

**Revealing Bodies:  
Knowledge, Power and Mass  
Market Fictions in G.W.M.  
Reynolds's *Mysteries of  
London***

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how one early mass-market text, G.W.M. Reynolds's 1844-56 *The Mysteries of London* (later *The Mysteries of the Court of London*), interrogates its own position as both artwork and traded commodity. Through imagery of bodies resurrected and secrets exposed, Reynolds uses the twelve volumes of his penny serial to consider questions about the purpose and value of art which link the developing popular market in fiction to wider issues about working-class autonomy and cultural power.

Chapter 1 considers the idea of surface value. In the nineteenth century the distinction between popular and elite culture was often positioned as a contrast between surface and depth. Examining how Reynolds disputes this notion through his depiction of forgers and their clients, I further suggest how the *Mysteries* might contribute to twenty-first century critical debates about surface reading.

Chapter 2 addresses the mid-century belief that it was necessary for the educated elite to protect more vulnerable (working-class) readers from certain cultural material. I show how Reynolds's portrayal of the eroticised woman allows him to challenge this belittling notion of the popular audience, depict censorship as a mechanism for reinforcing existing power structures, and suggest a way for conventionally objectified social actors to reclaim their autonomy.

Chapter 3 focuses on the hidden bodies of the poor, highlighting the analogy made in Reynolds's work between the working-class corpses traded for dissection under the 1832 Anatomy Act and the bodies of the servants and labourers on which industrial society was founded. I explore how Reynolds draws on the radical Gothic of Mary Shelley to argue that erasing the humanity of the poor risks turning them into monsters.

Reynolds's serial operates on an 'economy of secrets', with blackmail a central motif. Chapter 4 examines this trope in the context of crime fiction more broadly, with a focus on the role of the servant. Comparisons with *Caleb Williams*, *Bleak House* and *Lady Audley's Secret* throw the particular radicalism of Reynolds's work into sharp relief.

The *Mysteries*' sensationalism, structure and sexual content have often seen the serial dismissed as populist trash; but they can also be seen as deliberate aesthetic choices, positing a particular notion of what literature might do. I conclude my thesis, the first to consider this lengthy serial in its entirety, by suggesting that taking Reynolds's work on its own terms offers an important corrective to the period's existing literary histories.

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## Introduction



Figure 1.1

On the 28<sup>th</sup> September 1844, the London printer George Vickers published the first instalment of *The Mysteries of London*. Written by the novelist and journalist G.W.M. Reynolds, then employed as editor of Vickers's miscellany, the *London Journal*, this eight-page penny number began a serial of epic proportions. The *Mysteries*' weekly serialisation would continue for a further twelve years, spanning a period of literary and social change that saw not only the rise and fall of Chartism but the abolition of newspaper stamp duty, the

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<sup>1</sup> This engraving of G.W.M. Reynolds appeared on the cover of *Reynolds's Miscellany* and on the monthly parts of the *Mysteries of the Court of London*. In his 1852 memoir *Lions, Living and Dead*, the writer John Ross Dix offers an amusing account of the picture: 'on the covers of the monthly parts, may be seen a portrait of Mr Reynolds himself, looking as bland and beatific as though he had never dipped his pen in blood and brimstone, and sent his readers, after supping of horrors, to shiver in the streets. By the way,' he adds, 'the portrait is about one of the very best likenesses I ever saw.' (John Ross Dix, *Lions, Living and Dead; or Personal Recollections of The "Great and Gifted"*, 2nd edn [London: W. Tweedie, 1854], p. 281.)

Crimean War and the Great Exhibition. During the same period, Reynolds's own fortunes transformed. He went from a relative unknown working on another man's publication to the editor-proprietor of a newspaper and a miscellany-journal, both of which carried his name.<sup>2</sup> Although his output of fiction was largely confined to the 1840s and 50s, these other publications maintained the popularity that the *Mysteries* had helped to establish: and when Reynolds died, in 1879, he was obituarised in the *Bookseller* magazine as 'perhaps... the most popular writer of our time'.<sup>3</sup>

This thesis, which is the first to consider the *Mysteries* cycle in its entirety, offers an extended analysis of Reynolds's most notorious work. I argue that, although the serial's contemporary success might in itself be enough to merit some critical attention, what is most important about this particular text is the way in which Reynolds uses it to engage with his own position as an author writing for the popular market. In particular, the *Mysteries* examines the impact of industrial capitalism and consumer culture on the working class. These were, of course, the same economic developments which had contributed to produce the literary mass market. What Reynolds's serial does is to consider how the latter might mitigate the former: that is, how a newly literate working class might be empowered by a literature of its own. His faith in the possibilities offered by the new mass market and his inventiveness in creating a new kind of fiction to serve it make the *Mysteries* a compelling counterpoint to the canonical literature of the period. Reynolds's serial addresses many of the same central issues tackled by the Victorian realist novel; but it does so with a style and an attitude all its own.

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<sup>2</sup> *Reynolds's Miscellany* was established in 1846 and ran until 1869; *Reynolds's [Weekly] Newspaper*, which began publication in 1850, ran (under various titles) until 1967. There are useful chapters on both publications in Louis James's and Anne Humpherys's edited collection on Reynolds: Andrew King, 'Reynolds's Miscellany, 1846-49: Advertising Networks and Politics', in *G.W.M. Reynolds: Nineteenth Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*, ed. by Anne Humpherys and Louis James (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 53-74; Michael Shirley, 'G.W.M. Reynolds, *Reynolds's Newspaper* and Popular Politics', in *G.W.M. Reynolds: Nineteenth Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*, ed. by Louis James and Anne Humpherys (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 75-90.

<sup>3</sup> 'Obituary for G.W.M. Reynolds', *The Bookseller*, 260 (1879), 600-01.

Reynolds's keen interest in the condition of the working class reflects his own experience of financial insecurity. Born into a middle-class family in Sandwich, Kent in July 1814, he was sent to Sandhurst military academy in 1828 under the instruction of his guardian Dr MacArthur (his father had died when Reynolds was only eight years old). Reynolds left the school in 1830 without having completed his training. Reportedly inspired by his reading of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, at some point during the 1830s Reynolds decided to travel to Paris, where by 1835 he was working in an English-language bookshop. In July of that year he married Susannah Pearson at the British Embassy in Paris; Pearson was still a minor and was already pregnant with their first child. Despite its presumably hasty arrangement, the partnership seems to have been a happy one; notably, Reynolds encouraged Susannah in her own literary endeavours. The early years of their marriage, however, were marked by monetary problems. In 1836 Reynolds lost money through an ill-advised literary investment, declared himself bankrupt and was forced to return to the UK. This was the first of three bankruptcies he would suffer over the next fifteen years: the next in 1840 and the final one in 1848, and during the course of which he was actually imprisoned for debt. Supporting a growing family (an eventual total of seven children), the pressure on Reynolds's productivity must have been immense. The writer John Dix describes an 1846 visit to Reynolds's home in Bethnal Green which found him 'in a back room, wrapped in a dingy dressing-gown, and perched on a stool at a high desk, writing away like a steam-engine.'<sup>4</sup> All this industry eventually seems to have paid off. From 1848 onward Reynolds enjoyed greater financial security, largely as a result of his partnership with the printer and publisher John Dicks. When he died in 1879, it was in a comfortable home in Woburn Square.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Dix, *Lions, Living and Dead; or Personal Recollections of The "Great and Gifted"*, p. 282.

<sup>5</sup> The most up-to-date biographical information on Reynolds can be found in his entry on the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, written by Louis James, and the introductory chapter to James's and Anne Humpherys's edited collection of essays on Reynolds, published 2008. (Anne Humpherys and Louis James, 'Introduction', in *G.W.M. Reynolds: Nineteenth Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*, ed. by Anne Humpherys and Louis



It may have been some years in coming, but Reynolds's particular type of success would not have been possible at any previous historical moment. He made his name writing for a brand-new market: a growing working-class readership fuelled not only by rising literacy rates,<sup>6</sup> but by a series of economic changes including a 'dramatic growth in the cloth trade, which indirectly supplied the rags which were the raw material for paper-making, developments in printing and the paper-trade... changing structures of the working day and the emergence of a concept of leisure time'.<sup>7</sup> By the 1830s, the combined impact of all these factors made it possible for the first time to mass-produce literature at a generally affordable price.

Initial offerings to this audience emanated from the likes of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, 'purely instructive' publications crafted for sober usefulness and educational value.<sup>8</sup> However, these drily factual journals did not dominate for long. 'Speculative printers began to reflect that the number of persons who wished to be amused must be very much larger than the number of those who desired to be instructed';<sup>9</sup> and the market moved accordingly, 'towards entertainment rather than improvement'.<sup>10</sup> By the 1840s, publications like the SDUK's *Penny Magazine* and *Chambers' Journal*, the great successes of the decade before, were jostling for space with a new variety of serials and weeklies. Miscellanies like the *London Journal* (founded 1842) and the *Family Herald* (founded 1843) combined scientific, historical and geographical content with sensational fiction, lurid illustrations and political invective. New and existing novels were serialised in penny parts, and fledgling authors began increasingly to target their work at the lucrative

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James [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008], pp. 1-15; Louis James, 'Reynolds, George William Macarthur (1814-1879)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23414>> [accessed 26 August 2014].)

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed analysis of literacy rates in the period, see David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Lorna Huett, 'Among the Unknown Public: Household Words, All the Year Round, and the Mass-Market Weekly Periodical in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 38 (2005), 61-82.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Knight, *The Old Printer and the Modern Press* (London: John Murray, 1854), p. 280.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Frost, *Forty Years' Recollections, Literary and Political* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Seale and Rivington, 1880), p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription of Values in Word and Image* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004), p. ix.

popular market. Although fiction had been deliberately excluded from the improving works of the 1830s, it ‘became of increasing importance in popular literature’ as the century wore on. ‘[I]ts growth, at a romantic and sensational level, amongst unsophisticated and working-class readers was phenomenal’.<sup>11</sup>

Reynolds’s particular phenomenal success came off the back of a French sensation: Eugene Sue’s 1842-43 *Mystères de Paris*. The *Mystères* had taken Paris by storm, attracting readers from across the class spectrum and prompting customers to battle one another for the new instalments.<sup>12</sup> Beyond the city of its origin, the novel’s international popularity was such that it rapidly spawned a clutch of imitations, with mysteries of cities including Lisbon, Boston, San Francisco and Melbourne all appearing over the next decade.<sup>13</sup> Given Reynolds’s formative period of residence in France, and his enthusiasm for the country’s literature (which was formalised into an 1839 book),<sup>14</sup> it is not surprising that he should have been the one to transpose Sue’s model onto the streets of his native capital.

Although the *Mystères* certainly provided Reynolds with crucial inspiration, it is important to note that Reynolds’s serial is by no means a straightforward imitation of Sue. His *Mysteries* do not appropriate either the characters or the plots of their Parisian counterpart: and the two serials differ in other important ways. Sue’s work appeared initially in the *Journal des débats*, a publication whose ‘principal market was the well-to-do conservative bourgeoisie’.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, some members of the working class were able to

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<sup>11</sup> Victor E. Neuberg, *Popular Literature: A History and Guide* (London: The Woburn Press, 1977), p. 144.

<sup>12</sup> For readers fighting at Parisian *cabinets de lecture* (street reading kiosks), see Christopher Prendergast, *For the People by the People: Eugène Sue's Les Mystères De Paris* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), p. 78.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Knight’s 2012 *The Mysteries of the Cities* offers a comparative study of these ‘mysteries’ serials that deals not only with Sue’s and Reynolds’s work but with ‘Mysteries’ of Philadelphia, Melbourne and New York. (Stephen Knight, *The Mysteries of the Cities: Urban Crime Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* [Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2012].)

<sup>14</sup> G.W.M. Reynolds, *The Modern Literature of France* (London: George Henderson, 1839).

<sup>15</sup> Prendergast, *For the People by the People: Eugène Sue's Les Mystères De Paris*, p. 77. Prendergast gives some figures as an illustration: a subscription to the *Journal* cost 80F, at a period when the average French worker could expect to earn between 2 and 4 francs per day.

access the serial: Christopher Prendergast points in particular to the ‘army’ of domestic servants sent out to buy the *Journal* in the early mornings, who ‘read it before their masters rose from their beds’.<sup>16</sup> But the *Journal*’s position in the marketplace contrasts markedly with Reynolds’s penny *Mysteries*, published at the lowest possible price. There is a parallel difference in the politics of the two works. Sue’s initially rather conservative beliefs became markedly more socialist as the serial went on.<sup>17</sup> Even at his most progressive, however, his approach is much more restrained than Reynolds’s. Where Reynolds advocates rebellion, even revolution,<sup>18</sup> Sue takes a more Dickensian line; suggesting that the ignorance of the wealthy is the greatest problem affecting the working class. Once the rich are apprised of the plight of the poor, he argues, greater assistance will surely be forthcoming.<sup>19</sup> As this thesis will explore in more depth, Reynolds is more cynical, and his solutions more direct.

One crucial respect in which Reynolds’s *Mysteries* did emulate their French predecessor was in the popularity that the work enjoyed. Targeted at a market of servants and shopboys,<sup>20</sup> Reynolds’s serial attained not only rapid success, but notoriety. By 1851, when Manchester bookseller Abel Heywood was speaking before the Parliamentary Select Committee on stamp duty, he reported selling 1,500 copies of the *Mysteries* to just 600 of Dickens’s *Household Words*. Heywood’s testimony is marked by a determination to

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>17</sup> In *Classes labourieuses and classes dangereuses* (1958), the French critic Louis Chevalier claims that this shift in Sue’s politics can be attributed to the correspondence he received from the serial’s working-class readers. Prendergast (cited above) questions the evidence for Chevalier’s assertion but the theory has certainly proven popular with critics, who seem to enjoy the idea of a serial written both by and for the people. (Louis Chevalier, *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes: Paris During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* [New York, NY: Howard Fertig, 2000]. For a more recent reiteration of these same beliefs, see Marie-Christine Leps, *Apprehending the Criminal: The Production of Deviance in Nineteenth Century Discourse* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992], pp. 85-87.)

