

“Between the two how can I make my choice?”:
Sir Francis Burnand’s Dramatic Variations on Dickens’s
Pickwick-Bardell Misunderstanding

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On 7 February 1889, the Comedy Theatre, London, brought out a new matinée piece, *Pickwick*, as a vehicle for the star performer Arthur Cecil (1843-96). The writer was Sir Francis Burnand (1836-1917), the editor of *Punch*, who had written some ninety works for the stage and was a leading figure in the theatrical culture of burlesque and pasticcio. The original score was by Edward Solomon (1855-95), who had made his name with *Billee Taylor* (1880) and established himself, in the opinion of many contemporary critics, as second only to Arthur Sullivan in the field of English comic opera. *Pickwick* was an undisputed success. Rutland Barrington, who played the Baker, recalled that “the little piece used to go splendidly,” with Solomon’s score “brimming over with melodies that caught the ear at once” (81). It was soon moved to the evening, and the original cast also played it at Crystal Palace (Barrington 81) and, in 1891, at the New Court Theatre (Burnand and Solomon, *Pickwick*, new ed. x). For the 1893 Christmas season, a new production opened at the Trafalgar Square Theatre, starring the famous Jessie Bond (1853-1942) as Mrs. Bardell. Alongside these professional representations, there were almost certainly many amateur performances as well, for the publisher Boosey distinguished the work by bringing it out in their series of “Operettas for the Drawing-Room.” But as with so much popular theatre, silence soon descended on *Pickwick* – Solomon’s death in

1895 seems to have set in motion a gradual eclipse of his music – and it was not heard again until Retrospect Opera, a company I help direct, released a recording in 2017.

Pickwick is important, not just as a delightful specimen of Burnand's expertise in crafting works of popular theatre and Solomon's compositional talents, but as the first thoroughly musical English language stage adaptation of a Charles Dickens story. It represents what Michael Halliwell, in his study of the Henry James operas, calls "*metaphrasis*": the complete "'translation' or transposition of a particular artistic work from one genre to another" (11), and in the history of Dickens adaptation, it had been anticipated in this respect only by Giuseppe Gallignani's *Il Grillo del Focolare* (*The Cricket on the Hearth*) of 1873 – a work never performed professionally.¹ It quickly prompted some copycat operettas and would probably, were it not for Solomon's early death, have served as the foundation of a school of popular musical versions of Dickens's stories.² The present essay looks at a text which has not been discussed, or even noted before: a "New Edition" of *Pickwick* which Boosey issued some time after the first. It is impossible to date this with any certainty, but it is unlikely to have been earlier than 1894, for it documents the 1893 Christmas production. As it involves no new music, and rather crudely patches together the existing printed music to match the new text, it is, further, highly improbable that Solomon had anything to do with this New Edition, suggesting it may post-date his untimely death on 22 January 1895. It is a bibliographic rarity: almost all the libraries owning the score hold the first edition.³

I have discussed the cultural and theatrical genetics of *Pickwick* elsewhere.⁴ Suffice it to say here that the work represents, in a sense, a cross between John Hollingshead's spoken play *Bardell versus Pickwick* (1871)

– which closely follows Dickens – and Gilbert and Sullivan’s all-sung *Trial by Jury* (1875). Burnand was not the first to realise that ideas from these works could be happily combined, and there had been two earlier operettas based on the Pickwick-Bardell misunderstanding in *Pickwick Papers*, one written by Thomas Henry (“Harry”) Gem (1819-81), the other by Robert Pollitt (1833-1910) – both are listed below, in the Works Cited. While the earlier operettas had represented the famous trial scene in *Pickwick Papers*, Burnand found a way to dramatize simply the misunderstanding between Mr. Pickwick and Mrs. Bardell that led to the trial, thus creating a much smaller-scale work. For the most part, *Pickwick* is a dramatization of the first half of chapter 12 of *Pickwick Papers* – the chapter portentously entitled “Descriptive of a very important Proceeding on the part of Mr. Pickwick; no less an epoch in his Life than in this History.” At the heart of the misunderstanding, or “very important Proceeding,” is Mr. Pickwick’s innocent question to his landlady, Mrs. Bardell: “Do you think it’s a much greater expense to keep two people, than to keep one?” (Dickens 138) – a question related to his plan to employ a manservant, but misunderstood as a hint at matrimonial intentions. But to enlarge the scope of the incident, and to give it a clearer shape, Burnand incorporated some material from the trial scene itself, in chapter 34, in particular developing an idea from the evidence presented by Susannah Sanders:

Did not know that Mrs. Bardell was at that time keeping company with the baker, but did know that the baker was then a single man and is now married. Couldn’t swear that Mrs. Bardell was not very fond of the baker, but should think that the baker was not very fond of Mrs. Bardell, or he wouldn’t have married somebody else. (Dickens 434)

In Burnand's *Pickwick*, the Baker becomes a major character, a suitor to Mrs. Bardell whom she might be tempted to accept, were it not for her dream of doing better for herself and marrying Mr. Pickwick. Burnand's principal addition to the story in *Pickwick Papers* is the idea of the Baker's "ultimatum": the Baker has obtained a blank marriage license and gives Mrs. Bardell half an hour to decide whether he can enter her name on it; otherwise, he suggests, he will marry someone else.

The first version of *Pickwick* was described as a "Dramatic Cantata" – the designation Gilbert and Sullivan had given *Trial by Jury* (uniquely among their works). The choice of label was probably designed to highlight the relationship to *Trial by Jury*, but it also emphasized the fact that Burnand had laid most of his work out in song – *Pickwick* is far more continuously musical than the other operettas he and Solomon wrote together around the same time, such as *Domestic Economy* and *The Tiger* (both 1890), even though it does include some spoken passages. The obvious reason for Burnand to go about preparing a new edition was that, as a "Dramatic Cantata," *Pickwick* was proving too taxing for amateur performers, who were used to performing works with the music broken up by generous quantities of spoken dialogue. He thus cut a considerable quantity of music and added a good deal of spoken dialogue to create something more like a conventional operetta of the period. He was well aware that he was, as it were, recategorizing the work. The Prefaces to the publications of the original libretto and Boosey score had commenced with the statement:

THE Libretto of this Dramatic Cantata is founded on the well-known incident in the life of Mr. Pickwick when Mrs. Bardell mistook the

declaration of his intention to keep a manservant for a proposal of marriage. (i)

Burnand retained this sentence in the New Edition, but substituted “Operetta” for “Dramatic Cantata” (i). Other references to a “Dramatic Cantata” in the Preface are similarly replaced.

The revision was then, in all likelihood, undertaken for practical reasons, and perhaps in response to feedback from amateur performers, or Boosey. What is so interesting about the New Edition, though, is that the immensely energetic Burnand did not leave things there but took the opportunity to significantly rethink some aspects of his dramatic treatment of Dickens. His changes are well worth assessing, especially now *Pickwick* has been revived and has, I hope, a considerably improved chance of finally returning to the stage.

The two versions of *Pickwick* start identically. After the overture, Mrs. Bardell is “*discovered dusting*” (ii) and sings the first of her solos, explaining her widowhood and need to “take in lodgers” (ii), and setting up the story. Her son Tommy then appears to say Mr. Pickwick has paid him to deliver a message to the Borough (a message to Sam Weller, Dickensians will immediately realize). After Tommy finally leaves, Mrs. Bardell moves into spoken dialogue to explain that Mr. Pickwick is always making little trips away, but is very considerate in explaining his plans, and needs, to her. She quotes the very notes used against Mr. Pickwick, with great comic effect, in Dickens’s trial scene. At this point, though, the two versions develop quite differently. In the original “Dramatic Cantata,” Mrs. Bardell continues:

Sometimes I fancy he regards me with a – well if he were a younger man I should call it “a wicked eye,” but as it’s Mr. Pickwick, I can only call it a Pick-wicked eye. But is it my fancy? Ah! he is my fancy. Then there’s the other – the baker – the fancy bread-and-biscuit baker who has been uncommonly attentive. But then, – fate only knows what Bardell number two is to be. One thing I’ll answer for, he shan’t be like Bardell number one. For he treated me very Bardelly. It’s a conundrum: my first was Bardell; my second – hasn’t yet appeared.
(iii)

This leads naturally to her “conundrum” song, “My Next”: what will her next husband be like? And to ensure the audience (or listener, or reader) is fully cognizant with the main choice facing her, Burnand then introduces us to the Baker, who is making his morning call, and, as soon as the Baker has gone, having issued his ultimatum, to Mr. Pickwick, “*dressed for the day in the well-known costume*” (iii). Mr. Pickwick is clearly the only one of the three not to understand he is in a love triangle, as asides between Mrs. Bardell and the Baker succinctly reveal:

Mrs. B. (*aside*). Between the two how can I make my choice?

BAKER. (*aside*). Between us two she’ll have to make her choice.

In the New Edition, the spoken dialogue quoted above is cut and replaced with other dialogue which sets the action up quite differently:

Ah! he’s a real good gentleman, is Mr. Pickwick; a regular good ’un, he is! Which reminds me that he always has a regular good breakfast

at 10.30 punctually – it’s just on that now, and however Mr. Pickwick chooses to take other matters in life coolly, as to his breakfast, he loves to get it hot. (iii)

This is used to get Mrs. Bardell off stage so that Mr. Pickwick can be brought on, making his first appearance much earlier than in the “Dramatic Cantata” version. The initial impulse for this was almost certainly above all a practical one. In the “Dramatic Cantata,” Mr. Pickwick is alone on stage for an extended period subsequent to his first appearance. He sings three songs, interspersed with bits of spoken dialogue, and then, after a brief exchange with Mrs. Bardell, who comes and goes, adds a fourth. Christopher Webber’s review of the recording is apropos:

right at the heart of the plot Burnand strands Pickwick by himself on stage, to deliver no less than three comic songs in a row. Welcome though this might have been for fans of the hugely-popular Arthur Cecil ... it undermines the wafer-thin theatrical momentum.

Burnand may have detected a dramatic weakness here himself, and, in any case, have realized that he was asking an awful lot of amateur Pickwicks. So, in the New Edition, the third and most difficult of the songs, “The Happy Valet,” is cut completely, while the first two, though kept together, now appear at a much greater distance from the fourth. In short, while the professional version had required the performer playing Pickwick to come on stage and sing four songs in quick succession, the revised amateur version requires him to sing just two.

But the change, though driven by practical considerations, prompted

further changes in Burnand's protean imagination. Mr. Pickwick's breakfast is not an issue in the professional version of the work. Going back to the earlier text, in the light of the New Edition, one can only conclude that the audience was meant to infer he had already had his breakfast on the day of the "very important Proceeding" – that is, before 10.00, when the action commences. Moving the breakfast into the real time of the represented action allows for the introduction of some charming quotidian detail: the 10.30 breakfast is clearly an important ritual in Mrs. Bardell's household and a significant moment of interaction between her and Mr. Pickwick. But more important, I suggest, was the tightening of the plot, for Mr. Pickwick's breakfast is shown to depend on the Baker's visit. After Mr. Pickwick has sung his two songs, setting out his need for a valet, and then returned to his room, Mrs. Bardell reappears:

There! the kettle's on the hob, and everything ready except the hot rolls. It is no use doing the eggs, or the bacon, or the kippers unless the rolls are hot to keep 'em company. Talking of keeping company – where can that Baker have got to? (iv)

Cue, of course, the appearance of the Baker, who after a proper amount of music has been sung, has to be sent on his way so that the breakfast can be returned to: "Now, butter in the rolls – the kipper is frizzling – the breakfast is waiting for Mr. Pickwick" (v). This is the halfway point in the represented action and the emphasis on 10.30 in itself strengthens the dramatic shape of *Pickwick*, for the Baker has just presented Mrs. Bardell with his half hour ultimatum: a story beginning at 10.00, and ending at 11.00, is now literally centered on the breakfast and built around it.

