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# Dancing on the Dead:

## Death, Entertainment, and Respectability in Victorian London

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Spring 2021

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### Acknowledgements

After working on this project for almost a year, I've come to see it as a labor of love, one I definitely could not have completed without an incredible amount of support. First and foremost, I'd like to thank my advisor, Professor Ellen Wurtzel, who is entirely responsible for my declaring a History major and for the fact that I tried for Honors at all. I honestly don't think I could have started, much less finished, this thesis without her guidance and encouragement. I am incredibly grateful for the time she took to meet with me every Thursday for the past year, and all the far-too-wordy drafts she's read, and all the times she assured me that I was not behind on the process, that I was doing just fine, and that the thing I'd just said had, in fact, made sense, and wasn't just a jumble of words with no actual meaning. Ellen patiently interpreted what I was trying to say in ways that were far more eloquent than I ever could have hoped to say it, and always gave me just the feedback and support I needed. Working with Ellen on this project has not just been extremely helpful and rewarding, but also fun; our conversations about anything from books to our mutual distaste for true crime to the latest cool, gross, morbid thing I'd recently found made my week. I couldn't have asked for a better advisor and mentor, not just in this process, but through my entire four years at Oberlin.

To my friends, who kept my sanity intact throughout this process: I love you all so very much. My friends have probably heard me say "that's my thesis" in reference to some random death-related thing on TV so many times, but not a single one of them started charging me money every time I said it, even though it must have gotten pretty darn annoying. To Frog House, for being the best people to live through a pandemic with and making this year worth it with all our various shenanigans and worm-related pranks; to my D&D group, for being the best group of people to be silly, tell stories, and struggle through doing basic arithmetic with; and to

all the other friends who don't fit into those small categories but whose contributions to my collegiate (and pre-collegiate) life have been immeasurable—thank you all of simply being in my life. Whether it was getting coffee with me on a weekend when I had a deadline because I just couldn't look at my computer screen anymore, watching TV to just empty our brains, or just taking the time out of your busy schedules to just hang out and talk for a bit, you've been my support system through all of this, and I love you all dearly. Thank you for being my people.

To my family, who have been pestering me about sending them my thesis since the very beginning: here it is! Finally! It's done and ready to be seen by human eyes! My parents have been there for me since the very beginning, through all the times I insisted that they couldn't possibly know whether I'd get into the Honors program, or all the phone calls on Friday nights about how I didn't know how I could possibly get everything done. They've always been there to remind me that I could do it, and that it would all be okay. To Mom, Dad, Christine, Lisa, and Maya: thank you for being my biggest advocates, even while I've been all the way in Ohio, and for constantly reminding me that I am supported and loved. I don't know where I'd be without you all, and I'm sorry for talking about Enon Chapel at the dinner table. Here's my monster of a thesis, and I apologize in advance for the vivid descriptions of dead bodies (I did warn you).

Lastly, to the History department, to Professor Danielle Terrazas-Williams, and to my readers, Professors Shelley Lee and Ari Sammartino: thank you for all of your advice and guidance during this process, and for allowing me to combine my passion for research with my fascination with the macabre. This thesis synthesizes my love for history with my lifelong love of storytelling, and I couldn't think of a better finale for my undergraduate academic experience.

## Introduction

### *Spectacle and Spectacularization: the Shift of the Meaning of Death Culture*

In 1830s London, corpses overflowed the spaces devoted to their burial, making the public aware of their presence encroaching on the space of the living. In locations like Enon Chapel, a burial ground in an impoverished parish in Westminster, the bodies piled up; the macabre conditions and effluvia were recounted in newspapers as a true-to-life example of a cheap gothic horror story that could be bought for a penny. These stories sold, the rotting bodies of overcrowded burial spaces becoming props for the gruesome entertainment of the public. Many worried about the entertainment value of the dead, however, fearing the moral implications of taking a voyeuristic pleasure in the improper burial of others.

As London underwent a series of public health crises in the midst of a huge population surge, the increasing visibility of death in a period of heightened mortality rates brought about new questions of how the dead should be observed and dealt with. I argue in this thesis that in the nineteenth century, specifically in London, the showcasing of death shifted from a sphere of public punishment with a moral backing to a spectacle of entertainment, viewing death for enjoyment and taking pleasure in engaging with fear. These death spectacles were sold to the London public as if they were horror stories, the shock value in the details emphasized to heighten commercial potential and popularity. Developments in publishing and the serialization of literature, as well as the idea of progress brought by London's industrial age, contributed to this phenomenon, shaping the literary imagination of the city as a place to be charted and explored. Death spectacles became an entertaining way of engaging with the space of the poor by functioning as escapism, an exploration of a "dark," poverty-ridden London with which middle- and upper-middle-class Londoners would not have been familiar. Additionally, as London's

death spectacles moved from those dead of disease in the 1830s and 1840s to the high-profile murder narratives and funeral culture of the 1880s, I argue that the nature of the narratives surrounding them changed as well, although the details that made early death spectacles so shocking were utilized in later spectacles to make the narratives more compelling.

The central historiographical debates that I engage with in this thesis center around the concept of the popularity of the macabre during this period and the way in which London's print culture contributed to it. What about the city made death spectacles so popular? How did the media proliferate and, in some cases, create spectacles of death, and how did this change to align with the changing literary imagination of London? How did people envision what it meant to have a "respectable" death, and how did this differ by class? What kind of fears manifested from the viewing of displayed bodies in nineteenth-century London, and most of all, who had control over which bodies were on display? With these questions in mind, I will explore four public displays of the dead in different spheres of life in nineteenth-century London—dissection, media sensationalist death narratives, funerals, and overcrowded burial grounds—and connect them as pieces of a phenomenon of sensationalism, entertainment for those whose bodies were not at risk of becoming props, and fear of an anonymous, dehumanized end. These areas have been classified separately in studies of Victorian England, having nothing more to do with each other than the similarity of showing off a dead body. However, I argue that they are part of a larger phenomenon of media sensationalism and theatrical performance that emerged as the print media industry developed. The popularity of death-focused media provoked the public to question respectability, a term invented in the nineteenth-century as an emphasis on materiality emerged in Victorian London, and which historians have previously applied only to funeral culture.<sup>1</sup> I

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Laqueur, "Bodies, Death, and Pauper Funerals," *Representations*, no. 1 (1983), 109-131, 114.

argue that respectability politics are at play in all of these death spectacles, sparking debate over what exactly fitted the definition of a “respectable” death.

Historians have discussed death spectacles as punishment entertainment, “traditional” holdovers that faded in the nineteenth century. Michel Foucault theorized in *Discipline and Punish* that a society was not one of spectacle but of surveillance, and viewed public punishment, such as executions, as “school rather than a festival”—in a disciplinary society, punishment should be moved indoors so it stands for the correction of the offender, rather than the production of entertainment for the public.<sup>2</sup> However, the reality of nineteenth-century London society meant that rather than death spectacles moving completely behind closed doors, people organized spectacles for increasingly large publics.<sup>3</sup> Many of these arose alongside efforts for social reform and thus had an agenda behind them, arguing that they should be viewed for the purpose of bettering society.

Scholars such as Michel Ragon give the spectacle of death a timeline, beginning in the fifteenth century and ending in the nineteenth century, arguing that after the 1800s people no longer sought spectacles of death.<sup>4</sup> Ragon specifically argues that ritual is a crucial piece in the spectacle, and that ritual was key to why sudden death was feared for a long time—without last rites, how would the deceased be able to rest—but outside of a ritual context, he does not discuss the entertainment or commercial value of death, nor does he delve into nineteenth-century

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 115-116, quoted in Tony Bennet, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” from Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Pryzblyski, *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 118.

<sup>3</sup> Bennet also notes that in the nineteenth-century there was increasing involvement of the state in public spectacles of punishment, and in Britain, this involvement was indirect, through boards of trustees rather than direct state intervention. See Tony Bennet, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” in Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Pryzblyski, *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, 122.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Ragon, *The Space of Death: a Study of Funerary Architecture, Decoration, and Urbanism* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1983), 137-138.



London aside from the garden cemetery movement. Roy Porter too periodizes death spectacles such as public executions as “traditional entertainment,” a holdover from the early modern period, where he and Ragon both claim that the phenomenon of interest in death spectacles was at its height.<sup>5</sup> Judith Walkowitz and Judith Flanders, prominent historians also studying Victorian London, take up the question of how Londoners dealt with their dead that I engage with in my own work, such as Walkowitz’s analysis of the Jack the Ripper murders and Flanders’ exploration of sanitation. However, Walkowitz focuses primarily on gender, while Flanders writes more generally on London as Charles Dickens experienced it, without spending much time on death and theatricality apart from a brief mention of Enon Chapel in her section on sanitation. By bringing together media coverage of murder, burial overcrowding, funerals, and punitive-turned-noble dissection, I concentrate on how death was performed for the London public.

The transformation of an event into a visual spectacle is a phenomenon I am calling “spectacularization.” Drawing on instances of the public observing the dead, my work shows that the spectacularization of death became a form of entertainment in England, but more specifically London, in the nineteenth century. For example, in the case of executions, the spectacularization of the executions would entail the crowds gathering with the express purpose of watching a person die, and paying money for seats on a nearby building’s roof in order to get a better view. Considering modernity in terms of London’s immense change in population demographics and new ways of disseminating media and the escapist pleasure in reading about someone else’s

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<sup>5</sup> Roy Porter, *London: a Social History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 289.

death, London's development into a "modern" city allowed for new forms of spectacularization that were new to the nineteenth century.

Specifically, in nineteenth-century London, popular culture and visual aesthetics became intertwined with materiality and progress. As the experience of the city became increasingly divided along class lines, the middle and bourgeois classes viewed the London poor as increasingly alien. In the literary imagination of the city, the language in writings used to describe the poorer spheres of the city constructed the metropolis as "a dark, powerful, and seductive labyrinth"<sup>6</sup> where one could witness displays of the horrific and grotesque. This idea turned forms of public death—punishment through execution and dissection, or exhibitions of the dead poor, for example—into spectacles, part of a darkly fantastical, stranger than fiction London underbelly that had to be witnessed to be believed. The Ripper type of murder, for example, vastly magnified by the boom in newspaper circulation and the advent of serialization of print media in the nineteenth century, made London seem darker, more lurid and dangerous. It became the perfect setting for a modern true crime narrative, and inspired a new classification for this type of crime: lust murder, which provided sensational material for all of Europe and inspired countless serial novellas and pulp fiction stories.<sup>7</sup>

## ***Methods***

This thesis engages with the sensationalism of death through popular literature of nineteenth-century London, newspapers and journalistic writings such as Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), and pamphlets advertising reform, specifically

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Walkowitz, "Urban Spectatorship," in Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Pryzblyski, *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, 206.

<sup>7</sup> Scott Spector, *Violent Sensations: Sex, Crime, and Utopia in Vienna and Berlin, 1860-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 166. Spector also notes that the Ripper type of murders came to be associated with London specifically across continental Europe.

George Walker's *Gatherings from Grave Yards* (1839), which shaped the rhetoric surrounding burial overcrowding in poor London neighborhoods. These sources all center around the subject of spectacularized death, and either use it to enhance the mood of the narrative, in the case of novels, or debate the propriety of death spectacles, as in the newspaper articles and much of the reform-minded literature. The newspaper articles I refer to in this thesis, the majority from weeklies such as the *Spectator*, use death stories as attractions, drawing in readers through their almost fictionalized coverage of murder, disease, and debate over the reform of burial practices. Whether they argue against these attractions or present them to the public as a point of intrigue in the Sunday papers, these sources showcase death narratives as intricately constructed stories meant to draw in an audience—primarily a middle-class audience—for a cheap weekend thrill.

The novels I use in this thesis were very popular in the times of their publication—Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit* originally published serially in the 1840s, and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1891—and all comment on death culture. Shelley, for instance, taps into the fear surrounding anatomical dissection and whose bodies could be used in the decades leading up to the Anatomy Act of 1832, portraying the act of interfering with the sanctity of the grave as morally corrupting and leading to ultimately tragic ends. *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Dorian Gray* both revolve around presentation and entertainment, although while Dickens criticizes the unnecessary lavish commercialism of funeral culture, Wilde comments more on the upper-class obsession with the underbelly of the city and the intrigue and shock value associated with the idea of witnessing death up close. Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* is my more anthropological source, engaging with journalism in creating a “history of the poor” and of “lower class” culture, investigating the business of “death hunters,” who marketed or even made

up sensational stories of death and murder with the sole purpose of turning a profit. Through close reading, my thesis picks up and follows threads of class and respectability through these pieces of media and concentrates on the issue of control and the fear of losing control over one's own body and what happens to it. It is important to note, however, that all of these pieces of literature are written by the middle- and upper-classes, for the middle- and upper-classes. The voices of the poor, those whose bodies were at risk, are distinctly absent from these narratives, turning the poor into objects to be pitied or observed rather than shaping the narratives directly. The only inclusion of the actual voices of the poor are in a letter to Parliament published in the *Spectator* regarding the conditions of Enon Chapel, which I will go into in Chapter 3, and Mayhew's compendium of the world of the poor, in which he details interviews with the running patterers who marketed death stories to the public on the street.

Despite the voices in these sources being those with greater socioeconomic power possessing an authority over the regulation and use of their own bodies—as they were wealthier, they had significantly more options for what to do with their body when they died—the way they construct death narratives is extremely telling about what London popular culture found entertaining. Shelley, for example, uses the bodies of the poor as tragic fodder for her horror narrative. Wilde also touches on the lack of agency of the poor in the sensationalism of their deaths, although his narrative follows a member of the upper-class who toys with death as he tries to avoid it, his society finding murder and gruesome ends fascinating. The newspaper accounts of death and murder sensationalism, as well as Walker's pamphlet, reflect the concerns of the public regarding the visibility of death, using the details of the bodies of the poor as shock value. These sources use the stories of the dead poor to enhance the commercial appeal of their

narratives, but also show the level of concern and also fascination the middling and upper-class public had with the dead poor.

### ***London's Atmosphere of Death: Disease, Class, and Propriety***

While many cities in continental Europe saw a population boom in the nineteenth century alongside initial industrialization, London in particular had an unusual amount of growth resulting in a veritable population explosion. By 1800, London was already the largest city in Europe, double the size of Paris, with more than 1 million inhabitants living in 136,000 houses; this number would nearly triple by 1851, and by the end of the century, over 6.5 million people lived in London in approximately 6 million houses.<sup>8</sup> With this explosion, society split into distinct, modern socio-economic categories: the working class, divided into laborers, also known as “mechanics,” “intelligent artisans,” and on top the “educated working man”;<sup>9</sup> the middle class, whose lines of work did not involve manual labor; and the upper class, who were characterized by having an income of 1,000 to over 5,000 pounds per year.<sup>10</sup> Most of the middle class moved out of central London by the 1870s, with the resident population of the City of London declining from 129,000 in 1851 to 76,000 twenty years later.<sup>11</sup> Before this migration in the 1870s, however, and with London's population increasing quickly, more people attempting to fit themselves into increasingly smaller available spaces, the city found its resources strained. Additionally, Victorian London itself was made up of distinctly disconnected pieces without a

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<sup>8</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens' London* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012), 10-11. Specifically, in 1851, nearly 3 million people occupied 306,000 houses in London.

<sup>9</sup> Liza Picard, *Victorian London: The Life of a City, 1840-1870* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 81.

<sup>10</sup> Dudley Baxter, *National Income 1868*, quoted in J.M. Golby, *Culture and Society in Britain 1850-1890* (Oxford, 1986), in Picard, 95. The middle class were classified in a population analysis of England and Wales made in 1867 by Dudley Baker as making either 300 to 1,000 pounds per year, 100 to 300 pounds per year, or under 100 pounds per year (the largest number of the population being the latter group). However, although the working class also made under 100 pounds per year, they were distinguished from the middle class by doing manual labor.

<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian London* (London, 1971), quoted in Picard, 100.

central, unifying government body to regulate it, unlike Paris at the same time period. Judith Flanders quotes Walter Bagehot, an economist and journalist, who stated that “London is like a newspaper. Everything is there, and everything is disconnected... As we change from the broad leader to the squalid police report, we pass a corner and we are in a changed world.”<sup>12</sup> The city consisted of discrete, unintegrated parts, which is reflected in its lack of government centrality, relegating the authority over public issues such as health and social reform to localized parishes.

As London grew, its life expectancy shrank, causing a surge of numbers of the dead to appear in public spheres. In 1830, the life expectancy of an upper-middle-class professional man was 44 years, while for a tradesman or clerk—traditionally middle-class jobs—it was 25 years, and for a laborer, 22 years.<sup>13</sup> This was coupled with high infant and child mortality rates, with 150 out of every 1000 children dying before the age of 5.<sup>14</sup> The increasing number of dead was due in part to disease, spread through water polluted with human waste and exacerbated by overcrowding. This health crisis affected different strata of people in London differently, based on their access to a cleaner supply. Between the 1830s and 1850s, a series of consecutive epidemics swept through London, leaving tens of thousands of people dead.<sup>15</sup> First came influenza in 1831 and again in 1833; then cholera in 1831, followed by scarlet fever in 1834 and another wave of influenza; then waves of smallpox, typhus (also known as “gaol fever”), and typhoid, and a resurgence of cholera (as well as typhus and typhoid again) in 1846 and once again in 1853 to 1855. The return of cholera in the West End resulted in the creation of the Metropolitan Board of Works, which was given statutory powers to remove any civic

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Bagehot, “Charles Dickens,” in *The Works and Life of Walter Bagehot*, vol. 3, ed. Mrs. Russell Barrington (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1915), 84-85. In Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens’ London*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Flanders, 212.

<sup>14</sup> Flanders, 212.

<sup>15</sup> Flanders, 215.

“nuisances” such as street pumps or graveyards, but the Board still did not have the authority to create a London-wide system of sewers to drain the city.<sup>16</sup> The buildup of sewage in the public water supply contributed to the spread of disease, especially as until the 1870s, a household’s water supply was a private contract, and many less wealthy households in London had no piped water, which meant their water was more likely to be contaminated. This put the poor far more at risk for dying of disease, leading to a wave of dead poor with which the city had to reckon.