<sup>18</sup> See for instance this passage from the *Mysteries*’ second series: ‘It is a monstrous absurdity and a hideous mockery to prate of treason, and sedition, and rebellion, when a people rises up in its might and its power to demand the privileges which are naturally its own. The few cannot possibly possess an inherent or hereditary right to enslave the many... We are averse to the use of physical force;—but... if freedom can be gained by the loss of a few drops of blood—why, then those drops should be shed cheerfully.’ (*London* IV.199)

<sup>19</sup> ‘Si les riches savaient’, is Sue’s constant mantra.

<sup>20</sup> Patricia Anderson, analysing readers’ correspondence, concludes that ‘a majority’ of the audience for the penny press was made up of ‘clerks, shopkeepers, and the more prosperous strata of the working class’. (Patricia Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture, 1790-1860* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1991], p. 140.)

downplay the popularity of Reynolds's work: although he reports higher sales for the *Mysteries* than for any other publication, he dismisses the number as 'just 1,500' copies and offers the opinion that sales of the work act as 'a test of the taste of readers generally'. 'I believe that it would be almost impossible to put down the "Court of London;"', he reluctantly concludes: 'I believe that you could not educate people so that there could not be found 10,000, 15,000, or 20,000 of people in this country disposed to buy it.'<sup>21</sup>

Heywood's reluctance to endorse Reynolds's work reflects the controversy that the serial attracted. Its combination of soft-core eroticism, Gothic sensationalism and radical politics not only spoke to the desires of the new reading audience, but fit neatly into popular prejudices about mass-market fiction. These prejudices were aggravated by Reynolds's personal reputation. An outspoken republican throughout his life, he approved of the French and American governments, campaigned against capital punishment, and took an active part in the Chartist movement,<sup>22</sup> attracting the disapproval of more socially conservative contemporaries. Responding to one 1848 demonstration in Trafalgar Square, Charles Dickens wrote to his friend Macready that Reynolds's was 'a name with which no lady's, and no gentleman's, should be associated'.<sup>23</sup> This context gives additional credence to Heywood's report. If Parliament abolished stamp duty, the bookseller's profits would likely increase: persuading them to do so meant playing down the success of Reynolds's work, convincing

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<sup>21</sup> *Parliamentary Papers, Report of the Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969), pp. 374, 78. Heywood's testimony provides a key part of the limited available direct evidence about Reynolds's readers, and includes a description of the serial's readers so attractive that it played a key part in my own initial engagement with Reynolds's work. He tells the Committee that 'A great many females buy the "Court of London", and young men; a sort of spreeing young men; young men who go to taverns, and put cigars in their mouths in a flourishing way.' (p.378) The imagination suggests a kind of herd of earnestly upward-aspiring Mr Guppies.

<sup>22</sup> Reynolds was elected to the National Chartist Association's National Executive in 1848 with more votes than any of his fellow committee members; 1,805 to Feargus O'Connor's 1,314. (W.E. Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom* [London: Hutchinson, 1903], p. 236.)

<sup>23</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens, 1847-1849*, ed. by Madeline House and Graham Storey, The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), p. V.604.

his hearers that the working class was predisposed against such “bad” literature. Heywood is more likely to have understated the figures than exaggerated them.

Stamp duty had been raised in 1815 to counteract the dissemination of radical ideas through pamphlets and newsheets: evidence of the same anxiety about unregulated publications that drove middle- and upper-class responses to the developing mass market. Channelling his political polemic into his bestselling fiction, Reynolds threatened to realise all these fears. As his most successful and controversial work, one of the first examples of its type and one which was never afraid to push the boundaries of accepted literary taste, the *Mysteries* acquired an importance that went beyond its immediate context. Just as in Heywood’s example, it was often used as a metonym for the whole penny market: not just another cheap serial amongst the hundreds that inundated readers, but a symbol of the developing popular press as a whole.

*The Mysteries of London*’s unique position in the early Victorian imagination, as well as its undoubted popular success, both make the serial a promising object for critical attention; but the very symbolic importance that the work accrued also seems to be an explanation for Reynolds’s longstanding neglect. Taking their cue from their nineteenth-century predecessors, many scholars have read the *Mysteries*’ popularity as the work’s defining trait, prompting them to dismiss the serial as subliterary, interesting only for its socio-historical importance. Margaret Dalziel’s *Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago* (1957), Louis James’s *Fiction for the Working Man* (1963), and Richard Altick’s *The English Common Reader* (1967) were, for a great stretch of the twentieth century, the only critical texts to deal with Reynolds at all. All examine his work as part of a near-homogeneous mass of “popular literature”; although Dalziel singles Reynolds out as an ‘interesting exception’, commenting

on his ‘fluent, luscious, polysyllabic style’.<sup>24</sup> In fact, I would argue that the difference between Reynolds’s writing and that of the less sophisticated writers working in the same medium is significant: and that the conclusions which have been drawn about his work and its readers, on the basis that ‘one quality of mass-produced fiction at any date is its great sameness’, are open to challenge.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly, these are studies of some several decades ago; and recent years have seen an increase of critical interest in Reynolds’s work. Pamela Anderson, Ian Haywood and Andrew King devote chapters to Reynolds (although not limited to the *Mysteries*) in studies published 1991, 2004 and 2004.<sup>26</sup> Trefor Thomas’s abridgement of the *Mysteries*’ first series was published in 1996, making the text available for the first time to a wider audience;<sup>27</sup> and Louis James’s and Dick Collins’s complete edition of that same series came out with Valancourt Press in 2012.<sup>28</sup> Mary Shannon’s *Dickens, Reynolds and Mayhew on Wellington Street: The Print Culture of a Victorian Street* contextualises Reynolds in the literary milieu around London’s Strand, and will be published by Ashgate in 2015: and PhDs which draw at least partly on Reynolds’s work have been recently completed by Ruth Doherty (at Trinity College Dublin)<sup>29</sup> and Laurence Scott (at King’s College London).<sup>30</sup> Many of these scholars were brought together in July 2014 at a bicentenary conference celebrating Reynolds’s life.<sup>31</sup> But despite this developing corpus of critical work, Reynolds studies are still in an embryonic state. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Politics and the Press*, the collection of essays edited by

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<sup>24</sup> Margaret Dalziel, *Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago* (London: Cohen & West, 1957), pp. 35, 37.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture, 1790-1860*; Ian Haywood, *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, Politics and the People, 1790-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Andrew King, *The London Journal, 1845-83: Periodicals, Production and Gender* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> G.W.M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London*, ed. by Trefor Thomas (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> G.W.M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London (1844-45)* (Richmond, VA: Valancourt Books, 2012). Collins also edited an edition of Reynolds’s Gothic novel *The Necromancer* for Valancourt in 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Ruth Doherty, ‘Representations of Overpopulation in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction’ (Trinity College Dublin, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Laurence Scott, ‘A Tale of Two Terrors: The Aesthetics of Terror in the Novels of London and Paris, 1840-1950’ (King’s College London, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> *Remarkable Reynolds: Dickens’s Radical Rival*, held at London’s Westminster Archives on 26 July 2014.

Anne Humpherys and Louis James in 2008, remains the only volume devoted solely to Reynolds and his work;<sup>32</sup> and, as stated above, my thesis will be the first to examine the twelve volumes of the *Mysteries of London* in their entirety.

One possible reason for the lack of critical attention Reynolds's work has historically received is the physical elusiveness of his texts. A consequence of the ephemerality of popular literature, this problem is noted by the *Bookseller* as early as 1879.

In the July number of the *Bookseller*, 1868, we gave a list of Mr Reynolds's works. As will be seen, it was neither complete nor accurate. Indeed, there are no means of making a perfect list, for the books themselves are not to be found in anything like order in the British Museum Catalogue; some of them have disappeared, and their issue in penny numbers has long been discontinued.<sup>33</sup>

What was already a problem in Reynolds's lifetime has persistently hindered literary study: no scholarly library holds a complete set of his works, and James, writing in 2008, admits that 'It is impossible at this date to compile a complete and accurate bibliography of Reynolds's fiction.'<sup>34</sup>

However, although many of Reynolds's approximately thirty novels can be hard to locate, such is not the case for *The Mysteries of London*. Available in full at several university libraries, they can also be found online, and downloaded for electronic consumption;<sup>35</sup> so that lack of availability cannot explain the lack of critical attention to this particular work. A more convincing explanation might be found in the serial's length and structural complexity. Published in weekly instalments between 1844 and 1856, the *Mysteries* has been called 'the

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<sup>32</sup> Anne Humpherys and Louis James, *G.W.M. Reynolds : Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> 'Obituary for G.W.M. Reynolds'.

<sup>34</sup> Humpherys and James, *G.W.M. Reynolds : Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*, p. 271.

<sup>35</sup> A complete electronic transcription of the first series can be found at Lee Jackson's Dictionary of Victorian London (<<http://www.victorianlondon.org/mysteries/mysteries-00-introduction.htm>>), and all but one volume of the subsequent series is available through Google Books. It is also possible to download an electronic edition for Kindle.

longest British work of fiction in the nineteenth century'.<sup>36</sup> Making this claim, Louis James estimates the serial's length at somewhere around six million words, which would make it approximately seventeen times as long as *Bleak House*. Even amongst penny bloods the *Mysteries*' length was unusual. James Malcolm Rymer's *Varney the Vampire* (1845-47), which like the *Mysteries* was an early mass-market success, was completed in a total of approximately 670,000 words.

The massive difference in scale suggests that structurally, Reynolds's work might have more in common with a soap opera than with the serial novels to which it has more frequently been compared. Indeed, Reynolds anticipates the vocabulary of contemporary television by dividing the serial's twelve-year length into six 'series', each spanning two years (and two complete volumes). Unlike most television shows, however, each of the *Mysteries*' series is self-contained. Each pair of volumes can be read as a separate novel, though there is some overlap of characters between series 1 and 2, and series 3 and 4, and the whole twelve volumes share thematic and political concerns.

To confuse matters further, the four final series, or eight final volumes (from 1848-56) were published not as *The Mysteries of London*, but as *The Mysteries of the Court of London*. Reynolds eventually fell out with his original publisher George Vickers (the argument possibly precipitated by Reynolds's 1846 decision to leave Vickers' *London Journal* and establish the rival *Reynolds's Miscellany*); and in 1848 he severed their connection in favour of the apparently more congenial John Dicks.<sup>37 38</sup> Despite the change in

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<sup>36</sup> Louis James, 'From Egan to Reynolds: The Shaping of Urban 'Mysteries' in England and France, 1821-48', *European Journal of English Studies*, 14 (2010), 95-106 (p.101).

<sup>37</sup> In a move which has confused some twentieth-century scholars of Reynolds's work, Vickers continued publishing a *Mysteries of London* after Reynolds's departure from his stable. Written by Thomas Miller and E. Leman Blanchard, the continuation did not enjoy the success of Reynolds's original and I do not consider it part of the canonical text.

<sup>38</sup> Formalised into a business partnership in 1863, Dicks's and Reynolds's business relationship would last until death, or indeed beyond it; Dicks purchased Reynolds's copyrights in 1864, and *Reynolds's Newspaper* was published by the John Dicks Press until 1929. (For more on Dicks's life and achievements, see Anne



title, it is clear that Reynolds saw both *Mysteries* as a single work. The afterword which concludes the final volume refers to ‘*twelve years*’ of serialisation coming together in ‘one vast whole’: ‘an Encyclopedia of Tales’ in ‘twelve volumes’ (*Court* VIII.412).

The significance of yearly volume divisions in what was primarily a weekly serial is a reminder of the diverse formats in which Reynolds’s work appeared. The cheapest and most accessible of these was the weekly number, eight pages printed with no wrapper and a woodcut illustration on the front. This was priced at 1d. Monthly instalments collected the previous four weeks’ editions and came with a standardised paper cover, bearing a different illustration for each series.<sup>39</sup> These were priced at 5d; or occasionally, with the close of a year and a volume, at 6d. The additional penny paid for the extra paper necessary to fund a list of chapter titles and illustrations: ‘profit margins were tight’ at this end of the literary market.<sup>40</sup> More affluent readers still could have waited and paid for the yearly volumes, priced at 6s 6d.<sup>41</sup> Reynolds’s publishers also made the covers available for separate sale,<sup>42</sup> and there is

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Humpherys’s article in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, or Guy Dicks, *The John Dicks Press* [London: Lulu.com, 2006], a company history written by one of Dicks’s descendants.)

<sup>39</sup> Almost all of the surviving early editions of Reynolds’s work are bound into volume format. However, the John Johnson Collection at Oxford University holds all but one of the weekly numbers of *The Mysteries of London*’s first series, as well as eleven of this series’ 24 monthly parts (neither of these items has yet been catalogued on the public system). Cambridge University Library holds the first 22 monthly parts of the first series of *The Mysteries of the Court of London*, or the third series of Reynolds’s work (miscatalogued as weekly parts; almost a complete set). The monthly covers of the first series carry a Gothic illustration of a man and a masked woman leaning on a tomb, with the dome of St Paul’s visible in the background. In contrast, the part instalments of the third bear Reynolds’s own image: perhaps a testimony to his increased fame, or an attempt to reassert ownership in light of Vickers’s competing continuation.

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth James and Helen R. Smith, *Penny Dreadfuls and Boys’ Adventures: The Barry Ono Collection of Victorian Popular Literature in the British Library* (London: British Library, 1998), p. xiii.

