Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century

Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, 'Who wrote this script?': Pickwick in Stepney. *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 37 (2025) <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.11117>

Open Library of Humanities

# 'Who wrote this script?': Pickwick in Stepney

**Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton**

In 2016 the Dickens Museum in London acquired the manuscript minute book of a Stepney-based 'Pickwick Club' operating in the 1830s and early 1840s. This volume offers a unique record of Boz's reception by a radical, working-class community comprised largely of legal clerks. The voices presented in the weekly record both mock and seem complicit in the representation of working-class behaviour as irresponsible and in need of control. But they also deploy a flexible range of linguistic markers to position themselves as political and social critics in their own right. The club tests the limits of social and literary hierarchies through discussions of *Pickwick* alongside plagiarized spin-offs. At one point they consider co-authoring their own work, under the title 'Adventures of a Lawyer's Clerk', with each member writing a chapter. The young men who participated in these debates would themselves have been old in the 1880s and 1890s, when the rage for 'literary pilgrimages' began to capitalize on Dickens's exuberant early work. They would not in any case have recognized the sanitized version of *Pickwick* that was being presented by the emerging heritage industry. For that very reason, their immediate responses to the work are a good place for historians of reading to start.

In 2016 the Dickens Museum in London acquired the minute book of a Stepney-based 'Pickwick Club' when the estate of antiquarian collector Hugh Selborne was put up for auction.[1] The volume, as the then curator Louisa Price candidly admitted, is 'rather battered' and much repaired. The writing is also difficult to read (the evidence of the handwriting and several tankard rings strongly suggests that the weekly meetings took place in a public house) (*Figs. 1*, 2). The volume was digitized in 2021 with a grant from the National Manuscript Conservation Trust, making it available to researchers for the first time. It is important both as possibly the first Pickwick Club inspired by the serial, and because of its radical, working-class membership.

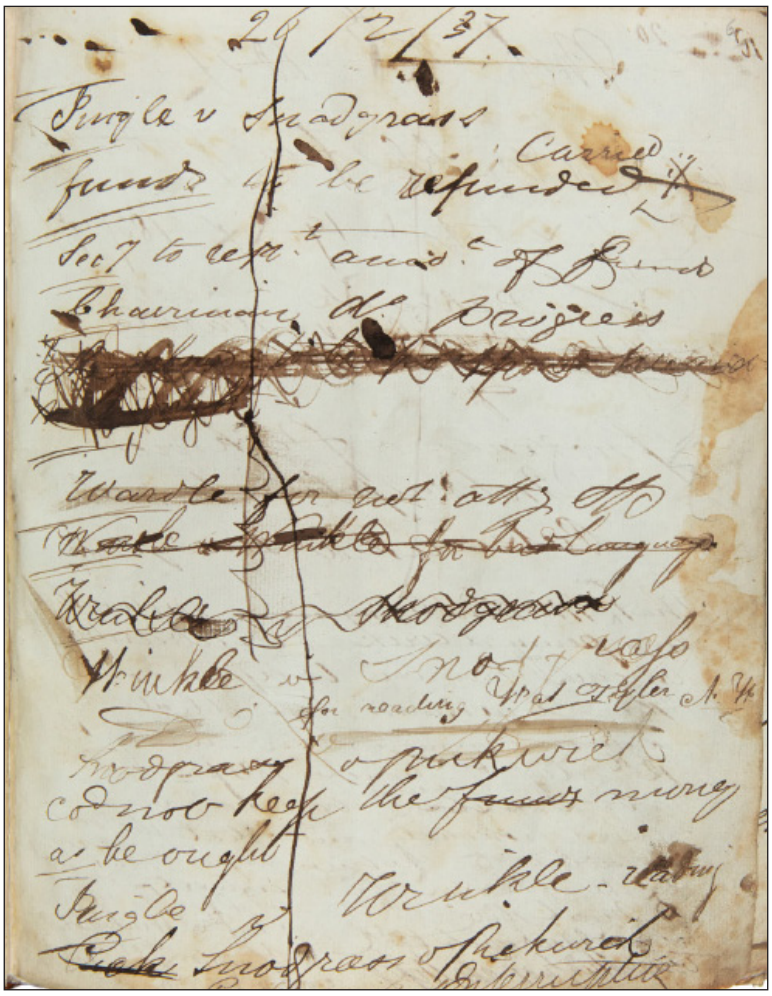

*Fig. 1*: Pages from The Pickwick Club Book, showing unsteady handwriting. London, Charles Dickens Museum Collection, The Pickwick Club Book, 1837–1843.

[1] Pete Orford, 'Inside the Dickens Museum No 2 — The First Pickwick Club', Dickens MA, 2020 <https://dickensma.wordpress.com/2020/06/04/inside-the-dickens-museum-no-2-the-first-pickwick-club/> [accessed 29 January 2025].

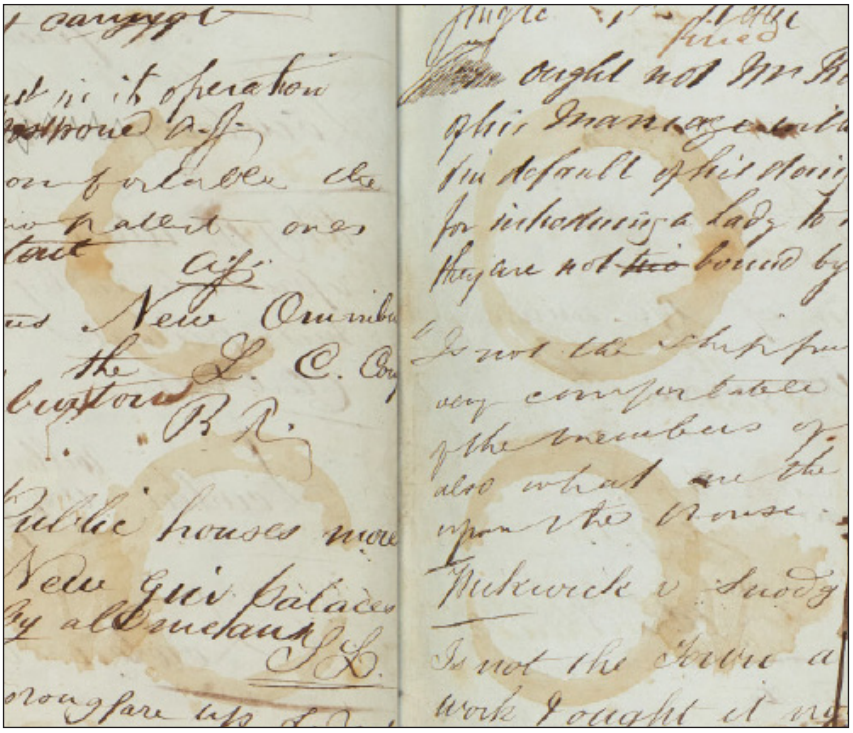

*Fig. 2:* Pages from The Pickwick Club Book, showing tankard stains. London, Charles Dickens Museum Collection, The Pickwick Club Book, 1837–1843.