Until 1858, the “great London nuisance” of human waste in the Thames and in the public water supply was not regulated by a centralized government authority, and waste was disposed of first in cesspools, which filled up and overflowed, seeping into the streets and contaminating drinking water, and then in sewers that flushed the sewage into the Thames. London’s lack of a central governing authority led to a very piecemeal way of dealing with the sewage problem, the public health crisis it caused, and the increasing number of dead from that crisis. The responsibility for sanitation, drainage, and water supplies were given to parish authorities in 1848 through the Metropolitan Commission of Sewers Act, localizing the reform to individual parishes rather than through centralized regulation. Individual parishes were thus in charge of appointing health officials and inspectors and condemning and closing houses and civic spaces being unsanitary, including cemeteries.

The deathly atmosphere of London was only exacerbated by the oppressive London fog, worsening as the population increased and coal fires spread. The lack of oxygen caused a spike in deaths for those with respiratory illnesses during periods of extreme fog.<sup>17</sup> The fog also caused

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<sup>16</sup> Only after the Great Stink of 1858, when the stench of the waste in the Thames forced the MPs in the Houses of Parliament to evacuate their offices, would the Prime Minister sponsor a bill to give the Metropolitan Board of Works the authority and funds to undertake a city-wide project of creating a London-wide sewer. After the new sewage system was put into effect, the cholera outbreaks stopped. See Flanders, 224-225.

<sup>17</sup> Flanders, 205.

significant issues navigating the streets safely, as many accidents occurred in periods of heavy fog due to an inability to see the road or the path. Boats could not run the river in these periods, and deaths occurred of people simply mistaking the steps at the foot of some of the bridges for the bridges themselves and falling into the river.<sup>18</sup> The city became a landscape of gloomy black buildings, the fog becoming, as Nathaniel Hawthorne described it, the “spiritualized medium of departed mud, through which the dead citizens of London probably tread in the Hades whither they are translated,”<sup>19</sup> capturing the literary imagination as a city of the dead. Dickens himself describes London as “gone into mourning, as one might imagine, for the death of the sun,” a city in mourning even aesthetically.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Chapter Outline***

This work is organized into three chapters, following the body from its dissection, to the media coverage and the subsequent funeral, to the burial, finally placing the body at rest. Chapter 1, “The Dissecting Theater and the ‘Respectable’ Cadaver,” takes a broader look at the practice of anatomical dissection in England, shifting in the nineteenth century from a process of posthumous punishment for executed criminals to a practice under attempted rehabilitation by medical men. This chapter discusses the fear of dissection inherent from its association with criminality, as well as the push from medical men to change its image into a process that was meant for the good of all, and lays the groundwork for the fear of the anonymous end for the poor, which carries through the rest of the thesis. Chapter 2, “Commercial Performance and ‘True’ Crime Media,” turns back to London to explore print culture and the development of the publishing industry and new forms of print media, specifically the advent of serial fiction, which

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<sup>18</sup> Flanders, 205.

<sup>19</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *English Note-Books*, vol. 2, 381 (1856). In Flanders, 204.

<sup>20</sup> Flanders, 204.



influenced murder and crime reporting and structured their stories around elements to draw in an audience and keep them interested. This chapter also discusses the culture of materiality and respectability in Victorian London as it relates to the idea of the “good” death, and how that contributed to the performative nature of public funerals. Finally, in Chapter 3, “Enon Chapel: the Making and Marketing of a Sensation,” I examine a specific instance of burial overcrowding—arguably the key instance—as a case study of the sensationalism of death narratives as escapist spectacles, using many of the tropes discussed in Chapter 2 in the context of serial fiction. This chapter argues that the man behind the accepted narrative of the Enon Chapel burial scandal, a reformer and surgeon named George Walker, capitalized on the bodies of the anonymous poor to elevate his own voice and create a performance off of which he and the press could profit.

## Chapter 1: The Dissecting Theater and the “Respectable” Cadaver

### *Introduction*

When James Somerville, an English anatomy inspector, visited the Edinburgh school of anatomy in the summer of 1837, he was horrified by what he saw: “groups of the labouring classes watching the students work on bodies, some of which were in a ‘very offensive state,’ and the students were laughing with a woman who was present.”<sup>21</sup> The casual atmosphere at this school of anatomy, with viewers laughing and enjoying themselves as they cut into corpses, indicated a drastic shift in the nature of the spectacle of anatomical dissection, from a form of punishment into a form of entertainment. Surgeons and anatomists lobbied to reframe dissection as a practice to benefit the study of science, but in the public mind, the stigma of punishment was lifted either too drastically, making the performance impersonal, nor not enough, making the death of a criminal far more easily attainable, without having to commit a crime.

Prior to 1832, the London public viewed the dissection of human bodies as a punishment fit only for dead convicted felons, “part of a sentence”<sup>22</sup> rather than a necessary practice for medical education, although universities had been performing dissections since the Middle Ages.<sup>23</sup> Britain, like elsewhere on the continent, only permitted “a few bodies of criminals, or some from the hospitals” to be used for dissection, although Britain had sufficiently more incidents of grave-robbing.<sup>24</sup> By the nineteenth century, medical schools in Britain expanded and

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<sup>21</sup> Helen MacDonald, *Possessing the Dead: the Artful Science of Anatomy* (Carlton, Victoria, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 2010), 36.

<sup>22</sup> “Untitled Item [POLICE OF LONDON. DEATH OF MR. NEALE.-John Butler was Brou..]”, *The Spectator* (April 4, 1829), 213.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Dwight, “Anatomy Laws versus Body-snatching,” from *The Forum for Decr.* 1896 (New York: Forum Pub. Co., 1896), 493.

<sup>24</sup> Dwight, 496. Dwight notes that there were grave-robbings on the continent, but none so much as in Britain. He specifies that in Italy, for example, there was nothing heard about the desecration of graves or of mobs, suggesting a “more enlightened policy.”

became more interested in the study of human anatomy, which could only be studied properly with the use of human cadavers. This “dissection fever,”<sup>25</sup> a thirst for scientific knowledge in an industrial age that could only be gained through direct engagement with death, pervaded the public as morbid entertainment became more popular,<sup>26</sup> as signaled in the publication and popularity of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.<sup>27</sup> However, the supply of bodies for dissection and study was finite, restricted by law since the sixteenth century: the only bodies that could be legally used for dissection in schools of anatomy were those of executed criminals, whose consistent number could not be counted upon.<sup>28</sup> With so few bodies available, medical schools floundered, unable to lecture properly on anatomy and surgery without cadavers on which to demonstrate. The English physician Southwood Smith refers to this limit on the supply of cadavers, in England specifically, as “detestable, and ought immediately to be changed.”<sup>29</sup> This scarcity led to a hunger for bodies that produced the industry of resurrection men, a nineteenth-century English development,<sup>30</sup> who would illegally dig up freshly buried bodies and sell them to schools of anatomy. The resurrection men created an atmosphere of intense fear in London, with people so concerned that their deceased family member’s grave could be broken into that families sometimes stood watch over the graves of the recently deceased for several days until the body decomposed and was no longer of use to resurrectionists.<sup>31</sup> Some resurrection men

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<sup>25</sup> My own term.

<sup>26</sup> Dwight, an American, notes in 1896 that America “we have rapidly reenacted the longer history of Europe.” See Dwight, 497. This is proof that the popularity of public dissections persisted abroad even sixty years after the passage of the Anatomy Act in England and the efforts to normalize the practice.

<sup>27</sup> Shelley’s original text was written in 1818 and republished in 1823 and 1831. I will be using the 1831 version, the last edition overseen by Mary Shelley.

<sup>28</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens’ London* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012), 374.

<sup>29</sup> Southwood Smith, “Body-snatching” (London: Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy, 1824), 49.

<sup>30</sup> See Thomas Dwight, “Anatomy Laws versus Body-snatching,” from *The Forum for Decr.* 1896 (New York: Forum Pub. Co., 1896), 496-497. Dwight also notes that until 1832, when the Anatomy Act was passed, theft of bodies by resurrection men was “practiced in a manner absolutely startling.”

<sup>31</sup> Johanna M. Smith, ed., in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical, Historical, and Cultural Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Johanna M. Smith (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2016), 211.

would even resort to murder to provide fresh bodies to sell.<sup>32</sup> Precautions were taken to keep the resurrection men out and keep cemeteries as respectable spaces for the dead; these spaces, however, were reserved for London's upper classes. The poor had to live with the fear that they could be killed for dissection, or their body stolen.

As a response to the lack of available bodies, medical men lobbied for a shift in demographics of the bodies available for dissection, arguing that the advancement of science was a righteous cause for which to sacrifice "respectable" deaths. This push would lead to a complete sacrifice of respectability in order to sanitize and normalize practical anatomy. In an attempt to curb the resurrectionist business—and protect the bodies of the rich—Parliament passed the Anatomy Act of 1832, which permitted those buried at the parish expense<sup>33</sup> to be dissected in addition to criminals executed at Newgate.<sup>34</sup> This Act allayed the fears of the rich that their bodies could be stolen, while opening up the potential ranks of the anonymous dead to a broader demographic. What had previously been a postmortem punishment for crimes committed during one's life became a fate that could befall anyone who could not afford a "respectable" burial. Additionally, the larger number of bodies available meant that more dissections could occur, which meant that the audiences for those dissections could grow. In 1824, as body-snatchers stole with abandon, Southwood Smith argued for the expansion of the definition of the anatomy subject, laying out a plan that the bodies of all people who died in hospitals, work-houses and

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<sup>32</sup> These murderers, if caught, were executed, and their own bodies used for dissection as a posthumous punishment. I will go into the historical background of the fear of dissection as it relates to criminality further on in this chapter.

<sup>33</sup> I.e., the poor, who could not afford the presentational trappings of "respectable" burials. I will examine funerals as spectacles in Chapter 2.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth T. Hurren, *Dying for Victorian Medicine: English Anatomy and its Trade in the Dead Poor, c. 1834-1929* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 4. Subsequent bills on anatomy that facilitated the trade in dead bodies and the expansion of the study of anatomy were the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which decreed that workhouses should hand over any abandoned corpses to be studied; and the Medical Act of 1858, which gave anatomists the official power to buy human material to teach medical students.

poorhouses, and prisons, if unclaimed by immediate relatives, should be “appropriated” to the purpose of anatomy.<sup>35</sup> He acknowledges the moral objection to this plan, but dismisses it, making an argument of usefulness:

These persons are pensioners upon the public bounty: they owe the public a debt: they have been supported by the public during life; if, therefore, after death they can be made useful to the public, it is a prejudice, not a reason—it is an act of injustice, not the observance of a duty, which would prevent them from becoming so.<sup>36</sup>

The bodies of the friendless poor, whom medical men like Smith argued were otherwise useless to the public and needed to repay their debt to society for existing, became objects of observation and props for the performance of dissection, picked apart in front of crowds hungry for contact with the dead. Once at risk of murder for dissection, now the bodies of the poor could be claimed legally for the practice. These bodies were once people, but the audience treated them as props, stripping them of their once-personhood. The middle classes could afford be entertained by dissection, as their bodies ended up on the dissection table only through theft from a graveyard—which was unlikely due to increasing security measures—or execution. The poor, however, watched dissection happen with horror, knowing that their own bodies could be in the same position, cut open and on display while the audience laughed.

This chapter argues that the push from medical men in an attempt to separate dissection from its connotation of punishment and reframe it as a necessary process to benefit humankind had the unintended consequence of changing the practice from a spectacle of criminal punishment to a spectacle of entertainment, particularly for those whose bodies were not at risk. To those whose bodies were at risk, dissection connoted the fear of an anonymous death, a fear that only grew as anatomists lobbied for the poor to be used as sacrifices to acquire knowledge

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<sup>35</sup> Southwood Smith, “Body-snatching,” 49.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, “Body-snatching,” 51-52.

gained through dissection which they argued was for the greater good of humanity. Dissection's media presence, through literature, newspapers, letters, and speeches, shaped the public's perception of it as both a ghoulish performance and a source of fear associated with criminality, particularly for the poor, who were faced with the reality that any of them could be next on the dissection table for simply taking up space.

The historiographical debate surrounding dissection concentrates on it as a practice of public punishment, associated with executions and constituting a spectacle of what Michel Foucault calls "punitive theatre."<sup>37</sup> However, while Foucault argues that the nineteenth century saw this public sphere, where the bodies of criminals had been displayed with the purpose of educating the public against wrongdoing, replaced with "a great enclosed, complex and hierarchized structure"<sup>38</sup> of incarceration. However, I argue that dissection took on a new form of spectacle rather than being moved indoors. As medical men took on the role of agents of change, pushing for the reduction of stigma so people would more readily perform dissections, dissected bodies became things to be used and learned from as tools of science, rather than things to be learned from as a means of punishment, as Foucault argues they should be. In that transition, the bodies became dehumanized—props for display, rather than perpetrators of wrongdoing. As the punitive aspect faded into historical memory and made way for rhetoric of improvement and modernization for the acquisition of scientific knowledge, crowds entertained by dissection ignored the personhood of the cadavers before them, desensitized through the bombast of stigma reduction and "the greater good." It didn't matter that the bodies on the dissecting table gradually became less murderers and criminals, as executions declined, and more people who fell below

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<sup>37</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 116, quoted in Tony Bennet, "The Exhibitionary Complex," from Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Pryzblyski, *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 118.

<sup>38</sup> Foucault, 116.

the poverty line and didn't have any living relatives to claim them. Once they were dead, they became objects on display, punished for the crime of poverty.

This chapter focuses on the push to destigmatize dissection in Britain and its consequences for the larger public, a phenomenon that was apparent across Britain rather than in London alone. However, London's particular demographics due to the cholera epidemics of the 1830s and the overcrowding of burial grounds, as well as its increasing population as a modernizing city, made the dead especially visible. These pressures, alongside the medical men attempting to change the public perception of dissection from horror to beneficial to humankind, aided in dehumanizing the dead poor and constructing the phenomenon of death becoming popular entertainment in London that I will discuss in later chapters.

### ***Anatomized Criminals: Execution and the Dissection Table***

Legal dissection began as a posthumous punishment for executed criminals.<sup>39</sup> Ruth Richardson refers to dissection in her book *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* as historically “an aggravation to execution, a fate worse than death,”<sup>40</sup> a sentiment that would persist through to the Victorian era. These dissections were public and popular: part of the punishment was the publicity involved in delivering the body from the hangman to the surgeons at the gallows, as well as the actual exhibition of the body opened up by the dissection.<sup>41</sup> The intense scrutiny that

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<sup>39</sup> The bodies of executed criminals were used for dissection in England as early as the sixteenth century through royal enactments by James IV of Scotland and Henry VIII, both of whom made dissection a recognized punishment by law. During the reign of Henry VIII, at least 72,000 criminals were executed in England, providing a large number of material for dissection. See Walter Thornbury, “the Old Bailey,” in *Old and New London: Volume 2* (London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1878), 461-477.

<sup>40</sup> Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 32.

<sup>41</sup> Richardson, 32. Also, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 117, quoted in Tony Bennet, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” from Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Pryzblyski, *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, 118. The spectatorship of the event added to the power of public condemnation.

these dissections represented is illustrated in an image like Hogarth's *Fourth Stage of Cruelty* (1751), depicting an official dissection at the Company of Surgeons (Fig. 1)<sup>42</sup> as a macabre space. The space of the illustration is packed full of onlookers and props such as a dog eating the organs of the body being dissected as they spill out of a bucket, and bones being boiled in a pot in the corner. However, the oratory and moral arguments surrounding dissection would change in the early 1800s, as executions began to decline and teachers of practical anatomy found they needed a more consistent supply of human specimens in order to learn how to perform surgery properly.

The principles of this kind of spectacle of punishment differed from that of execution in two crucial aspects: medical men were performing the punishment of dehumanizing one's body and displaying it in front of an audience, rather than executioners, and besides just carrying out a punishment on the body of the criminal, this act of dissection was meant to benefit the study of science, thereby making the surgeon-anatomist "an executioner of the law."<sup>43</sup> Walter Thornbury, a nineteenth-century English historian, notes in his discussion of the history of the Old Bailey—the site of public executions in London beginning in 1783—an incident in April of 1760 when a Laurence Earl Ferrers was tried for the murder of his steward:

[He was] sentenced 'to be hanged by the neck till he was dead, after which his body was to be delivered to Surgeon's Hall, to be dissected and anatomised.' At the latter part of the sentence, we are told, his lordship cried out, 'God forbid!' but, soon recollecting himself, added, 'God's will be done!'<sup>44</sup>

The fear of postmortem anatomization in the above quote would persist, a fear then only reserved in criminals bound to be hanged, and fed into the idea of a "bad" death, having one's body put on display and cut open for all to see like an object, rather than having a proper burial.

<sup>42</sup> See Appendix; William Hogarth, "The Reward of Cruelty (The Four Stages of Cruelty)," 1751.

<sup>43</sup> Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, 34.

<sup>44</sup> Walter Thornbury, "the Old Bailey," in *Old and New London: Volume 2*.



Criminals bound for death were terrified of dissection and what it would mean for their bodies—an objectively bad death, transforming from a human being to a nameless prop. The Murder Act, passed during the reign of George II in 1752, included a provision for dissection in order to better prevent murder in Britain: if the execution of a murderer occurred in London, the body should be taken immediately to the hall of the “*Surgeons Company*,” where the body should then be “dissected and anatomized by the said *Surgeons*... in order to impress a just horror in the mind of the offender, and on the minds of such as shall be present, of the heinous crime of murder.”<sup>45</sup> The stigmatization through the association of dissections with executed criminals persisted a hundred years later to the nineteenth century, when the number of executions in England waned but the demand for bodies for anatomical dissection increased.

This connection to criminality became a central concern for those arguing for and against the Anatomy Act of 1832—the arguments being between medical men pushing for scientific knowledge above all and those who accused the legislation of “[suffering] the poor to be so treated, in order that [the rich] may receive the advantage without partaking in the danger”<sup>46</sup>—and played a significant role in perpetuating dissection as a trope of the horror genre. Thomas Dwight, an American writing in 1896 on the history of anatomy legislation and practice in America and Europe—America’s development of the practice was influenced heavily by Britain’s, particularly Edinburgh and London<sup>47</sup>—spells out the dynamic between execution and dissection plainly: “it is curious to note,” he says about dissection in Britain, “that dissection was

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<sup>45</sup> “An act for better preventing the horrid crime of murder,” 22 George II., c. 37, 1752. In Edward Mussey Hartwell, “The Study of Anatomy, Historically and Legally Considered,” *Journal of Social Science* 13: 54 (1881), 59.

