britain. Dotheboys Hall, for instance, becomes Dotheolds, an assisted-living home that receives five stars from the oversight organization, here run by a not terribly effective Mr. Cheeryble, but secretly abuses and tortures its residents. Sir Mulberry Hawk, the predatory and conniving man who wants to sleep with Kate, becomes the terrifying and rapacious Russian oligarch Hawkovsky. Cooke speculates further:

Dickens, it seems to me, has rarely chimed with modern life so harmoniously as now: the wealth and the poverty, the sudden changes in fortune, the vulgar characters and the downtrodden, the taste for transformation. (Cooke 1)

The economic context matters here. During the 2007-2008 fiscal term, both the credit and housing bubbles burst, resulting in a global credit crunch; this led to a period of rapidly rising unemployment and low economic growth. The United Kingdom was able to pull itself out of the recession by the end of 2012, thanks in part to a steady influx of anonymous money. According to Radio Free Europe, Deutsche Bank has reported that since 2006, about \$140 billion has entered the country, with about 40 percent of that coming from Russia. Ben Judah, author of *Fragile Empire: How Russians Fell In And Out Of Love With Vladimir Putin*, claims that the money “comes from screwed-up and beneficial contracts to corrupt officials” (cited in Coalson). It is moments such as this—modern ages of anxiety—that Kleinecke-Bates identifies as the times in which “film most often dramatized, adapted, remediated, and remade classic nineteenth-century literary texts” (Kleinecke-Bates 3). Almost inevitably, a contemporary version of Ralph Nickleby proves to be exactly the kind of wealthy British person who would go into business with a Russian oligarch—this series' version of Hawk. Ralph has struck a deal through which he will control virtually all of the care homes in England if he gets enough money from

Hawkovsky; the only way to convince the Russian to contribute is to feed his niece to the wealthy predator.

Adrian Dunbar's portrayal of Ralph is particularly interesting. Ralph and his associates, with the help of new and personal technology (such as cell phones), have a much easier time following through with schemes. Squeers and his boss share information often; the technology allows them not only to plan more frequently and more carefully, but also to keep each other constantly updated (for instance, when the two worked together to find Nick and get him arrested). As noted in the previous chapter, one of the reasons why Ralph is so difficult to portray on stage is his character's lack of direct action. This coldness carries over better on the screen, as the director can use the benefits of film style to his advantage; close-ups, voice-overs, and the ability to track different characters in different locations simultaneously (cross-cutting) make it far easier to depict subtle character traits and the effects of action. A very good example of Ralph's lack of emotionality—and his commitment to distance—comes at the end of the second episode, when Nick is thrown in jail by Squeers.

Though he is not physically violent towards his nephew, Ralph goes to visit Nick in the cell, and tells him off for being "just like [his] father." Nick's family is completely unaware of his situation, and likely cannot pay for his bail; when he reaches out to grab his uncle, Ralph moves away, and leaves him in the cell without any way to contact the outside world. Though eventually Noggs gets the boy out of jail, the fact that Ralph actually left his own nephew in a cell makes him an even less salvageable and more inherently violent character. In a sense, this is the first time that Nick *really* meets his uncle: it is the initial moment in which Ralph shows his true colors to a member of his extended family. Despite having the ability to depict Ralph's devious personality, *Nick Nickleby* must still occasionally play into audience expectations by

having a few scenes that are overly obvious in their motivation. Take, for instance, the moment where Kat wants to show her appreciation to her uncle, and gives him a framed photograph of the Nickleby family. For a brief moment, it seems as though Kat might have been the first person to really reach her uncle; he fakes gratitude, but as soon as she exits the room, he throws the picture into the trash.<sup>11</sup> A scene like this would perhaps be considered unnecessary, since audiences already know that he does not care at all for his family; however, viewers of dramatic television tend to place a high value on feelings and relationships between people, and so this scene serves not only to capitalize on their emotions but to close off an avenue of redemption for Ralph.