The volume shows a group of young men variously discussing and caricaturing the cultural hierarchies of early Victorian London. Responding to Dickens's depiction of life in the city in both *Pickwick Papers* (serialized from March 1836 to October 1837) and *Sketches by Boz* (originally published between 1833 and 1836), the minutes critique his writing and engage with the questions he poses. The recording 'clerk' appointed by the club captures vocal debates, ribaldry, and literary enjoyment in both formal and phonetic forms. The voices presented in the weekly record both mock and seem complicit in the representation of working-class behaviour as irresponsible and in need of control. But close analysis reveals a flexible range of linguistic markers, used by club members to position themselves as political and social critics in their own right.

The minutes date from 8 January 1837, a few months before Victoria's accession, through the formal dissolution of the club on 15 November 1840 and brief revival in the last months of 1841 to the final entries in October 1843.[2] While numbers fluctuated, there seem to have been five regular attendees and probably no more than six or seven at any one time, all of whom took names from *The Pickwick Papers*. Of the twelve members recorded

[2] The club officially dissolved on 15 November 1840 for reasons that remain unclear. It seems to have enjoyed a brief resurgence; female family members are recorded as having attended an irregular meeting on 11 December 1841, and two final entries date from October 1843.

as having belonged to the club at one time or another, at least four were legal clerks and six belonged by birth or were related by marriage to the same family (the Platers).[3]

The volume shows the interactions of a group of working men and their female relatives as they debated political questions of the day as well as testing the limits of social and literary hierarchies. At the same time, they found ways to negotiate personal tensions and dilemmas, through a combination of innovative linguistic register and the regular administration of alcohol and tobacco. What makes these men so intriguing for Dickens studies is that they were readers of both Boz and his unauthorized imitators.

Having begun their weekly meetings on a Sunday, the club clearly saw no reason to bow to sabbatarian pressure over the next few years. 18 June 1837 sees them resolving: 'Whether the Mosaic Law relative to the observance of the Sabbath is binding upon Christians No' [*sic*].[4] Club funds were accordingly accrued on this day from a combination of subscriptions and fines, such as Winkle for slapping Wardle (5 February 1837, p. 5).

Dickens's own juxtaposition of registers in the Stump and Magpie in *Pickwick* is suggestive in capturing the atmosphere of a working-men's club at this time:

> This favoured tavern, sacred to the evening orgies of Mr. Lowten and his companions, was what ordinary people would designate a public-house. [...] A large blackboard, announcing in white letters to an enlightened public, that there were 500,000 barrels of double stout in the cellars of the establishment, left the mind in a state of not unpleasing doubt and uncertainty as to the precise direction in the bowels of the earth, in which this mighty cavern might be supposed to extend.[5]

Despite his presumably higher class, Pickwick is politely refused access to the inner room on his first arrival: '"The gen'l'm'n can't go in just now," said a shambling pot-boy, with a red head, "cos' Mr. Lowten's a-singin' a comic song, and he'll put him out. He'll be done directly, Sir"' (p. 248).

Notwithstanding the convivial atmosphere, one club member refuses to sing:

> 'Because I only know one song, and I have sung it already, and it's a fine of "glasses round" to sing the same song twice in a night,' replied the chairman.
> This was an unanswerable reply, and silence prevailed again. (p. 250)

---

[3] After the dissolution of the club, a young boy called James Plater added a list of his mother's children to the flyleaf of the volume. The occasional use of real names has been used to identify members including: Richard Plater, William Plater, Robert Plater, and their brother-in-law Thomas Laker, Frederick Drew (who also married a member of the Plater household), Edmund Drew, Thomas Drew, John William Elliott, Thomas Elliott, and Henry Webb.

[4] London, Charles Dickens Museum Collection, The Pickwick Club Book, 1837–1843, C225, 18 June 1837, p. 16. The digitized PDF is held at the museum. Subsequent references to this PDF are given in parentheses in the main text.

[5] Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. by James Kinsley (Oxford World Classics, 2008), p. 247.

The Pickwick Club inspired by the text embeds very similar rules, which are strictly enforced through the imposition of both fines and collective reproof. The punctilious notetaking is itself a reminder of what Daniel Jenkin-Smith has called 'the incongruous physicality of office work', transferred to a supposedly more liberal setting.[6] The archival record of a small community in East London may be insular in its reach and comically self-important in its elaboration of an arcane system. But the conversation of legal clerks also offers an intriguing perspective on early Victorian working-class culture as they move effortlessly (and drunkenly) across a range of linguistic registers: law, politics, and literature.

## The language of legal practice

*Pickwick* itself sets up a sophisticated tension between legal and dialect speech. The way in which Dodson and Fogg's clerks switch rapidly between registers in the presence of a complainant is intentionally disconcerting. Brushing off Pickwick with the claim that 'Mr. Dodson ain't at home, and Mr. Fogg's particularly engaged' (p. 236), they immediately resume a conversation about their social club:

> I was so precious drunk, that I couldn't find the place where the latch-key went in, and was obliged to knock up the old 'ooman. I say, I wonder what old Fogg 'ud say, if he knew it. I should get the sack, I s'pose — eh? (p. 237)

This ease of movement between registers allows them to merge almost invisibly on the page, when '*that chap* as we *issued the writ* against' is recalled as 'a precious seedy-looking customer' (p. 237, emphasis added). An already bewildered Pickwick must navigate the linguistic games being played in an unexpectedly dingy room, in which 'the debris-ridden office space in general obtrudes itself upon the senses and belies the intellectual content of the legal process'.[7]

The pages of *Pickwick* itself embed a model for how a group of legal clerks might engage with Dickens. But the Stepney club makes its own experiments with voice. Some genuine interest in law is apparent in the discussion about the trial of James Greenacre, accused of murdering Hannah Brown in 1837. The club debated the possibility of alternative charges 'Supposing Greenacre to be found not guilty' (23 April 1837, p. 13). A week later on 30 April the club postponed the question 'Cannot a member better apply his money than by becoming [a] member of the Law Clerk Society' (Richard Plater was

[6] Daniel Jenkin-Smith, 'Earthly Intermundia: Office Space in the Works of Charles Dickens', *European Journal of English Studies*, 27.2 (2023), pp. 331–50 (p. 334), doi: 10.1080/13825577.2023.2285993.