<sup>46</sup> G. J. Guthrie, *Remarks on the Anatomy Bill Now before Parliament : In a Letter Addressed to the Right Hon. the Lord Althorp, and Given to the Members of either House on their Personal Or Written Application to the Publisher* (London: Wm. Sams, Royal Library, St. James’ Street, 1832), 2.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Mussey Hartwell, “The Study of Anatomy, Historically and Legally Considered,” *Journal of Social Science* 13: 54 (1881), 59. Hartwell states that “inasmuch as in the development of anatomy in America, the influence of Edinburgh and London is more readily traced than that of Paris and Leyden.”

at times added to the sentence for certain offences,—not for the good of medicine, but to add horror to the punishment.”<sup>48</sup> This horror as part of the spectacle became inexorably entangled with the entertainment value of the act of dissection itself, so while the practice moved away from criminal sentences, for those at risk of the dehumanizing process, the terror remained.

### ***Occult Knowledge: Dissection as Cost or Benefit to Humanity***

Anatomical dissection for the purpose of acquiring knowledge of the human body is an ancient process, dating back to the third century BCE with the reign of Ptolemy I Soter in Egypt,<sup>49</sup> but the argument that more than the bodies of criminals were needed to acquire this crucial knowledge appeared in many English scientific texts by medical men whose rhetoric was structured around shaping the next generation of anatomists for the greater good of humanity. James Scratchley’s *The London Dissector*, a reference text for medical students published in 1816, reveals the level of erudition associated with the practice by those who were pro-dissection, and clearly makes a judgment on the moral righteousness of the practice: “this species of knowledge,” he says, “will afford [the anatomy student] the most essential assistance in his future operations on the living subject.”<sup>50</sup> Scratchley refers to his manual as a “performance... offered to the public,” imagining the nature of dissection as entertainment before an audience with a knowledge component.<sup>51</sup> His idea of dissection moves away from a public audience of non-experts filling a room, watching a criminal reduced to simply pieces of a body, and moving towards dissection as the rehearsal, but surgery as the performance. He frames dissection as a

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas Dwight, “Anatomy Laws versus Body-snatching,” 496.

<sup>49</sup> Edward Mussey Hartwell, 54-55.

<sup>50</sup> James Scratchley, *The London Dissector, or, System of Dissection, practised in the hospitals and lecture rooms of the Metropolis: explained by the clearest rules, for the use of students: comprising a description of the muscles, vessels, nerves, and viscera, of the human body, as they appear on dissection: with directions for their demonstration* (London: Longman and Co., 1816), 2-3.

<sup>51</sup> Scratchley, v.

prologue, a necessary act in order to make the performance of surgery as successful and seamless as possible,<sup>52</sup> and more broadly, to further the study of anatomy and thus the progress of humankind. He views dissection as so necessary a rehearsal that he is “perfectly astonished to see persons rash enough to use the knife without possessing this information [gained through dissection].”<sup>53</sup>

From Scratchley’s point of view, and the point of view of those lobbying for the Anatomy Act of 1832’s expansion of dissection eligibility to the poor, in order for humankind to progress, someone had to be sacrificed. He portrays this issue as a matter of life and death, and calls for those who perform surgery without the proper knowledge and practice on cadavers to be punished for their “criminal temerity.”<sup>54</sup> His emphasis on the knowledge that could be gained through this study and how it could help the future performance of surgery on the living echoes the point made by pro-anatomy lobbyists. However, those questioning this viewpoint on the grounds of propriety raised the issue of dehumanization: at what cost did this knowledge come, through treating another human being’s body like an object?

### ***Fear the Resurrection Men***

As the study of anatomy “languished”<sup>55</sup> in Britain due to the decreasing number of executions—and thus subjects—available while numbers of medical students increased, what Thomas Dwight refers to as “a new era of unprecedented horror”<sup>56</sup> began: the era of the

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<sup>52</sup> He states outright that “should this work in any degree facilitate the progress of the Anatomical Student, the object of the Author will be attained.” Scratchley, vi.

<sup>53</sup> Scratchley, 2-3.

<sup>54</sup> Scratchley, 3.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Dwight, “Anatomy Laws versus Body-snatching,” 496.

<sup>56</sup> Dwight, 496.

resurrectionists. These body-snatchers stole freshly-deceased corpses from coffins and graves—sometimes killing them themselves—and sell them to medical schools. The resurrectionists could reach anyone, no matter where they were buried or who they were. Anyone was in danger of having a “shameful” death, one associated with criminality and a murder sentence,<sup>57</sup> no matter their social class—even the wealthy were at risk, especially when considering the resurrectionists who resorted to murder to acquire bodies to sell. The most infamous resurrectionists were two murderers, William Burke and William Hare in Edinburgh. Between November 1827 and October 31, 1828, Burke and Hare murdered upwards of seventeen people in Edinburgh before selling their bodies to Dr. Robert Knox’s anatomy school<sup>58</sup>, which was the largest and most famous in Europe.<sup>59</sup> They were finally caught, and Burke executed, in 1829, but resurrectionists and imitators of Burke and Hare’s murders became known as “Burkers.”

Appealing for a change in anatomy legislation used the Burke and Hare murders as the inciting incident, a cautionary story that made the practice of dissection appear even darker. London’s own Burke and Hare, John Bishop and Thomas Williams, were tried and executed for wilful murder in 1831, having tried to sell the body of the deceased to “Guy’s-hospital” and to the “King’s-college.”<sup>60</sup> Those in favor of expanding the practice of anatomy argued that these kinds of murders would only continue if nothing was done about making dissection easier to do. People called for the poor to be added to the table, instead of only criminals, to ensure that there was not such a great need for bodies that people would resort to killing each other with the purpose of selling the nameless corpse. As historian Helen MacDonald says, if anatomists’

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<sup>57</sup> See "Untitled Item [POLICE OF LONDON. DEATH OF MR. NEALE.-John Butler was Brou..]," *The Spectator* (Apr 04, 1829), 213.

<sup>58</sup> Judith Flanders, *Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens' London*, 375.

<sup>59</sup> Edward Mussey Hartwell, 61. In the winter of 1828-1829, Knox had a class of 505, by far the largest in Europe.

<sup>60</sup> *Trial of John Bishop, Thomas Williams, James May*, 24 (December 1831), Old Bailey Proceedings Online ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org)).

legitimate need for corpses “was not serviced by devoting one portion of humanity to science then grave-robbing and murders would again be committed.”<sup>61</sup> The poor would have to be sacrificed, or this gruesome nightmare in Britain would surely continue.

Dwight and other writers on this subject frame the horror brought by the resurrectionists as a solidly nineteenth-century development, born out of the sheer demand for corpses to dissect. Dwight specifically compartmentalizes this “horror” as a marker of a darker time,<sup>62</sup> with the Anatomy Act of 1832 marking the transition from the “Dark Ages” of rampant grave-robbing to the more widespread and more “orderly” dissection of the modern age, post-1832. He discusses an account of resurrectionists in a book on the life of Sir Astley Cooper as something suitable for “the reader with a taste for horrors... if he can stomach it,”<sup>63</sup> and describes a particular instance of body theft in which the body of a gentleman was stolen from the coffin in his own house right before his funeral, the coffin filled with a proportionate weight of dirt to substitute for the body. Through these details, Dwight plays into the tradition of gothic horror stories, making this back-alley way of facilitating dissections into something worthy of a penny dreadful.

### ***Dissection as Entertainment in Frankenstein***

The existence and popularity of Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein*, published in 1818, demonstrates the middling classes’ new obsession with dissection as entertainment and the commercial value of horror. As a horror novel, *Frankenstein* capitalized on the fears of the period—of the resurrection men, and of the fervor with which medical men sought to gain knowledge over life through studying the dissected dead—to enhance the ghastliness of the

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<sup>61</sup> Helen MacDonald, *Possessing the Dead: the Artful Science of Anatomy*, 223.

<sup>62</sup> Dwight states that “during their reign, no grave in England was safe,—till one is aghast at the thought of such a phase of civilization in modern times.” See Thomas Dwight, “Anatomy Laws versus Body-snatching,” 497.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Dwight, “Anatomy Laws versus Body-snatching,” 497.

narrative.<sup>64</sup> It utilizes tropes familiar in gothic fiction, much like penny dreadfuls, cheap escapist stories revolving around death which I discuss in greater depth in Chapter 2. Shelley's titular character of Victor Frankenstein describes his study as "the most insupportable to the delicacy of human feelings"<sup>65</sup> as he ruminates on the process of death: the corruption of the body, the consumption by worms, the cycle of life to death and death to life. Throughout his explanation of his obsession with his work, he continuously refers to himself as "animated by an almost supernatural enthusiasm,"<sup>66</sup> a man possessed:

Darkness had no effect upon my fancy; and a churchyard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life, which, from being the seat of beauty and strength, had become food for the worm. Now I was led to examine the cause and progress of this decay, and forced to spend days and nights in vaults and charnel-houses.<sup>67</sup>

Although she does not go into the gory details of the acquisition of cadavers, merely mentioning the sites of acquisition is enough to absolutely horrify her reader, living in an age filled with consistent reminders that the grave was no longer sacred, threatened by resurrection men. Victor Frankenstein's narrative is injected with an underlying sense of dread at his own work, which he himself judges to be profane: "I collected bones from charnel-houses; and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame."<sup>68</sup> Shelley does not describe exactly how he acquired the biological pieces to create his creature, but merely says that "the dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of [Victor's] materials."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Tim Marshall, *Murdering to Dissect: Grave-robbing, Frankenstein, and the Anatomy Literature* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 201. *Frankenstein* follows the formula of stories from the resurrectionist era, where the anatomist realizes with horror that the corpse they are about to dissect is someone they know. In the novel, it can be argued that Victor Frankenstein is the anatomist, and when the Creature kills his friend Clerval and his new wife Elizabeth, it draws on this fear of seeing one's loved ones on the anatomy table, although Frankenstein himself does not dissect them.

<sup>65</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical, Historical, and Cultural Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Johanna M. Smith (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 55.

<sup>66</sup> Shelley, 55.

<sup>67</sup> Shelley, 55.

<sup>68</sup> Shelley, 58.

<sup>69</sup> Shelley, 58.

The entertainment of *Frankenstein*, which persists today, lies in the horror of the act, enhanced by Victor's constant bemoaning his fate and his path of study, and the death and destruction it has brought him. Shelley's novel was largely well-received, but many critics were uncomfortable with her premise and her concentration on the consequences of scientific experimentation, fearing that seeing dissection in literature such as *Frankenstein* would result in the practice itself becoming a form of mainstream popular culture akin to a night at the theater. One such review, which appeared in *The Scots Magazine*, published in London on March 1, 1818, accuses Shelley of "revolting our feelings"<sup>70</sup> by analyzing the phenomenon of anatomical dissection. This reveals that while the media capitalized on interest and discourse regarding anatomical dissection, some tried to evoke the public stigma surrounding it to obligate "respectable" people to disparage it.<sup>71</sup> The reviewer clearly believes that Shelley's work goes too far in exploring the bounds of science, using the word "impropriety"<sup>72</sup> to describe its contents. He avoids mentioning dissection altogether and comments that although it might have been Shelley's purpose to show that man should not seek to create life artificially, as only misery would follow, "all these monstrous conceptions are the consequences of the wild and irregular theories of the age."<sup>73</sup> His studious avoidance of the topic reveals a deep-seated anxiety surrounding the increasing visibility of the dissected dead. Another reviewer, writing in the *Weekly Dispatch* published in London on November 13, 1831, betrays a similar sentiment in his

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<sup>70</sup> "Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus," *The Scots Magazine* (London: Lackington, &c., March 1, 1818), 253.

<sup>71</sup> The only mention of dissection in the review is not that of human beings, but "the old and approved manner [of] dissecting living animals, groping into all the repositories of the dead, and making [Frankenstein] acquainted with life and death in all their forms." By referring to the vivisection of animals as "the old and approved manner," the reviewer makes a judgment statement on the dissection of humans, regarding it as something new and grotesque, and drawing a concrete moral distinction between human and animals. "Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus," *The Scots Magazine*, 250.

<sup>72</sup> "Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus," *The Scots Magazine*, 253.

<sup>73</sup> "Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus," *The Scots Magazine*, 253. The monstrous conceptions in question are, of course, dissection of human bodies.

short mention of *Frankenstein* in a section on the “Standard Novels” series; he states that “the tale itself is no favourite of ours; though we must admit that the impossible creation that forms its chief feature is related in a powerful and fearful style, and that the accompanying events are *horribly* interesting.”<sup>74</sup>

### ***Stigma and Public Opinion***

With resurrectionists such as Burke and Hare in Edinburgh and Bishop and Williams in London murdering to acquire bodies to be sold to medical schools, the popular opinion of dissection was deeply connected to fear of an anonymous death for the dissection table. Public opinion of the practice of dissection stood directly in the path of expanding the range of bodies available, and legislators and surgeons alike pushed for the rehabilitation of the practice’s image as a crucial part of the Anatomy Act of 1832. The association of the practice with the dissection of murders, used as a form of “final punishment” postmortem, created a pervasive stigma that prevented many people from leaving their bodies for anatomical purposes or permitting their friends to be dissected. Some medical men and supporters of the expansion of the act, such as G.J. Guthrie, professor of surgery and anatomy at the Royal College of Surgeons, argued that the stigma only existed due to the fear of resurrectionists, which would only continue unless more bodies were made available legally to medical schools, “unless the law relating to anatomy be altered, and its study protected.”<sup>75</sup> He notes in his letter to Lord Althorp that the resurrectionist murders are the most public in London or Edinburgh, but “it is from the country towns and places in the heart of England that the anatomical schools of London and of Scotland are

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<sup>74</sup> “Standard Novels,” *The Weekly Dispatch* (London, November 13, 1831), 366.

<sup>75</sup> G. J. Guthrie, *Remarks on the Anatomy Bill Now before Parliament*, 1.



supplied.”<sup>76</sup> If Parliament expanded the potential supply from convicted criminals to a broader array of cadavers, Guthrie argued, the traffic in dead bodies would stop and the entrenched fear in the public of anatomists would disappear.<sup>77</sup> However, after legislature was put into place to stop the industry of resurrectionists once and for all, there was public opinion to worry about.

Supporters of anatomical dissection, such as Jeremy Bentham, who donated his body to the study of anatomy after he died in 1832, made a decided effort to reframe the image of the study of dissection from a back-alley horror story to something honorable and altruistic. A lecture given over Bentham’s body by Southwood Smith in the Webb-Street School of Anatomy and Medicine in June of 1832 provides a perfect example of the rhetoric used to make the practice seem more palatable and break the stigma associated with it. Bentham was hailed as a saint in the eyes of science for this donation, but he was one of few wealthier citizens who willingly gave up their bodies to the practice, or argued for other medical men to do the same. Guthrie comments on this in his letter:

There is no more reason for a medical man’s giving up his body for anatomical purposes than for any other person... but if a medical man maintains the opinion that dissection is an unobjectionable process which people ought to submit the dead bodies of their friends to for the sake of science and the benefit of the living, I in turn maintain, that they are bound to set the example.<sup>78</sup>

Smith begins the long-winded and rather flowery lecture praising the morality of donating one’s body to science by rhapsodizing about the greater good and the happiness of humanity, and compares Bentham to Isaac Newton, calling him “the great philosopher of human nature”<sup>79</sup> who, like Newton, observed a fundamental law of the universe. Bentham saw that “as

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<sup>76</sup> Guthrie, 1. He specifically states that “it is not to London or Edinburgh that these murders are confined... it is in other towns and places in England that they can be perpetuated with even greater security.”

<sup>77</sup> Guthrie, 2.

<sup>78</sup> Guthrie, 3.

<sup>79</sup> Southwood Smith, “A lecture delivered over the remains of Jeremy Bentham, Esq., in the Webb-Street School of Anatomy and Medicine, on the 9th of June, 1832,” (London: Effingham Wilson, 1832), 9.

his own greatest happiness at each moment is the only actual end of action in every sentient creature, so it is the pursuit of this end that can alone secure the maximum of the aggregate of happiness.”<sup>80</sup> In other words, he discovered that the pinnacle of “all sound morality, all wise legislation, and all good government”—to quote Smith—was the improvement of the human being.<sup>81</sup> This was the great rhetorical tactic of the supporters of the expansion of dissection legislation: the dissection of human cadavers provided anatomical knowledge that would assist when needing to perform surgery on a live subject,<sup>82</sup> and thus would advance the happiness of the human species.

### ***Public Performance and Attendance***

As James Somerville observed, the push to view human bodies as tools to bring humankind into the modern age created the unintended consequence of advertising dissections as entertainment, making them much more casual events than Scratchley and others had imagined. Dissections were still used for the acquisition of medical knowledge, but once they could occur more often with an increased number of specimens available after 1832, they became even more accessible to the public, while their usual audiences were still mostly academic.

Postmortem examinations, however, became a practice that people were willing to readily undergo for themselves and their families, even while dissection remained stigmatized. Students paid fees for tickets to watch postmortem examinations performed in mortuary and postmortem rooms at hospitals, and thus extend their knowledge from morbid anatomy lectures through something that became a form of entertainment. They complained when the hospital

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<sup>80</sup> Smith, 9.

<sup>81</sup> Smith, 9.

<sup>82</sup> James Scratchley, *The London Dissector*, 2-3.

restricted their attendance, accusing the hospital of scheduling the postmortems too early in the morning without giving them prior notification, and charged that “the men autopsying the corpses were ‘either incapable or unwilling’ to turn these occasions into useful lessons” by not letting the students witness them.<sup>83</sup> Typically hospital pathologists performed the postmortems, rather than anatomy students, but anyone from the hospital who was “sufficiently interested” in the case could attend, even those whose job descriptions had nothing to do with morbid anatomy.<sup>84</sup>

These postmortems were considered spectacularized performances of their own, but more palatable than anatomy school dissections due to the absence of the stigma of criminality. During the debates over the legislation and propriety of anatomy, critics of dissection law claimed that “while the public abhorred dissection, which destroyed a corpse, they were less likely to protest against a post-mortem being performed on their own or on a relative’s or friend’s body.”<sup>85</sup> Dissections “destroyed” a corpse for knowledge, while postmortems kept the sense of the cadaver’s identity as a person. Even William Roberts, one of the Anatomy Act’s loudest critics, differentiated between the two procedures in this way, arguing that the Act “should have legalized the postmortem examination of most citizens, while reserving dissection for criminals’ bodies.”<sup>86</sup> These claims reinforce the fear of dissection as something deeply connected with criminality, a connection that postmortems did not have.