The end of this contemporary miniseries contains one big reveal: that Mrs. Smike (real name: Sarah Michaels) is Ralph's mother, and that he had been adopted into the Nickleby family. To give Ralph this characterization is particularly interesting—in an effective reversal of the novel's narrative, Ralph, rather than Smike, began as the weak, abandoned child. The reveal is especially poignant because he has believed his entire life that he has been a part of this family, and even with that knowledge, has so actively detached himself from them. Perhaps the most devastating scene in the series is when the family opens up Smike's letter to her son: "I always loved you and I'll always be proud of you, whoever you are and whatever you've done." Ralph begins to recognize that he treated his ill biological mother as less than human and turned her away at the door, rejecting the only person alive who had loved him unconditionally.

Ralph's identity was mysterious for the briefest of times (because viewers are led to assume up until the end that he and Nicholas Nickleby Sr. are biological brothers) but once he discovers who he really is, order is again restored. Ralph's adoption also evokes the question of

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<sup>11</sup> This is a wonderful use of the Kat plot—the scene begins with a line that causes us to believe that Ralph might convert her to the evil side. He tells her that she looks nice, and that she reminds him of himself. It is very hard to tell at points who is winning over whom.

whether or not *that* is the reason he is so obsessed with succeeding in a capitalist society. Simon Joyce discusses the trope of the Victorian orphan, noting that they “orphans...need to compensate for the lack of knowledge of their place in the world, one that is typically derived from familial relationships, by looking instead to cultural forms” (Joyce 158). This story, then, allows for Ralph to take on some of the Smike plotline, which is now split between an old woman and a lost child. The *Belfast Telegraph* conducted a brief interview with the cast members, in which Adrian Dunbar offered his own opinion on the character: “Ralph is the type of man who believes society owes him” (Coleman 2). Although we are not given the benefit of hearing Ralph’s internal monologue before his death, this idea is corroborated by the scene in which all of the major characters of the series (his family, Noggs, and Knagg) come to confront him about his calculating and cold nature, and he claims that “[money]’s all anybody cares about, that’s what the world is.”

When Ralph loses all his money and relations, he finds himself back in the powerless position of his youth. He reverts to a more childish attitude, becoming defensive in a way that feels reminiscent of a nervous animal backing into a corner. His final words to the rest of the characters express a rejection of humanity and a connection with it: “grinning skulls, that’s all you are, out for whatever you can get...I’d rather die than be like you.” Ralph remains an isolated figure, a free agent to the end. In his final moments, he knows that he is unable to escape his fate: the file with which he blackmails Noggs is empty, and the police, as in the novel, have come to arrest him. This miniseries does, in fact, show Ralph committing suicide, though under changed circumstances: rather than hanging himself, this Ralph stands on the edge of the roof of his office building and simply falls forward to the street below. In his hand the whole time is Mrs. Smike’s locket with his baby picture. Sneeringly, he stares down at the police car

and people walking around the street, and again whispers the phrase “grinning skulls”—not even innocent passerby are immune to his judgment. Ralph is always looking on from the outside—his trajectory is one of complete rejection of community. When Nicholas runs forward, hand out in an effort to save his uncle, Ralph jumps: his final act is a refusal of accepting help from a person whom he resents. The changing of his method of suicide is significant—he could have easily hung himself as he did in the original narrative. But there is poignancy to the image of Ralph standing out and looking over London—his city, the city over which he once had control—and then physically manifesting his fall from power with a literal plunge to his death. Throughout the series, clips of London are interspersed with the narrative (perhaps in association with Ralph’s unstoppable actions); sped-up shots of the city follow his fall, as London continues on without him.

Though Smike might seem to be a period-bound character (he is very grounded in Victorian ideals), he turns out to be infinitely adaptable. Mrs. Smike is an enthralling reinterpretation of Dickens’s miserable orphan boy. She is trapped at Dotheolds, a senior assisted living facility meant to parallel Dotheboys—though abusive boarding schools are not a big issue anymore, perhaps this transition to a nursing home is meant to comment on Western society’s poor treatment of the elderly. Oftentimes, seniors are placed in nursing homes and assisted living facilities—what the British call “care homes”—only to be forgotten about by their families. In the *Belfast Telegraph* interview, Andrew Simpson (Nick) expounded upon his own time volunteering at a nursing home: “The care workers there were great, but you hear some shocking stories now about abuse of the elderly, especially in the last few years. Sometimes I think elderly people are just forgotten about. They’re not high on the political agenda; they don’t really matter” (1). An extraordinarily lonely situation in which to be placed, it provides a perfect