The revised *Pickwick* then continues with a breakfast scene in which the performer playing the eponymous hero is presumably intended to make a reasonable show of eating. There is some light conversation between him and Mrs. Bardell, full of the sort of word play Burnand loved, then, in a considerable departure from the first version, Mrs. Bardell sings “My Next” in Mr. Pickwick’s presence. By singing this, her finest solo number, essentially *to* Mr. Pickwick as he eats his kipper, it works very differently: no longer a meditative soliloquy, it becomes a coy statement of availability that could easily assume an ogling tone. Mr. Pickwick is left with the feeling that something significant has been said, but his own thoughts are so far from matrimony that he does not take the hint:

“He who speaks first is my next.” Ahem! it sounds like part of a conundrum. My first is my next – but I was never good at guessing riddles. (vi)

This seems to me a distinct improvement on the original scenario, as the very different mentalities of Mrs. Bardell and Mr. Pickwick are now dramatically juxtaposed and the scene anticipates and helps set up the climatic misunderstanding. When Mr. Pickwick goes on to sing his third (originally fourth) solo number, “The Bachelor,” the established impression of incompatible destinies is driven home with gusto.

At this point, the revised version departs most unexpectedly from the original. In the original, the Baker only appears twice: fairly early on, to establish his courtship and issue his ultimatum, and then again at the end, when he comes to claim Mrs. Bardell’s decision – only to find her fainting in Mr. Pickwick’s arms. There is no scene between him and Mr. Pickwick. The

revised *Pickwick*, however, brings together the three principals ten minutes before the hour; the added passage is short enough to quote in full:

Enter BAKER.

BAKER. I've the licence in my pocket, with a blank left for the name – and if she doesn't fill it up – I shall have lost the prize and only got a blank. My basket⁵ – But where is she?

MR. P. Young man, do you want to see me?

BAKER. No, I can't say I do.

MR. P. But you are in my room.

BAKER. But I didn't expect to be in your company. So the company must be limited, and I go out of it.

MR. P. One moment! You are paying your addresses to Mrs. Bardell.

BAKER. Merely to pay addresses is to put a stamp on every letter.

MR. P. That is an evasion. I trust you are well off.

BAKER. (*going*). I shall be in another second.

MR. P. I mean if you marry Mrs. Bardell, you, as a Baker, can support her?

BAKER. Sir, do you suppose I wish to reduce her to Bakery?

(MRS. BARDELL, *unperceived by* MR. PICKWICK *and the* BAKER, *appears in doorway* R.C.)

BAKER. If she will accept me I shall –

Mrs. B. (*entering*). What?

BAKER. Enlist! be a soldier, drop the Baker, follow the roll of the drum.

Mrs. B. That's a downhill course.

BAKER. I shall join a regiment in some distant country, I shall fight

for death or victory, and when in the morning, after the roll-call comes, where will be the Baker! A nameless headstone will mark his grave, and his sole epitaph will be “The Baker – Butchered!”

Mrs. B. (*affected*). Oh, don’t go on like that!

BAKER. I won’t. I’ll go off like this. (*At door.*) To mate or not to mate? Ten minutes allowed for refreshment. Then I return for your ulti-mate-um! (*Exit.*) (vii)