## ***Conclusion***

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<sup>83</sup> Helen MacDonald, *Possessing the Dead: the Artful Science of Anatomy*, 98.

<sup>84</sup> MacDonald, 98.

<sup>85</sup> MacDonald, 98-99.

<sup>86</sup> MacDonald, 99.

While dissection did become seen as necessary for anatomical study, the fear surrounding the process did not fade in the media that displayed it. The London media market in particular profited immensely from the horror-factor of dissection. For example, in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for instance, after the main character commits murder, he calls upon a man with a knowledge of science gained through experiments on dead bodies to help him dispose of his victim. Anatomical dissections of cadavers still carried an air of horror sixty years after the Anatomy Act of 1832, and Wilde draws on the fear still deep-rooted in the practice due to the sheer randomness of whose body was chosen to be dissected. The character with the anatomical background in *Dorian Gray* has an association with buying bodies illegally off of resurrection men, adding another level of wrongness and horror to the situation.<sup>87</sup> Newspapers and popular literature amplified the horror of dissection in conjunction with the new parameters of the Anatomy Act, which made the practice no longer a concern for the wealthier classes, who could observe the process as something useful for scientific advancement, as well as entertaining for them. The poor, however, became susceptible to the indignity of dissection simply for the crime of living in poverty, their bodies turned into objects for the public's entertainment.

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<sup>87</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 183. Dorian tells the man of science, Alan, "you don't inquire where the dead things on which you experiment come from. Don't inquire now." He also argues that if Alan saw the man whom Dorian had killed in a "hideous dissecting-room or fetid laboratory," he would surely not think he was doing anything wrong, and would even believe he was benefiting mankind, "or increasingly the sum of knowledge in the world, or gratifying intellectual curiosity, or something of that kind."

## Chapter 2: Commercial Performance and “True” Crime Media

### *Introduction and Murder and Death as Media Events*

Most people familiar with nineteenth-century London have heard of Jack the Ripper, the paradigmatic sensationalized murderer of the late nineteenth century, active in 1888. Murders were the ultimate mass media events, and none more popular than Jack the Ripper. The media coverage of the Ripper murders followed the tropes of popular serial fiction closely, using excessive goriness and violence to draw in an audience.<sup>88</sup> The public was ravenous for this kind of content, and the Ripper murders became commercially lucrative for many London papers. Anonymous letters forecasting the murders and signed “Jack the Ripper,” sent to the Central News Agency and a Whitechapel vigilance committee in 1888,<sup>89</sup> deepened the mystery and provided props to keep public interest, as copies of the first two letters were republished in all newspapers and posted at street corners.<sup>90</sup> Newspapers framed the whole ordeal as if the murders were a serial mystery story, the public waiting impatiently for the next installment.<sup>91</sup>

Just as dissection became a phenomenon of entertainment, I argue that the public interest in death spiked and manifested in new, ultra-theatrical ways in nineteenth-century London. As

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<sup>88</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 199. Commentators on the crime scene described the victims as slaughtered animals at a butcher shop, or as cadavers used for anatomical dissection, drawing on the fear of dissection that persisted throughout nineteenth-century London, fifty years after the Anatomy Act of 1832. Walkowitz discusses how the anatomization of the victims portrayed them as guilty bodies, punished through dissection, but focuses more on the gendered aspect of the Ripper murders and the female sexual mutilation, while I am using her analysis in the context of media sensationalism rather than gender.

<sup>89</sup> Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 199. The Central News Agency letters were received on September 30, 1888, while the letter sent to the chairman of a local vigilance committee in Whitechapel was sent two weeks later, and, even more intriguing, contained half of a human kidney.

<sup>90</sup> Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 200. Police authorities believed these letters to be inauthentic, the work of an “enterprising journalist,” but whether real or not, the letters established the killer as a single, elusive figure playing a game, communicating with the public through the newspaper to keep them playing along.

<sup>91</sup> Scott Spector writes that the Jack the Ripper murders were reported “in the manner of a serial novel, where readers could be counted on for knowing the names of yesterday’s suspects and last week’s victims.” See Scott Spector, *Violent Sensations: Sex, Crime, and Utopia in Vienna and Berlin*, 166.

serialization changed how the public consumed entertainment, the concepts of sensationalism and respectability arose as part of the conversation surrounding death spectacles. As London found itself at the head of the capitalist world, the death industry—funerals, journalism—became caught up in materiality. For the upper and middling classes, this was revealed through hugely elaborate, expensive funerals, class shown through costumes and props,<sup>92</sup> sparked by an anxiety to ensure one's death was perceived as "good," while media concentrated on the uglier side of death, capitalizing on fears of a "bad" death to turn a profit.<sup>93</sup> Meanwhile, the lower classes clamored for death stories and spots from which to witness the most theatrical funerals, but had no possibility of attaining the "good" death that the bourgeois could simply pay for. For the poor, all they could do was witness and consume death stories and hope theirs was not next.

The most sensational stories the newspapers presented were riddled with grisly details, and the sexual mutilation of the Ripper murders made them the perfect journalistic flashpoint. They also played upon existing fears of surgeons, dissection, and vivisection that had not gone away, despite the efforts of medical men to remove the stigma of criminality from the practice; the stain still remained.<sup>94</sup> The Ripper murders placed prostitute bodies on display specifically as corpses, literalizing, as Judith Walkowitz argues, the moral argument that the price of sin was death<sup>95</sup> and fitting handily into what we would now call the true crime genre of literature and media. However, the serial murder reporting seen with the Ripper murders—the public following

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<sup>92</sup> I will describe the types of objects and goods used in funeral processions—and their prices—later in this chapter.

<sup>93</sup> This can be seen through the case study of the Enon Chapel scandal, which is the focus of chapter 3.

<sup>94</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, 199. Walkowitz specifically focuses on the impact the mutilation of women in the Ripper murders had on the readership of the crimes, and how fears of dissectors, surgeons, vivisectionists, vaccinators, and gynecologists were played out in the Ripper murders, calling back to the idea of dissection as punishment, differentiating between "innocent" and "guilty" bodies in Jack the Ripper's choice of victims.

<sup>95</sup> Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 199.

the murders and the investigation in the papers as it unfolded—was primed by of a longstanding tradition of “true crime” murder media.

As printing and literacy climbed in the industrializing city, serialization developed in the publishing industry, giving more people access to cheap, engrossing death narratives. These stories became more and more sensational, and more available to all strata of London society.<sup>96</sup> The term “sensationalism” itself was invented in the nineteenth century as a pejorative term to dismiss works of literature or journalism designed deliberately to elicit an emotional reaction.<sup>97</sup> The history of crime narratives is older than the nineteenth century,<sup>98</sup> but became associated with lower-class, sensationalist entertainment in the 1850s with the spread of literacy and the running patterers, also known as “death hunters,” who ran the streets of London and shouted out headlines, often death-related and often fabricated. These “death hunters,” working alongside a desire for death narratives cultivated by penny dreadfuls,<sup>99</sup> in a way democratized the interest in death that was present in London, as well as elsewhere on the continent through their low prices and vast coverage.

### ***Theatrical Bodies and True Crime Narratives***

A similar phenomenon of media serialization of violent death, displaying victims’ bodies by both journalists and police for seemingly the gratification of the public, appeared in Paris at

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<sup>96</sup> The pieces of media that were consistently popular were declarations of death, execution bulletins, and penny dreadfuls filled with details of bereavement and scandal.

<sup>97</sup> Joy Wiltenburg, “True Crime: the Origins of Modern Sensationalism,” *The American Review* 109, no. 5 (2004), 1377-1404, 1378. Wiltenburg notes that sensationalism’s most salient feature as a genre is its appeal to emotions.

<sup>98</sup> Wiltenburg, 1382. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, sensationalist crime narratives were aimed at the prosperous and literate classes.

<sup>99</sup> Penny dreadfuls were a new form of cheap literature that were popular in the Victorian era, stories that were often serials and sold for a penny per copy. They were cheap to print and cheap to purchase, making them very popular in the nineteenth century.

the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the Paris Morgue show.<sup>100</sup> The Paris Morgue dressed up bodies that had not been claimed and set them up in the Morgue's display rooms for free public viewing.<sup>101</sup> The official purpose of the Morgue show claimed that civilians should do their "civic duty" and identify the bodies,<sup>102</sup> participating personally in crime, unlike English morgues, which did not receive the public at large. Those who had the means to visit Paris made a significant effort to distance themselves from the Morgue show, calling it "ever a ghastly sight to an Englishman"<sup>103</sup> and dismissing it as a Parisian peculiarity. However, newspapers and other forms of media, such as literature and anthropological journalism—for example, that of Henry Mayhew—played heavily into the spectacle of death and murder both in Paris and London.<sup>104</sup>

Nineteenth-century England in particular marked a shift in print media culture with the advent of periodical serialization, publishing stories in parts.<sup>105</sup> The relationship between death spectacles and the media was cyclical in nineteenth-century Europe: death was put on display, the media would pick up on it and amplify it, and the displayed form of death would become a sensation, generating even more media attention. The number of readers and their access to print

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<sup>100</sup> The Paris Morgue displayed unidentified corpses to the public from 1804 to its closure in 1907. It was one of Paris's most popular tourist attractions in the nineteenth century.

<sup>101</sup> Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-De-Siecle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 46. Schwartz notes that although other European cities had their morgues, only in Paris were corpses displayed behind a large glass window for the public to look at for free, seven days a week, from dawn to dusk. The Morgue administrative staff leaned into the theatricality of the display, installing a green velvet curtain to indicate "changes of scene," points when the staff would add or remove a body from the display.

<sup>102</sup> Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 62.

<sup>103</sup> "PICTURES OF LIFE AND CHARACTER IN LONDON AND PARIS," *Graphic* (August 1, 1874, *British Library Newspapers*). English tourists visiting the Paris Morgue in the late nineteenth century referred to it as "ever a ghastly sight to an Englishman," distancing themselves from what they believed was a distinctly French morbidity.

<sup>104</sup> The most popular stories, as I will discuss regarding the running patterers, involved the bodies of women or children, which the newspapers would report on greedily, skewing their stories towards particular audiences. Other popular narratives involved foul play or remained "unsolved mysteries," inviting the public to participate and engage with true crime stories that were unfolding in front of them.

<sup>105</sup> Allan Dooley, *Author and Printer in Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 148, quoted in Catherine Delafield, *Serialization and the Novel in Mid-Victorian Magazines* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), 6. Dooley suggests that serial publication in the nineteenth century grew as a result of the shortage of type to set up the pages of print novels, and serialization meant that publishers could afford to produce literature faster and at cheaper prices for consumers.



increased significantly in the nineteenth century due to increased urbanization, lower prices of periodicals, and advancements in print technology,<sup>106</sup> and as newspaper reading gained traction, so did the proliferation of the “staple diet of the popular press”<sup>107</sup>: dramas, crimes, and catastrophes. By the 1850s there were half a dozen daily papers in London, and as newspapers began to be printed on flimsier paper and prices went down, the circulation only increased; the *Daily Telegraph*, for example, grew in circulation from 141,700 issues in 1861 to 300,000 in 1888.<sup>108</sup> Major Sunday papers were filled with stories of death and crime, and enjoyed massive circulation, but these stories were read more for entertainment than anything else, seen almost as fictional,<sup>109</sup> fulfilling a middle-class desire for escapism in the real world (running patterer narratives were cheaper, and marketed more towards the working class).<sup>110</sup> This media culture led to interest in what we call today the true crime genre. The media invited civilians, uninvolved with dramatic, newsworthy death in their own lives, to witness and participate in spectacles of death, which drummed up further interest in newspaper stories of said death. In this way, the media’s focus on death stories, churning them out to meet the demand of the public, blurred the lines between literature and life, approaching reality as it was presented in newspapers, letters, and word of mouth in the same way audiences approached serials.<sup>111</sup> Reality became fictionalized and sensationalized, and the public ate it up.

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<sup>106</sup> Catherine Delafield, *Serialization and the Novel in Mid-Victorian Magazines*, 10.

<sup>107</sup> Lucy Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 96.

<sup>108</sup> Brown, 52.

<sup>109</sup> Brown, 96.

<sup>110</sup> Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 4. Hughes and Lund further discuss how word of mouth and notices in newspapers spread the readership of popular serials, creating a cycle of publicity further carried out through reviews of serials in prominent newspapers.

<sup>111</sup> Hughes and Lund, 11. Hughes and Lund compare the print culture in Victorian London to the modern day consumption of highly reviewed and discussed media, arguing that literature in Victorian England had an immediacy and pervasiveness generated in the present day only by best-selling books and popular television shows.

The media's construing of crime, death, and murder as spectacular events worthy of public hyperfixation stemmed from a literary classification of London's various disparate pieces: that which was known and familiar to the upper classes, and the "shadow" city, the underbelly occupied by the poor. This movement constructed the metropolis in literature as a "dark, powerful, and seductive labyrinth,"<sup>112</sup> using mystery and criminality as key pieces of that dark and seductive identity. Judith Walkowitz describes the fact and fantasy of urban exploration and the language of imperialism associated with that exploration, such as Henry Mayhew's attempt to anthropologically study and catalogue the spheres of the poor in London, trying to "read the 'illegible' city,"<sup>113</sup> making what appeared to him to be a chaotic, haphazard environment into something that could be easily understood by his bourgeois readers. This fascination with the "dark side" of the metropolis was inherent to how bourgeois readers approached crime and death related media; they approached these stories as escapism, macabre or grotesque horror pieces that would not affect them in their comfortable, orderly portion of the increasingly modern city.

Newspapers, penny dreadfuls, and other media that revolved around death and violence relied on historical compartmentalization, drawing on a dark and gruesome past that the "modern" bourgeois reader would not have been familiar with in order to shock them and leave them wanting more. Scott Spector, whose work focuses on Berlin and Vienna but who also explores sensationalism as a genre and medium of creating intensive attention and excitement,<sup>114</sup> argues that the cohabitation of pride in the progress of civilization and "simultaneous elaborately staged disgust (perhaps paired with a vicarious thrill) for the urban underworld"<sup>115</sup> is a marker of

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<sup>112</sup> Judith Walkowitz, "Urban Spectatorship," in Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski, *The Nineteenth Century Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 205-209, 206.

<sup>113</sup> Walkowitz, "Urban Spectatorship," 207.

<sup>114</sup> Scott Spector, *Violent Sensations: Sex, Crime, and Utopia in Vienna and Berlin, 1860-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 7.

<sup>115</sup> Spector, 20.

media priority in the nineteenth century, in Berlin as well as in London and Paris. London specifically, due to its media creating a sensational out of the Ripper murders, inspired a new classification for this type of true crime reporting: lust murder, which provided sensational material for all of Europe and inspired countless serial novellas and pulp fiction stories.<sup>116</sup>

The impossibility of knowing whether one would have a “good” or “bad” death and the anxiety inherent in the obsession with appearances and the way death disregards those appearances, remains consistent within literature in this period, from the 1830s through the end of the century. Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published in 1891, stands as an example of literary sensationalism trafficking in the lurid nature of death, much like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, drawing on the fears Shelley herself evoked. The plot of Wilde’s novel revolves around an upper-class youth terrified of aging who wishes that he might remain young, while a portrait of him shows the signs of age and corruption as he is drawn into the seductive, sinful London underworld. Wilde’s novel satirizes the upper-class Victorian obsession with appearance, artifice, and the anxiety of dying a “bad” death, drawing on gory descriptions and tropes present in popular crime narratives and dreadfuls of the nineteenth century. The interest in death that exists in the people around Dorian, who himself is terrified of it, reflects the attitude of the wealthy towards narratives of the “dark side” of the city, encompassing both the fear and desire to be close to death for the thrill of it. The character of Lord Henry displays this combination of detachment from reality and interest in the fantasy of death towards the end of the novel, when he says “I should like to know some one who had committed a real murder.”<sup>117</sup>

The fantasy of death as presented to the wealthy, who could afford funeral processions with all

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<sup>116</sup> Spector, 166.

<sup>117</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 222.

the proper accoutrements and costumes, possessed an allure in its mystique, but also an inherent fear carried within print culture that death could touch anyone, regardless of the pomp of their funeral or lack thereof. Anyone could read tales of murder in the newspaper and feel both relief that they were not the victim of such a “bad” death and at the same time a perverse desire for more, entertained by the excessive violence in the literature they purchased for a penny. Lord Henry tells Dorian, “death and vulgarity are the only two facts of the nineteenth century that one cannot explain away.”<sup>118</sup>

### ***“Death Hunters”: Victorian Clickbait***

Newspapers profited immensely from gruesome death narratives, to the point that “running patterers,” who ran the streets of London shouting their headlines, would fabricate the deaths of public figures to make their stories more lucrative. These “death hunters,” as Henry Mayhew calls them in his book *London Labour and the London Poor*, would announce and report on high profile murders and deaths, both actual and invented. This title, as Mayhew states, “refers not only to his vending accounts of all the murders that become topics of public conversation, but to his being a ‘murderer’ on his own account... he puts someone to death for the occasion, which is called a ‘cock.’”<sup>119</sup> If there were no “truths for sale”<sup>120</sup>—stories of criminals’ lives and dramatic deaths in newspapers—then the death hunter invented them, crafting elaborate narratives to draw in a larger audience. Mayhew interviews multiple running patterers who engaged in “death hunting,” and quotes one particular death hunter who describes that he reported the Duke of Wellington’s death twice in eight years, once by fall from his horse,

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<sup>118</sup> Wilde, 230.

<sup>119</sup> Henry Mayhew and Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *London Labour and the London Poor: A Selected Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 81-82.