[7] Ibid., p. 337.

a member).[8] A few months after this the question whether 'lawyers are not generally speaking rogues' seems to have arisen with reference to a dispute (*Snodgrass v. Jingle*) about 'false evidence' (7 January 1838, p. 35). Despite these reservations, the club clearly enjoyed legalistic language, which is invigorated by being deployed across unexpected contexts. One of their recorded puns is, 'Are the French soldiers and sailors equal to the English? Certainly not without prejudice' (31 December 1837, p. 34). Members' numerous disputes are dutifully recorded as one '*v.*' another and the unfortunate Winkle is 'struck off the rolls' with three groans and hisses on 2 April 1837 for failure to attend three consecutive meetings (p. 11). On 31 December 1837 Jingle was expected to propose a new rule that

> If any member should go to sleep during Club Hours or if any member should lay himself down on his head or his knee as if asleep [insert: or seem to the members of the club during club hours to be asleep] that such member be finable to the tune of one halfpenny. (p. 33)

The convoluted syntax mimics the language of legal address and suggests that it is in itself soporific. But it does this by drawing attention to the behaviour of drunken men who cannot stay awake, and whose implied insistence that they are fully functional must be controverted through the use of subclauses (laying down their heads 'as if asleep', appearing to club members to be asleep).

Less nuanced uses of this register include: *Pickwick v. Tupman* for throwing paper in the Chairman's face; *Snodgrass v. Jingle* for calling him 'a damned vagabond — 25 minutes past 10 o'clock'; *Snodgrass v. Jingle* for saying he was not a gentleman; and Jingle on behalf of the *Club v. Snodgrass*.[9] The latter offence is not specified but it is presumably the clerk, Snodgrass's brother, who has written immediately underneath:

> Rule 3
> England my arse (3 November 1839, p. 80)

While the club debates appear to have been recorded in real time, the questions were probably written down first. As we have seen above, the result is a mix of registers where reported speech collides with this framing language. This trend becomes highly visible when slang and phonetic speech infiltrate the language of legal disputes. In Sally Ledger's account of *Bardell v. Pickwick* as 'a contest between language and power', authority is demonstrated in the fictional courtroom's 'politics of laughter' — the magistrate decides

[8] See London Metropolitan Archives, United Law Clerks Society Annual Reports, 1833–1843, ACC/1559/060.

[9] 18 June 1837, p. 16; 10 December 1837, p. 32; 21 December 1837, p. 33.

who will laugh, when, and at what.[10] But if the observing Dickens satirizes the magistrate's heavy-handed joking, the Stepney club in turn parodies the power of authority figures through their own misapplication of legal terms. Fines for using 'improper language' are recorded, but also specific instances where the actual phrases are captured. On 15 October 1837 *Jingle v. Snodgrass* is carefully framed as a formal investigation, only to be immediately punctured by the intrusion of Jingle's recording voice, 'contempt — said he'd punch my head[.] Mr Pickwick witness' (p. 22). In legal parlance 'contempt' records interference with the administration of justice, but 'threatened to punch my head' is clearly reported speech. Details of why Snodgrass threatened to punch Jingle are not included. But this navigation of different registers stands as a reminder that there are two speakers in the dispute, one of whom controls how the initial exchange is captured.

## The language of debate

The tenor of the club records points to a radical, working-class, but educated group of men. On 10 November 1839, they conclude that they are 'all radicals with the exception of Mr Snodgrass' (p. 80). Against the proposal on 31 May 1840, 'are the lives of a dozen noblemen worth that of one clever industrious artisan?', appears in a different hand the response 'We do not' (p. 98). This somewhat ungrammatical entry suggests that the proposal was at least discussed, with the question being first written down and then verbally summed up along the lines of: 'Do we believe…?'. Dickens would later satirize judge Sir Peter Laurie as Alderman Cute in *The Chimes* (1844). But the Pickwick Club had beaten him to it by three years — the question 'Is Sir Peter Laurie a clever man?' had met with a resounding 'No' on 31 October 1841 (p. 110).

Tom Scriven argues that 'in the 1830s Radicalism incorporated many aspects of working-class life, such as drinking, festivity, and sexual libertarianism, as a means of infusing politics into the everyday life of the working class'.[11] It is in this context that, according to Rob Breton, 'the literature of the 1830s and 1840s are saturated with politics, demonstrating a turn towards a broad politicisation of everyday life.' The problem arose because, in the minds of the ruling class, this anarchic culture was precisely what made working-class men unfit to vote. In literature of the time, the significance of speech is largely dependent on the implied status of the speaker, meaning that 'the language of reform, or just discontent and dissatisfaction, can be simultaneously the language of social unrest and economic class when uttered by or put in the mouths of the poor'.[12]

---

[10] Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 49, 51.

[11] Tom Scriven, *Popular Virtue: Continuity and Change in Radical Moral Politics, 1820–70* (Manchester University Press, 2021), p. 3, doi: 10.7228/manchester/9781526114754.001.0001.

[12] Rob Breton, *The Penny Politics of Victorian Popular Fiction* (Manchester University Press, 2021), pp. 1, 12, doi: 10.7765/9781526156396.

Club debates include overtly political subjects, including initial strictures on the young Victoria. Nonetheless, a meeting on 5 November 1837 suggests a mellowed outlook: Pickwick, Jingle, Wardle, and Snodgrass signed their agreement to a new club rule, underneath which appear the words 'Vivat Regina' in a different ink. But the question 'whether the members of this club ought to sing the national anthem on their extraordinary meetings' was answered in the negative just over two years later on 19 January 1840 (p. 88).