residence for vulnerable, sympathetic characters. In the 2012 version, the inhabitants—or rather, the prisoners—of Dotheolds are curiously similar to the young boys of Dotheboys; they are sneaky, rebellious, and pose a threat to their persecutors when they band together (in the end, they film Squeers’s abuse of a resident and get the home shut down for good). Mrs. Smike’s identity and origin remain a mystery to both audiences and key players in the series until the final episode. She had been sexually assaulted and committed to an institution, and was in no state to bring up a child of her own; for much of her life, she’d lived homeless, on the streets of London, searching for her lost son. Much like the original Smike, she is unaware of her actual family—she remembers bits and pieces, and is conscious of their existence, though viewers and other characters alike are ignorant of her private motivations for the majority of the episodes.

So what does it mean to have poor Smike performed by an older woman? Certainly the Victorian aspects of feminine sexuality are not at play in this version. A good place to start is by noting that this character is *supposed* to be female, rather than a young male who would be played by someone of the opposite gender. We must then consider the possible connotations of Mrs. Smike as a senior woman. Mrs. Smike remains an endangered and threatened character. Like the Smike of the novel, Mrs. Smike does not have any distinctly masculine qualities and is therefore more likely to be thought of, at least initially, as powerless in her own situation. Often, elderly are considered weak and frail, due to their inability to take complete care of themselves: they revert to a childlike status, where others must assist them to perform basic tasks. Mrs. Smike has an overwhelming fear of institutions, due to all of the corrupt systems that have failed her in the past—the madhouse, the care home, and even the city of London itself have all contributed to her position in life and the person whom she has become. We are, in this

narrative, also led to believe for a period of time that Sarah is illiterate: recall here David Threlfall's Smike, who knows only how to spell a few words like "outcast".

We quickly learn, however, that Mrs. Smike is comfortable subverting stereotypes. She turns out to be one of the most active characters in the series—she knows what lies beyond the walls of Dotheolds, and wants to escape. In actuality, Mrs. Smike is quite smart; she is knowledgeable about the ins and outs of Dotheolds (and its caretakers) and helps Nicholas arrange an escape plot. Despite the preservation of her character's trajectory—persecution, escape, recapture, and subsequent death—Mrs. Smike has far more agency than any other representation of the character to date. Episode two presents a scene in which Mr. Squeers attempts to bribe the police, while Nick has to run away—Mrs. Smike quickly asserts herself by throwing an apple at Squeers and then stealing his car keys. In the next episode, when a mugger steals Mrs. Khenwigs's purse in a public park, Nick would not have been able to stop the thief without the help of Mrs. Smike, who trips the man as he runs by her.

The change in gender has clear implications for the relationship between Nicholas and Mrs. Smike. One of the most important aspects of their connection is the fact that, in this adaptation, the two are not blood relatives; she is Ralph's biological mother, not Nicholas Sr.'s. Audiences—especially those who know Dickens well—are quickly set up to believe that the two will be grandmother and grandson at the beginning of the series: when Nicholas first views Dotheolds, he catches the eye of Mrs. Smike, who waves at him out the window even before she knows who he is. Minor moments within the narrative continue to point to this ending: Mrs. Smike tells Nicholas to pretend that she is his "Nana" (and he proceeds to refer to her as his grandmother for the rest of the episode). In a key revision, the family narrative is subverted, as the concept behind "family" is expanded. The conclusion of the series validates this concept, as

well: though it uses the template of the novel, there is only one wedding at the end, that of Noggs and Knagg, not a *Nickleby*. Nicholas and Madhi are together at this point, though not engaged—Kat, without the presence of a Frank Cheeryble, is completely devoid of a romantic plotline (potentially due to her young age). The new narrative, therefore, is one about the importance of different types of bonds between people, a broader notion of community; order is restored through the reclamation of home, family, and friends.<sup>12</sup> While preserving the sentiment of the ending of Dickens narrative, Wilkinson’s screenplay presents a very contemporary application of it.