<sup>120</sup> Mayhew, 81-82.

and the other by a “sudden and myst-erious death” without giving any specific details to Mayhew.<sup>121</sup> This same death hunter announced the assassination of Louis Phillipe, the king of France from 1830 to 1848, twice, as well as injuries accrued by Prince Albert multiple times, and he had considered “poisoning the Pope,” but was afraid of the backlash he might face in the streets for putting such an important figure to death.<sup>122</sup>

Another death hunter tells Mayhew about how he and his associates “assassinated” Julius Jacob von Haynau, an Austrian general who was infamous for his brutality.<sup>123</sup> Haynau actually died in 1853 of natural causes, but this narrative imagined a narrative reminiscent of true crime. In this story, Haynau and his two companions entered a café in Brussels, had some refreshments and retired to bed. Directly afterwards, a “tall and rather noble looking man enveloped in a large cloak”<sup>124</sup> appears, a mysterious stranger, and later retires to bed himself, and nothing seems amiss until the next morning when the landlord’s family are roused by a “noise over head and cries of murder.”<sup>125</sup> They venture upstairs to ascertain the cause and find Haynau on the bed, his throat cut, and his two companions standing by his bed side, mourning. The key commercial element of the story comes into play with the disappearance of the mysterious stranger, and a card on the table beside Haynau’s body that read “Monster, I am avenged at last.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Mayhew, 82.

<sup>122</sup> Mayhew, 82. He states that this death hunter specifically was afraid of “the street Irish,” and thus thought better of reporting the Pope’s poisoning. This death hunter did not have much to say about the Queen, while another said that “nothing can be said against her, and nothing ought to,” and that he had tried to report on the Queen once “the last time she was confined” but had been stopped in the street by a policeman who accused him of impudence.

<sup>123</sup> For the full account given by the patterer of Haynau’s fabricated assassination, see Mayhew 83-84. Mayhew comments on this account and notes that his informant complained bitterly about the printer for leaving in mistakes that made the narrative seem sloppier, and less factual.

<sup>124</sup> Mayhew, 83.

<sup>125</sup> Mayhew, 83.

<sup>126</sup> Mayhew, 84.

This kind of story was typical of death hunters, and was eaten up voraciously by the Victorian public. The very terminology used by these death hunters describing their stories, speaking as if they themselves killed these prominent public figures, reveals the levity with which the industry considered stories of murder. These were hardly hard-hitting, thought-provoking pieces of news, but gossip pieces, entertaining talking points meant to shock and scandalize. Running patterers drummed up the mystery for drama and intrigue, emphasizing the gore and the shadowy nature of the murders. The level of detail in these death hunter stories drew much more attention than a run-of-the-mill heart attack and made the stories incredibly popular amongst the easily moved.<sup>127</sup>

Haynau's assassination story is just an example of the popularity of these narratives—running patterers knew their audiences, and structured their stories, or “killings,” to fit popular demand. They created and circulated stories tailor-made for specific audiences, considering what types of gruesome accounts were more popular with certain demographics. Out of all the running patterer stories, dealing in “murders, seductions, crim.-cons.,<sup>128</sup> explosions, alarming incidents, ‘assassinations,’ deaths of public characters, duels, and love-letters,”<sup>129</sup> Mayhew writes that popular, notorious, bloody murders are the “great goes.”<sup>130</sup> He transcribes the patterer's entire account of two of the most popular murders: the Scarborough Tragedy, which his informant tells him has been in the works for a full twenty years and that he has worked himself, and the

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<sup>127</sup> Mayhew interviews a running patterer who has been in the business for twenty years and has experienced the popularity of the franchise firsthand: “A gentleman's servant come out and wanted half a dozen [copies of a death narrative, specifically ‘The Last Dying Speech and Full Confession of William Corder’] for his master and one for himself in, and I wouldn't let him have no such thing. We often sells more than that at once. Why, I sold six at one go to the railway clerks at Norwich about the Manning affair, only a fortnight back.” See Mayhew, 79-80.

<sup>128</sup> Criminal conversation, i.e. adultery.

<sup>129</sup> Mayhew, 76-77.

<sup>130</sup> Mayhew, 77.

Liverpool Tragedy, both of which the informant describes as “very attractive.”<sup>131</sup> He summarizes the stories to Mayhew—in the Scarborough Tragedy, a noble and rich young naval officer seduces a poor clergyman’s daughter, who is confined in a ditch and destroys her child, and is executed for infanticide.<sup>132</sup> This particular story, says the informant, is geared towards women—“mostly all our customers is females,” he says, “...they are the chief dependence we have... It draws tears to the women’s eyes to think that a poor clergyman’s daughter, who is remarkably beautiful, should murder her own child.”<sup>133</sup> The Liverpool Tragedy, also marketed towards women, is structured the same way, for maximal commercial and emotional impact. The story centers around a mother murdering her own son for gold, not recognizing him until after the deed, when she notices a distinctive birthmark. The gory details are particularly pronounced in the patterer’s account of this story; he specifies that the parents placed a washing-tub under the bed of their son, who was staying at their inn anonymously, to catch the blood.<sup>134</sup> This story as well relies on dramatic, almost gothic tropes that persist through modern true crime narratives or ghost stories: mistaken identity, murder for money, a distinctive birthmark spurring the murderers to recognition and then to their own deaths. The patterer comments that this story “is a deeper tragedy than the Scarborough Murder... [which] suits young people better; they like to hear about the young woman being seduced by the naval officer; but the mothers take more to the Liverpool Tragedy—it suits them better.”<sup>135</sup> The specific details of the deaths are what distinguish the stories’ intended audiences: young women prefer scandal, while older women prefer the regret of mistaken identity and filicide.

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<sup>131</sup> Mayhew, 77.

<sup>132</sup> Mayhew, 77.

<sup>133</sup> Mayhew, 77.

<sup>134</sup> Mayhew, 77-78.

<sup>135</sup> Mayhew, 77-78.

Running patterers themselves did not create these stories, but merely circulated them to the intended commercial audiences. The stories themselves utilized formulaic plots and characterization made popular in penny dreadfuls, cheap escapist literature sold for a penny per copy. These “dreadfuls” and the patterer stories were often the same, peddling old crimes refurbished as new for the reliable, death-seeking audience. Murders were popular, as were suicides, especially after the 1830s as a tragic end for women in love.<sup>136</sup> Gruesome details were paramount in both types of death stories and designed to frighten and titillate the audience in the same way that true crime podcasts do in the present. Common settings for penny dreadfuls included the charnel house<sup>137</sup> or the gallows of a public hanging, the latter with which Victorian audiences would have likely been very familiar due to the frequency and popularity of public executions.<sup>138</sup> Newspapers and dreadfuls drummed up interest in crime, both the generic running patterer variety and the high-profile murder, by including just enough gory, macabre detail to entice the reader into finding out more.<sup>139</sup>

These types of crime narratives turned the sites of horrible murders into popular tourist attractions, mirroring the status of the Paris Morgue despite English feigned disgust. Mayhew describes the popularity of these stories, both the fakes and tales of actual murder, and the people willing to shell out a significant amount of money to see objects or places related to those who had been killed. In Mayhew’s interview with a running patterer, the patterer mentions that the wife of a murdered man, James Burdon, who featured in a popular story about a murder committed by Robert Blakesley, kept the inn that Burdon had been landlord of open on the

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<sup>136</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens’ London* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012), 418.

<sup>137</sup> Charnel houses were buildings or vaults where corpses were piled, and often thought of as sites of violent death. I will touch on charnel houses more in Chapter 3, in my discussion of Enon Chapel, which was structured much like a penny dreadful story in both setting and gruesome content.

<sup>138</sup> Michael Anglo, *Penny Dreadfuls and Other Victorian Horrors* (London: Jupiter, 1977), 13.

<sup>139</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City*, 387.



morning of Blakesley's execution, and "the place was like a fair."<sup>140</sup> The patterer himself capitalized on the popularity of the crime and the punishment of said crime: "I even went and sold papers outside the door myself. I thought if she war'n't ashamed, why should I be?"<sup>141</sup>

### ***Funeral Culture and Respectability: Securing the "Good" Death***

A strong Elm Coffin, covered with fine Black... adorned with rich ornamental Drops, a handsome Plate of Inscription, Angel above the Plate and Flower beneath, and four Pair of handsome Handles with wrought Gripses... For Use, a handsome Velvet Pall, Three Gentlemen's Cloaks, Three Crepe Hat bands, Three Hoods and Scarfs, and Six Pairs of Gloves: Two Porters equipped to attend the Funeral, a Man to attend the same with Band and Gloves.<sup>142</sup>

These were all set dressings for the theatrical public funeral, which gained popularity alongside the death narratives of the patterers as a form of public entertainment, rather than religiously-influenced ritual. Funerals too were media sensations, the most public ones put on by the bourgeois who sought to present a "good" death, but were consumed by everyone—the interest and viewing of the spectacle of a good death were not split exclusively along class lines. The above quote was taken from an advertisement of a London burial society, which states that for two pence a week, one could get all of the above upon their death. These trappings were staples of the sensationalized London funeral, meant to pay homage to the dead by presenting the "respectable" death as something that could be bought.<sup>143</sup> Funerals presented a means of selling respectability, seeing the theatricality of death as something marketable, rather than the dominant published narratives of murder and dissection. They represented an opportunity to show off one's wealth, making sure the public knew that one's family member was having a "respectable" death

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<sup>140</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 80.

<sup>141</sup> Mayhew, 80.

<sup>142</sup> From an advertisement issued by John Middleton in Funeral Box 3, The John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library, in Thomas Laqueur, "Bodies, Death, and Pauper Funerals," 114-115.

<sup>143</sup> Charles Dickens notes this in his serial novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which an undertaker explains that "the laying out of money with a well-conducted establishment, where the thing is performed upon the very best scale, binds the broken heart, and sheds balm upon the wounded spirit." See Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1907), 310.

through excessive spending and media coverage. At the Duke of Wellington's funeral in 1852, arguably the most magnificent and well-attended funeral of a public figure in nineteenth-century London, an estimated one hundred thousand people traveled to London to see the Duke's body on the second day of the lying-in-state, wanting to avoid the crowds predicted on the first day.<sup>144</sup> The mass of people was so overwhelming that two onlookers died, pressed by the crowds into the railings.<sup>145</sup> *London Illustrated* later published accounts of the funeral, selling two million copies, with temporary shortages in copies resulting in scalpers' prices rising to up to five times the original cost.<sup>146</sup> While this much attention and crowds of this size and scope were unusual for anything other than a beloved public figure, the popularity of witnessing or participating in death as public theater grew immensely in the mid-nineteenth century in London.

Scholars have discussed funerals and funeral culture in the context of ritual and devotion, traditions of spiritualism and mourning in a more religious sense, but there is a distinct absence of scholarship on the hunger for death stories and funerals' role in performing death for an entertained audience. However, Londoners, regardless of social class,<sup>147</sup> relentlessly sought out the death spectacles that funerals, as well as newspapers, provided as entertainment. The performative nature of middle- and upper-class funerals, physically manifested in the lavish accoutrements of the mourning party, capitalized on the fear of an anonymous or humiliating death that spread through the London public as these salacious, morbid narratives circulated.

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<sup>144</sup> Since people feared massive crowds, the actual crowds did not manifest on the first day, as everyone wanted to avoid the crowds and came on the second. See Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens' London*, 339-340.

<sup>145</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City*, 340.

<sup>146</sup> Thomas Laqueur, "Bodies, Death, and Pauper Funerals," in *Representations*, no. 1 (1983), 109-31, 120.

<sup>147</sup> Henry Mayhew, who observed and reported on the state of the London poor in 1851, notes in his book *London Labour and the London Poor* that running patterers, who spun tales of dramatic deaths and murders, found certain types of macabre narratives popular with younger women and some with older women, depending on the circumstances surrounding the death in the narrative. I will go into this further in this chapter.

Some writers, especially Charles Dickens, who commented on numerous aspects of Victorian London life, intensely criticized them as overly showy and utterly distasteful, both to the living and the dead. This, however, was an unpopular opinion.<sup>148</sup>

Dickens despised this commercialism, the perverse enjoyment and profit taken from a ceremony of death, and satirized it in his own serial, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in the planning of a character's wealthy father's funeral.<sup>149</sup> In his characterization of the undertaker, Mr. Mould, and his assistant and chief mourner, Mr. Tacker, Dickens makes it clear that they are charlatans with a breadth of experience with "the performance of funerals."<sup>150</sup> Tacker calls the funeral "a beautiful show... [with] the horses prouder and fresher than ever I see 'em; and toss their heads, they do, as if they knowed how much their plumes cost."<sup>151</sup> Mr. Mould then rhapsodizes about the power of money in putting on a "proper" funeral, listing all the expensive material items that could be purchased in order to testify one's "love and veneration" for the deceased.<sup>152</sup> Material objects, according to the undertaker's view, could pacify the spirits of those in mourning because the spectacle of the funeral mattered to the dead.

Victorian funerals, particularly of the upper-class variety, called for performative, ostentatious displays of mourning, costing at least £100 for a "professional person"<sup>153</sup> and

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<sup>148</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City*, 324.

<sup>149</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1907), 299. The book was originally published serially in 1843-1844. The character of Jonas Chuzzlewit, a relatively wealthy man charged with organizing his father's funeral, fits into this trend of performative upper-class funerals neatly, and instructs his household to spare no expense, taking for his motto "spend, and spare not!"

<sup>150</sup> Dickens, 311.

<sup>151</sup> Dickens, 310.

<sup>152</sup> Dickens, 310. Mr. Mould's list mirrors that of the advertisement at the beginning of this section: "...It can give him four horses to each vehicle; it can give him velvet trappings; it can give him drivers in cloth cloaks and top-boots; it can give him the plumage of the ostrich, dyed black; it can give him any number of walking attendants, dressed in the first style of funeral fashion, and carrying batons tipped with brass; it can give him a handsome tomb; it can give him a place in Westminster Abbey itself, if he choose to invest it in such a purchase. Oh! do not let us say that gold is dross, when it can buy things such as these..."

<sup>153</sup> *A Supplementary Report on... the Practice of Interment in Towns*, 1843 (509) xii, 50-51 and 69-71, in Thomas Laqueur, "Bodies, Death, and Pauper Funerals," 115. Laqueur details that Cassel's *Household Guide* in its 1870

designed to catch the attention of all gathered to watch funeral processions pass by. Crowds gathered outside houses where a disaster had occurred—murder, violence, death—and watched the mourning family pass by,<sup>154</sup> or followed stories of death closely in the newspapers.<sup>155</sup> London funerals were visual spectacles, meant to be seen by passersby. For public figures in particular, death was a ceremonial event, making the street into a theater where passersby and outsiders were expected to take part, having an unspoken “duty” to participate, but even for less famous individuals, funerals were designed to be seen.<sup>156</sup>

In the new industrial economy, the heavy emphasis on consumer goods linked death with money; if one had it, one would spend it to ensure that the funeral was respectable. Anxieties about the “respectability” of a funeral drove families to spend excessively, which marked the nineteenth-century funeral as a new form of theatrical spectacle, more than funerals in prior centuries.<sup>157</sup> Most Londoners recognized the commercial aspect behind this marketable respectability but were compelled by the security shown through the demonstration of wealth.<sup>158</sup> Mourning family members purchased funeral drapery through London burial societies, where a subscription of a few pence could guarantee someone the trappings of a “respectable” funeral, or through undertakers, who were considered to be manipulative charlatans profiting off of the bereaved. For the wealthier bourgeois funerals, hearses would arrive at the house, with the attendants and coachmen all in black, to transport the coffin, while for those who couldn’t afford

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edition listed various classes of funerals, from £3/5 for the poorest classes to £53 for middle class funerals, but a Parliamentary Report in 1843 announced that in London, the lowest tradesman needed a £10/2 funeral while the average prosperous tradesman required one for £50.

<sup>154</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens’ London*, 305.

<sup>155</sup> I am specifically referring here to announcements that a prominent public figure had died. Many of these were fabricated for commercial purposes, as seen in Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*.

<sup>156</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City*, 322.

<sup>157</sup> Thomas Laqueur, “Bodies, Death, and Pauper Funerals,” 114.

<sup>158</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City*, 324.

this level of expenditure, the coffin would be carried in the street for a walking funeral, followed by a train of mourners.<sup>159</sup> Families would purchase black feathers, porters, hearses and horses, amongst whatever else undertakers would convince them to buy through the insistence that “there is no limitation, there is positively NO limitation... in point of expense!”<sup>160</sup> The theatricality of funerals called for splendor, and undertakers were notorious for persuading widows and widowers to spend as much as possible on the “‘propriety’ of all sorts of extraneous trappings.”<sup>161</sup> Mourning was commercialized,<sup>162</sup> be it through costumes and dressings for the hearse and horses in a funeral procession or in clothing, as seen in an account of a visit of a woman to a shop in 1844 quoted as a transcript in Judith Flanders’ *The Victorian House*, where a woman worrying over What to Wear in Fashionable Mourning set out to purchase a new funeral outfit. In this transcript of the conversation, the shopman encourages the woman to buy a new widow’s silk, called “Inconsolable,” and in response to her question of “Is it proper to mourn in velvet,” replies “Oh, quite! Certainly.”<sup>163</sup>

The whole funeral enterprise can be seen a performance, not even just the funeral itself; the functionary in charge of the funeral, the undertaker, even the mourners all participate in a theatrical farce, showing their best “mourning countenance[s]”<sup>164</sup> to put on the best and most exciting show. Dickens notably despised these ostentatious displays and described the funeral

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<sup>159</sup> Flanders, *The Victorian City*, 323.

<sup>160</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, 304.

<sup>161</sup> Dion Clayton Calthrop, *I Will Be Good!* (London: Little Brown, 1929), in Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight Against Filth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 107. These trappings included “the best black feathers,” “2 porters at the door in gowns, staves, silk covers, halberds and gloves,” “use of seven superfine cloaks,” etc.

<sup>162</sup> Thomas Laqueur notes that by 1870 over 1500 people in the town of Whitby worked making jet mourning jewelry, which indicates that the funeral industry had grown to the degree of using an entire town for its production. Thomas Laqueur, “Bodies, Death, and Pauper Funerals,” 114.

<sup>163</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House* (London, 2003), quoted in Liza Picard, *Victorian London: The Life of a City, 1840-1870* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006), 305.