The widespread hostility to the New Poor Law of 1834 is well known. In Anna Clark's words,

> The working class first began to be defined in the 1830s, not by its own volition, but through a process of exclusion from the privileges of participation in the state, through the 1832 reform act, the failure of factory reform, and the 1834 New Poor Law.[13]

Dickens's *Oliver Twist* began serialization in February 1837, shortly after the formation of the Pickwick Club. The club's lack of engagement with this text is striking, and may suggest that the members were unconvinced by its 'logic of melodrama', in which the figure of Oliver represents an embodied goodness triumphing over legislative evil.[14] Elaine Hadley points out that the confusion over specific features of the legal framework attracted immediate criticism, albeit 'most probably, Dickens was no more fuzzy about the details of the new law's bureaucratic features than were most people during its earliest years of operation' (p. 115).

But the club offers a slightly different perspective in the question 'Could the money spent in illuminating the Mansion House have been better applied if spent on workhouses?' (12 November 1837, p. 26). Their protest against this civic extravagance registers unease not necessarily about workhouses per se, but about the administration of poor law reform. A few months later, the question 'Is not the Poor Law unjust in its operation?' was answered, 'Certainly' (11 March 1838, p. 40).

Not surprisingly, the club had little time for the House of Lords, which they deemed to be not 'of any use to this country' on 18 June 1837 (p. 16). In the autumn of 1839, they agreed to two proposals: 'Whether there is not great distress prevailing throughout England at the present time', and 'Whether there is [*sic*] not two laws in this country

---

[13] Anna Clark, 'The Rhetoric of Chartist Domesticity: Gender, Language, and Class in the 1830s and 1840s', *Journal of British Studies*, 31.1 (1992), pp. 62–88 (p. 66), doi: 10.1086/385998.

[14] Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800–1885* (Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 110.

— one for the rich and the other for the poor' (29 September 1839, p. 77). That these conclusions were not based on nostalgia for an earlier time is clear from a debate of 15 November 1840 on the subject, 'Was George III a good king?'; the answer 'He was not' has been double underlined (p. 104). Other topical questions include: 'Are railroads beneficial to the public [?] Divided', on 29 September 1839 (p. 76); and 'Whether pawnbrokers ought to be restricted from taking pledges from children under 12 years of age. They ought', on 22 March 1840 (p. 93).

The club debates suggest an atmosphere of rowdy homosociality, underpinned by a genuine desire for social conversation as opposed to drunken escapism. This distinction is signalled by a debate on 25 February 1838, on the question 'Were not the old public houses more comfortable than the new gin palaces[?]' (p. 40). Nicholas Mason has highlighted the role of the Beer Act of 1830, which reformed the licensing laws for landlords wanting to sell beer on the premises and which 'was at least in part designed to turn English workers from gin back to the national drink'. While an 'exponential increase in the number of retailers reflected a corresponding rise in the amount of beer that was being consumed during the 1830s', there is also evidence of traditional pubs simply being turned into gin palaces.[15] Notably, Dickens's 'Gin Shops', first published in 1835, comments grimly that these places are 'invariably numerous and splendid, in precise proportion to the dirt and poverty of the surrounding neighbourhood'.[16]

Perhaps owing to the family connections between members, it is also notable that their recorded conversations are largely inflected by a sense of responsibility towards women. But the tone can be difficult to pinpoint. What, for instance, are we to make of the question 'Which is most productive of benefit to the public[:] short petticoats or long[?]'; or, 'Whether Mr Snodgrass should be reprimanded' for referring to one Miss K as 'a bladder hog of lard[?]'.[17] There are clear hints of misogyny lurking in such questions as 'why lush makes Mrs Lutton's face so red and her temper so bad' (24 June 1837, p. 18). In some editions of *Pickwick*, a textual variant makes Fogg's clerk 'uncommon lushy' rather than 'precious drunk' — while the club is emphasizing Mrs Lutton's excesses, they are also enjoying a slang term which they likewise find expressive.[18] As in *Pickwick*, the dynamics of single men's relations with women are treated humorously, but perhaps with a hint of risk. The proposal in September 1838 that 'Snodgrass makes the

[15] Nicholas Mason, '"The sovereign people are in a beastly state": The Beer Act of 1830 and Victorian Discourse on Working-Class Drunkenness', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29.1 (2001), pp. 109–27 (pp. 112, 114, 117), doi: 10.1017/S1060150301291074.

[16] Charles Dickens, 'Gin-Shops', in Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, ed. by Dennis Walder (Penguin, 1995), pp. 214–20 (p. 217).

[17] 4 June 1837, p. 16; 31 December 1837, p. 35.

[18] See, for example, the edition published by Project Gutenberg <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/580/580-h/580-h> [accessed 5 February 2025].

[*sic*] overtures to the widow or be fined' is uncomfortably reminiscent of Mrs Bardell's action against Pickwick for supposed breach of promise (30 September 1838, p. 50).

But their engagement with questions of gender and domesticity goes beyond this type of joke about individual women of their acquaintance. Anna Clark points out that 'domesticity was an important subtext in Chartist language because in the politics of the 1830s gendered notions of virtue demarcated the working class as different and inferior to the middle class' (p. 66). In other words, as Matthew Roberts explains, 'what stamped the working class as brutish was their lack of refined sensibility. Refuting these charges was crucial to the Chartist strategy of demonstrating the fitness of the working class for enfranchisement.'[19] It is tempting to read the question of 'Whether iron or wooden spittoons would be the best' (they plumped for wooden) as the reverse of domestic (8 September 1839, p. 75). In fact, this probably speaks to a genuine concern with preserving the carpet, in line with 'Is it not a very bad plan to burn sulphur in a bedroom to destroy bed bugs[?] Certainly' (16 June 1839, p. 72). It is not entirely clear whether 'the tallow chandler in Paternoster Row' should be considered 'the biggest nuisance in London' on personal grounds or on the basis of his inferior candles (8 April 1838, p. 42).