There is, no doubt, a good deal of Hollywood’s ticking clock about this addition – a reminder that Mrs. Bardell is under pressure to resolve her thoughts quickly. But there is also a remarkable eruption of the sort of misogyny which so often circulated around the figures of widows and spinsters in the popular theatre of the period. Indeed, it is worth evoking the full-blown comic misogyny of Burnand’s most enduringly popular work, *Cox and Box* (1866), which contemporary critics saw as related to *Pickwick*. The comedy of *Cox and Box* turns on two men who very much do *not* want to get married to a woman, Penelope Ann, who very much *does* want to get married. On the face of it, Mrs. Bardell is in a more fortunate position than her predecessor, for if Mr. Pickwick is wedded to the bachelor life, the Baker, it would appear, is determined to have her. But not on the terms she wants. “Will he be always at home to dinner?” she had sung in “My Next” (vi), and the answer can only be a resounding “no.” The Baker’s fantastic vision of marriage comes in so oddly one can almost suspect a printer’s error, and that Burnand intended him to say “If she will *reject* me I shall –.” Certainly a modern production, attempting to avoid full-blown Victorian misogyny, could easily make that slight change. But the flow of

the conversation suggests there is no mistake, and besides, I argue, there is some strong satire here related to the situation of army widows.

The relevant social background is magisterially set out by Myna Trustram in her *Women of the Regiment*. In the past, women, whether married or unmarried to soldiers, were an accepted part of army life and, as camp followers, did much of the work needed to maintain an army in the field. But with the development of the idea of a permanent, professional army in Britain, from the late 1600s onwards, the military developed its own support services, the consequence being that marriage was increasingly discouraged in the ranks. In 1859, officers were ordered to explain to their men

that their comforts, as soldiers, are in a very small degree increased by their marriage, while the inconvenience and distress naturally accruing therefrom are serious and unavoidable, particularly when regiments are ordered to embark for foreign service. (qtd. Trustram 30)

Further regulation in 1867 permitted no more than 7% of ordinary soldiers to be officially married (Trustram 46). There was widespread public awareness of the fact that soldiers' widows, or the wives of disabled soldiers or soldiers serving abroad, were often left in a desperate financial plight. Nevertheless, humane proposals to provide public provision for such women were opposed by officers and MPs throughout the mid-nineteenth century, on the grounds that such provision would simply encourage more soldiers to marry (Trustram 39).

There was some change. The Crimean War (1853-56) prompted a good deal of high profile organized philanthropy, and in 1881 the War Office

finally introduced a very modest pension: “Widows of NCOs and men who were killed in action, or who died as a result of wounds received in action, became eligible to receive a gratuity of one year’s pay” (Trustram 93). Two years later, a War Office committee recommended this become an annual pension for the life of the widow, but this recommendation was rejected (Trustram 93). Impoverished widows thus remained largely dependent on private philanthropy and the poor laws. In my understanding, Burnand’s satire is at the expense of the hopelessly inadequate public provisions for war widows: the Baker would have to die in action to win a pension for Mrs. Bardell, and yet that would only represent a year of army pay. Perhaps this would be slightly more than he can offer her as a Baker, but it is impossible to think it would be much more.

Inevitably, though, the satire is bound up with the misogyny. The Baker’s death may offer a certain comic “heroism,” but there is no doubt it is a vision of distance and death, of having as little to do with his wife as possible. In fact, given that the Baker’s notion of marriage is a parody of many real and fictional stories of women left at home by soldier-husbands, and that there is a clear homoerotic subtext in *Cox and Box*, one could certainly make the argument – following the general thrust of Eve Sedgwick’s *Between Men* – that Burnand’s Baker is not really interested in women at all, and is even more committed to male society than Mr. Pickwick. The latter’s “Bachelor” song may catalogue the innocent pleasures of life in an all-male society, travelling, hobbies, food and drink, but behind the Baker’s comic vision of married life lurks something less innocent: a final consummation of the flesh in a “butchering” among men.