<sup>41</sup> The extent of Reynolds’s popularity amongst middle-class readers is still hard to determine. Trefor Thomas comments in the introduction to his abridged edition of the *Mysteries*’ first series that ‘some surviving sets of the novels have original inscriptions which indicate a respectable middle-class, or even aristocratic, ownership of the volumes’ (G.W.M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London*, ed. by Trefor Thomas [Keele: Keele University Press, 1996], p. xvii.), and Reynolds himself claims in an 1851 ‘Notices to Correspondents’ column that ‘[Bradbury and Evans] propagate an infamous falsehood when they represent such periodicals as THE MISCELLANY, the LONDON JOURNAL, and the FAMILY HERALD to be read only by the *lower orders*: for they circulate widely amongst the middle class, and the Volumes obtain a sale in the richer sphere.’ (G.W.M. Reynolds, ‘Notices to Correspondents’, *Reynolds’s Miscellany*, 3 [1848], 63-64.). It is possible that Reynolds’s reputation dissuaded such readers from acknowledging their interest. Andrew King writes that “‘Slumming”, whereby a culturally respectable reader takes pleasure in mass-market reading, was in the nineteenth century a love that dare not speak its name’; and John Dix suggests that the *Mysteries*’ style was so ‘taking... that persons who would have been ashamed to have owned that they read such a work, did so stealthily.’ (Dix, *Lions, Living*

evidence that at least some of the serial's readers collected their weekly or monthly parts for eventual binding into volume form.<sup>43</sup>

All these various shifts and subdivisions present a particular problem to the scholar working on Reynolds's *magnum opus*: the need to define the boundaries of the text to be discussed. Much of the existing critical work on the *Mysteries* focuses solely on Reynolds's first series;<sup>44</sup> which does a fair job of representing the themes and concerns of the work more broadly, but an exclusive focus on which can I think be misleading. In particular, the symmetrical structure and obvious moral didacticism of this series' central storyline, focusing on a pair of brothers' opposing moral development, have lent themselves to scholarly readings founded in the aesthetics of melodrama. Anne Humpherys's 1983 article 'The Geometry of the Modern City' suggests that 'the conventional melodramatic form of the novel [is]... the true ordering principle that controls the chaos of the modern city'; balancing Reynolds's near-anarchic vision of a society which carries 'nothing' at its heart.<sup>45</sup> Humpherys played an important part in bringing Reynolds to critical attention, and has continued an important scholar of his work: but her argument in this instance suffers from a failure to consider the serial as a whole. The first series' 'totally conventional' resolution, with good

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*and Dead; or Personal Recollections of The "Great and Gifted"*, p. 284; King, *The London Journal, 1845-83: Periodicals, Production and Gender*, p. 11.)

<sup>42</sup> According to a response in the *Miscellany's* 'Notices to Correspondents' column, the covers for the journal's annual volumes were available at 1s. 5d. Given that the two works were otherwise similarly priced, it seems reasonable to assume that the *Mysteries'* bindings would have cost the same. (G.W.M. Reynolds, 'Notices to Correspondents', in *Reynolds's Miscellany* [1848], pp. 335-36.)

<sup>43</sup> Heywood told the Parliamentary Select Committee that of 'the parties who read the "Court of London", 'many are regular subscribers, and we have the volumes brought to bind'. (-, 'Parliamentary Papers, Report of the Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps', p. 379.)

<sup>44</sup> For example, Juliet John's essay on Reynolds and popular culture, published as part of the Humpherys and James collection; Ellen Rosenman's article on the *Mysteries'* performing women; and Sara Hackenberg's comparison of the *Mysteries'* and *Varney the Vampire's* corpse-like villains. All three pieces make convincing points about Reynolds's work which are largely substantiated in its later development but in every case there are examples of plots and characters from later series which offer suggestive possibilities for developing their ideas. (Sara Hackenberg, 'Vampires and Resurrection Men: The Perils and Pleasures of the Embodied Past in 1840s Sensational Fiction', *Victorian Studies*, 52 [2009], 63-75; Juliet John, 'Reynolds's 'Mysteries' and Popular Culture', in *G.W.M. Reynolds: Nineteenth Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*, ed. by Anne Humpherys and Louis James [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008], pp. 163-77; Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, 'Spectacular Women: The "Mysteries of London" And the Female Body', *Victorian Studies*, 40 [1996], 31-64.)

<sup>45</sup> Anne Humpherys, 'The Geometry of the Modern City: G.W.M. Reynolds and *the Mysteries of London*', *Browning Institute Studies*, 11 (1983), 69-80.

brother Richard prosperous and bad brother Eugene dead in disgrace, has less ideological weight when we remember that the serial continued publishing for a further ten years.

If Humpherys's plot-based argument is unconvincing, her emphasis on Reynolds's serial as a melodramatic work is not. Historically, describing a work as "melodramatic" has been just another reason to dismiss it: Elaine Hadley comments that the label has been treated by critics 'as a literary convention of vague definition... situated beyond the boundaries of what has been deemed literature'.<sup>46</sup> In fact, as Hadley (and others)<sup>47</sup> have shown, melodrama was a literary 'mode' founded in specific economic and political conditions,<sup>48</sup> with distinctive narrative strategies quite as considered and deliberate as those employed by the more widely respected literary realists.<sup>49</sup> *The Mysteries of London* is demonstrably influenced by the aesthetics of this (originally) theatrical form: evincing melodrama's influence not only in its reliance on clichéd or repetitive plots, but in its simplistic characterisation, its tendency to build towards formal tableaux, and in the heightened, 'florid' language recognised by Dalziel.<sup>50</sup>

By and large, these qualities do not align with received literary good taste; which has tended rather to emphasise understatement and psychological complexity and repudiate an overreliance on coincidence or repetition. But although they have remained resolutely outside the literary pale, these same conventions have maintained their popularity within many contemporary popular texts; particularly women's formula romance. Janice Radway's

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<sup>46</sup> Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800-1885* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> Notably Martha Vicinus, Peter Brooks and William Morse: Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976); William R Morse, 'Desire and the Limits of Melodrama', in *Melodrama*, ed. by James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 17-30; Martha Vicinus, "'Helpless and Unfriended": Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama', *New Literary History*, 13 (1981), 127-43.

<sup>48</sup> Specifically, 'the social, economic and epistemological changes that characterised the consolidation of market society in the nineteenth century'. (Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800-1885*, p. 3.)

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Dalziel, *Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago*, p. 3.

*Reading the Romance* (1984), a reader-response study of the genre, observes its distinctive tone, which Radway describes as ‘straining after an identifiably “literary” effect’ and which is characterised by a combination of ‘an exceedingly simple syntax’ with ‘the passive voice... subordinate clause constructions, elaborate similes, and rhetorical flourishes’.<sup>51</sup> This could be a description of Reynolds’s style.<sup>52</sup> In another suggestive comparison, Scott McCracken, in *Pulp* (1998), comments on the critical tendency to discuss formula fiction (both romance and crime) in terms of its ending, suggesting that the habits of formula *readers* might complicate such a scholarly approach. ‘[F]ormula romances... are commonly read one after another. The experience of reading is thus not of a single text, but of multiple texts in series, where each closure is just a prelude to another opening.’<sup>53</sup> This quotation might also describe the unusual structure of Reynolds’s work: ‘multiple texts in series’ where every ending is also a promise of more. In both cases, the continuities between Reynolds’s work and today’s popular literature suggests that further thought about the *Mysteries*’ melodramatic mechanics ought to have implications for wider ideas about mass market fiction.

McCracken’s emphasis on the repetitive structures of formula fiction is particularly apposite to my understanding of the narrative strategies of Reynolds’s text: which operates by reiterating and reworking particular plots and motifs. As argued by Peter Brooks in *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), melodrama ‘exteriorises conflict and psychic structure’.<sup>54</sup> Anxieties and emotions which realist novels would explore through the interior insights of first person narration or free indirect discourse are represented by melodrama as struggles with external forces. More specifically, in Reynolds’s work, images which realist fiction

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<sup>51</sup> Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 192.

<sup>52</sup> George Worth’s description of melodramatic rhetoric as ‘declamatory and highly structured’, characterised by ‘archaic diction [and the]... use of parallel clauses’, provides a useful comparison. (George J Worth, *Dickensian Melodrama: A Reading of the Novels* [Lawrence, KA: University of Kansas, 1978], pp. 9, 15.)

<sup>53</sup> Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 89.

<sup>54</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 35.

would leave comfortably metaphorical are translated into unlikely physical life. His fallen women, to take one neat example, have a tendency to fall to their deaths.<sup>55</sup> The *Mysteries* therefore lends itself to a structuralist interpretation: a quality emphasised in Michael Kirby's melodrama 'manifesto', printed in the introduction to a 1980 collection of critical essays on the genre. 'In melodrama, structuralism finds clear, dynamic structures that repeat themselves in limited variations and versions'.<sup>56</sup> This can be done through stereotyped or conventional storylines (repeated plots) or through thematic motifs which recur throughout the work. Situations are reconfigured and repeated in the service of working through a difficult philosophical point.

This repetition gives the *Mysteries* what might be construed as a linear structure, long and shallow in contrast to the focused depth of the realist novel. In such a work, a single scene might operate on multiple levels of meaning; in the *Mysteries*, the same story is told and retold, accruing additional layers of significance with every repetition. This distinction between melodramatic surface and realist depth evokes an opposition absolutely fundamental to Reynolds's work. As Laura Mulvey writes, '[t]he inside/outside opposition is central to the themes of melodrama':<sup>57</sup> Reynolds's serial not only aspires to a structure that carries meaning on the surface, but preoccupies itself with the question of what 'surface' might mean. In particular, the *Mysteries* worries continually at the problematic notion that what is shown on the outside need not reflect what is hidden beneath.

It is a theme which Reynolds most notably explores through a single persistent image: that of the displaced or reanimated corpse. Dead bodies turn up in unexpected (and unwelcome) places; or those characters thought to be dead appear some time later, alive.

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<sup>55</sup> For example, Cecilia Harborough, whose separation from her husband is followed by an affair with the good-looking rector Reginald Tracy. Tracy murders his housekeeper after she discovers their affair; imprisoned and awaiting execution, he persuades Cecilia into bringing him poison and then writes a letter to his lawyer exposing her. She kills herself in a dramatic fall from the Monument. (*London* I.382-395, II.25-28, 39-42, 54-68)

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Daniel Gerrould, 'Melodrama', (New York, NY: New York Literary Forum, 1980), p. xiv.

<sup>57</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. xxxi.

Across the serial's twelve-year span, two separate criminals, Tom Rain and Philip Ramsey, are restored to life after being publicly hanged (*London* III.166-67; *Court* I.234-37); another corpse, that of the banker's clerk Michael Martin, is reanimated on the surgeon's table (*London* I.328-331). Ariadne Varian spends several days in a deathlike coma, reviving only as the coffin is about to be closed (*Court* III.332-344); and Harriet Saxondale is so convinced of her son's demise that when she meets him twenty years later, she not only fails to recognise him but tries to persuade him to sleep with her (*Court* V.104-110). Even those bodies which do get buried resolutely refuse to stay put. Profit-seeking grave robbers, amateur detectives and even an urban vampire roam the streets of Reynolds's London, digging through the refuse of the overcrowded cemeteries; and disturbing not only the sleep of the dead, but the equanimity of the serial's ruling class.

Taking my cue from Reynolds, I draw on this motif of the body displaced as a structural principle for my own work. Each chapter of this thesis begins with a body that is in one way or another not where it ought to be, and works out from that to explore the resonances of this single repeated image within the context of that chapter's concerns. This is possible because of the imaginative richness that the image possesses: a quality attested by its contemporary popularity. Reynolds was not the only writer of early penny fiction to be preoccupied with the reanimated corpse. Critics Sally Powell (in 2004) and Sara Hackenberg (in 2009) both track a series of unruly bodies through the popular serials of the 1840s.<sup>58</sup> The Sweeney Todd narrative, published as *The String of Pearls* in 1846-47, is now the best-remembered of these sanguine tales; but other popular titles like *Varney the Vampire* (1845-47) and *Manuscripts from the Diary of a Physician* (1843-44) share this and the *Mysteries'* preoccupation with corpses mistreated, manhandled and resurrected. 'Secreted in

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<sup>58</sup> Hackenberg, 'Vampires and Resurrection Men: The Perils and Pleasures of the Embodied Past in 1840s Sensational Fiction'; Sally Powell, 'Black Markets and Cadaverous Pies: The Corpse, Urban Trade and Industrial Consumption in the Penny Blood', in *Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation*, ed. by Andrew Maunder and Grace Moore (Farnham: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 45-55.

sewers, sealed up in cellars, left to corrupt in tumble-down houses, unearthed fragment-by-sensational-fragment in overcrowded cemeteries, butchered and sold in pies, emitting noxious gases, even causing explosions', the 'displaced urban corpse' is impossible to ignore.<sup>59</sup>

Powell associates the image of the displaced corpse with working-class anxieties in the wake of industrialisation: linking the casual facility with which the bodies of the poor are exhumed, dismembered and distributed to the physical vulnerability of the period's industrial workers. Hackenberg, considering *Varney the Vampire* and the *Mysteries*' first series, focuses on the serials' use of villains who are somehow undead. Although Varney's survival is supernatural and the Resurrection Man (in Reynolds's work) is at least supposed to be human, Hackenberg reads both characters as embodying past violence against the working class, presenting the threat of retribution against their oppressors.

Both Hackenberg and Powell make persuasive arguments, and I draw on their work in the course of my own. But there seem to me to be many more possible readings of this pervasive trope of the body exposed. As the various chapters of this thesis discuss, stories about live bodies where dead ones ought to be prompt questions about reading and interpretation; about the objectification of certain social groups; about the commodification of working-class bodies under capitalism; and about the possibility of concealing or escaping one's personal past. Reading the *Mysteries* at length, as it is possible to do in a project of this size, imparts a sense of the way in which Reynolds's linear structure enables him to work with all of these meanings simultaneously. The image becomes richer with repetition. Each body, as it is uncovered, acts as both parallel with and contrast to those that have preceded it.

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<sup>59</sup> Powell, 'Black Markets and Cadaverous Pies: The Corpse, Urban Trade and Industrial Consumption in the Penny Blood', p. 45.

As my first chapter explores, this narrative technique can be seen as Reynolds's response to a contemporary critical discourse that valued inaccessibility as an indicator of the profound. The chapter examines how Reynolds uses images of forgers and their work in order to ask questions about the origin of artistic value, and to dispute the idea that obscurity connotes philosophical depth. His arguments on this point resonate suggestively with recent debates in the field of Victorian Studies around the notion of surface reading: and serve to interrogate the educated classes' comfortable certainty in their own reading confidence. As the final section of the chapter suggests, this challenge to middle-class interpretive authority carried additional weight in the context of the period's urbanisation. An inability to read accurately had implications for one's relations not only with texts, but with other people.

The first chapter suggests, amongst its other conclusions, that Reynolds's text is characterised by a self-reflexive interest in the literary market with which it engages. My second chapter builds on this observation to examine how Reynolds's work was condemned by contemporary critics under the charge of its obscenity. Censorship laws were another way in which the early Victorians responded to the rise of the mass market: they promised another possibility for regulation. The *Mysteries*' unabashed eroticism made them a particular target for vilification, and, like the serial's supposed shallowness, has proven a hindrance to Reynolds' literary longevity.