In fact, as Clark shrewdly observes, in practice middle-class regulators 'did not impose domesticity' on the class below them, 'instead, they denied its privileges to them' (p. 67). While declared Chartism is not a feature of club debates, its influence may be apparent in topics such as: 'Whether it is necessary to gain consent of parents to their children's marriage'; 'What sort of a lady ought a member of this Club to choose for a wife and whether it is better to remain single'; and 'Whether a man can maintain a wife and family on 25 bob a week' ('Certainly he can').[20] The question 'Whether ladies of a certain age should be neglected and despised' resonates with a memorable theme in *Pickwick*: Tupman's elopement with the middle-aged Rachel Wardle rather than either of her nieces (9 December 1838, p. 57). Philip Allingham points out that she is not often the focus of Phiz's illustrations, suggesting that, as far as her appearance went, 'clearly she was not of much interest' to the artist (or presumably the author).[21] For Dickens, in other words, the question of a middle-aged woman's feelings simply did not arise in the way that it did for the club members. To ask 'Whether a man is one, or a brute, who beats his wife' is not an especially radical act, but given the danger of London streets at night there is a surprisingly contemporary feel to the question 'Whether it is proper for

---

[19] Matthew Roberts, *Democratic Passions: The Politics of Feeling in British Popular Radicalism, 1809–48* (Manchester University Press, 2022), p. 183, doi: 10.7765/9781526137050.

[20] 16 December 1838, p. 57; 30 April 1837, p. 14; 3 November 1839, p. 79.

[21] Philip V. Allingham, 'Miss Wardle and Her Nieces', Victorian Web, 2 February 2012 <https://victorianweb.org/art/illustration/eytinge/126.html> [accessed 8 February 2024].

any member of this club to walk home with a lady against her will'.[22] As in the examples above, the agreement that 'We don't' suggests a question written in advance of the meeting and either debated or otherwise delivered verbally in a different form of words (the writer's grammar is generally impeccable).

By the 1840s 'Chartism pushed for ascetic forms of "self-culture"', an area in which the Pickwick Club seems already to have excelled.[23] Minutes from 12 December 1841 on the opposite page include the lines 'damn and bugger the pickwick [*sic*] Club | Damn and bugger the prick, wick Club', underneath which the same hand politely notes that (despite having withdrawn for a second time on 12 September), 'Mr Lowton will deliver a lecture upon the principles of the steam engine' (p. 112) (*Fig. 3*). Assuming the writer to be Lowton himself (aka the 19-year-old Robert Plater), it is difficult to know what to make of this proposed intellectual treat. But it is worth noting that Plater is uncharacteristically given the title of 'Mr' at the very moment when his own language is most unrestrained. The collision of linguistic registers in this entry can be usefully

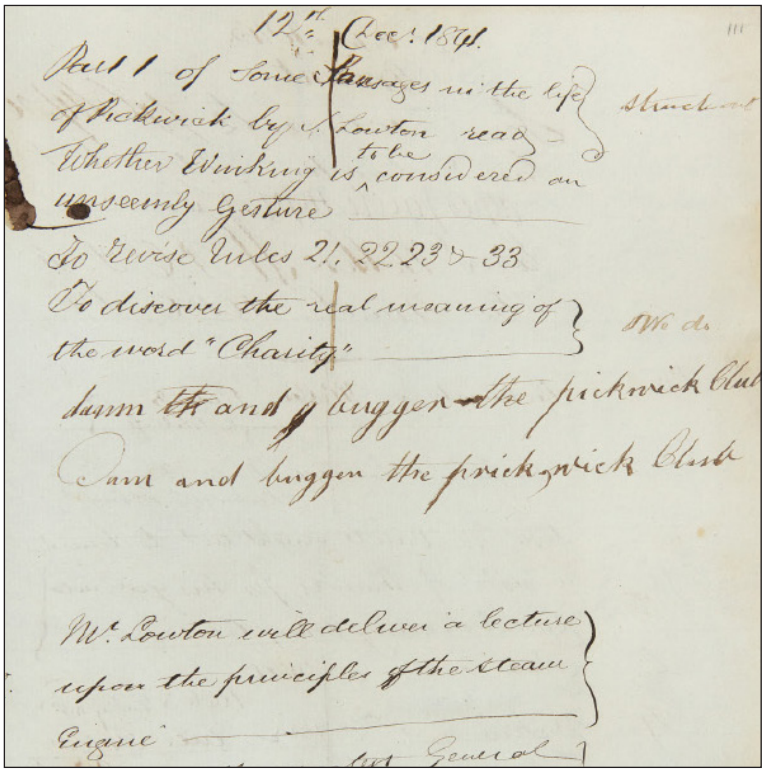
12th Dec: 1841.
Part 1 of some Passages in the life of Pickwick by Mr Lowton read to be
Whether Winking is considered an unseemly Gesture
To revise Rules 21. 22. 23 & 33
To discover the real meaning of the word "Charity"
damn the and bugger the pickwick Club
Damn and bugger the prickwick Club
Mr Lowton will deliver a lecture upon the principles of the steam Engine

*Fig. 3:* Pages from The Pickwick Club Book, 12 December 1841. London, Charles Dickens Museum Collection, The Pickwick Club Book, 1837–1843.

[22] 22 September 1839, p. 76; 30 April 1837, p. 14.

[23] Scriven, p. 3.

framed by Scriven's analysis of 'humour, irreligion, and sexual libertarianism' as both 'a feature in early Chartism' and a culture which was ultimately resumed 'after the interregnum caused by Chartism's turn towards ascetic moral improvement' (p. 5). Within the club minutes, these changing imperatives coexist without any obvious discomfort or sense of contradiction.

## Literary language

Members of the club make no apology for their enjoyment of plagiarized spin-offs, apparently awarding them equal value with *The Pickwick Papers* itself. In other words, the members of this obscure Pickwick Club were not particularly concerned with memorializing Boz as an author, although in some ways they embody the culture he so vividly captured in his writing.