Certainly, a darker note intrudes into the revised *Pickwick*. The original version can be read as a humorous illustration of the proverb “a bird in the

hand is worth two in the bush,” or of the value of Rosalind’s advice to Phebe in *As You Like It*: “Sell when you can, you are not for all markets” (3.5.60). Mrs. Bardell could, possibly, be happy with the Baker, but misses the chance by dreaming of a better catch. In the revised version it is clear, even before we get to the final, celebrated misunderstanding with Mr. Pickwick, that there is no alternative happy ending for her. After the interpolated passage, just discussed, Burnand drives right on to the misunderstanding, centered on Mr. Pickwick’s immortal question, which in Burnand’s slight reworking becomes: “Do you think it is a much greater expense to keep two than one?” (viii). In the original version, there is an extended musical sequence here. Much of that is cut in the revision, and replaced with terse spoken dialogue. The practical rationale was presumably again to make things easier for the performers, but it may be, too, that Burnand saw some theatrical advantage in moving more swiftly to Mrs. Bardell’s climactic fainting fit, or decided that the more precise sense of time in the revised version required a brisker pace. More music and dramatic business is cut before the end, with the fainting episode itself now moved into spoken dialogue.

Burnand’s desire to create a faster, simpler ending led him to cut the references to the presence of Mr. Pickwick’s friends, Tupman, Winkle and Snodgrass, just offstage at the end (as in the novel, they witness Mrs. Bardell’s faint), and to Sam Weller, the new servant, below. In the original, Mr. Pickwick actually tries to explain his compromising situation to his friends, which explanation is followed, in a delicious scene direction, by “*Three dubious ‘ahems’ heard without*” (xi). Burnand may very well have decided that this effect, though well suited to the capacities of professional theatres, was beyond the means of many drawing rooms. But his decision to cut this part also reflects his apparent determination to tidy up loose ends

and remove any hint of a sequel. A note at the end of the original libretto had stated:

I have not introduced the three Pickwickians, who were witnesses of the compromising situation, into the Cantata, at least not any further than the landing, for very evident reasons. It is not improbable that we may see something of them on a future musical occasion. (xi)

A sequel, which would almost inevitably have courted comparison with *Trial by Jury*, had also been hinted at in the text itself, as a bitter Mrs. Bardell says “*slowly and menacingly*” to Mr. Pickwick:

You’ll hear from me another day.

Then something more to you I’ll say, – (xi)

But these lines are removed in the New Edition, along with the “three Pickwickians” outside, the changes suggesting that any thought of a sequel had been abandoned. The new ending is tighter and more complete, more final.

In making the recording of *Pickwick*, issued on compact disc, there was really no question concerning which version of the text and score to use: the first has considerably more music, much less spoken dialogue, and the music cut in the New Edition is well worth hearing. Judged as a musical piece, a “Dramatic Cantata,” the first version is clearly superior. Judged as a theatrical work, on the other hand, the second version has strong claims to attention, as this article has argued. Burnand had had the chance to see the original *Pickwick* performed and had noted ways to make it better:

tightening the action with the use of the breakfast and attendant need for rolls, making Mrs. Bardell's second solo a song directed at Mr. Pickwick, and bringing Mr. Pickwick and the Baker together; and also finding ways to reveal more about his conception of his characters. If *Pickwick* is to be one day revived in the theatre, as I very much hope it will be, I would strongly recommend a synthetic text basically following the revised version, but using as much of the more extended, musical, and complex ending of the original as possible. If desired, the note of Victorian misogyny can be removed with the substitution of a single word, as I have suggested.

Notes

- 1 For Galignani's operetta (as it was called, in the original sense of "little opera") and its performance history, see Chandler, "Giuseppe Galignani."
- 2 Burnand and Solomon were planning at least one further Dickens work, and probably two, the second being a *Pickwick* sequel, as discussed below. See Chandler, "Singing Dickens" 258-59.
- 3 The only library I know of holding the New Edition is the Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- 4 See Chandler, "Singing Dickens" 249-58.
- 5 In the original *Pickwick*, Burnand included the contrivance of the Baker accidentally leaving his basket behind on his first appearance, giving Mrs. Bardell an excuse to leave the stage (following him with the basket) and thus clearing the way for Mr. Pickwick's first appearance. From this reference to the basket in the revised text, it seems Burnand may have thought of using the forgotten basket as an excuse for the Baker's second appearance, but this is not made clear in the stage directions.

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