<sup>164</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, 301. This quote is in reference to the character of Mrs. Gamp, the functionary for the funeral of Anthony Chuzzlewit, who is described as having a “face for all occasions.”

accoutrements and costumes as “revolting absurdity,”<sup>165</sup> revealing his concern that funerals were moving too far away from ritual and into entertainment. In his own writings, he commented on the Duke of Wellington’s funeral in 1852 that people waited for over five hours to pay their respects in “bitter weather”<sup>166</sup> while the “traders in Death”—Dickens’ name for them—profited, putting seats in shop windows to watch the procession and advertising discounted seats reserved for clergymen specifically “upon condition that they appear in their surplices.”<sup>167</sup> The blatant profiteering scandalized Dickens,<sup>168</sup> who was additionally disgusted by the son of the local haircutter selling funeral souvenirs, clippings of the Duke’s hair.<sup>169</sup> For Dickens, this turning of what should have been a somber occasion into a performance with cheap, distasteful souvenirs was not how the dead should be celebrated. Rather than a respectable and serious way to honor those who had died, funerals became shows where one could buy a ticket for a better seat, or purchase mementos to tie them to the occasion.

### *Conclusion*

As materialism became increasingly tied to “respectable” social culture, commercialism and entertainment became the core of death displays in London. New types of reporting and literature, particularly the advent of serial fiction, capitalized on the desire for death spectacles and sold them to the public, whether accurate or fictional. The pervasive anxieties about what made a “good” death and who could have one, especially in contrast with the gruesome death

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<sup>165</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City*, 324. Flanders quotes Dickens’ will, written a year before his death in 1870.

<sup>166</sup> Liza Picard, *Victorian London: The Life of a City, 1840-1870* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006), 308. Picard quotes the Unpublished diary of Thomas Rogers, Guildhall Library MS 19,019, in Creton, specifying that it was “a wet drizzling day—in an awful crowd for 4 hours before getting in—a grand sight but not worth the trouble.”

<sup>167</sup> “Trading in Death,” in *Household Words*, included in Michael Slater (ed.), *“Gone Astray” and Other Papers* (London, 1998), in Liza Picard, *Victorian London: the Life of a City*, 308).

<sup>168</sup> Dickens accused the tradesman of trying to “get up a reverend tableau in his shop window of four-and-twenty clergymen all on six rows.” Picard, *Victorian London: the Life of a City*, 308.

<sup>169</sup> Picard, 308.

stories circulating in the media, led to an investment in and engagement with death that manifested in excess, be it of ostentation in funerals or of gore in cheap and popular narratives. Those concerned about propriety spent large amounts of money on lavish funerals to guarantee their status, both in living society as those who could afford to put on a show, and in the sphere of the dead, ensuring that their burials would not fall into salacious disrepair. However, as I will discuss in the following chapter, for the London lower-classes who could not afford to spend quite as much on a spectacle, there was always the possibility that they would find themselves the victims of the latest penny dreadful.

### Chapter 3: Enon Chapel: the Making and Marketing of a Sensation

#### *Introduction*

In 1844, the Enon Chapel scandal captured the attention of Londoners across the metropolis and generated widespread horror. The chapel itself was small and catered to the poor residents of the St. Clement Danes parish in Westminster (Fig. 2),<sup>170</sup> its cellar turned burial vault measuring fifty-nine by twenty-nine feet, large enough to contain, as one contemporary observer estimated, only one thousand, three hundred and sixty-one coffined bodies.<sup>171</sup> However, in 1844, officials investigating the space to install a new sewer under the building discovered that the chapel's burial vault contained almost twelve thousand corpses, buried over the course of twenty years, with twenty new corpses added each week.<sup>172</sup> Reformers like George "Graveyard" Walker, the surgeon at the forefront of the public fight for burial reform and the most prominent voice in the argument for it, capitalized on the scandal and the chapel's notoriety and inherent shock value, using its story to spark a public movement for legislative reform regarding standards of burial and public health. Instead of succeeding at reform, however, Walker got caught up in the entertainment value of the chapel's story, converting it into an attraction and using the dead as props to create a more compelling story.

In this chapter, I argue that the existing narrative, one that elevates Walker as the champion reformer who shut down Enon Chapel, framing the chapel as symbolic of everything

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<sup>170</sup> See Appendix; "Descriptive Map of London Poverty 1889," from *Life and Labour of the People in London*, ed. Charles Booth (London: Macmillan, 1892-1897).

<sup>171</sup> Peter C. Jupp, "Enon Chapel: No Way for the Dead," in Peter C. Jupp and Glennys Howarth, eds., *Changing Face of Death: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1997), 90-103, 94. The calculation of the capacity of the burial vault was done by George Walker in 1846.

<sup>172</sup> George Walker was told the way that room was made for new bodies in Enon Chapel's cellar was to flush the ones already there down a storm sewer to the Thames. See Thomas W. Laqueur, "The Cemetery and the New Regime," in *The Work of the Dead: a Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 211-362, 220.



that was wrong with the treatment of the dead in London, is not the whole story, but a construction in order to boost the entertainment value of the scandal. The chapel changed hands multiple times over the course of ten years, first sold to a Temperance Society who converted it into a dance hall, then to George Walker himself in 1847, and finally purchased by George Sanger in 1850 after Walker sold the building, having allegedly emptied it. Walker constructed this narrative with himself as the hero of the middle class to make fiction out of fact, creating a piece of entertainment and using the bodies of the anonymous poor buried in the chapel's vault as props to make his story of the gothic, penny dreadful-esque chapel more compelling to a commercial audience. Public figures such as historian Walter Thornbury and showman George Sanger used the chapel fifty years later as the point that shifted public opinion towards burial reform, as well as a truly scandalous story, but the story of Enon Chapel and its many proprietors is murkier than is chronicled by these later writers. It is a case of the physical bodies of the dead turned into entertainment in a new way: not sliced open on the dissection table or simply described in the paper, but promoted as a penny dreadful and then physically displayed to the public as live entertainment.

The press sensationalism of Enon Chapel turned a public health crisis into a theatrical exhibit of human remains, widening the gulf between the dead rich and the dead poor through public policy response such as the establishment of garden cemeteries and the abolition of parish burial.<sup>173</sup> However, Enon Chapel made its impact not through its success in sparking reform, but through its entertainment value. The media used the story to scandalize the upper classes, while

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<sup>173</sup> In 1825, people did not believe that graveyards posed much of a health threat, but this would change with the popularization of anti-parish-burial rhetoric, as seen in Walker's 1839 pamphlet, which spread the idea that dead bodies gave off miasma that was causing people to fall ill, and thus created a need in the minds of the upper classes for a separate space for the dead. Though the idea for garden cemeteries came about before the Enon Chapel scandal broke, they became popular after miasma theory took off, an idea proliferated by Walker and his peers.

it capitalized on the fears of the poor that their bodies could become part of an anonymous mass like the one below Enon Chapel. Walker and those who echoed him used and emphasized the gory details of the scandal to create a newsworthy story that would catch public attention, rewriting history to seem like a work of literature.

### ***Hygiene and Reform of the Burial Crisis***

The bulk of the public argument against Enon Chapel, and the context in which it is almost always discussed by historians, was the question of hygiene. However, the issue of hygiene and illness was only used as setting for the Enon Chapel story. Enon Chapel was one of many parish churches open for burial and available to the poorer citizens of London who could not afford to bury their loved ones in fancier garden cemeteries<sup>174</sup> but refused to subject themselves to the humiliation of a “pauper’s funeral,” a burial at the parish expense.<sup>175</sup> Under the Anatomy Act of 1832, the unclaimed bodies of those who died in workhouses like the Portugal Street Workhouse, only 100 yards away from Enon Chapel, could be used for dissection, and burial at a space such as the chapel was a secure way to avoid the indignity of the dissection table.<sup>176</sup> A series of consecutive epidemics swept through London in the early nineteenth century, resulting in over 102,000 people dead from cholera and scarlet fever alone between 1831 and 1834.<sup>177</sup> Due to a complete lack of governmental regulation of burial grounds while

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<sup>174</sup> Garden cemeteries developed beginning in the mid-1830s, at the same time as many parish burial grounds were under public fire for using illegal means to dispose of corpses to make room for new burials. These larger, suburban grounds were thought to be more “respectable” places for the dead, designed to be elegant and tasteful, but only wealthier families could afford to bury their dead in individual plots.

<sup>175</sup> Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight Against Filth*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 123. A “pauper’s funeral” was paid for by the parish, but rather than a private interment that one could buy at a parish burial ground, the parishes would bury paupers in mass graves that would be filled over a period of weeks, coffins separated from each other by wooden boards covered by a smattering of earth (not unlike mass plague burials a few hundred years earlier).

<sup>176</sup> Peter C. Jupp, 95.

<sup>177</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens’ London* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012), 215. The epidemics consisted of influenza in 1831 and 1833; then cholera in 1831; then scarlet fever in 1834, followed by

increasing numbers of Londoners died from disease, parish burials fell under scrutiny for a problem that was not new, but began to garner increasing public attention: overcrowding in burial grounds. Enon Chapel was no exception, corpses crammed to the rafters in the cellar that its management used as a burial vault. However, unlike with its peers, the press latched onto the story, gaining Enon Chapel a reputation as a “modern Golgotha” that outlasted its closure by decades.<sup>178</sup>

Walker and his contemporary Edwin Chadwick, both prominent reformers, advocated for the abolition and closure of parish burial grounds, like Enon Chapel and Spa Fields,<sup>179</sup> arguing that these masses of decaying corpses posed significant threats to the health of the population of London, both at present and in the future.<sup>180</sup> They argued that the miasma from the bodies putrefying in the cellar was causing the residents of the neighborhood, particularly those attending the chapel, to get sick. The dead poor, by their argument, were infecting the living poor. However, the health and hygiene argument was just a front, one that could have been applied to any parish burial ground. Walker and Chadwick’s use of the press to zero in on Enon Chapel specifically made their efforts not just successful in moving the bourgeois towards reform, but lucrative as well. Through media sensationalism, they created a grim narrative that was worse than all others to epitomize the crisis and capture the public’s attention, keeping them hooked as the scandal continued like a piece of serialized fiction.

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another wave of influenza; then waves of smallpox, typhus, and typhoid and a resurgence of cholera in 1846 and from 1854 to 1855.

<sup>178</sup> Walter Thornbury, “St. Clement Danes: the Parish,” in *Old and New London: Volume 3* (London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1878), 26-32. Access provided through *British History Online*.

<sup>179</sup> Another prominent case of burial ground overcrowding, discussed by George Walker on page 176 of *Gatherings from Grave Yards*. Walker notes that Spa Fields contained a massive amount of dead, but spends much more time on Enon Chapel in his pamphlet, using it as the primary example of burial wrongdoing.

<sup>180</sup> For his discussion of hygiene and life expectancy in England, see George Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*, 240-241.

***Enon Chapel: the Perfect Problem Child***

The chapel received a great deal of public attention as the quintessential occurrence of the problem of overcrowding the dead, particularly by those arguing for the abolition of parish interment. Walker's narrative, comparing all other examples to it, was embraced (and shuddered at) by the public. However, in Walker's construction of a sensation, he used the bodies of the poor as visual aids for bourgeois spectatorship. He first published his narrative of the chapel in 1839, detailing its history. His pamphlet, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*, detailed his discovery and his horror at this place, which seemed almost archaic in its ghastliness—a thing of the past, out of a gothic horror serial, in the middle of modern, industrializing London. The chapel had been open for burial from 1823, when it was converted from a secular meeting house to a place of worship by a Dissenting congregation,<sup>181</sup> to 1844, when it was discovered that George Walker's claims were true: the cellar was packed with bodies to a gruesome degree.<sup>182</sup> Walker was disgusted by the putrefaction, but also by the gatherings of people that still occurred directly over the cellar.

The chapel's strange horror potential only grew when it was closed down and changed purposes, while the bodies still remained in the cellar. Sometime between 1844, when the scandal broke and the chapel's burial services ceased, and 1847,<sup>183</sup> “other speculators,”<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> George Alfred Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards: Particularly those of London: With a Concise History of the Modes of Interment among Different Nations, from the Earliest Periods, and a Detail of Dangerous and Fatal Results Produced by the Unwise and Revolting Custom of Inhuming the Dead in the Midst of the Living* (London: Longman, 1839), 237. Dissenters were Protestants who were not part of the Church of England and were classified as religious separatists.

<sup>182</sup> Walker wrote about the chapel in 1839, describing the conditions: having only an approximately fifty-nine by twenty-nine foot space in which to place the bodies, over the years the vault became crowded “even to the top of the ceiling” with dead. Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*, 154.

<sup>183</sup> Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: the Victorian Fight Against Filth*, 124. In 1847, Charles Cochran, a member of the Society for the Abolition of Burial in Towns, published an exposé on the fate of Enon Chapel.

<sup>184</sup> George Sanger, *Seventy Years a Showman: My Life and Adventures in Camp and Caravan the World Over* (London: C. Arthur Pearson, 1908), 80.

specified to be a Temperance Society by historian Lee Jackson,<sup>185</sup> purchased the chapel. This Society held an “infant-school” in the chapel’s meeting room during the day, and regular dance nights in the evening until three or four o’clock in the morning,<sup>186</sup> directly over the masses of dead below. The previous owners had not re-interred the bodies after the chapel closed; this would only be done (allegedly) after Walker bought the building in October of 1847.<sup>187</sup> Those who came to dance knew about the scandal and the chapel’s history, as well as the actual numbers of dead beneath the floorboards: advertisements for the dance hall promoted “Dancing on the Dead — Admission Threepence. No lady or gentleman admitted unless wearing shoes and stockings.”<sup>188</sup> The dance hall provided an image with a stark and somewhat ironic contrast between life and death that endured years later (Fig. 3)<sup>189</sup> and recast the Enon Chapel dance hall as a place of sensationalized impropriety, where being close to the dead was an attraction.

### ***The “Epitome of a Numerous Class”: the Resonance of Walker’s Narrative***

Walker’s narrative of Enon Chapel became the accepted narrative, the one that would be remembered as a catalyst for change decades later. In his pamphlet, which was echoed and emulated by reformers who followed him,<sup>190</sup> Walker discusses over twenty burial grounds across London in *Gatherings from Grave Yards*, but Enon Chapel is the site to which he gives

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<sup>185</sup> Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: the Victorian Fight Against Filth*, 124.

<sup>186</sup> “Debates and Proceedings in Parliament.” *The Spectator* (April 12, 1845), 338, 341.

<sup>187</sup> It was discovered in 1850 when George Sanger bought the property that Walker’s contractors had not fully reinterred the bodies; I will elaborate on this later in this chapter.

<sup>188</sup> George Sanger, *Seventy Years a Showman*, 80.

<sup>189</sup> See Appendix; “Enon Chapel Cemetery and Dancing Saloon.” In National Philanthropic Association, *Sanatory Progress: Being the Fifth Report of the National Philharmonic Association* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1850), 71.

<sup>190</sup> Other reformers parroted Walker’s arguments directly, spreading the idea that these methods of burying the poor improperly were a contagion that would surely lead to further death and disease, a regression to “darker” times. I will discuss this in more detail later in this chapter, especially as it relates to Walter Thornbury and his account of the chapel’s history in relation to the history of the parish of St. Clement Danes.

the most attention and detail.<sup>191</sup> In his initial depiction of the site in *Gatherings*, he notes that “vast numbers of bodies have been placed here in pits... the uppermost of which were covered only by a few inches of earth; a sewer runs angularly across this ‘burying place.’”<sup>192</sup> He bolsters the initial horror of the image of bodies piled high, up to the rafters, with a description of a fly crawling out of a coffin:

This insect, a product of the putrefaction of the bodies, was observed on the following season to be succeeded by another, which had the appearance of a common bug with wings. The children seen attending the SUNDAY SCHOOL held in *this chapel*, in which these insects were to be seen crawling and flying, in vast numbers, during the summer months, called them ‘body bugs’... the stench was frequently intolerable.<sup>193</sup>

Other sites detailed in *Gatherings* share many of these traits that one would ascribe to a poor neighborhood rather than a wealthy one—vermin on the premises or in nearby houses, people falling ill, piles of dead and bugs spawning from the corpses—but Enon Chapel stands out. Walker frequently emphasizes the proximity of these “body bugs,” as well as rats infesting homes in the vicinity, to children, a tactic which many of his supporters and fellow reformers copy in writings that reference Enon Chapel. As Walker states outright, “is this place a sample of other private burying places? It is, I fear, but an epitome of a numerous class.”<sup>194</sup> Enon Chapel is the perfect subject for public scrutiny because it encompasses the common traits of all other parish burial grounds, and Walker expresses his dismay in his book that such a vile offense has not received enough public attention.<sup>195</sup>

Walker used the gruesome details—the body bugs, the smell—to shock and disgust his audience, “respectable” people,<sup>196</sup> most of whom likely would have been able to afford burying

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<sup>191</sup> Walker mentions Enon Chapel by name more than seven times in different sections of *Gatherings from Grave Yards*.

<sup>192</sup> George Alfred Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*, 154-155.

<sup>193</sup> Walker, 155. Emphasis is original to the text.

<sup>194</sup> Walker, 237. Walker compares other sites, such as Elim Chapel, to it, using Enon Chapel as a template.

<sup>195</sup> Walker, 237.

<sup>196</sup> “WORK FOR THE SANATORY COMMISSIONERS,” *The Spectator* (Dec 11, 1847), 1190.

their family members in private church plots. Walker specifically used this “epitome of a numerous class,” a site in a poor neighborhood where the poor were buried, to appeal to the rich, who came to gawk at the site and read about it in the newspaper. The upper classes were not directly involved with the Enon Chapel scandal or other burial grounds like it, but were entertained by its resemblance to a penny dreadful, which Walker only emphasized through his appeal to the bourgeois fear of a “bad” death. There was no worse death, argued Walker, than death in Enon Chapel.

While it was still owned by the Temperance Society, the press—and Walker—used Enon Chapel’s neighbors’ complaints about the current occupation of the building to further profit off of the morbid popularity of the scandal. In a letter from a Mr. George Brace to Edwin Chadwick in 1845, included in *The Spectator*’s April 12 issue of “Debates and Proceedings in Parliament” to illustrate the argument against parish interment, a neighbor’s opinion of the Enon Chapel dance hall business sets the scene as a site rife with poverty and Dickensian impropriety. In the letter, Brace parrots Walker’s account of the chapel’s obscene conditions.<sup>197</sup> He describes the “peculiar insect” crawling up through the floor during the summer,<sup>198</sup> as well as the general demographic of the area of St. Clement’s Lane, the thoroughfare directly adjacent to Enon Chapel: “densely inhabited by the poor... [in which] I need scarcely inform you that fever, cholera, and other diseases, have prevailed to a frightful extent.”<sup>199</sup> Brace thus creates a concrete

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<sup>197</sup> “Debates and Proceedings in Parliament,” *The Spectator*, 341. Brace lists the dimensions, describes the floor as the only barrier between the living and the dead, specifies that at present “in the cellar there are now human remains,” and that “the stench which at times issues through the floor is so intolerable as to render it absolutely necessary that the windows in the lantern-roof should be kept open.” For Walker’s own description, see George Alfred Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*, 155.