*The Pickwick Papers* felt revolutionary not least because, in Alice Turner's phrase, 'Sam Weller could [...] be appreciated by working-class people, as, for once, they had a speaker of vernacular London English cast in a leading role.'[24] Jane Hodson argues that 'the primary effect of respellings is often to denigrate the speaker in terms of their social status, intelligence and education', but that nonetheless 'in practice stereotyping is unavoidable if dialect representation is to be effective for readers'.[25] As an obvious example, Sam Weller is widely credited with having first brought reversed 'v' and 'w' sounds into the realm of comic speech:

> Dickens played a fundamental role in enregistering a certain view of cockney speech and cockney speakers through the characters of the Wellers. Through the Wellers, Dickens developed positive stereotypes that promoted a more egalitarian view of non-standard, cockney speech, even if this is not always the case in Dickens's treatment of cockneys and cockney speech.[26]

The Pickwick Club claims identity with Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* in its very name. But crucially, these men were not reading only Boz. In the case of *Pickwick* 'the proliferation of plagiarisms and theatrical adaptations meant that the characters had become part of the wider popular culture' and could therefore be appropriated and reinterpreted any number of times.[27] Members stage their own intervention in literary culture through

[24] Alice Turner, 'The Only Way Is Dickens: Representations of Cockney Speech and Cockney Characters in the Works of Charles Dickens' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2020), p. 88, doi: 10.25392/leicester.data.12666944.v1.

[25] Jane Hodson, 'Talking Like a Servant: What Nineteenth Century Novels Can Tell Us about the Social History of the Language', *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics*, 2.1 (2016), pp. 27–46 (pp. 30, 31), doi: 10.1515/jhsl-2016-0002.

[26] Turner, p. 92.

[27] Ibid., p. 114.

debating the merits of Dickens's imitators, as 'mimic Pickwicks gyrated through mimic Pickwick plots but also into new adventures at home and overseas'.[28]

Interestingly, Louis James notes that in claiming to use entirely new material, 'Thomas Pecket Prest, the presumed author of The Penny Pickwick edited by "Bos" (1837–39) was not wholly disingenuous. His serial was not only different in content from Dickens's serial, but it was pitched at readers outside Dickens's middle-class audience.'[29] In their critique of this text, the Pickwick Club is indifferent to its plagiarized status, focusing instead on its relevance to their own experience. One entry includes 'the observations in A[*sic*] Penny Pickwick respecting the Lawyers Clerk[s?] whether they are true and justly applied. Stated wrong' (31 December 1837, p. 35). Part of the appeal may also have been that 'the popular plagiarisms [...] are more physically violent than the original'.[30] In *The Penny Pickwick* for instance, 'events happen in rapid succession, subjecting Pickwick to recurring slapstick violence.'[31]

The club's own critique of popular literature, however, goes beyond simple identification with comic disaster or even a recognition 'that hitherto unrecorded lives might have their own dignity and worth'.[32] In their debates on contemporary literature, the members determine their own position through active engagement with source texts that deploy vernacular speech. Club minutes show a lively awareness of phonetic spelling and the games that can be played with it in the alternative spellings of 'discover' used throughout. 'Diskiver' is not a variation used by Dickens, but does appear in a story serialized in *Bentley's Miscellany* in 1841, where an inset poem 'Legend of King's Cross' includes the line, 'What afterwards became of him we never could *diskiver.*'[33] As club members variously 'diskiver' and 'discover' the origin of words and phrases, the record occasionally reverses 'v' and 'w', as on 18 June 1837 when the club set out 'to diskiver the meaning of the word circumwent. We dont' (p. 16).

A club proposal to co-author their own work called 'Adventures of a Lawyer's Clerk', with each member taking a chapter, was withdrawn (9 February 1840, p. 89). But a series of verses on topical themes, most of them authored by Jingle, reveal a

---

[28] Louis James, 'Pickwick in America!', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 1 (1970), pp. 65–80 (p. 65) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44371816> [accessed 5 February 2025].

[29] Louis James, '"I am Ada!": Edward Lloyd and the Creation of the Victorian "Penny Dreadful"', in *Edward Lloyd and His World: Popular Fiction, Politics and the Press in Victorian Britain*, ed. by Sarah Louise Lill and Rohan McWilliam (Routledge, 2019), pp. 54–70 (p. 55).

[30] James, 'Pickwick in America!', p. 79.

[31] James, '"I am Ada!"' p. 55.

[32] Robert L. Patten, 'The New Cultural Marketplace: Victorian Publishing and Reading Practices', in *Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Juliet John (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 481–506 (p. 501), doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199593736.001.0001.

[33] George Daniel, *Merrie England in the Olden Time*, 2 vols (Bentley, 1842), II, p. 168, emphasis in original.

highly self-conscious use of dialect juxtaposed with standard forms. If 'Dickens's representations of cockney speakers are complex, nuanced and playful', as Turner has argued (p. 8), this could equally be said of the club records, including their sprightly verse forms. Contributions by Snodgrass and Jingle offer rich examples of the ways in which dialect intersects with form to bring an audience in on the joke.

Jingle's poems are more sophisticated than those of Snodgrass, alternating between standard and dialect spelling to heighten the comic effect. A poem of 18 June 1837 sets up an ABCB rhyme scheme, with what appears to be a chorus, 'So I fell in love sing hey down derry down', introduced and instantly abandoned at the end of the first stanza (p. 18). The opening lines read 'Once I courted a lovely damsel | She was tall, genteel and young', and give little indication of what is to come: 'T'was not for her wealth nor yet for her beauty | T'was for her d...d deceitful tongue' (p. 17). The visual joke of the ellipsis is of course that it draws attention to the redacted word, a nuance that is necessarily lost in oral delivery.

The next poem invokes the familiar image of a lover who metaphorically sickens, which is in its turn instantly undermined. Switching his attention to Pickwick, the speaker appeals to the 'Lord of poetry divine': 'Lest perchance I should grow sick | While I am singing of Pickwick'. The members of the club are then introduced in mixed register as the poem moves across standard and non-standard spelling. Pickwick is 'The head of this here club | Established for the public good'; Snodgrass 'is a cove wots literary'; Wardle sits 'with his pipe' taking no part in the discussion; Tupman is 'The gallant chap the gals deceiver'. He is the only member specifically identified as an atheist, 'the unbeliever': 'Fiends of Satan mark him well | He says there's no such place as Hell'. The poem ends in a flurry of competing modes. The speaker first appears to lose inspiration and wish the club 'all sorts of things' rather than any specific blessing: 'That all sorts of things wots good | May be showered on this club'. He then resumes a romantic and even lachrymose poetic register as he rhymes his own name to create both final line and signature: 'Is the prayer of the single | And disconsolate | Alfred Jingle' (p. 17).