This most recent adaptation, in general, emphasizes female agency. Take Kat *Nickleby*, for instance. A feisty teenager, she is not afraid to talk back to her mother and stand by her own decisions, even if they go against everyone else’s advice. This Kat is even annoying because of her stubbornness: unlike the original Kate *Nickleby*, who is silently tossed around between dangerous situations, 2012 Kat actively puts herself in danger. She is more than content with her mother being sent off to the spa for a day, so that she can act (and be treated by others) as though she were more of an adult. Whereas Kate *Nickleby* seems almost reluctant to grow up and face the dangers of the outside world, Kat cannot wait to fend for herself. Madhi—a contemporary Asian-British take on Madeline Bray—is a single mother willing to participate in an arranged marriage (to a repulsive man, though notably of a similar age) in order to financially support her daughter and ill father. Madhi has a lot more at stake than simply her family’s finances. By bringing *Nicholas Nickleby* into modern times, writer Joy Wilkinson had the ability to represent another group of people that is often wronged by the rich and a system that favors them: immigrants. In the novel, Madeline’s marriage with Gride is the brainchild of Ralph, and

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<sup>12</sup> After the big reveal about Ralph’s biological mother, Nick tells him that they’ll still stand by him even though “I know you’re not our real family.” Despite all of the miserable situations that he has put them through, the *Nickleby* family is still at the ready to extend their help—Ralph has none of it, of course, but it is the thought that counts.

involves a good deal of stealth on the part of its conspirators; in contrast, Madhi actively searches the Internet for a husband, making the choice on her own, despite her father's paranoia about the situation. (It is perhaps worth noting that the marriage plot worked out similarly to that of the novel, as the Khenwigs family had been lying about the money that they had—as was Gride, the Khenwigs are engaging in fraud.) The character of Mrs. Squeers does not appear in this version, so Fanny Squeers takes on both roles (she and her father retain weirdly lovey pet names: Fannykins and Daddypie). Fanny is what the British disparagingly refer to as a “chav”; she may not be highly respected at Dotheolds, but she certainly exercises a lot of power over its residents—she is also more sexually empowered than any other female character, which is a humorous change from her textual counterpart.<sup>13</sup>

Even Miss Knagg plays a more active role in the series, despite her minor status in the novel. Knagg, for the majority of the series, is an associate of Ralph—the term “associate” used loosely, as she tends to be at his mercy. A key setting in this series is a men's club: Ralph seems to make all of his business deals in this impressive building full of clandestine—and creepy—happenings, and Knagg acts as something of a madam (“This is a private purpose club. We make our own rules”). It is Knagg who, under the direction of Ralph, sets Kat up as a bartender at the club (though she is too young for the post) and sends her in the way of Hawkovsky, despite Kat and her mother's concerns. When Kat begins to express dismay at Hawkovsky's intentions, Knagg tells her to “have a martini, [and] go with the flow”: for a young woman whose biggest desire is to be treated as an adult, Kat does not have much of a choice. (Kat tends to put faith in anyone not related to her, which is why audiences often question whether or not she will switch to Ralph's side.) It is Knagg who suggests that Kat be drugged in order to sleep with the Russian

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<sup>13</sup> The *OED* defines “chav” as slang for “a young person of a type characterized by brash and loutish behavior and the wearing of designer-style clothes (esp. sportswear); usually with connotations of a low social status.”

oligarch, feeling the need to up the ante after being told by Ralph that she is paid more than she's worth. When Kat goes to confront Knagg about the situation, she responds in a surprisingly revealing manner: "This is a business. You're nothing more than a bargaining chip. None of us are." This cynicism is later emphasized by her interactions with Lord Verisopht: in another business deal, Knagg is effectively his prostitute (and emerges from their final tryst with a large bruise on her face). Once Knagg begins to recognize her own agency, she knows that it is her place to help right the wrongs of the business; she helps Kat escape from Hawkovsky, and works closely with Noggs to begin the slow takedown of Ralph. Knagg finds herself happily married to Noggs by the end of the series. The novel's Miss Knagg was a grumpy, bitter spinster; this version, in its own revision of Dickens's intergenerational happy ending, conspicuously grants this minor figure both agency and happiness.