In fact, the relative sexual openness of Reynolds's work can be read as a challenge to the limiting authority by which government figures attempted to regulate the literary market. Disputing the popular depiction of the mass reading audience as impressionable and naïve, Reynolds dismantles the false distinctions between high art, popular culture, and pornography. Through the story of a carefully curated aristocratic collection of pornography, he suggests that censorship is merely a method of cultural control. And through the further stories of a series of women who take control of their own objectified image, he presents the



image of what might happen if this censorship were evaded: if the cultural groups conventionally objectified by Victorian society were able to see themselves as they were typically depicted and to capitalise on that knowledge in order to manipulate those who observed them.

Reynolds's deconstruction of the ways in which women were socially oppressed through their objectification dovetails with his concerns about the treatment of the working class. My third chapter examines the ways in which early Victorian legislative and social changes conspired to alienate and commodify the working class; a behaviour that the 1832 Anatomy Act made particularly explicit. Legalising a trade in paupers' bodies, the Act worked effectively to dehumanise the poor. Reynolds's distaste for this development is evident in his portrayal of resurrection men within his text. These are villainous and sometimes terrifying characters: but the cause of their villainy can ultimately be found in a corrupt aristocracy reluctant to tackle its own dirty work. As in his depiction of objectified women, Reynolds posits revolutionary possibilities through his depiction of a working man who refuses to engage in the resurrection trade, choosing instead to expose the secrets that his society has persistently tried to conceal.

My final chapter builds on the themes of my third; but where the third chapter positions Reynolds against the Gothic of the late eighteenth century, the fourth looks forward to the crime fiction of the 1860s. Operating on what has been described as a 'blackmail economy', Reynolds's serial is ahead of its time, anticipating the later popularity of both sensation and detective fiction. Engaging with contemporary debates about personal privacy, Reynolds distinguishes himself from the detective literature of Poe (his contemporary) and Conan Doyle (his successor) in refusing absolutely to condemn the blackmailer's art. One explanation for this can be found in blackmail's established radical history; the other, I suggest, in the universality with which blackmail is practised within Reynolds's text. Rather

than merely a strategy (as it is in Doyle) to reinforce an existing imbalance of power, blackmail in Reynolds presents a prospect of egalitarianism, acting as a symbol of the possibilities of knowledge for all. Diffusing the knowledge of crucial secrets across the characters of his text, Reynolds decentres the detective figures who would rise to such blinding prominence within later Victorian crime fiction. In contrast to the authoritative investigating policeman or middle-class male, Reynolds's detectives are frequently drawn from marginalised social or racial groups. As I argue in the final section of my work, this seems to me to be eminently consistent with the serial's wider argument about the importance of knowledge in redressing social inequality.

The *Mysteries of London*, then, I suggest, is not only one of the most important examples of the texts which developed in the early days of the literary mass market, but is also a crucial example of a text *about* this mass market: which engages consistently with its own position as an artistic work within a system of commerce and exchange, and which is concerned to explore the relationship between this commodity-status and that of its working class readers.

**‘A picture of such extraordinary merit that no-one could understand it’: surface meaning and surface value in the new mass market**



**Figure 2**

Halfway through the *Mysteries*' first series, the policeman Morris Benstead leads the hero, Richard Markham, through 'the maze of Saint Giles's' slum (*London* II.1). They are on a quest for Markham's nemesis, the Resurrection Man; and although the search is unsuccessful, Richard does learn something from his explorations. Benstead takes him to Rat's Castle, a 'night-house' frequented by 'all kinds of low people'. To gain entry, Richard

poses as ‘a [wealthy] stranger, impelled by curiosity’ – a slummer – and, inside, makes a disquieting discovery (II.2).

The place is full of beggars disrobing; casting aside their crutches and wooden legs, or reclothing themselves in ‘coat and shoes’ after a day spent ‘almost naked’ on the streets. Benstead meticulously points out every deception to his charge, listing a series of bluffs and swindles deployed by the poor to extort money from the rich.

The man over there in sailor's clothes tumbled down an area when he was drunk, and broke his leg: he was obliged to have it cut off; and so he now passes himself off as one of Nelson's own tars, though he never saw the sea in his life... that feller there isn't married; and so he goes with a woman who frequents this place, and they hire three or four children from the poor people in this neighbourhood, at the rate of two-pence a day each child, and its grub... Look at that man who carves at the second table: he can see well enough to cut himself the tit-bits; but to-morrow he will be totally blind in one of the fashionable squares... He keeps his eyes fast shut, and colours the lids with carmine and vermilion. (II.3)

Richard, a good-hearted, charity-supporting member of the middle classes, is appalled by what he sees, ‘almost... disposed to doubt’ the veracity of *any* of the poverty and misery he has seen during his time in London. ‘[F]lushing with indignation’, he demands of the policeman “‘why [he] do[es] not interfere to protect the public?’” Benstead’s answer is almost blasé. “‘Lord, sir!’” said the constable, “‘if we took up all persons that we know to be impostors, we should have half London in custody.’” (II.4)

Such a scene, with the middle-class explorer peeping behind the scenes of the theatre of working-class life, had already become a staple of the urban mysteries genre by the time this chapter of Reynolds’s work appeared in September 1845. Pierce Egan’s *Life in London* (1821), one of the genre’s first examples, includes a long scene in a working-class gin palace where its undergraduate heroes go looking for ‘a *bit of fun*’ and enjoy something very close to Richard’s experience. ‘MOTHER BRIMSTONE, an old *cadger*... who is pouring some *blue*

ruin down the baby's throat to stop it crying, has borrowed the *kid*, in order to assist her in exciting charity from the passing stranger in the street.'<sup>1</sup> Similarly, James Grant in his *Lights and Shadows of London Life* (1842) describes one beggar, 'the late and notorious Peter Hill' whose facility for disguise was such that despite receiving 'no fewer than 300' complaints against him, the police 'passed him day after day in the public streets, without recognising him'.<sup>2</sup>

This was, then, a popular trope, and one which Reynolds's readers might have expected to find in his work. But the scene still reads oddly in the context of a serial which purports to be advocating the working-class cause. Painting the beggars on the London streets as impostors exploiting the gullibility of the rich seems to complicate the claims Reynolds elsewhere makes on their behalf, for the sympathy of his readers and of the government. "Were the interior of this den but once exposed to general view," as Richard says, "charity would be at an end, and the deserving poor would suffer for the unprincipled impostor." (II.4) The acknowledgement goes some way towards moderating the impact of the scene – Richard recognises the claim of the 'deserving poor' – but exposing the Rat's Castle customers to 'general view' is exactly what Reynolds's mass-market serial seems to be doing.

In this chapter, I put forward an argument to resolve this apparent ideological tension. It centres on the social changes, provoked by industrialisation, to which the development of melodrama has been ascribed: the shift from a primarily rural to an urban society, and the increasing objectification, or commodification, of the working class. During the nineteenth century, the population of England displaced itself from the country into the towns.<sup>3</sup> Rather

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<sup>1</sup> Pierce Egan, *Life in London: Or, the Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn, Esq, and His Elegant Friend Corinthian Tom, Accompanied by Bob Logic, the Oxonian, in Their Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis* (London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1821), pp. 178-79.

<sup>2</sup> James Grant, *Lights and Shadows of London Life* (London: Saunders & Otley, 1842), pp. II.11-13.

<sup>3</sup> 'In the century before 1901 the numbers living in cities of at least 50,000 inhabitants had grown from 1.46 millions to 15.1 millions [sic].' B.I. Coleman, 'Introduction', in *The Idea of the City in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by B.I. Coleman (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 1-21 (p. 1).

than neighbouring families whose whole history was bound up with one's own, a citizen of the period's new urban society had increasingly to live and work amongst strangers. At the same time, industrialisation entailed an estrangement between employers and workers that prompted anxieties about the objectification of the working class. It is to these anxieties that Sally Powell, in an essay of 2004, ascribes the recurrence in nineteenth-century popular fiction of narratives describing the displaced corpse: 'penny fiction writers responded... to the [changing] relationship between the... individual and the Victorian city, by suggesting that the commodification of the human body was integrated into its commercialism'.<sup>4</sup> This was true in particular of workers in the industrial north, dehumanised into "hands" instead of human beings; but the same commercial impulse extended its reach over the whole of the country.

The notion of the commodity, and of the commodification of the poor, seems to me to be vitally important to an understanding of Reynolds's work. Like the strangers with whom the city-dwelling Victorian came into contact on a daily basis, the commodity is fundamentally mysterious. In particular, the question of whence a commodity derives its value (does it relate to scarcity? to labour input? to the consumer's desire?) evokes the same tension between surface and depth – or appearance and reality – as is evinced by the beggars' deceit. Moreover, the rise of the literary mass market (which in itself is a central theme of Reynolds's serial) made it necessary to consider the commodity-status of the book. As Andrew Miller suggests, this development was fraught with both 'possibilities and dangers'; which many of the writers of the period felt bound to address.<sup>5</sup> Authors became anxious that books, exposed to the market, would lose their distinctive status and become objects of

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<sup>4</sup> Sally Powell, 'Black Markets and Cadaverous Pies: The Corpse, Urban Trade and Industrial Consumption in the Penny Blood', in *Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation*, ed. by Andrew Maunder and Grace Moore (Farnham: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 45-55 (p. 48).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew H. Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 13.

ordinary worth. That very anxiety begs the question of the particular value of the work of art: by what right ought it to be considered in a different category to other commodities?

This is an issue that is crystallised with particular clarity in the example of the forgery, a very particular type of commodity and one which Reynolds explores in the *Mysteries* through the depiction of several characters who make their money through fraud. As Ian Haywood has observed, forgeries prompt consideration of the ways in which a 'culture imbues a work of art with authority and significance'.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, the forgery seems to expose the importance of extra-aesthetic factors in determining the value of art. A convincing forgery that is later revealed as a fake is liable to shed a good deal of its value, despite the fact that its outward appearance has not changed. Like the working-class beggars who profit from their invented, sympathetic histories, a large proportion of an artwork's worth depends on the story of its past.

The distinction between the surface value of a piece of art – what people would pay for it based solely on its aesthetic appearance – and the less immediately tangible circumstances of its creation, which also exert a significant effect on its price, suggests a possible theoretical framework through which to consider Reynolds's work. 'Surface reading' is a critical movement that has gathered momentum particularly over the last five years, after a special issue of the journal *Representations* was devoted to the subject in 2009. According to that issue's editors, Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, 'surface reading' brings together a disparate set of critical practices which are united primarily by what they define themselves against: the hermeneutic (or 'suspicious', or 'paranoid') criticism popular in the 1980s and 90s. Hermeneutic criticism conceives of the text as a substantive body of meaning concealed behind a deceptive surface. The critic is tasked with working through the tangle of surface meanings in order to uncover the deeper truth within; in the words of the critic Fredric

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<sup>6</sup> Ian Haywood, *Faking It: Art and the Politics of Forgery* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1987), p. 9.

Jameson, ‘restoring to the surface of the text [a] repressed and buried reality’.<sup>7</sup> As the term suggests, ‘surface reading’ seeks to reconfigure this critical paradigm. Instead of conceiving criticism as a journey into the hinterland of a text’s unconscious, scholars working in a surface-focused critical mode attempt to restrict their focus to what is immediately in front of them: positioning a surface, to paraphrase Best and Marcus, as something to look *at* rather than something to be seen *through*.<sup>8</sup>

In this chapter, then, I explore Reynolds’s depictions of forgers and forgeries through the critical lens of surface reading. I draw in particular on the stories of two forgers, one from the *Mysteries*’ third series and one from its sixth; of which I argue that an analysis can show the development of a coherent aesthetic theory on Reynolds’s part. This theory both responds to the new market conditions under which the *Mysteries* was produced, and reacts against a prevailing, elitist discourse which stressed the importance of literary depth.

The chapter’s first section deals with melodrama, a genre that critics have defined through its determined exteriority. Contextualising melodrama’s development within the economic development that I have outlined in this introduction, I suggest that Reynolds’s variation on the genre can be seen to extend its meaning; transforming melodrama’s aspiration towards transparent morality into a more sophisticated argument about the possibilities of popular fiction. Section two focuses on Wilkie Collins’s article, ‘The Unknown Public’. Published in *Household Words* in 1858, Collins’s piece is centrally preoccupied with the practice of reading and interpretation as it is performed by the new mass reading audience: the ‘unknown public’ of his title. Both compelling and self-contradictory, the article offers a

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<sup>7</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction’, *Representations*, 108 (2009), 1-21 (p. 9). The exact quotation identifies the surface as ‘what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*’.



useful example of the attitude that Reynolds's work sought to contradict; and exposes, in its contradictions, an insecurity which the *Mysteries* neatly skewers.

Section three moves on to explore in more detail the forgers who appear in Reynolds's work. Through his depiction of two 'artistic' forgers and their customers, Reynolds casts doubt on existing conceptions of the traditional or elite reading public, challenging an interpretative paradigm that emphasised the immaterial text at the cost of all else. Reynolds's depiction of wealthy readers making interpretative mistakes leads me into my concluding section four; which returns to the story of the false beggars of St Giles's in order to demonstrate how Reynolds's aesthetic theory might translate into something like a manifesto for social action.

## 1.1 Surface reading and surface writing: melodrama's dramatic legibility

The term 'surface reading' acts as a broad umbrella under which a number of different critical approaches have been collected. Eve Sedgwick's idea of 'reparative reading', and Sharon Marcus's 'just reading', stress the importance of abandoning preconceptions and working carefully with the evidence provided by the text.<sup>9</sup> Both women are working in the field of queer theory and their arguments in both cases can be immediately contextualised as suggesting a more open-minded approach to ideas about Victorian same-sex relationships; a desire to avoid forcing nineteenth-century perspectives into the categories imposed by our own society. It seems reasonable, however, to suggest that a similar approach might be applied to popular fiction; another genre whose reception has tended to be affected by critical prejudice.

Margaret Cohen, whose work appears in Best and Marcus's issue of *Representations*, makes an additional case against hermeneutic criticism as a strategy for reading popular fiction. Her article 'Narratology in the Archive of Literature' argues that narratological criticism is necessarily limited because it is shaped by the same works that it goes on to dissect:

the theories and descriptions we use to make sense of individual works are thoroughly intertwined with the artefacts themselves... narratologists' models of the novel based on the forward movement of plot and penetrating the depths of character and society abstract the mechanisms of the European realist lineage. Narratologists then use individual works in this lineage to exemplify the working of their theories.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Marcus discusses 'just reading' in the introduction to *Between Women* and Sedgwick outlines her ideas on reparative reading in *Touching Feeling*. (Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007]; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003].)