Poems by both Snodgrass and Jingle appear with a date of 19 November 1837, which suggests an element of competition. Snodgrass has appended a date of 18 November to his poem, possibly because he has brought in and transcribed a draft on the day of the meeting. He limits himself to introducing the club, with jokes about members including 'Mr Thomas Wardle | Who to bring on his cases is apt to dawdle' and a self-deprecating lament that his own renown has diminished: 'For poetry he once was far famed | But it now has vanished and not to be named'.[34]

[34] 'Poetry by August Snodgrass', 19 November 1837, pp. 27–29.

Jingle's attempt of the same date uses rhyming couplets to relate the story of a girl who goes mad for love of a 'flashy' man. The opening line, 'There lived in town a short time ago', gives no indication as to whether standard English or dialect will be used, and the spelling offers no further clue. But the next lines play with both accent and visual rhyme: 'A gal whose heart was filled with woe' substitutes 'gal' for 'girl' but also invokes the register of keepsake verse in the juxtaposition of dialect words with the sentimental phrase 'filled with woe'. In the lines, 'Concerning a wery handsome cove | Whom she did wery dearly love', the 'w' substitution in 'wery handsome cove' is intensified through repetition in the phrase 'wery dearly', but the reader is immediately brought up short by being unable to rhyme 'cove' with 'love' (confirmed later in the poem when 'cove' is rhymed with 'jove').

A different strategy is deployed in the next stanza, where vowel substitution is used to emphasize the dialect pronunciation of 'such':

> Now this one gal was wery pretty
> And she could sing a wery nice ditty
> Her woice it was so wery rich
> In all my life I never heard sich.

The first 'v' substitution appears in stanza 3, where the speaker praises the girl's foot 'On vich there was a wery nice boot' and her 'Flesh coloured stockings my eyes how flash' that allow her to 'cut a dash' on Sundays.

The narration sees the object of the girl's affection breaking her heart when he 'Used to go with naughty gals at night', causing her to lose her reason. Tragedy ensues in strongly hammered out rhyme, as 'Alas this dear gal as sure as fate | Was lugged afore a magistrate' and is despatched to Bethlem Hospital (as Jingle's spelling is usually faultless, its misspelling as 'Beldame' suggests a momentary indecision between 'Bethlem' and the familiar nickname 'Bedlam' at the moment of writing or copying out). Had the listener heard the girl's roars, 'You would have said it sarved her right' and, at the climactic moment, she threatens the keeper that if he fails to let her out, 'I will pull off your precious snout'. In the final stanzas,

> The keeper he vas much afraid
> That she would do all vot she said
> Vich put him into such a fit
> That he never properly got over it.

Instead, the keeper goes to remonstrate with the man, ‘my cove I’d have you know | There’s a gal in quod and all through [you]’.[35] This appeal has no effect, and the man ‘kickt the keeper out with his foot’, with the result that ‘the gal she soon after died | And in a grave was snugly lig[hed]’ while ‘the cove who brought her to t[his] | Was killed von day by a kick on the’ (the next word is now concealed by the inner spine of the volume, but can probably be guessed).

Jingle excels at the use of flexible linguistic register to create self-consciously light verse. One poem ‘proving’ that another member is not really in love uses standard English throughout, mocking the excessive display of the would-be lover whose coat is ‘Black superfine edged with silk’ and who further sports black ‘trowsers. What bran new. | Yes. High lows made of kangaroo’ out of sheer vanity. The speaker warns ‘Where in the name of goodness will this end | Why surely soon he’ll have no cash to spend’, while the woman herself remains unimpressed. The pretentious speech of the young man is derided through the poem’s inclusion of a false rhyme for ‘parbleu’ (par-blur), which is here pronounced ‘par-blue’ and made to rhyme with ‘true’, a mistake presumably arising from the anglicized pronunciation of ‘adieu’ as the familiar ‘adew’: ‘What! refuse me!! a lover true | Preposterously ridiculous. Par Bleu!’. The poem ends with a nod to the legal atmosphere of the club:

> I will not longer waste your time
> in listening to my doggerel rhyme
> I think I have adduced clear proof
> he cannot love, so that’s enough.[36]

This elaborate joking is extended in the prose address to Tupman on the occasion of his marriage in November 1837. Fellow members

> cannot help expressing their unqualified admiration of the moral courage evinced by him in setting at defiance the fears that generally accompany the entering into a state of connubial felicity by a youthful pair. […] Descartes was excelled by a Newton and who knows but that the exemplary pattern set by Mr Tracy Tupman may not kindle a desire for matrimonial happiness in the hearts of the Bachelor Members. (5 November 1837, p. 24)

Jingle’s ‘Song’ of 24 June 1837 moves across a range of registers associated with light verse of the 1830s (p. 18). Prefaced with an excerpt from ‘Ballad — In the Waterman’

[35] The word is hidden in the crease of the spine but can be inferred.

[36] ‘Poetry by Alfred Jingle Esq PC’, 24 June 1837, pp. 17–18.

by Charles Dibdin,[37] the first stanza begins with the lines: 'Come all you ones most inclined to pity | I'll sing to you a dismal ditty', and ends on a bow-wow chorus 'Ri lol liddy iddy ol lol'. This framing heightens the comic effect of the intervening lines: 'Tis all concerning a handsome cove | Whom the gals why von & all did love'. 'Tormented' by an overdose of female attention, Tom declares, 'vy blow me kight | I'll go for a lodger this here blessed night'. In a rare use of a double 'r' Jingle then sends Tom off 'in a *werry* bad temper' to enlist in the navy of the Spanish Isabella: 'Straightway to Voolwich off eh vent sir'. Hard and soft consonants are interchanged seemingly at random when Tom quickly changes his mind, 'For in a veek or two, vy he *wos* back agin' after sending up a prayer for a fair breeze 'vich *vos* heard'. A repentant Tom dreams of kissing 'The lips of his moll but ah frail voman | Ven he come back vy I'm blowed if they knowed him'. The appended moral is that 'if he had never not vent to fight | Vy he still would have been the gal's delight' (pp. 19–21, emphases added).