<sup>198</sup> “Debates and Proceedings in Parliament,” *The Spectator*, 341. These are the “body bugs” that Walker discusses in his book, though Walker says he “has not been able to obtain a scientific description of these insects.” (George Alfred Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*, 155).

<sup>199</sup> “Debates and Proceedings in Parliament,” *The Spectator*, 341. Specifying that the area is rife with disease references the prevalent idea that the decaying dead emitted miasma, which made people exposed to it ill.

setting for the real-life penny dreadful: a chapel attended by the poor and in which the poor are stacked and buried in piles. This is no proper bourgeois neighborhood.

The letter lingers on the image of children, “huddled together for long periods of time” just inches from the piles of dead in order to shock the likely upper-class reader and grab their attention further.<sup>200</sup> Brace’s angriest complaint, however, is a moral one rather than one of hygiene: Enon Chapel is, in the world of the press, a “nuisance.”<sup>201</sup> What scandalizes him the most, even more than the presence of children near to the dead, is Enon Chapel’s commercial operations, shamelessly profiting off of the dead poor as an attraction:

A band of music is in attendance during the whole night, and cards are played in a room adjoining this chapel charnel-house.<sup>202</sup> The Police have declined to interfere, alleging that the building does not come under the description of a place of amusement.<sup>203</sup>

Brace stresses the communal burden that the dance hall poses by emphasizing that these dancers and musicians stay in the chapel from dusk until dawn, *willingly* prolonging their exposure to the bodies and their pleasure-taking in a space that should be reserved for the dead. They are all aware of the history behind the building and show up anyway, *because* of it, staying out all night, deliberately choosing to invade the only space available to the dead poor in the neighborhood short of the humiliation of a pauper’s funeral.

The discussion of reform had been on the table since the chapel first entered the public imagination, but the dance hall proves that salaciousness sold as a way to get attention for the

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<sup>200</sup> "Debates and Proceedings in Parliament," *The Spectator*, 341.

<sup>201</sup> "WORK FOR THE SANATORY COMMISSIONERS," *The Spectator*, 1190.

<sup>202</sup> Brace mentions gamblers to further emphasize the seediness of the operation, and the ill repute that it has brought the neighborhood.

<sup>203</sup> "Debates and Proceedings in Parliament," *The Spectator*, 341. Brace references the description as defined by the act of 25 George II. c. 36. Enon Chapel would be eligible of being shut down later, in 1850, under George Sanger’s ownership as a theater. Among the nuisances that required an application to police-courts: “Theatres, unlicensed; Trades, offensive (keeping pigs, soap-house, slaughter-house, or manufactures in trade causing effluvia, &c.).” See Charles Dickens Jr., *Dickens’s Dictionary of London*, 1879. In Lee Jackson, *A Dictionary of Victorian London: An A-Z of the Great Metropolis* (London; New York, NY: Anthem Press, 2006), 184.



cause of reform. Sanger describes the enterprise only briefly in his autobiography as he chronicles the building's history before he purchased it, but he specifies that only "a few months" after the chapel closed it was purchased by this Society.<sup>204</sup> Under its former management, one of the most shocking aspects of Enon Chapel was the sheer number of corpses—between 10,000 to 12,000—stuffed into the cellar, separated from the meeting house above by only a thin wooden floor.<sup>205</sup> The new owners refinished the floor, but to Sanger, and to the reformers he echoes, there was still not enough space put between the living and the dead. Calling for people to come "dance over the dead," as Sanger quotes from an old bill, "well shows the character of the place and kind of persons who used it."<sup>206</sup> This juxtaposition of enjoyment and entertainment directly above the rotting, nameless dead made it a central aspect of the appeal of the chapel's horrible, hardly believable history.

A similar concern came to light with the establishment of garden cemeteries, proposed as a "respectable" solution of dealing with the increasingly visible dead, although the focus by scholars studying the movement has previously been on sanitation, rather than on aesthetics and visual propriety. As burial grounds within city limits and in residential areas overflowed, reform-minded architects constructed new sites for burial that were specifically marketed towards the middling and upper classes. The issue of space available for burial concerned everyone, regardless of social class; William Tayler, a footman, discussed the increasingly visible dead in 1837: "Every day the streets are regularly crowded with funerals and mourning coaches, [hearses] and such like... The undertakers in London are [usually] very particular in having all

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<sup>204</sup> Sanger does not name them, but states that "these worthies put a single brick floor over the old wooden one, and another wooden one on top of the bricks, and then proceeded to make money by turning this charnel house into a low dancing-saloon." George Sanger, *Seventy Years a Showman*, 80. Effectively, the Temperance Society simply buried the evidence and called attention to its presence through its advertising.

<sup>205</sup> "Debates and Proceedings in Parliament," *The Spectator*, 341.

<sup>206</sup> George Sanger, *Seventy Years a Showman*, 80.

black horses to attend funerals but now there are so many wanted they are glad to get any colour.”<sup>207</sup> The burial site one could choose for their departed loved ones reflected socio-economic class and religious scruples, and the anonymity and lack of ceremony of a pauper’s funeral was to be avoided at all costs.<sup>208</sup> These new, larger, suburban grounds, often with aesthetically-pleasing trees and statues, provided a more visually respectable place for the London middle to upper classes to deal with their dead. As a product of reform, they worked—but only for the wealthy. George Frederick Carden, a founder of the garden cemetery movement, intended for these cemeteries to be an “*elegant* resting place for the dead beyond the built-up city,” befitting the loved ones of wealthier families who would be buried there.<sup>209</sup> These spaces were specifically designed to include “tasteful” vegetation and greenery,<sup>210</sup> like Pere Lachaise in Paris, so as to match the austere nature of the act of burial, but without becoming too grim.<sup>211</sup> However, some critics of the garden cemetery movement as a method of burial reform expressed concern that these sites would become fashionable promenades and too much like pleasure grounds—an attraction that was a mix of hotel, theme park, and dance hall, meant solely for entertainment. Spoofs of Carden’s plans appeared in magazines, describing the new garden cemeteries as archetypal, morally dubious London “pleasure gardens,” meant to “rob death of its terrors and make it delightful.”<sup>212</sup> Even so, these cemeteries became the popular option for those who could afford it; through the emphasis of the family plot and the solemnity of the site, the

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<sup>207</sup> Judith Flanders, 215.

<sup>208</sup> Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: the Victorian Fight Against Filth*, 114.

<sup>209</sup> Jackson, *Dirty Old London: the Victorian Fight Against Filth*, 108. Emphasis added by me.

<sup>210</sup> James Stevens Curl, “John Claudius Loudon and the Garden Cemetery Movement,” in *Garden History* 11, no. 2 (1983), 133-56, 142. Loudon, one of Carden’s peers and a founder of the garden cemetery movement, favored evergreens over deciduous trees because evergreens were grander, and more suited to solemnity.

<sup>211</sup> Judith Flanders, 223.

<sup>212</sup> “The Life, Death, Burial, and Resurrection Company,” in *The Spirit of the Public Journals for the year M.DCC.XXV* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert and Piper, 1826), 108, in Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight Against Filth*, 108.

bourgeois classes of London gradually became comfortable burying their dead in these cemeteries, marketed as “restful,” while the bodies of the poor were spectacularized in displays and mass graves. The poor could not afford proper burials in these new reform-created spaces; when parish burial grounds closed as a result of local lobbying for reform, pauper’s funerals moved to the larger cemeteries, but to the most neglected parts of the site where corpses were buried in large pits.<sup>213</sup>

### ***Sensationalism Sells: Enon Chapel as Penny Dreadful***

When Enon Chapel changed hands again in 1847, from the Temperance Society to George Walker, it took on its most egregiously commercial form, dropping the pretense of fixing hygienic problems completely in favor of exploiting the public’s hunger for morbidity. This new owner would capitalize on the chapel’s reputation as a site of disrespect for the dead, putting the evidence on display as props in a performance. Walker, the famed crusader, purchased the property in 1847, promising to remove the accumulation of corpses, coffins, and decay from the premises. This is not what he did, although his reputation and diatribes against the chapel—which jump-started its infamy—kept his reform-focused, altruistic narrative in the public consciousness. Even now, historians such as Peter Jupp do not so much as mention Walker’s exhibition, nor what actually happened to the bodies in the cellar; the historical record still relies on Walker’s story as the accepted one, his reputation keeping him a hero in the public eye.

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<sup>213</sup> If a family could not afford to pay for a proper burial in a consecrated churchyard like Norwood Cemetery or Kensal Green, which most poor families couldn’t, there were two options: a pauper’s burial, or keeping the body in their house until they could afford a burial at a parish burial ground. After reform efforts closed these parish grounds, the options for the poor narrowed. Corpses were taken en masse to the cemetery twice a week and buried in large pits, kept open until they contained a sufficient number of coffins. These graves were at the far end of the cemetery, the most neglected part of the site. Mortuaries were developed in some parishes to attempt to fix the issue of keeping bodies in the home until households could afford burial, but the poor were too nervous about their relatives being used for dissection to let the mortuaries have the bodies.

From his diatribes in *Gatherings from Grave Yards*, one would have expected Walker, such an ardent critic of the chapel's existence as a source of egregious scandal, to quietly rebury the bodies on his own dime for the sake of the parish. This was not what happened. Rather than closing the chapter of Enon Chapel's infamy for good, he continued the chapel's sensationalism, capitalizing on the bodies of the poor for media attention and capital, both social and monetary. Walker exhumed the bodies from the cellar and set them up in an exhibition, stacking skulls and piling up bodies aboveground for the public perusal of "respectable" people, "so monstrously offensive as to become an object of curiosity exhibited by ticket."<sup>214</sup> The following excerpt from an issue of *The Spectator* from December 11, 1847, spells out Walker's true purpose plainly:

Mr. Walker, the surgeon, who has worked indefatigably at our graveyards, will give a ticket to any respectable person who desires to see and smell Enon Chapel, and so ascertain experimentally its mephitic poison. 'Crowded houses' have been rushing to enjoy this exhibition, which certainly beats Jullien [a French conductor and composer living in London from 1840 to 1856] for novelty.<sup>215</sup>

Therein lies the media profitability of this piece of macabre entertainment. Walker first built up the fear of the space through his polemics against its conditions, publishing his pamphlet and using newspapers to spread his narrative as the loudest and most accepted, and then bought entirely into the commercial value of such a horrific display of the dead and constructed his own in order to garner even more media attention. Instead of quietly reintering the bodies and selling the empty building, Walker "stage-managed a remarkable stunt... [inviting] the public... to come and view the infamous 'Golgotha' beneath the dance hall, an object lesson in the perils of urban burial."<sup>216</sup> This "object lesson" was a theatrical horror show, which did not charge

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<sup>214</sup> "WORK FOR THE SANATORY COMMISSIONERS," *The Spectator*, 1190. "Respectable" meaning the upper and middle classes. This article confirms the target audience of the Enon Chapel scandal as a spectacle—it was meant to appeal to those who could afford to deal with their dead respectfully and would be scandalized by the masses of dead poor.

<sup>215</sup> "WORK FOR THE SANATORY COMMISSIONERS," *The Spectator*, 1190.

<sup>216</sup> Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: the Victorian Fight Against Filth*, 125.

admission but had a “suggested donation” towards re-burying the bodies in a decent cemetery.

According to the *Examiner* in December of 1847, Walker stationed a man at the chapel gate

“who walked about with skulls in his hand, apparently with the view of increasing the excitement of the persons assembled outside.”<sup>217</sup> Lee Jackson elaborates further on the details of Walker’s “corpse museum”<sup>218</sup>:

Once inside, the public were treated to various revelations, including visiting the neighboring out-house, where bodies had once been quietly removed from the vaults for the purpose of sale and dissection.<sup>219</sup> ... The press lapped up the Gothic spectacle, lovingly describing not only the exposed bones, skulls and coffins in various stages of decomposition, but the slumland location:<sup>220</sup> “windings of narrow and dirty lanes... an obscure and choked-up market... a gloomy and frowsy court was pointed out to us by squalid children playing around a stagnant puddle.”<sup>221</sup>

To the press, this was the perfect spectacle, mirroring the setting of a penny dreadful or a murder story in a Sunday paper: a dreary, poor, miserable neighborhood; piles of human remains housed in one building alone; a general atmosphere of gloom and decay. Walker successfully set the mood for a dramatic and shocking enterprise, but took the exhibit even further into the realm of the indecorous. As part of his exhibition, Walker had not only exhumed the human remains from the cellar, but set up the former proprietor, the late Reverend Howse, as the highlight of the tour. Howse was “ten years deceased, a ‘stark and stiff and shrivelled corpse’ resembling an Egyptian mummy, propped up for public inspection, recognizable by his ‘screw foot’.”<sup>222</sup> Despite not being buried in the chapel but merely associated with it by trade, Howse became the

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<sup>217</sup> *Examiner* (11 December 1847), quoted in Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: the Victorian Fight Against Filth*, 125. Whether these skulls were from within the chapel is not confirmed, but it is clear that Walker wanted his potential audience to view the chapel as a macabre quasi-museum.

<sup>218</sup> My own term; Jackson refers to Enon Chapel simply as a show or exhibition.

<sup>219</sup> Resurrection men, as mentioned in Chapter 1, made money by digging up freshly buried corpses to sell to schools of anatomy before the Anatomy Act of 1832 expanded the range of corpses available for dissection to paupers as well as convicts.

<sup>220</sup> Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: the Victorian Fight Against Filth*, 125.

<sup>221</sup> *Era* (5 March 1848), quoted in Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: the Victorian Fight Against Filth*, 125. The description of the location further emphasizes the poverty of Clement’s Lane.

<sup>222</sup> Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London*, 125.

central piece in the collection, a macabre detail for further shock value and literary device, making the story almost cyclical.

The parish churchwardens in St. Clement Danes complained about Walker's exhibit, thinking it unseemly and obscene, and grew concerned about the size of the mobs gathered to view it. They knew of Walker's reputation as a respected surgeon and crusader for public health, but the number of people who took up Walker's invitation to see and smell the chapel bothered them.<sup>223</sup> They noted that this was surely not a *respectable* way to make his point, or handle the dead, but was just as bad as the dance hall that he had condemned so heavily, especially since Walker had also taken money for admission to his exhibition.<sup>224</sup> After the exhibition ran for a few months, Walker paid £100 to transfer the remains for re-interment in Norwood Cemetery, but there is no record of whether this money came from the show's takings or from Walker's savings.<sup>225</sup> This economic transaction is mentioned in George Sanger's autobiography and in Walter Thornbury's popular history of London, but in both it is described as an altruistic deed, Walker spending his own money to finally wrap up the story. The horrible details of Walker's corpse museum are completely absent from later accounts, which include only the barest mentions of Walker's owning the building before moving on to his emptying it. It is an unusual case—the surgeon at the front of the movement to shut Enon Chapel down capitalizing on it for his own commercial gain—and according to Jackson, it is “doubtful that [the exhibit] had any lasting impact on the case for burial reform.”<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Peter C. Jupp, 100. I do not have quotes from the parish churchwardens themselves, but Jupp notes that 6,000 people came to witness “the removal of ‘this Golgotha’ whose detritus constituted ‘four upheaved van loads.’” Jupp does not address Walker's exhibition at all, merely the fact that he publicized the removal of the remains.

<sup>224</sup> Accused of creating his exhibition for profit, Walker countered that “the only money taken—at the end of the visit—was at the discretion of the individual. Any cash would... contribute towards a fund for removal of the bodies to a decent cemetery.” Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: the Victorian Fight Against Filth*, 125.

<sup>225</sup> Jackson, *Dirty Old London*, 125.

<sup>226</sup> Jackson, *Dirty Old London*, 125.

Contrary to his promise, after Walker shut down the exhibit and sold the building, the bulk of the bodies remained, although the London public, including the showman George Sanger, thought otherwise. Surely Walker, that great man, would have cleared them out, as he campaigned to do for years. This lack of action reveals his true priorities: money and media attention. After Walker's exhibition had shocked enough of the population, and the bodies had supposedly all been cleared out, Sanger purchased the building in 1850, intrigued by its sensational history, and turned it into a theatre, thinking that Walker, the "public spirited surgeon," had "put an end to the scandal"<sup>227</sup> beforehand and removed the bodies "at his own expense... the cost [of which] was very great."<sup>228</sup>

Because of the proliferation of Walker's accepted narrative, positioning him as the hero, Sanger believed the issue to be over by the time he purchased the chapel in December of 1850, which had been empty for a few months since Walker owned it.<sup>229</sup> However, Walker's negligence only prolonged the scandal. Just as Sanger's new show business was proving lucrative, he received a rude awakening from a police inspector<sup>230</sup> who informed him of the recent discovery that the contractor hired by George Walker had not fully removed the bodies from the premises. The contractor's men confessed that "over a hundred barrels of human bones and remains, and, as a sort of grim joke, the coffin of the minister himself, instead of being removed, had been cemented up in the floor at one end of the building; in fact, under the very

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<sup>227</sup> George Sanger, *Seventy Years a Showman*, 80.

<sup>228</sup> Sanger, 80. The full quote is as follows: "At his own expense Mr. Walker entered into a contract with a builder to have all the bodies removed to Norwood Cemetery, and the floor properly bricked and cemented over. The cost was very great, for the men engaged in the gruesome work, which was done at night, had to be paid enormous wages; but the public-spirited surgeon saw the work through, and then allowed the place to pass out of his hands again."

<sup>229</sup> Sanger, 80.

<sup>230</sup> Sanger, 80. Sanger describes this police inspector as "an intimate friend," perhaps to make the knowledge appear as though it was given as a favor to Sanger.

spot over which [Sanger's] stage was erected."<sup>231</sup> This meant that Walker had neither fulfilled his promise nor his purpose in constructing his spectacle. He had used it to magnify the sensation, just another showman creating a piece of entertainment.