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Cohen, 'Narratology in the Archive of Literature', *Representations*, 108 (2009), 51-75 (pp. 53-54).

What this means (and although Cohen is writing about narratology, I would argue that her point holds more broadly true), is that critical practices shaped by a particular literary tradition are liable to misjudge or misprize works which operate outside this generic paradigm. Instead, Cohen suggests a process of recalibration; working outward from the examples of a particular genre (she instances the nineteenth-century shipwreck narrative) in order to understand a work's particular context and goals.

I would agree with Cohen that hermeneutic criticism is singularly ill-suited as an approach to Reynolds's work. Attempting to read the *Mysteries* against realist expectations about 'penetrating the depths of character' and 'the forward movement of plot', is not likely to be particularly fruitful, because these are not the standards by which Reynolds's text is constructed.<sup>11</sup> Rather, as I have suggested in my introduction, the *Mysteries* takes most of its generic cues from melodrama. Originating in post-revolutionary Parisian theatre, melodrama carefully privileges the surface; an aesthetic choice which manifests itself in clichéd or formulaic language, a reliance on symbolic gesture, repetitive plots, and shallow characterisation. In Elaine Hadley's words, 'melodrama's narrative theory represents characters in terms of plot... a character in a typical melodramatic narrative does not possess a 3D psychology – a representation of psychic depth distinct from his or her identity in social configurations.'<sup>12</sup> A critical style which aims at moving beyond this surface is therefore liable to miss the most important aspects of work in this generic tradition.

The development of melodrama, and in particular its insistence on 'immanent meaning',<sup>13</sup> seems to stem from the same economic developments that prompted anxiety about fraudulent begging. As industrialisation prompted a movement from the countryside

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800-1885* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 214.

<sup>13</sup> William R. Morse, 'Desire and the Limits of Melodrama', in *Melodrama*, ed. by James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 17-30 (p. 18).

into the cities, booming urban populations combined with developments in commercial practice with the result that business transactions were increasingly carried out between people whose personal lives and histories were unknown to one another. Lacking the reassurance of prior acquaintance with those to whom they were trusting their money, the city-dwelling population had to determine their veracity within what Richard Sennett describes in *The Fall of Public Man* (1977) as ‘the frame of the immediate situation... how one behaves – talks, gestures, moves, dresses, listens – within the situation itself’.<sup>14</sup> The situation was further complicated by ‘[t]he repeal of English sumptuary laws in the 1820s and 1830s’. ‘Now clothes were no longer directly connected to social class but... costumes to be donned as part of identity-games and roleplaying... part of the manipulable furniture of self-presentation.’<sup>15</sup> ‘The cosmopolitan city was a world in which physical appearance had no certainty’.<sup>16</sup> ‘trust was everywhere sought and constantly contested’.<sup>17</sup>

It makes sense that one might choose to respond to a world where appearances seemed increasingly treacherous by imagining one in which they were absolutely to be trusted. And critics working on melodrama have indeed concurred in suggesting that its valorisation of moral legibility is a response to these social conditions.<sup>18</sup> Martha Vicinus describes the genre as ‘a cultural response to the growing split under capitalism between production and personal life’,<sup>19</sup> Peter Brooks sees it as an attempt to rediscover ethical authority in an increasingly unstable world, and Elaine Hadley argues quite explicitly that it arose ‘as a polemical response to the social, economic, and epistemological changes that characterized the

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> Murray Baumgarten, ‘London, Dickens, and the Theater of Homelessness’, in *Victorian Urban Settings: Essays on the Nineteenth Century City and Its Contexts*, ed. by Debra N. Mancoff and D.J. Trela (New York, NY: Garland, 1996), pp. 74-88 (p. 80).

<sup>16</sup> Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, p. 176.

<sup>17</sup> David Vincent, *The Culture of Secrecy: Britain, 1832-1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> The idea of the melodramatic world as ‘morally legible’ comes from Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> Martha Vicinus, ‘“Helpless and Unfriended”: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama’, *New Literary History*, 13 (1981), 127-43 (p. 129).

consolidation of market society in the nineteenth century’;<sup>20</sup> specifically, ‘the structural shift from a patronage economy to a market economy... from an old and familiar vertical system of status relations to a new and unfamiliar horizontal system in which transactions were private, commercial, and contractual.’<sup>21</sup>

As Hadley’s comparison between ‘old’ and ‘new’ social systems suggests, another popular perspective on melodrama is that the genre is innately rather ‘conservative’ in its ‘formal imperatives’.<sup>22</sup> Hadley describes melodrama’s aesthetic as ‘nostalgic’<sup>23</sup> and notes its ‘conservative adherence to patriarchy’,<sup>24</sup> emphasising that its plots typically conclude with conflicts reconciled in an idyllic rural setting that harks back to an idealised feudal past. Similarly, George Worth observes that ‘[t]he chief good to be sought in the world of early nineteenth-century melodrama was a chastely happy home and family life’,<sup>25</sup> Vicinus baldly observes that ‘[d]omestic melodrama by its very nature is conservative’,<sup>26</sup> and Brooks argues that ‘[m]elodrama cannot figure the birth of a new society... but only the old society reformed.’<sup>27</sup> The suggestion is that melodrama’s adherence to an inherently feudal ideal limits the genre’s revolutionary possibilities. Its condition is rather one of regret.

Critics have struggled to reconcile this regressive ideology with the working-class audiences that melodrama attracted. William Morse, for instance, contrasts the genre’s ‘conservative... formal imperatives’ with ‘the popular political views of its mass audience’;<sup>28</sup> and Gabrielle Hyslop describes French critics’ ‘politically conservative’ hope that theatrical melodrama would ‘educate the public, particularly the common people, in bourgeois

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<sup>20</sup> Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800-1885*, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Morse, 'Desire and the Limits of Melodrama', (p. 26).

<sup>23</sup> Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800-1885*, p. 74.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>25</sup> George J Worth, *Dickensian Melodrama: A Reading of the Novels* (Laurence, KA: University of Kansas, 1978), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Vicinus, "'Helpless and Unfriended": Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama' (p. 141).

<sup>27</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 205.

<sup>28</sup> Morse, 'Desire and the Limits of Melodrama', (p. 26).

values'.<sup>29</sup> The same suggestion might be made about Reynolds, adopting a melodramatic mode for his mass-market serial. Vicinus makes the argument explicit, singling out Richard Markham (he who was so shocked by the beggars' deception) as an example of the '[a]ristocratic republicans' which melodrama deployed 'to bring together power and goodness' and make possible its happy endings.<sup>30</sup> This description of Richard's character is literally accurate. His story takes an unexpected turn in the *Mysteries*' second volume, as he embarks on a mission to win the hand of his love Isabella Montoni by fighting for the independence of Castelcicala, an (imaginary) Italian state of which her father is the exiled Prince (*London* II.50-54, 100-11, 165-74, 218-23). Victorious at the last, Richard returns to England in some state (*London* II.277-281). He reappears in the second series offering a lengthy disquisition on governance, having ascended the Castelcicalan throne before abolishing the monarchy altogether (*London* IV.88-94).

Reynolds's depiction of the misleading beggars of the London slums stands out still more starkly against Richard's benevolent aristocracy. Certainly, in and of itself, the beggars' deception is typical of the genre on which Reynolds is drawing. '[E]arly forms of the melodrama... manifest a predilection for transformations and disguises':<sup>31</sup> and William Axton understands the genre as being driven by 'the hidden relationships between disguised characters'.<sup>32</sup> But in melodrama (as one would expect from a genre that values legibility) disguise is associated with villainy; and melodramatic villains are drawn conventionally from the upper class. Douglas Jerrold's *Black-Eyed Susan*, which ran for over 150 performances at the Surrey Theatre in 1829, is typical: the eponymous Susan has her virtue threatened first by

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<sup>29</sup> Gabrielle Hyslop, 'Pixérécourt and the French Melodrama Debate: Instructing Boulevard Theatre Audiences', in *Melodrama*, ed. by James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 61-85 (p. 68).

<sup>30</sup> Vicinus, "'Helpless and Unfriended": Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama' (p. 132).

<sup>31</sup> Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800-1885*, p. 73.

<sup>32</sup> William F Axton, *Circle of Fire: Dickens's Vision and Style and the Popular Victorian Theatre* (Lexington, KY: Kentucky University Press, 1966), p. 25.

an avaricious landlord uncle and then by her sailor husband's villainous captain.<sup>33</sup> Both fulfil Peter Brooks's description of their type: 'those who have power and use it to hurt'.<sup>34</sup>

The *Mysteries* has its fair share of aristocratic scoundrels; for instance, Richard's brother, Eugene. The central antagonist of the *Mysteries*' first series, Eugene leaves home at the age of nineteen after a disagreement with his father, adopting a series of aliases to conceal his identity during his dizzy (although ultimately short-lived) rise to power. In the course of this social ascent he swindles Richard's future father-in-law out of £15,000 (I.115-17, 148-51, 250-54), pays a working-class seamstress for her virtue (I.216-19), attempts to assault another reluctant young woman (I.54-55) and blackmails his friends (I.239-42); all behaviours repeated throughout the rest of the serial's volumes by a parade of vicious Earls, Lords, Counts and even Princes.<sup>35</sup> But all Eugene's bad behaviour does not counteract the fact that many of the *Mysteries*' villains are not only morally, but financially impoverished. This does not mean only peripheral characters, like the beggars Richard encounters in the St Giles slum. Many of the serial's most prominent antagonists are drawn from the ranks of the working class.<sup>36</sup>

I would argue that one way to understand the purpose of Reynolds's depiction of a performing, or disguised, working class is to think about another important element of melodrama: the genre's emphasis on misunderstanding or misreading. This trope is fundamental to the essential melodramatic plot: the story 'of Virtue threatened by Vice and then redeemed, triumphant'.<sup>37</sup> A typical melodrama might depict the hero or (usually) heroine cast out of society for a transgression of which they are falsely accused. The villain,

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<sup>33</sup> Douglas Jerrold, *Black-Eyed Susan* (Boston: William V. Spencer, 1856).

<sup>34</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> Series three and four of the *Mysteries* (series one and two of *The Mysteries of the Court*) feature the Prince Regent (later George IV) as a central character. Chapter 4 of this thesis examines in more detail Reynolds's decision to focus on the Prince.

<sup>36</sup> I discuss these working-class masters of crime in more detail towards the end of Chapter 3.

<sup>37</sup> Worth, *Dickensian Melodrama: A Reading of the Novels*, p. 1.

appropriating moral authority, is able for some time to enjoy the rewards of his schemes before 'the *reconnaissance* or discovery scene' that forms the play's emotional climax; which reveals the innocence of the protagonist, prompts the punishment or expulsion of the villain, and restores the balance of justice. This 'moment of ethical evidence and recognition' at the heart of the narrative has parallels with tragic *anagnorisis*:<sup>38</sup> but where a tragic protagonist comes to understand the truth of his own situation, in melodrama it is the wider society that must correct its understanding of the heroine's moral nature. The melodramatic drama of community is, more specifically, a drama of social misinterpretation.

Such a plot creates an obvious contrast between the characters' legibility as regards the offstage audience, and the persistent misapprehension of their actions by those within the narrative diegesis of the play. This dramatic irony is deliberate. 'As much as 60-80% of a [melodramatic] script was spoken directly to the audience':<sup>39</sup> characters openly 'announce their moral identity' in a series of soliloquies and asides.<sup>40</sup> The manoeuvre affords the audience an authority which was also reflected in other aspects of melodramatic performance. Specifically, the audience was expected to 'participate in their entertainment through cries of "shame" for the arch-villain or "bravo" for the hero'.<sup>41</sup> Hadley cites the invitation of 'laughter, hisses, or tears' as 'the single constant criterion in the definition of stage melodrama'.<sup>42</sup> Beyond even this, Lynn Voskuil emphasises that 'early nineteenth century audiences' expected 'to comment [vociferously] on [the] performances' they witnessed, and

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<sup>38</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800-1885*, p. 68.

<sup>40</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 39.

<sup>41</sup> Christina Parolin, *Radical Spaces: Venues of Popular Politics in London 1790-C.1845* (Acton, ACT: ANU E Press, 2010), p. 227.

<sup>42</sup> Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800-1885*, p. 67.



even ‘to object where they saw fit’.<sup>43</sup> ‘[F]or early nineteenth-century plebeian spectators, “a place in the audience was also a voice.”’<sup>44</sup>

It seems to me that this model, of a confident offstage audience responding to the misinterpretations of the characters onstage, is one that Reynolds deliberately adopts in his work. More specifically, *The Mysteries of London* uses scenes like those with which my chapter began to dramatise upper-class *misreadings*: that is, to portray a traditional educated elite interpretatively baffled by the complexities of urban society. As a forlorn Richard is informed by his policeman-companion, “‘it’s very difficult for such as you to decide between the true and the false’” (II.3). This suggestion may be disquieting for the wealthy reader seeking a suitable object of benevolence; but from the perspective of a member of the working class, things are likely to appear somewhat different.

Like the forgeries which they resemble, the deceitful beggars described by Reynolds challenge ideas about cultural authority and, specifically, about where commodity-value originates. The scandal of their behaviour arises from the difference between the amount of ‘work’ they do, and the financial reward they receive. Earning more than a regular labourer but without putting in as much effort, the beggars upset the (Marxist) idea that the commodity derives its value from the amount of labour it embodies.<sup>45</sup> Instead, these working-class swindlers have recognised another possibility for creating value: the creation of a compelling provenance for their misfortune. The drunken beggar who associates himself with Lord Nelson, or the family ‘pinch[ing]’ their borrowed children to make them scream, demonstrate

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<sup>43</sup> Lynn M. Voskuil, 'Feeling Public: Sensation Theatre, Commodity Culture, and the Victorian Public Sphere', *Victorian Studies*, 44 (2002), 245-74.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. Voskuil is quoting Mark Baer, *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 179.

<sup>45</sup> ‘A... useful article... has value only because abstract human labour is objectified or materialised in it.’ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 129.

their understanding of the narrative tropes best suited to encouraging the wealthy to part with their cash (*London* II.3).

The fact that these false histories can attract investment from the London wealthy who support the beggars' lifestyle has similar implications to the successfully forged work of art. If an artwork is exposed as fraudulent, it (typically) loses a great deal of value; suggesting that the cultural value of art lies beyond its exterior. But what this situation *also* implies is that the critical opinion on which beliefs about provenance are generally founded is less authoritative than it first appears. A successful artistic forgery challenges notions of critical expertise; which, during the nineteenth century at least, means challenging the interpretative authority of the traditional, educated elite.