A more empowered representation of females enables a definitive change in the portrayal of violence that permeates the story. The change is perhaps most notable in the handling of the Kate/Hawk plotline; of all of the adaptations discussed so far, this is absolutely the most graphic and disconcerting. Hawkovsky, after attempting multiple times to get Kat drunk, pulls down his pants entirely (revealing leopard print briefs) and begins to make a move. She grabs for an umbrella for self-defense, and—either luckily or unluckily—Hawkovsky trips over his own pants and is cut by its poisoned tip. There is in fact a real-life reference here to actual KGB-style assassinations.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of her intentions, Kat actually kills the man who is trying to take advantage of her; the powerless young girl becomes the *powerful* young woman, which would be completely unheard of in any of the older adaptations.

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<sup>14</sup> Writer and dissident Georgi Markov was stabbed in the thigh with an umbrella (ricin-filled pellet at the top of it) by an agent of the Bulgarian secret police while waiting to take the bus to his job at the BBC on September 7, 1978. He died four days later. This event is commonly referred to as the "Umbrella Murder."

As noted earlier, this new female agency also applies to Mrs. Smike. Though brutally mistreated by Squeers, Mrs. Smike is very intelligent and has the ability to concoct a way of fighting against her abuser. Unlike the RSC's obscured carriage combat between Nicholas and Hawk, in this case, Nick and Mrs. Smike work in tandem in the third episode to thwart Hawkovsky, at least temporarily. After hearing the oligarch refer to Kat as his "main course" from behind the door, Nick walks into the room—enraged—enters the room and loudly states "That's my sister you're talking about!" before punching Hawkovsky in the face. While he attempts to get up, Mrs. Smike grabs his umbrella and uses the back end of it to hook around his neck, dragging him to the ground so that she and Nick can escape, hand-in-hand. This adaptation is still quite physical in its portrayal of violence, and perhaps even the most transparent about it.

Of course modern audiences bring a set of expectations, so we must ask the question of how closely a cinematic adaptation should recreate either particular textual features or general effects produced by the literary texts that they are adapting. Does it even matter, as long as the audience understands its message? Linda Hutcheon, writing on adaptation theory, argues that:

adapters must have their own personal reasons for deciding, first, to do an adaptation, and then which adapted work to choose. They not only interpret that work, but in doing so they also take a position on it. (4)

Again, comparison of the two most recent miniseries adaptations of *Nicholas Nickleby* may be useful: the 1977 series is perhaps the closest direct adaptation of the novel. Almost all of the dialogue is verbatim, most of the major plot points are included on screen, and the characters are presented in the exact same way as they are in the text (for instance: Noggs cracks his knuckles when he is anxious, and limps everywhere). In addition to this the heavily detailed *mise-en-scène* tries (with some success) to evoke in the viewers a sense of nostalgia for old England. Everything is as it should be, for an adaptation that is meant to be an exact replica of its source

text. The 2012 miniseries, in contrast, bravely takes Dickens into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Venning in his review comments:

Writer Joy Wilkinson remains largely faithful to the premise of the source material—which proves to be both a blessing and a curse—but is obliged to gallop through the storyline at a pace that will leave Dickens purists gasping for their smelling salts. It is, however, an exhilarating and enjoyable ride. (1)