### ***International Infamy and the Enduring Story***

Walker marketed his story so well that it even spread to America. An article in *The Catholic Telegraph* from 1843 chronicles the "abominations" of London burial grounds, calling for legislative reform and using Walker's testimony as evidence from an expert of the nightmarish conditions of these parish burial grounds.<sup>232</sup> His testimony is structured like a piece of fiction, with the punchline that the events he describes are true to life. These narratives, such as the first, set at No. 30, Clement's Lane, guide the reader (referred to in the second person) to different houses along the street and use the inhabitants to invite the reader to imagine witnessing instances of illegal interment:

Just under his window, about a month ago, [the man] tells you, they made a shallow grave and there had laid a dead body brought from the hospital over the way; and now they are at work at the same spot again, and have just dug down apparently to the same depth as before. ... You look a little longer, and your stomach turns when you see them shovel up with their spades broken fragments of the late inhabitant of the [last month's] coffin [*sic*]—human bones with tatters of flesh hanging to them, and then about four spadefuls of a soft pappy substance, once the flesh of a human animal called a pauper. Your companion, not relishing this amusing exhibition, cries out to the men to cease their filthy doings; and the men ashamed of their task, turn their backs to the houses to screen their work from the inhabitants. ... This is only one instance.<sup>233</sup>

Newspapers positioned narratives like this one, depicting Enon Chapel as the biggest, worst, stranger-than-fiction example, as horrifying pieces set in London's "dark, lowly underbelly" meant to shock the public into thinking about what needed to be done to physically separate the living and the dead. However, although reform was the purported end goal for

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<sup>231</sup> Sanger, 81. This begs the question of what Walker did with the money, and which bodies actually ended up buried in Norwood Cemetery; there has been practically no scholarship on this.

<sup>232</sup> "HORRORS OF LONDON BURYING-GROUNDS," *The Catholic Telegraph* (1831-1846) (Jan 07, 1843), 2.

<sup>233</sup> "HORRORS OF LONDON BURYING-GROUNDS," *The Catholic Telegraph* (1831-1846), 2.



Walker and his contemporaries, the media's capitalizing on the scandal to create a real-life penny dreadful-esque horror spectacle became the overarching priority for those telling Enon Chapel's story.

### ***Conclusion***

The narrative of the Enon Chapel scandal that prevailed fifty years later was a salacious story of rot and neglect in a poor London neighborhood, with George Walker as its shining upper-class hero, rather than its director and profiteer. In his setup of the narrative in his book *Old and New London*, Walter Thornbury situates Enon Chapel as part of London's dark, historical past, representing the "backwardness" of the age. Like George Sanger, Thornbury views Enon Chapel as a product of its time, bringing it up as an anecdote included for shock value<sup>234</sup> to create a morbid past for the parish of St. Clement Danes. Thornbury in particular plays up the gruesome details of the scandal to captivate an interested audience while simultaneously avoiding any extreme vulgarity.<sup>235</sup> Skirting the line between macabre and outright disgusting, Thornbury further alludes to its popularity with the statistic that it was visited by about 6,000 people prior to the (alleged) removal of the bodies from the building.<sup>236</sup> However, he compartmentalizes the phenomenon as a piece of the ghastly past. "It is indeed

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<sup>234</sup> Thornbury quotes a Mr. Diprose in his book to emphasize the impropriety of the chapel's history, stating on the subject of the Temperance Society's occupation of the building that "the upper premises then became tenanted by a set of teetotallers, who, amongst other uses, turned it into a dancing-room, where the thoughtless and giddy went to 'foot it' away over the mouldering remains of sad mortality, part of the bygone generation turning to dust beneath the dancers' feet." See Walter Thornbury, in "St. Clement Danes: the Parish," in *Old and New London: Volume 3*.

<sup>235</sup> Thornbury does not mention Walker's exhibition either, and the furthest Thornbury goes in his detailing of the chapel's contents is to describe the remains as a "pyramid of human bones" and that the quantity of remains was enough to fill four vans.

<sup>236</sup> Thornbury, "St. Clement Danes: the Parish," in *Old and New London*.

strange,” he says, “to think that such foul abuses were not swept away until the reign of Victoria.”<sup>237</sup> Sanger does the same in his autobiography.<sup>238</sup>

By placing its horrors in the public eye for perhaps altruistic but more likely commercial reasons, Walker—as well as Sanger, and Thornbury, and others who used the chapel’s history as a point of interest—created a piece of entertainment, using the dead poor as objects of pity and disgust to make the experience more compelling. Enon Chapel offered Londoners the chance to interact with death up close—a real life penny dreadful, like those made popular through newspaper serials—but in a way that exploited those being harmed by the problem the chapel spectacle was attempting to address. Through his use of the dead poor as nameless props in his Enon Chapel sideshow for “respectable” people to witness, Walker just highlighted further disparity between the dead rich and the dead poor, and profited off of the distinction.

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<sup>237</sup> Thornbury, “St. Clement Danes: the Parish,” in *Old and New London*. This is a somewhat strange statement, as Victoria’s reign began while Enon Chapel was still in operation as a private burial ground.

<sup>238</sup> George Sanger, *Seventy Years a Showman*, 80. In Sanger’s own description of the scandal, he addresses the reader directly: “think of it, you who are blessed by the splendid sanitary arrangements of this age, and imagine what it meant in a crowded neighbourhood, if you can!” The call to the reader to imagine it in a crowded neighborhood is Sanger’s way of skirting around outright calling the neighborhood “poor,” and imagining his audience as at least middle class.

## Conclusion

The concept of the “entertaining” death, the displays of death presented through dissection, through the pomp of funeral processions or sensational murder stories, through decomposing masses put up to spur the public towards reform, represented both a profound fear that the viewer could be next and an escapist spectacle for the unconcerned. Newspapers and publishers controlled the proliferation and structure of these events, spinning them into spectacles of performance. My contribution to the debate over Victorian displays of death centers around the idea that regardless of the intention behind each spectacle, whether it was furthering human knowledge or ensuring hygienic burial, media sensationalism won out overall. Although dissection, funerals, true crime media, and burial overcrowding have been considered separate areas in which death was made visible to the public, and the majority of scholarship on Victorian England has not linked these to sensationalism and theatrical performance, I argue that the media spin of their respective types of displaying death link them as part of a larger phenomenon of media sensationalism. George Walker, for instance, positioned himself as the great reformer and is remembered as such by his contemporaries due to his masterful control of the Enon Chapel story, and his contribution in ending it. However, under the pretense of chasing reform, Walker threw his energies into putting on a show for “respectable” people, advertising that visitors could “ascertain experimentally [the chapel’s bodies’] mephitic poison”<sup>239</sup> and inviting the public into the space of the dead, much as the previous owners of Enon Chapel had when they invited the public to dance on the dead until four o’clock in the morning (see Fig. 3).

In twenty-first century America, the dead are much less publicly visible than they were in George Walker’s London, to the point that seeing exhibits of the dead and the bodies of those

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<sup>239</sup> “WORK FOR THE SANATORY COMMISSIONERS,” *The Spectator* (Dec 11, 1847), 1190.

who donated their bodies for the purposes of anatomical dissection is a novelty.<sup>240</sup> Due to the scarcity of bodies in the public sphere, we have become much more sensitized to displays of death when they occur; however, COVID-19 brought the dead back into the public sphere, and with them a number of parallels to the world of the Victorian death spectacle. The COVID-19 pandemic mirrors the cholera and influenza epidemics of London in the nineteenth-century: spinning stories of the dead as entertainment gives people certainty and solace in a time when the seeming randomness of death, both from murder and disease, hangs over their heads. As the modernization of the nineteenth century brought population fluctuation and disease, London's living sought methods of escape from the reality of the dead piling up in the streets. People found solace in the performative spectacle of death, desensitizing themselves to it so as not to see fellow citizens of London, but nameless objects.

As COVID-19 made death visible in the public imagination once again, beginning an unfortunate resurgence of frequent exposure to the dead, the dead piling up in hospitals and funeral homes dredged up the fear of an anonymous end in their wake. A specific instance of dozens of decomposing bodies stashed inside two trucks outside a funeral home in Brooklyn is described in an article published in the *New York Times* in November of 2020, bearing a shocking resemblance to Enon Chapel during the cholera epidemics of the late 1830s. The article details a trailer, parked outside a funeral home in Queens, New York, filled with bodies stacked on top of each other. The author describes the crisis of overcrowding in hospital morgues, cemeteries, and crematories at the height of the spring peak in April 2020 in New York, when the death rate had reached four times the city's normal rate.<sup>241</sup> The need for burials far

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<sup>240</sup> It is particularly interesting how in the present day, those who donate their bodies for the purpose of scientific study are even seen as noble, a vastly different atmosphere surrounding dissection than we see in Victorian London.

<sup>241</sup> Alan Feuer and William K. Rashbaum, "'We Ran Out of Space': Bodies Pile Up as N.Y. Struggles to Bury Its Dead," *New York Times* (November 18, 2020).

outstripped the capacity, as it was in London almost two hundred years before, and both nineteenth-century London and COVID-era New York City stood as parallels: both had incredibly large populations and a lack—or, in New York, a failure—of centralized governmental regulation of public health crises, be it London’s contaminated water or the government’s failure to handle the coronavirus. In both cities, the response to the epidemics and the pileup of the dead became localized, and thus the local systems for dealing with the dead became overwhelmed. The worry that a body might become anonymous resurfaced as well, with bodies left unclaimed for fourteen days being buried at a potter’s field on Hart Island in the Bronx, or getting lost in a public morgue.<sup>242</sup>

This article echoes the language of the Enon Chapel debacle, described in Chapter 3, emphasizing the confined spaces, the number of bodies, the lack of propriety in the way they were stacked on top of each other. However, what has changed between the cholera epidemics of Victorian London and coronavirus in America are the characters and their intentions in regards to dealing with the visible dead. The undertakers and funeral directors of Victorian London preyed on the mourning families of the deceased, connecting respectability with materiality and arguing that the only proper funeral was an ostentatious one. In contrast, the funeral directors, gravediggers, and cemetery workers of the coronavirus age are what the *New York Times* article call “hidden heroes,” working tirelessly to de-anonymize death but with no public attention or accolades given to them. Respectability for the dead looks different in the twenty-first century, and especially during COVID-19: people no longer want huge, lavish funerals publicized to the world but instead simply want privacy.

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<sup>242</sup> Feuer and Rashbaum, “‘We Ran Out of Space’: Bodies Pile Up as N.Y. Struggles to Bury Its Dead.”

In the era of COVID-19 in America, we are consistently inundated with news of the dead, and yet during quarantine, the true crime genre has surged in popularity. Both in the Victorian era and the modern day, thinking about the dead in a general, detached, fictionalized way seems to present the easiest way to process it in an era of profound loss of life. I myself was drawn to this project as escapism, a way to historicize and process the tragedy of the present by focusing on it happening elsewhere, in another time, to people with whom I had no personal connection. *TIME* magazine states that in the first month of America's nation-wide coronavirus quarantine, true crime shows gained immense popularity in what journalist Melissa Chan calls an "unprecedented opportunity for binge-watching."<sup>243</sup> On March 20, 2020, Netflix released *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem, and Madness*, a true crime documentary series about zookeeper and convicted felon Joe Exotic, which became the "great 'unifier' of the coronavirus age," viewed in sixty-four million homes worldwide since its release and providing a form of binge-able escapism during the chaos of the pandemic.<sup>244</sup> Many people at the time told me that watching it was single-handedly getting them through quarantine. *Tiger King's* appeal, however, lay not just in its gruesome escapism as a true crime story, but in its spectacularization of class, presenting a window into the "other America," also colloquially referred to as "redneck America," to middle- and upper-class viewers in urban areas. In this way, *Tiger King* functions as the modern equivalent of narratives marketed towards the bourgeois delving into the "dark underbelly" of London, a world occupied by the poor.

True crime stories capitalize on the dead and the gruesome to provide the perfect escape for people caught in a world in upheaval, but their popularity brings up a question that runs

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<sup>243</sup> Melissa Chan, "The Human Cost of Binge-Watching True Crime Series," *TIME* (April 24, 2020).

<sup>244</sup> Chan, "The Human Cost of Binge-Watching True Crime Series." Chan also specifies that the series, which she describes as "packed with quirky characters—some missing limbs, many missing morals," drew more than 34 million viewers in the first ten days of its release.

through this thesis: who has control over one's dead body? Chan frames her article around this question, arguing that true crime re-traumatizes those affected by the death. She notes that in the U.S., there is no legal obligation for a media corporation—such as Netflix—to get a family's permission or cooperation before going ahead with a production, book, or podcast. The profit and the entertainment value are at the forefront of consideration, giving no thought to dignity or privacy. True crime strips the family of the deceased of their agency and dignity, subjecting them to the ultimate humiliation of seeing their loved one propped up and put on display before an even larger audience due to true crime TV and podcasts. However, the demographic of the displayed dead remains the same as in Victorian London: the poor never have control over whether their bodies are displayed, while the wealthy gain insight and interest into the violent lives of the poor while not at risk themselves.

The COVID-19 pandemic, while traumatic and tragic, provides the perfect opportunity to reflect on the phenomenon of spectacularized death in the nineteenth century. Most scholars studying the Victorian period consider its approach to death as the end of an era of ritual and punitive spectacle, the mark at which death began to become an outdated, “traditional” form of entertainment. However, the coronavirus pandemic reveals that the fascination and obsession with death and death media as seen in the nineteenth century in London did not peter out into “respectable” forms of entertainment, but rather changed form as the technology by which it spread changed form. Fewer people attended public executions, but read about high-profile murders and murderers in the newspaper. The same is true in the twenty-first century; punishment moved behind closed doors and high walls as Foucault argues, but death

entertainment still grips the public today.<sup>245</sup> While its media is far easier for all to access, through print books or newspapers, podcasts, or television, its protagonists and victims are still clearly divided along class lines, and the thrill still lies in the juxtaposed relief that the viewer is not on display and the fear, knowing that they could be.

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<sup>245</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 115-116, quoted in Tony Bennet, "The Exhibitionary Complex," from Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Pryzblyski, *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 118.



## Appendix

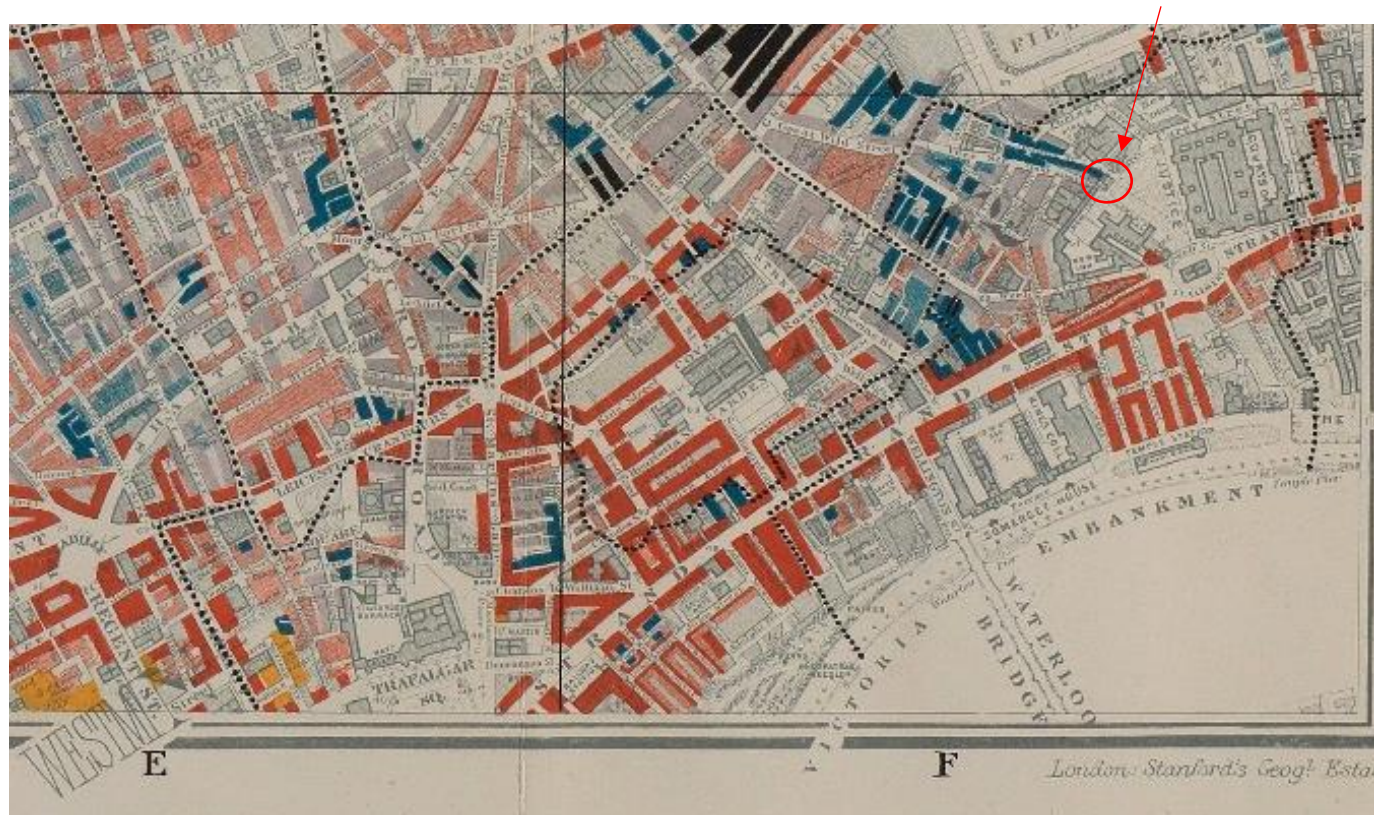
Fig. 1



William Hogarth, "The Reward of Cruelty (The Four Stages of Cruelty)," 1751.



Fig. 2



A map of Westminster, showing the location of Enon Chapel.

Taken from “Descriptive Map of London Poverty 1889,” from *Life and Labour of the People in London*, ed. Charles Booth (London: Macmillan, 1892-1897).

The blue and black areas highlight areas of severe poverty, indicating that St. Clement Danes was a very poor neighborhood.

Fig. 3



“Enon Chapel Cemetery and Dancing Saloon.” In National Philanthropic Association, *Sanatory Progress: Being the Fifth Report of the National Philharmonic Association* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1850), 71.

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