The final two sections of my chapter will go on to explore two scenes in which Reynolds more explicitly realises this suggestion about the interpretative vulnerability of the upper classes; reinforcing his argument for an aesthetic mode in which due attention is paid to the surface. But in the next section, I present an example of the mid-century attitudes that the *Mysteries* had to position itself against. Read against melodrama's careful interpretative openness, Wilkie Collins's 'The Unknown Public' reveals itself as a paragon of traditional values: attempting to delineate a limited cultural sphere which the new mass reading public found itself very definitely outside.

## 1.2 'What a Lot of Print for the Money': 'The Unknown Public' and the surface reader

Wilkie Collins's article 'The Unknown Public' was published in *Household Words* in 1858. In it, Collins promised to introduce the readers of Dickens's eight-year-old journal to 'a new species of literary production': the 'penny novel-journal' of the popular press.<sup>46</sup> Despite the fanfare about the novelty of his discovery, Collins is actually arriving rather late to this party. The penny miscellany became popular in the early 1840s, perhaps fifteen years before the publication of Collins's piece. Nevertheless, Collins's work is important for several reasons. Firstly, *Household Words*, where the article appeared, had itself been conceived as an intervention in the new mass market; which fact lends a different perspective to Collins's carefully vocalised astonishment at the state of the publications he inspects. Secondly, the piece brings together a series of common prejudices about the mass market and its readers; which, by the time the piece was published, had had several years to gain the air of established truth. And finally, Collins couches these beliefs in terms which clearly reflect the extent to which ideas about surface and depth informed nineteenth-century debates about popular fiction.

This chapter offers a close reading of Collins's article, considering the value systems on which it rests and comparing them to the principles I have already described as underpinning Reynolds's melodramatic serial. Again, I have found it useful to draw on critical debates around surface reading in my exploration of Collins's work. In this instance, Collins's work seems to align with the type of criticism this alternative movement is meant to displace. If Reynolds is (or is writing to create) a 'surface reader', then Collins can be positioned as a hermeneutic critic.

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<sup>46</sup> Wilkie Collins, 'The Unknown Public', *Household Words*, 18 (1858), 217-22.

One quality which Collins's work shares with (the best) hermeneutic criticism is that it is pleasant to read; a quality to which I would attribute the article's enduring popularity in the face of its bias and logical discrepancies. The piece is both entertaining and well-written, coloured with anecdotal humour whose charm does much to conceal its many self-contradictions. In this and other respects, 'The Unknown Public' resembles the 'paranoid' criticism whose wisdom Eve Sedgwick disputes in her essay 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', published in *Touching Feeling* (2003).<sup>47</sup> Sedgwick takes for her example of this critical mode D.A. Miller's highly successful *The Novel and the Police* (1988).<sup>48</sup> Miller's book applies Foucault's ideas on discipline and surveillance to the nineteenth-century novel, arguing that although the works he examines frequently express a distrust of or aversion to the police, they are in fact agents of the same social discipline which the police force was intended to impose. This contradiction of what seems to be the overt tendency of the texts he describes displays a distrust of the surface which is characteristic of paranoid literary criticism.

As Sedgwick recognises, this 'performative paradox' provides a large part of the pleasure afforded by Miller's work. Deliberately arguing against what appears to be obvious, Miller demonstrates the playful possibilities of scholarly thought. The book is characterised, in Sedgwick's words, by 'tonal nuance, attitude, worldly observation... aggression, tenderness, wit, inventive reading, *obiter dicta* and writerly panache'.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, its 'main argument... is entirely circular: everything can be understood as an aspect of the carceral, therefore the carceral is everywhere'.<sup>50</sup> Sedgwick sees this tautologous logic as typical of the paranoid reader. To take another example (of my own), Marxism is a total belief system which attempts to account for the entirety of historical socio-economic

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<sup>47</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*.

<sup>48</sup> DA Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>49</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, pp. 135-36.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

development. It therefore seems inevitable that an enthusiastic Marxist (like Fredric Jameson) would find evidence of that historical narrative in any text they might care to pick up. I would agree with Sedgwick that this does not make paranoid criticism entirely useless: ‘an insistence that everything means one thing... permits a sharpened sense of all the ways there are of meaning it’.<sup>51</sup> The ‘strong theories’ of paranoid reading can produce unexpected, and fruitful, new perspectives on familiar work.

Characterising Collins’s work as a piece of paranoid criticism makes sense to me not only because it shares the playful style and the logical instability of Sedgwick’s examples, but because the content of the article engages with the opposition between surface meaning and significant depth. As the title of his article suggests, Collins’s promise to introduce his readers to the ‘penny novel-journal’ also entails introducing them to the working-class audience that consumed it. Throughout the piece, he is concerned to mock this readership for what he depicts as an ignorant tendency to take its literature at surface value: both in terms of making decisions about what to purchase, and in the detail of the actual text itself. He also takes time to laugh at one particular example of mass culture, the ‘Notices to Correspondents’ page that appeared in many popular journals, which he understands as exemplifying an embarrassing personal openness on the part of this reading public.

However, as I will go on to suggest, this depiction of the working class reader as embarrassingly, shamefully open is at odds with the narrative stance Collins adopts throughout the piece. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his own involvement with the development of detective fiction during the 1860s, he positions himself as an expert investigator explicating the details of an obscure social phenomenon for the benefit of his readers at home. In order to earn this interpretative authority, Collins is obliged to constitute the mass reading public as obscure – or indeed, as ‘unknown’. This contradiction is one of

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

many within the article. In combination, they work to suggest not only that Collins's critical authority is every bit as precarious as Reynolds's serial seems to suggest, but that Collins was aware of this instability as an important consequence of the new mass market.

Collins begins his article by contextualising for his readers his interest in the productions of the penny press. Like the working class themselves, these cheap printed productions manage to insinuate themselves into the spaces of everyday life; Collins barely notices them for some considerable time, but when he does begin to pay attention, they appear to be everywhere. Rambling through 'the second and third rate neighbourhoods' of the capital, Collins finds penny novel-journals peeking at him through every shop window. 'Day after day, and week after week,' he writes, 'the mysterious publications haunted my walks.' Even leaving London, he is not able to escape them.

There they were in every town, large or small. I saw them in fruit-shops, in oyster-shops, in lollypop-shops. Villages even—picturesque, strong-smelling villages—were not free from them. Wherever the speculative daring of one man could open a shop, and the human appetites and necessities of his fellow mortals could keep it from shutting up again, there, as it appeared to me, the unbound picture-quarto instantly entered, set itself up obtrusively in the window, and insisted on being looked at by everybody. "Buy me, borrow me, stare at me, steal me—do anything, O inattentive stranger, except contemptuously pass me by!"<sup>52</sup>

This is humour: but it is also close to a discourse of prostitution. Like the prostitute, or like the working-class beggars of my introduction, the penny print journals exert a fascination over the passer-by, impelling investment through their strident self-advertisement.

Collins is not immune to this demand on his attention. After some unspecified time, he succumbs to the journals' temptations and purchases the five specimens of the genre to whose analysis he devotes the remainder of his piece. His analysis of their fictional content is

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<sup>52</sup> Collins, 'The Unknown Public' (p.217).

perhaps the least interesting aspect of Collins's piece. In brief, he dismisses it all point-blank, describing it in suggestively spatial terms as soon 'settl[ing] down... to the same dead level of the flattest and smoothest conventionality.'<sup>53</sup> His particular emphasis on the *moral* blandness of the works he consults – their 'intense in-dwelling respectability' – seems to rule out Reynolds as an author of any of the pieces, but it is I think striking that this is felt as a loss. In the 1840s, it was more typical to bemoan the dangerous political or moral tendencies of penny literature than it was to bewail its saccharine morality. Coming late to the conversation, Collins is confronted with a literature that was settling down into the respectability it had been criticised for lacking in the decade before.<sup>54</sup>

However, a much richer aspect of Collins's work is his attention to the working-class readers themselves. His first portrait of these readers, and his first insinuation as to their reading practices, comes in the context of 'a little popular criticism' garnered by Collins from two of the paper-shop keepers from whose products he purchases the penny-novel journals of his choice.<sup>55</sup> Describing these encounters to the readers in some detail, Collins evidently intends to cast doubt on the discernment of the mass-market reader; a condemnation quite distinct from the quality of the works that they buy.

Both of the men whom Collins approaches, asking advice as to the purchases he plans to make, are either unable or unwilling to respond to his request. When he is asked to give a recommendation from one of the journals in his stock, the first man says cautiously, "Some likes one and some likes another." Pressed by Collins to offer a further opinion – "[what] about the stories in this one? Are they as good... as... in that one?" – the shopkeeper reverts

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.221.

<sup>54</sup> Rohan McWilliam suggests that over '[t]he period between 1832 and 1867... Respectability became a key radical virtue'. Working-class radicals who, earlier in the century, might have identified themselves with libertine, libertarian ideals began instead to prioritise 'sobriety and moral advance, countering the middle-class view that working men were irresponsible drunks'. (Rohan McWilliam, *Popular Politics in Nineteenth Century England* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 47.)

<sup>55</sup> Collins, 'The Unknown Public' (p.218).

to a more certain standard. “‘There’s just about as much in one as there is in another... Look what a lot of print in every one of ‘em! My eye! What a lot of print for the money!’” The second man offers only an echo of this response. “‘A good pennorth; that’s all I can say! Bless your soul, look at any one of them for yourself, and see what a pennorth it is!’”<sup>56</sup>

The tension between the qualitative judgement that Collins is expecting, and the quantitative assessment he receives, speaks to an estrangement between the immaterial ‘text’ and the physical ‘book’ that Leah Price has related to a growing distance between the classes. Price suggests that ‘at the very moment when the poor are learning how to read, the rich are unlearning how to handle—are forgetting... how to assess the reuse potential and the resale value of pages.’<sup>57</sup> To put it another way, for the traditional, elite male reader of the nineteenth century, ‘reminders of the book’s material attributes got delegated to persons less rich or male or Protestant than oneself.’<sup>58</sup> As Price argues in *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (2012), this tendency is clearly manifested in the realist novel, which praises its protagonists for their ability to see through the printed page to the transcendent text beyond. ‘Conservative and radical fiction agree in classifying books as a special category of commodity that can be alienated only at the price of disloyalty.’<sup>59</sup>

The motif was sufficiently pronounced for William Thackeray to satirise it in ‘George de Barnwell’, an article of 1847; which describes a grocer’s-boy so ‘[i]mmersed’ in his book that he pays no attention to the theft of the articles he is supposed to be selling. ‘A careless guardian was he of the treasures confided to him... The knave might filch his treasures; he was heedless of the knave. The customer might enter; but his book was all in all to him.’<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.219.

<sup>57</sup> Leah Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>60</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *Miscellaneous Contributions to Punch, 1843-54*, The Oxford Thackeray (1909), p. 89.



The story's implicit conclusion, that 'books are simply objects', 'provoked hostile commentary from fellow writers [including] Dickens, Forster and Bulwer';<sup>61</sup> supporting Price's contention about elite nineteenth-century literary culture's aversion to the notion of the book as commodity. Collins's distaste for the penny papers, sold 'in fruit-shops, in oyster-shops, in lollypop-shops', evidently derives at least in part from this jumbling of dissonant objects; this implication that the book is no different than a sweet or a shellfish.

Just as Collins was not alone in expressing his distaste for the idea that literature might be merely a commodity, he was one amongst several observers of the new reading public to comment on that public's pragmatic relationship with the literature it bought. In terms which speak to the accuracy of Price's work, Henry Mayhew, in *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-62), reports enterprising readers buying their reading material with a keen eye on its future worth:

From other quarters I learned that some of the costermongers who were able to read, or loved to listen to reading, purchased their literature in a very commercial spirit, frequently buying the periodical which is the largest in size, because when "they've got the reading out of it," as they say, "it's worth a halfpenny for the barrow."<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, Charles Knight, writing in 1854, claims that 'the popular estimate of a publication is that of the square inches which it contains of print'.<sup>63</sup> a suggestion which anticipates Collins precisely. It is to this emphasis on 'external cheapness' – what Collins's shopkeeper might describe as 'a lot of print for the money' – that Knight ascribes the failure of his own *Penny Magazine*. 'The existing class of penny periodicals... have beaten almost every

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<sup>61</sup> Andrew [H.] Miller, 'Vanity Fair through Plate Glass', *PMLA*, 105 (1990), 1042-54 (pp. 1051, 1052). Miller's article on Thackeray makes for a suggestive parallel to the arguments about Reynolds that I advance in this chapter. As Miller describes it, Thackeray's pragmatic attitude to the book's commodity status seems to be very similar to Reynolds's own. Indeed, there is a direct personal connection between the two writers. Reynolds, in his capacity as editor of the *Paris Literary Gazette*, was responsible for commissioning Thackeray's first paid writing assignment. (Maha R. Atal, 'G.W.M. Reynolds in Paris 1835–6: A New Discovery', *Notes and Queries*, 55 (2008), 448-53.)

<sup>62</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (New York, NY: Dover, 1968), p. I.26.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Knight, *The Old Printer and the Modern Press* (London: John Murray, 1854), p. 278.

competitor who has sought to address *the same class* of buyers with something higher, intrinsically as cheap, but not as cheap to the eye'.<sup>64</sup>

Regardless of the accuracy of his interpretation, the fate of Knight's SDUK-sponsored publication (which folded in 1845 after thirteen years in print) explains his desire to stress the distinction between the readers of the new mass market and the more sophisticated literary consumers who might properly have appreciated his work. Equally, the encounter which Collins reports in his piece provides an important prop to 'The Unknown Public's' central contention: that the 'reading public of three millions' which supports the penny publishing industry is entirely distinct in its preferences and habits from the smaller reading elite incorporating Collins and his readers.<sup>65</sup> As Lorna Huett has shown, this claim is highly disingenuous.<sup>66</sup> Like Knight, Collins was involved in the very market he sought to discredit. *Household Words*, in which the article appeared, had been founded by Dickens in direct competition with the same 'penny novel-journals' that Collins's piece describes.<sup>67</sup> Priced at two pence and printed on 'a similar size and type of paper as the penny blood[s]' it sought to replace,<sup>68</sup> *Household Words* may have succeeded in shedding some of the weekly format's radical political associations; but its target audience overlapped, at the very least, with the papers Collins's article dissects.