An unattributed poem from 31 December 1837 is written almost entirely round a single rhyme and narrates the experience of the speaker after 'I fainted away' and as a result 'was werry ill all the next day'. Its interest lies in the underlining of the end rhymes:

> They then passed me into a Shay
> And upset a boy with a Beer Tray
> And he says what are you at a
> Nothing says I will you take some Tay
> I will if you will pay
> No I'll do that another day. (p. 36)

This emphasis, unique in the club's verses, may suggest that the writer is less experienced than Snodgrass and Jingle and needs to focus his mind on the rhyme words. But, if so, it must be a fair copy of an earlier draft, as there are no other signs of uncertainty. In which case, why bother to copy over the underlinings? A more likely explanation is that this device is a reading prompt, reminding the speaker to land hard on the end rhymes. The use of the article 'a' in 'what are you at a' is absurd enough to be either a novice mistake or verbal clowning. The poem is finally abandoned with the unrelated phrase, 'Damn your eyes', which could easily have been rhymed with 'I say' by substituting the available spelling 'Damn your aië'.[38] Like the records of the club itself, this verse exercise is subject to unexplained gaps and disconnected incidents, before unexpectedly trailing off mid-sentence.

---

[37] *A Collection of Songs, Selected from the Works of Mr. Dibdin* (Rice, 1799), pp. 2–4.

[38] 31 December 1837, p. 36.

Throughout the volume, ostentatious and sometimes disruptive shifts in register speak to the energy and humour of these forgotten clerks, who clearly enjoyed the work of Boz without feeling obliged to take him too seriously. Certainly, he was not permitted to dominate their conversation or direct the course of their own literary experiments. During the same period, Dickens's own career captures the dynamic changes of the early years of Victoria's reign, as the raucous behaviour of Pickwick types real and imagined was coming under increasing scrutiny.

Susan Shatto points out that, even outside London itself, 'Pickwick's exploration of the countryside and Dickens's burlesque of the picaresque plot are reflections of the violence which was an everyday occurrence in early nineteenth-century England.'[39] At one point Pickwick and Tupman are mistakenly arrested for inciting a duel, and inset tales including 'The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton' are predicated on the efficacy of extreme violence in inculcating a moral message. The club members themselves are often critical of what Rob Breton has termed the 'aesthetic of violence' with which popular fiction of the period is imbued (p. 158).

But despite the prognostications of Dickens's more sceptical critics, *Pickwick*'s legacy was still embedded in the literary establishment at the *fin de siècle*. Another period of cultural instability, this was also the time when the investigator of the tittlebat was at his most mobile, through the proliferation of Dickens fan clubs and the popularity of literary pilgrimage. Challenging the repeated claims that comic authors had fallen off from an early Victorian standard, a spoof review written by New Humorist Barry Pain in 1893 imagined the likely reception of *The Pickwick Papers* if it had been published at the end of the century:

> Mr 'Charles Dickens' — the name is evidently a pseudonym — is apparently one of the New Humourists. We do not remember that we have ever heard his name before, and we only notice his book at length in the hope that by so doing we may save ourselves from ever hearing his name again.[40]

This joke only works because *Pickwick* had survived a series of changes in literary fashion. In fact, the emerging heritage industry deliberately capitalized on this exuberant early work at the very time that critics were disclaiming the New Humorists who routinely claimed Dickens as an influence. The explanation for this seeming paradox is that the version of *The Pickwick Papers* presented in tourist guides and memorabilia was not

---

[39] Susan Shatto, 'Mr. Pickwick's First Brush with the Law: Civil Disobedience in *The Pickwick Papers*', *Dickens Quarterly*, 26.3 (2009), pp. 151–64 (p. 155) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45292222> [accessed 5 February 2025].

[40] Barry Pain, 'If He Had Lived To-Day: A Specimen of the New Criticism', *To-Day*, 23 December 1893, p. 10.

exactly the same work that had been so eagerly absorbed by its first readers. In fact, by allowing us to trace responses to the text in the 1830s East End, the minute book shows just how far the needs of readers had shifted in sixty years.

In the set pieces of literary pilgrimage, the sporadic violence and sexual possibilities of the pre-Victorian *Pickwick* are routinely sanitized or edited out. *A Week's Tramp in Dickens-Land* (1891) speaks to a broad readership when the scholarly William Hughes and his illustrator Frederic Kitton buy tickets for an excursion train to Kent. But we are meant to register that they are in holiday mode, and not take too literally their joke that 'tramps usually go on the cheap'.[41] Just over a decade earlier in 1880, reviewers had largely ignored the pioneering *In Kent with Charles Dickens* written by the working-class author Thomas Frost.[42] The son of a Chartist, Frost had, in Peter Gurney's words, 'drifted out of radical politics in the late 1840s and became a relatively isolated, geographically and socially mobile individual, who managed to scratch a precarious living from writing'.[43] This was not the face of *Pickwick* the *fin-de-siècle* establishment wanted to endorse. The Dickens industry was nervous about its own past and critics worked hard where necessary to distance Dickens and his characters from dissident elements. In a particularly intrusive intervention, the 1899 *Mr Pickwick's Kent: A Guide to Its Places and People* updates and sometimes 'corrects' Robert Seymour's original illustrations, replacing them with new photographs to direct readers' attention to specific views. This use of photography is almost uncomfortably powerful in its literalism, attempting to recover a supposedly authentic reading experience even as it speaks to the demands of modernity.

The minutes of the Stepney Pickwick Club remind us that the world depicted by Boz was considerably less sanitized than a later generation of 'literary pilgrims' would have us believe. But the young men who participated in its debates would themselves have been old in the 1880s and 1890s. Born in Croydon in 1821, Frost (while not a member of the club) would appear to be a natural spokesman for this generation of working-class readers and was discountenanced for that very reason. *Pickwick*'s posthumous reputation had to be reconfigured if it was to stand as the embodiment of national heritage. Without a few new photos and invisible edits, it risked becoming an embarrassment. So too did the readers who had first enjoyed it.

---

[41] William R. Hughes, *A Week's Tramp in Dickens-Land* (Chapman and Hall, 1891), p. 317.

[42] Carolyn Oulton, 'Thomas Frost (1821–1908)', Kent Maps Online <https://www.kent-maps.online/19c/19c-frost-biography/> [accessed 5 February 2025].

[43] Peter Gurney, 'Working-Class Writers and the Art of Escapology in Victorian England: The Case of Thomas Frost', *Journal of British Studies*, 45.1 (2006), pp. 51–71 (p. 52), doi: 10.1086/497055.