Despite the confused critical reception that the series received, the response has been generally positive, perhaps due to the story's surprising ability to resonate with modern audiences. Director Innes Edwards made a few other changes to the story (besides the obvious). Take, for instance, the Crummles family—Wilkinson transformed the characters from a travelling theatre troupe to a mother and daughter trying to become famous through a Star Search type of program. Though the marriages at the end were not the same, it was the middle-aged, heterosexual couple of Knagg and Noggs who was wed. There were even a few short musical moments—especially with Mrs. Smike—that were presumably meant to make her a distinctly loveable character. The Cheeryble brothers become just one Cheeryble, who is here less effective as a force for good; this is a version that, much like the original text, portrays the failure of institutions: care homes, the police, oversight agencies, etc.<sup>15</sup> Wilkinson and Innes Edwards had to balance out the expectations of modern society, Dickens fans, and their own ideals of a contemporary story in order to create the miniseries. It got relatively good reviews (especially from commenters on the online articles), which is also quite impressive considering its daytime, weekday time slot. It seems quite clear, then, that an adaptation does not necessarily need to be perfectly accurate in order to appeal to viewers, as long as it is well done and the sentiment behind it is similar to that of the original.

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<sup>15</sup> The police in this story are either corrupt or non-existent; the care home system is absolutely rigged towards the good of the upper class; and the financial system, as in the original text, is proven to be a dishonest one.

The end of any production is perhaps its most important part—audiences are left to ponder the final moments. One of the most poignant scenes in the novel is the breaking up of Dotheboys Hall: the young children fight for an opportunity to escape, and then are left wandering the streets alone, confused and scared due to their sheltered and miserable upbringing:

There were a few timid young children, who, miserable as they had been, and many as were the tears they had shed in the wretched school, still knew no other home, and had formed for it a sort of attachment, which made them weep when the bolder spirits fled, and cling to it as a refuge. Of these, some were found crying under hedges and in such places, frightened at the solitude. One had a dead bird in a little cage; he had wandered nearly twenty miles, and when his poor favorite died, lost courage, and lay down beside him. Another was discovered in a yard hard by the school, sleeping with a dog, who bit at those who came to remove him, and licked the sleeping child's pale face. (Dickens 774)

The Royal Shakespeare Company's ending, as discussed above, offered a provocative picture by recalling the happy endings of Dickens's novels (e.g. the cast singing "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" as a nod to *A Christmas Carol*) and simultaneously undercutting them, using Dickens's own figure of the sympathetic orphan to symbolize failed institutions. The 2012 adaptation does something new with the persecuted residents of its corrupt institution. After three of the inhabitants of Dotheolds secretly film Squeers, he is arrested, Dotheolds is forcibly shut down, and we are left not with confused and helpless people, but with victorious residents clapping and celebrating their newfound freedom. Here, Dickens's heart-tugging description of the dispersing of the boys is radically altered: the next time we see the residents of Dotheolds is after a three-month jump into the future, at the wedding of Noggs and Knagg. They arrive as guests in a van labeled "The Mrs. Smike Foundation"—which we are to assume is a much healthier environment in which to live—and they all join the party to participate in the activities that they tried valiantly to participate in before: singing and dancing. This final scene, a wedding with family, friends, and acquaintances alike all celebrating together, is the perfect representation

of the subverted and expanded family narrative, and an intriguing updating of Dickens's sentimental ending. While the political and economic focus is far from absent in the 2012 series, the contrast between the RSC's and this version, in the use of Dickens's Dotheboys plotline, is notable: Edgar's challenge to the audience is turned into a convivial gathering, entirely lacking an irony.

## CONCLUSION

*Nicholas Nickleby* has endured as a presence in popular culture since its publication, and I have a feeling that it won't be going anywhere anytime soon; after 177 years, the novel is still judged relevant today. This thesis has examined a range of adaptations of the novel, and a variety of critical sources and perspectives to create a broad analysis of *Nickleby*'s adaptation history. The first version of the novel was produced for the stage before the serialized portions had even finished being published in 1839, and the most recent adaptation—a television miniseries—was completed and aired in early 2012. Throughout this analysis, I have considered the novel in its entirety: its malleability and emotionality, and the elements preserved or rejected in adaptation. Filled with emotional moments, the novel mixes comedic and tragic components, making for a melodramatic work that easily lends itself to both dramatic and filmic representation.