It seems that there is an additional agenda, then, in Collins's determination to categorise the working-class reader as blind to the genuine value (or indeed, the true worthlessness) of

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>65</sup> Collins, 'The Unknown Public' (p. 218).

<sup>66</sup> Lorna Huett, 'Among the Unknown Public: Household Words, All the Year Round, and the Mass-Market Weekly Periodical in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 38 (2005), 61-82.

<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Dickens's allusion in *Household Words*' opening article to certain of his predecessors, 'Panders to the basest passions of the lowest natures', who 'we should consider it our highest service to displace', is generally thought to be directed at Reynolds. (See, for example, Ian Haywood's comment that 'The Preliminary Word does not name Reynolds, but clearly refers to him'; or Michael Slater's commentary on the 'Preliminary Word' at Dickens Journals Online, which makes the same connection. (Ian Haywood, *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, Politics and the People, 1790-1860* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], p. 237; Michael Slater, *A Preliminary Word* [Buckingham, Dickens Journals Online, 2012-2014] <http://www.djo.org.uk/indexes/articles/a-preliminary-word.html> [accessed 9 September 2014].)

<sup>68</sup> Huett, p. 77.

the literature she consumes. This same agenda is made still more apparent in ‘The Unknown Public’s’ other central discursive strand; which focuses more explicitly on the character of the readers themselves. It is evident from the outset that Collins intends to constitute this audience as difficult to know. Commenting with some awe on this public’s presumed scale (he estimates their numbers at at least ‘three millions’), he describes them as ‘the enormous, outlawed majority... the lost literary tribes’.<sup>69</sup> I have already suggested that this is an exaggeration. The claim that this public is ‘unknown to the literary world’ ignores entirely the substantial overlap that can be assumed between the readers of penny journals and the audience for *Household Words*;<sup>70</sup> that is, the very group to which Collins’s words were addressed. What is striking, however, is the extent to which Collins’s description of the ‘unknown public’ echoes the language used by contemporary journalists to describe the inhabitants of the London slums. George R. Sims, for instance, in a series of articles on ‘How the Poor Live’, hoped that the ‘wild races’ he described might ‘gain public sympathy as easily as those savage tribes for whose benefit the Missionary Societies never cease to appeal for funds.’<sup>71</sup>

In both cases, describing the working class as members of some distant or foreign tribe has a dual effect. It alienates them both from the writer who describes them, and from the readers who consume his work. In the case of the working class, this dehumanisation contributes to the comfortable sense that existing class hierarchies remain firmly in effect. Rather than being recognised as increasingly sophisticated cultural consumers in their own right, the new mass reading audience are consigned to their proper position beyond the literary pale. At the same time, the emphasis on the *unknowability* of this particular group affords a particular authority to the writer who is able to penetrate their shadowy exterior, and

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<sup>69</sup> Collins, ‘The Unknown Public’ (p. 218).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> George R. Sims, ‘How the Poor Live’, in *Into Unknown England, 1866-1913: Selections from the Social Explorers*, ed. by Peter Keating (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), pp. 65-70 (p. 66).

report back on the truth. Just as commentators on the contemporary slums stressed their distance and danger in order to aggrandise their own efforts,<sup>72</sup> so Collins's emphasis on the obscurity of the mass reading public contributes to his own position as expert cultural critic.

This manoeuvre on Collins's part is rendered particularly transparent in his attitude to the cultural phenomenon of the 'Notices to Correspondents', a topic to which he devotes around half of his piece. The 'Notices' were a feature both common and unique to the penny miscellanies; and I am tempted to agree with Collins when he describes them as 'the most interesting page in the penny journals'.<sup>73</sup> They comprise, as the name suggests, a series of brief paragraphs in which the journal's editorial staff responds to the written queries of its readers. In contrast to present editorial practice, the readers' letters themselves do not appear: so that one is left to deduce, from the response and the pseudonym which marks it, as much as one can about the correspondent and his or her query. The result is an oddly angled kind of portrait of the reader, of which the obscurity is half the charm.

Although they seem (at least to my contemporary critical eyes) to offer only an oblique insight into the readers whose enquiries they represent, Collins positions the Notices, in his commentary, as offering direct access into the psyche of the popular audience. He claims 'the pleasure of presenting' to his readers 'members of the Unknown Public... speak[ing] quite unreservedly for themselves'.<sup>74</sup> Already, the suggestion seems to be at odds with his careful position of the working class as impossible to know. But Collins goes on, regardless, to detail at some considerable length numerous instances of the queries dealt with in the pages of the journals he samples.

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<sup>72</sup> Or so Peter Keating suggests, at least: 'The social explorer wants to inspire others to follow his example... but if he makes the journey seem to easy then no real challenge is offered and his main purpose is defeated.' (Peter Keating, *Into Unknown England, 1866-1913: Selections from the Social Explorers* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976], p. 15.)

<sup>73</sup> Collins, 'The Unknown Public' (p. 220).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

A reader of a penny-novel-journal who wants a receipt for gingerbread. A reader who complains of fulness in his throat. Several readers who want cures for grey hair, for warts, for sores on the head, for nervousness, and for worms. Two readers who have trifled with Woman's Affections, and who want to know if Woman can sue them for breach of promise of marriage. A reader who wants to know what the sacred initials I. H. S. mean, and how to get rid of small-pox marks. Another reader who desires to be informed what an esquire is. Another who cannot tell how to pronounce picturesque and acquiescence. Another who requires to be told that *chiar'oscuro* is a term used by painters. Three readers who want to know how to soften ivory, how to get a divorce, and how to make black varnish. A reader who is not certain what the word Poems means; not certain that Mazeppa was written by Lord Byron; not certain whether there are such things in the world as printed and published Lives of Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>75</sup>

(The catalogue continues for several paragraphs more.)

Certainly, this is a very miscellaneous list, and Collins makes a good deal of comic capital out of the sheer variety of the topics the letters address: 'how to soften ivory, how to get a divorce, and how to make black varnish', for example. So far, this is fairly gentle mockery. But the real thrust (and, I would argue, the injustice) of his criticism relates to the column's very premise.

Hidden under cover of initials, or Christian names, or conventional signatures, such as Subscriber, Constant Reader, and so forth, the editor's correspondents seem, many of them, to judge by the published answers to their questions, utterly impervious to the senses of ridicule or shame. Young girls beset by perplexities which are usually supposed to be reserved for a mother's or an elder sister's ear only, consult the editor. Married women who have committed little frailties, consult the editor. Male jilts in deadly fear of actions for breach of promise of marriage, consult the editor... [and so on, and so on.]<sup>76</sup>

Collins objects on principle to the idea of a public forum for answering what ought to be personal questions. There are certain issues, he says, which ought to be confined to domestic conversation: certain admissions of ignorance which ought only to be made in private. That

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

the penny journals' working-class correspondents are either unable or unwilling to admit this distinction is, like the misapprehension that prompts them to evaluate literature on its surface area, evidence of their lack of cultural decorum.

It is worth noting that Reynolds himself at least momentarily expressed a somewhat similar point of view. Replying to a correspondent in the first series of the *Miscellany*, he regrets being able to offer 'only general recommendations, not particular hints', on the topic of the literary canon.

Our noble language abounds in good and great works; but to point out any set of books in preference to others, would be very ungracious to those authors whose works would not be named. It is the business of a private friend, a relation, or a brother to do this, *behind the screen of domestic life*.<sup>77</sup>

This is precisely the approach that Collins seems to advocate, and its appearance in the *Miscellany's* pages serves if nothing else to demonstrate that this compunction was widely felt. However, Reynolds's personal squeamishness on the subject soon subsided. By the third series, two years later, he is confidently advising a reader that 'Milton is the greatest English epic poet; and Shakspere [sic] the greatest dramatic poet',<sup>78</sup> and advising another to '[r]ead Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire", Robertson's "History of Scotland", Johnson's "Lives of the Poets", The "Spectator" (Addison's and Steele's) and the "Rambler".<sup>79</sup>

This initial reluctance on Reynolds's part to engage with his readers on the topic of literary taste seems particularly unlikely given the extent to which the 'Notices' concern themselves with cultural and historical topics. That is, the readers who interacted with the journals in this way clearly relied on the column as a source of exactly that type of knowledge which Collins mocked them for lacking, and to which he ascribed their lack of

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<sup>77</sup> G.W.M. Reynolds, 'Notices to Correspondents', *Reynolds's Miscellany*, 1 (1846), 431-32 (p. 431).

<sup>78</sup> G.W.M. Reynolds, 'Notices to Correspondents', *Reynolds's Miscellany*, 3 (1848), 112.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 143-44 (p. 144).

literary taste. ‘Look back at the answers to correspondents, and then say, out of fifty subscribers to a penny journal, how many are likely to know, for example, that Mademoiselle means Miss?’<sup>80</sup> It does not seem reasonable to condemn the working class reader for a lack of basic cultural understanding, and then to laugh at their attempts to correct this deficiency. How else does Collins expect them to learn ‘the difference between a good book and a bad’?<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, Collins’s condemnation appears particularly unfair given his own clearly declared dependence on a competing set of critical authorities. At the start of ‘The Unknown Public’, when Collins is describing his initial investigative forays into the popular marketplace, he lists the several sources to which he has turned for advice: ‘the gentlemen who are so good as to guide my taste in literary matters... [m]y favourite Review... [and m]y enterprising librarian’.<sup>82</sup> Clearly, then, in Collins’s cultural world, it is both rational and acceptable to consult the views of others when forming one’s literary opinions. But there is a marked contrast between Collins’s favoured authorities and the ‘Notices’ of the working class. Collins stresses direct, interpersonal relationships with ‘gentlemen’ – those who share his social position. Even the published authority to which he refers – the ‘Review’ – is modified with a ‘favourite’ that perpetuates the notion of an intimate circle of educated acquaintance, mutually and cosily informing one another’s tastes. By contrast, the forum of a newspaper column seems nakedly, obscenely exposed.

Of course, as I have argued above, this open, reciprocal relationship between reader and writer is precisely the condition to which melodrama aspires. The ‘Notices to Correspondents’ can be seen as a cultural site in which the same relationship that characterised the melodramatic theatre – where, we remember, ‘a place in the audience was

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<sup>80</sup> Collins, ‘The Unknown Public’ (p. 222).

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

also a voice'<sup>83</sup> – could play out in print. Not everybody could be a member of Collins's club; nor could the ordinary working man expect to enjoy a personal relationship with a 'librarian', in Collins's sense of the term (which seems to have been something like a book-dealer for private collections). But anybody with a penny or two to spare could buy a cheap novel-journal and seek advice from its editor. For the upwardly aspiring working class (and it seems clear from the columns themselves that Reynolds's readers might be thus described),<sup>84</sup> the 'Notices' promised access to a broader cultural sphere. Their neighbours might not be able to advise on the most accurate edition of Shakespeare's works; or to estimate the likely cost of a university education. The editor could, and would. Even though this type of question is mingled with more mundane (though no doubt equally pressing) enquiries about personal grooming or employment rights, it does not negate the necessity for the forum's existence. Without something like the 'Notices', it is tempting to suggest, it would be much more difficult for the working classes to attain the kind of comfortable cultural confidence that Collins assumes in his readers, and on which he rests his own authority.

This blatant contradiction in Collins's view raises the disquieting (and rather convincing) possibility that the whole point of the 'unknown public', as he defines it, is that this audience will never come up to scratch: that is to say, that they will *always* be 'learn[ing] to read'.<sup>85</sup> After all, if this readership were to attain a competence that Collins would accept, this would necessitate ceding his position of cultural power. Surprisingly, Collins acknowledges this threat in his work. 'When that period comes,' he writes, at which the unknown public shall have learnt to read, 'the readers who rank by millions, will be the readers who give the widest reputations, who return the richest rewards, and who will,

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<sup>83</sup> Baer, *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London*, p. 179.

<sup>84</sup> Along with the numerous queries on literary and cultural matters, the 'Notices' also routinely feature enquiries which relate either to education or to employment ('is my handwriting good enough to obtain work as a clerk?'). The impression received is certainly that of a group working hard to better itself.

<sup>85</sup> Collins, 'The Unknown Public' (p. 222).



therefore, command the service of the best writers of their time.’<sup>86</sup> It is at least worth considering that although the rewards Reynolds collected from his readership might not have been absolutely the richest available, Edward Lloyd (who at the age of 22 had published a *Penny Pickwick* for which Dickens unsuccessfully sued) left a fortune of over £500,000 to his numerous children on his death. The penny market did offer substantial opportunities for an enterprising writer; whether or not Collins would consent to recognise their literary merit.

The other disquieting possibility which Collins’s insistence on the naivety of the unknown public helps to obscure is, of course, that the mass reading audience knows a great deal more about the literary elite than the literary elite knows about them. That is to say: if the mass reading public combines an interest in literary surfaces with a personal impenetrability (Collins’s enjoyment of the ‘Notices to Correspondents’ notwithstanding), then surely it is possible that the elite reading public, with its emphasis on arcane or difficult to access reading material, might conversely find its desires and motivations uncomfortably exposed. As my next section will go on to discuss, this is precisely what Reynolds himself contends in the two stories about artistic forgers and their customers which appear in the fourth and the sixth series of his work. Disputing the aesthetic value system which prioritised obscurity or depth over surface value, he also argues that the consumers of this traditionally valuable material are motivated by considerations which render them, as readers, transparent. Easily read, they leave themselves open to exploitation.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

### 1.3 “A Rum-Looking Mummy”: Forgery and the reading elite

This section of my chapter explores two scenes from the *Mysteries of London* which deal with artistic forgers, their products and the customers who purchase them. Appearing two series (and five years) apart, the scenes in question are both extraneous to the central narrative thrust of the series in which they appear; they are additional, not required. The circumstance helps to reinforce the idea that the forgers’ narrative importance derives from their relevance to the serial’s wider themes. The strategy is typical of Reynolds’s narrative technique, which relies on reworking ideas from several angles; repeating similar characters, plots and situations to think through fully what their significance might be.