Historical context has proven essential in each case, as every work is illustrative of the time period in which it was produced. Thatcherite Britain, for instance, had a particularly large impact on *Nickleby* adaptations and heritage culture in general; David Edgar's script for *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, written early in Margaret Thatcher's rise to power, maintains a strong focus on the corrupting (or potentially good) power of money in a capitalist society, as well as the importance of community in a country embracing individualistic ideals. Edgar's obvious political commentary harkens back to the influential social and economic commentary so rooted in Dickens's own novels. As we see with Edgar, the writers of adaptations clearly play the largest role in deciding the focus of the work; the script that Joy Wilkinson wrote for the most recent *Nickleby* adaptation, for instance, presents an entirely new concept of the expanded family narrative (one filtered through a very contemporary sensibility).

Dickens is widely known for his idiosyncratic, even grotesque characters, and his (very Victorian) orphan boy Smike—not the titular Nicholas—proves to be the key all representations of the novel. Throughout this discussion of adaptation, it becomes clear that the portrayal of a single character can affect the entire trajectory of a production. The treatment of Smike has been stunningly varied: young, old, male, female, unpleasant to look at and even rather waifishly attractive; each of these choices result in an altered reading of the text. For instance, a female Smike—such as Mrs. Keeley of the Victorian theater—tends to heighten the emotionality of the endangered and threatened character, even while containing that emotion within a theatrical frame.

A final idea to consider is audience expectation and its effect on the shifts in the presentation of *Nickleby*. Violence in the narrative provides a perfect demonstration of the necessary changes made for the comfort of the audience; since initial adaptations focused mostly on the emotionality of the plot, there was limited room for physical, sexual, or fiscal violence to occur. Over the course of *Nickleby*'s adaptation history, plots became more focused on corrupt institutions and their consequences—modern audiences, considerably more desensitized to the depiction of violence, allowed for more provocative performances. With overwhelmingly positive critical and audience reviews following almost every adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby*, I continue to wonder how this work, when compared with such prominent Dickens texts as *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, and *A Christmas Carol*, has flown under the radar for so long. The aim of this thesis is, accordingly, to start a dialogue about the novel, its adaptations, and the implications of its continued relevance.

Though this paper is uniquely comprehensive in its survey of *Nickleby* adaptations, the topic cries out for additional research. A more in-depth analysis of certain aspects of the novel

and its adaptations would be welcome; in particular the weirdly protean nature of Smike in these versions requires deeper scholarly attention. One of the topics that stood out as a likely point of continued interest is that of the “modernized” adaptations of Victorian novels—a comparative study of such updatings, particularly in contrast with the glossily historicized “heritage” adaptations, and of their relative success (or failure) would, I think, reveal some useful ideas about the incorporation of Victorian materials into our culture. This study mentions one or two contemporary adaptations and the abysmal reviews that they received—why in fact did audiences dislike them so much? Furthermore, what about *The Life and Adventures of Nick Nickleby* made such an approach more appealing to modern audiences? Are any new *Nickleby* adaptations forthcoming? What further variations on the Smike character are possible? Other *Nickleby* adaptations merit critical analysis. One such is *Smike: The Musical*, a 1973 pop musical adaptation of the novel, televised on BBC, that focuses only on Smike’s short character arc. It might be a valuable resource for the discussion of genre—Dickens’s writing, of course, lends itself particularly well to the melodrama of musical theatre. With songs entitled “Don’t Let Life Get You Down” and “Dotheboys Rock,” *Smike* might present a completely different take on the novel; it would also make for a fascinating comparison with the RSC’s short musical numbers.

The treatment of Dickens’s female characters in adaptation is an obvious area for further study. Chapter three addressed the changing conventions for female characters in a Victorian narrative over the years—does the characterization of female characters in other works by Dickens, or other Victorian novels, alter dramatically? With this question in mind, it might also be beneficial to trace the role of the broken/restored family narrative throughout the history of adaptation, and how the changing representation of female characters contributes to a revision of family tropes. Finally, should I have the chance to investigate further the adaptation of Dickens,

the role of the heritage industry and the related genre of televised miniseries would be a place to start. There seems to be very little scholarly work on the miniseries as a domestic product and cultural export despite its massive popularity around the globe—the field is fairly new. This thesis could thus be easily be expanded in the areas of character, genre, and historical analysis—work I hope to continue in the future.

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