In a reading of the *Mysteries*’ first series, Juliet John suggests that Reynolds is concerned to illustrate the continuity between fine art and popular culture: to show that ‘the cultural marketplace functions as a shifting continuum’.<sup>87</sup> This project is clearly in evidence in both of the scenes I describe. Reynolds deliberately draws correspondences between artefacts of traditionally high cultural worth and the processes and conditions of mass production. However, I would argue that by extending his focus to depict the artefacts’ purchasers, Reynolds is able to advance his argument further: suggesting not only that popular culture and high culture exist in the same imaginative space, but that the aesthetic criteria by which the latter is prioritised are founded in concerns about status and self-image that have little to do with the work itself. Where commentators on cheap fiction stressed the mass audience’s misplaced emphasis on quantitative surface value, Reynolds depicts elite consumers of high-status artworks as deluded in prioritising a supposedly profound obscurity. Neatly counterpointing Collins’s conclusion in ‘The Unknown Public’, Reynolds’s stories of

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<sup>87</sup> John, p. 173.

forgery suggest it is in fact this *upper-class* readership that has difficulty telling the difference ‘between a good book and a bad’.<sup>88</sup>

The first of the two scenes that I wish to present appears later in Reynolds’s work: in fact, in the serial’s final volume. The scene takes place in the Bow Street apartments of the antiques dealer Samuel Bealby. His rooms, which the reader encounters before the man himself, are presented as markedly over-stuffed with *things*.

[T]he place was most singularly crowded with articles... There were helmets, and shields, and weapons of all sorts—curious costumes—a Turkish turban surmounting the wooden framework on which a mandarin's robe was displayed—a Red Indian's tomahawk lying next to an old-fashioned English musket--and a whaling harpoon keeping company with a New Zealand bow and arrows. (*Court* VIII.157)

Reynolds’s narrative comparison is with a theatrical prop-room; but there is another obvious parallel in the exotic, esoteric collection of material goods that were presented to the British public at the Great Exhibition. Opening in Hyde Park in 1851, just over halfway through the *Mysteries*’ serialisation, the Exhibition is commonly described by historians as initiating a new stage in the development of British commodity culture. In the words of the historian Thomas Richards, it was the first world’s fair, the first department store, the first shopping mall:<sup>89</sup> a palace to the commodity whose contents Andrew Miller lists in a catalogue that echoes the contents of Bealby’s rooms.

[P]reserved larks and fruits from Prussia, sax-horns, sax-trumpets and saxophones from Adolphe Sax of Paris, gamboge from India, hog skins from Scotland, japan-ware from China, bowls, dishes and plates of felted, varnished rabbit fur from Russia, turnip cutters from England, artificial legs from the United States, and circular playing cards from India.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Collins, p. 222.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 17.

<sup>90</sup> Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative*, p. 52. In the fourth series of his work (published 1850-52) Reynolds includes a passage which explicitly draws comparison between the shining

Unlike the wares at the Great Exhibition, however, which were presented for admiration rather than for immediate purchase, these items are Bealby's stock in trade. He is a dealer, it transpires, in 'curiosities'; antiques specially manufactured for a credulous market. Listing some of his finer inventions, he includes not only 'the bullet which slew Nelson at Trafalgar', and 'the identical pen with which Napoleon signed the Treaty of Amiens', but pieces both of 'the true cross' and of 'the holy coat'. Of course, the items are 'humbugs': the value is in Bealby's *ideas* (VIII.161).

The parallel between Bealby's objects and the beggars whose performance opened this chapter is suggestive; precise even to the mention of Nelson. But the link is reinforced by Bealby's account of his own career. His venture into curiosity-trading is only the latest instalment in a long history of swindling and deception, which has not only taken him through the creation of numerous fictional companies (scamming the share-holders, as in Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* [1843-44]) but has encompassed periods as a recruitment agent, a begging-letter writer and the proprietor of a pyramid scheme (VIII.158-59).<sup>91</sup> Like the beggars, Bealby is a master manipulator. He recognises the value of a convincing surface, and a convincing story: with his most recent venture perhaps the purest expression of this art.

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commodities exhibited at the Crystal Palace and the dirty poverty suffered by the working class. 'O Prince Albert! we hope—we sincerely hope—that in the Great Exhibition which your princely wisdom has most graciously concocted for 1851, you will not fail to have a model of Jacob's Island placed in some conspicuous part, with three or four *living* specimens of the human beings whom a cruel social system, the pressure of class-interests, and the influence of vile legislation have doomed to pine, languish, rot, and die prematurely, in that most loathsome spot upon the face of the whole earth.' (*Court* III.79) Although the passage is clearly intended in the first instance to indict the Exhibition as a waste of public money and a performance of wealth which denies the realities of working-class poverty, it also serves to reinforce the connection between the commodity and the working class.

<sup>91</sup> It is perhaps worth noting at this point, as a curiosity which I have not seen mentioned elsewhere, that Reynolds's son Ledru Rollin Reynolds appears, after his father's death, to have engaged in a financial swindle precisely similar to the kind that Bealby describes. Newspaper reports of 1881 describe his trial and conviction for the establishment of a fraudulent mining company, represented as owning a profitable Cornish mine. Ledru Rollin not only attracted 7000l. of investment into the company but impersonated a stockbroker and at least three fictitious directors. He pleaded guilty at trial and was sent to prison ('with hard labour') for two years. His imprisonment frustrated a further lawsuit relating to two additional companies: something called the 'Industrial Bank', and a 'Working Men's Mutual Society', both of which put money into Reynolds's pocket but never paid out. This last echoes with eerie precision the details of one of Bealby's scams. ('Extraordinary Charge of Fraud', *The Morning Post*, 12 September 1881, p. 7; 'The Alleged Extraordinary Mining Frauds', *Daily News*, 3 September 1881, p. 2; 'The Mining Frauds', *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 18 September 1881, p.8.)

Lamenting his present lack of funds, he tells his friend and interlocutor Benjamin Limber that there is ‘a lull in the curiosity-market’. This kind of fluctuation in taste has a dramatic effect on Bealby’s purse, because the ‘intrinsic value’ of his products is ‘nothing’: they “‘are not worth eighteenpence, unless somebody takes a fancy to them’” (VIII.162).

Bealby’s particular commodity theory, which links economic value to the consumer’s desire, reflects Reynolds’s own experiences as a writer making his living from his work. Andrew Miller, writing on Thackeray, argues that the novelist’s early experience of financial difficulty must have contributed to his unusual pragmatism about the commodity status of the book.<sup>92</sup> Reynolds, too, endured a pervasive financial uncertainty which saw him actually imprisoned several times for debt.<sup>93</sup> It is not difficult to imagine that the experience of writing desperately to keep one’s young family alive might make one rather cynical about the transient nature of artistic success; or, to put it another way, to make one attentive to the economic aspect of literary production.

As for Bealby, the frustrated artist, he has at least one income-boosting sale in prospect, on which he is relying to support him until more comes in. The product (or the curiosity) he has sold is purportedly ‘the oldest mummy ever brought into this country’, though actually ‘not in existence four months back’ (VIII.162); and the man to whom he has sold it is one Mr Fossilton, introduced to the reader as ‘one of [the] brightest ornaments’ of the Archaeological Society. Fossilton has been persuaded to make his purchase after Bealby’s successful presentation to that group of two specimens rather less than their nominal ‘four thousand years old’. He is ‘a man of deep learning’ in his particular field; but Reynolds’s narrator qualifies that praise with a disparaging assessment of his broader understanding.

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<sup>92</sup> Miller, ‘Vanity Fair through Plate Glass’.

<sup>93</sup> The British Library’s Royal Literary Fund archive includes several letters from Reynolds soliciting funds. Two of these, dated 15 May and 8 August 1839, are written from the Queen’s Bench Prison. (London, British Library, Royal Literary Fund Archive, M1077/3/957/1; London, British Library, Royal Literary Fund Archive, M1077/3/957/3.)

He could make a speech of three hours' duration on an old pipkin dug out—or represented to have been dugged out of Herculaneum: but he could scarcely say three words on any topic which people generally choose to converse upon... Photography, the steam-engine, the railway, the electric telegraph, and all the brilliant discoveries or inventions of modern science, were with him as nothing in comparison with broken old china, bits of Roman cement, and other antique relics... Such was Mr Fossilton—the type of that class who prefer groping their way through the darkness of the tombs and sepulchres in which antiquity lies buried, than to bask in the light of the knowledge of the nineteenth century. (*Court* VIII.168)

Tellingly described by Bealby as ‘deaf and half-blind’ (VIII.162), Fossilton’s narrow vision (both literal and metaphorical) makes him vulnerable to Bealby’s machinations. Having paid for and collected his false mummy, Fossilton anticipates with ‘complacent satisfaction... the pleasure he [is] shortly to enjoy in unrolling [its] bandages’. But before he can leave the neighbourhood, an accident with a potato-cart leaves the mummy unravelling into the street, where a passing cobbler casts doubt on its authenticity. Fossilton initially resists the man’s alternative gloss on the product into which he has invested so much; but, as he looks at the mummy ‘more closely’, his ‘happy conviction’ is dispelled and he is forced (before a laughing crowd of passers-by) to admit that he has been ‘grossly deceived’ (VIII.171).

It seems to me that Fossilton’s encounter with the mummy might very well be read as an encounter with a printed text. The comparison is less esoteric than it might appear. As demonstrated by Leah Price, Victorian commentators often made cultural capital of the material connection between books and leather goods.

The leather binding that linked books metonymically to the animals whose carcasses covered them also linked them metaphorically to other, nontextual leather goods... in 1860, the *Saturday Review* attacked Trollope for “mak[ing] a novel just as he might make a pair of shoes”.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*, p. 29.

Price demonstrates the longevity of the association by citing the further and much later example of Virginia Woolf; who argues in an article of 1927 that ‘Just as hand-made boots fitted better and lasted longer than machine made boots, so hand-made books read better and wore better than do our machine made books’.<sup>95</sup>

Both Woolf and the anonymous Saturday Reviewer use the comparison between books and footwear to comment disparagingly on the development of a literary mass market. There is an implication that books written for a large, popular readership are somehow shoddily produced. Even though one might imagine the same initial act of individual composition, regardless of the ultimate number of books in which the writing results, the suggestion in both of these cases is that work for the mass marketplace is held to a lower standard; that it exhibits the same ‘conventionality’ (or uniformity) condemned by Collins in the fictions of the penny-novel journals.

However, it ought to be noted that Bealby’s mummy quite evidently does not fit this stereotype. Clearly, the mummy is not what it ought to be. But equally, it is carefully crafted by hand. Bealby describes learning from the curiosities dealer whose patronage set him on this particular path ‘how to make mummies [from leather]’ as one of ‘the mysteries of his craft’; and he describes the two examples with which he has already fooled the Archaeological Society as ‘artistic’ in their success (*Court* VIII.161-62). This is, then, a particular ability for which some training is required: an artisan product, rather than something mass-produced.

The comparison reinforces Reynolds’s suggestion that the value of the commodity does not lie in its labour-value. The working-class beggars provoke disapprobation because they do not contribute sufficient labour to justify their income. In contrast, the mummy represents

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<sup>95</sup> Leonard Woolf and Virginia Woolf, ‘Are Too Many Books Written and Published?’, *PMLA*, 121 (2006), 235-44 (p. 235).

a good deal of concentrated labour; but Fossilton's evaluation of its worth does not reflect that value. He is interested only in its purported provenance. When the mummy is revealed as a fake, he demands the return of the twenty pounds he has paid for it.

In his single-minded focus on the mummy's provenance, Fossilton also belies the other obvious comparison that his story suggests. In his fetishisation of the mummy, as well as his narrow-minded academic focus and his laughable, dusty appearance, the character of Fossilton recalls the bibliomaniac book-collectors who provided the subject for a great deal of satire during the Regency period. As several recent articles have described, the 'sudden mania for collecting early printed books' which arose amongst the aristocracy in the first two decades of the nineteenth-century prompted conflicting opinions in the popular mind.<sup>96</sup> Although (as Deirdre Lynch suggests) some people praised the book-collectors for acting as curators for a national library of valuable works,<sup>97</sup> mockery seems to have been a much more common response. Lynch lists off the 'symptoms' by which contemporary satirists characterised this modern disease:

1. a liking for large paper copies; 2. for illustrated copies; 3. for copies printed on vellum instead of paper; 4. a liking not just for first editions but also 5. for particular copies rendered not simply rare but unique by printers' errata... [and] 6. the... drive to acquire volumes in which the pages have never been cut.<sup>98</sup>

Fossilton seems to parallel this last criterion, in particular, with his interest in the pristinely wrapped bandages of the mummy he buys: 'bandages which for three thousand years, as he thought, had enveloped his precious acquisition!' (*Court* VIII.171)

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<sup>96</sup> Philip Connell, 'Bibliomania: Book Collecting, Cultural Politics, and the Rise of Literary Heritage in Romantic Britain', *Representations*, 71 (2000), 24-47; Ina Ferris, 'Book Fancy: Bibliomania and the Literary Word', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 58 (2009), 33-52; Deirdre Lynch, 'Wedded to Books': Bibliomania and the Romantic Essayists', *Romantic Circles*, (2004) <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/libraries/lynch/lynch.html>> [accessed 8 September 2014].

<sup>97</sup> Lynch, 'Wedded to Books': Bibliomania and the Romantic Essayists'.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, para 2.



But this same focus on materiality is what makes the book collectors and Fossilton so distinct. The Regency book-collector focused with narrow-eyed fervour on the physical trappings of the books he bought and sold: 'downplaying meaning, and loving matter',<sup>99</sup> thus pitting himself against a cultural narrative which advocated the supremacy of the immaterial text. As Philip Connell writes, 'Such collectors, it was claimed, were more interested in *looking* at their books than actually reading them.'<sup>100</sup> This, then, is simply another manifestation of the same aesthetic principle that prompts Collins to laugh at the newspaper-vendor who rates his penny journals by the volume of print they contain. In contrast, Fossilton is made vulnerable by his compliance with the very same value system that nineteenth-century literary culture dictated. His belief in the provenance of the mummy that Bealby has sold him – his investment in the *narrative* it represents – is what blinds him to the truth of its material form. In direct opposition to the book-collector fetishistically selecting his volumes for their aesthetic harmony, Fossilton pays so little attention to the mummy he's purchasing that Bealby all but succeeds in selling him a crock.

Fossilton's purse is ultimately saved by the intervention of two working-class readers: one amateur Egyptologist, and a cobbler whose focus on the *materiality* of the mummy-as-text enables him to see quite clearly the truth of what is before his eyes (or under his tongue).

"It's his mummy, you fool," said a somewhat superior species of the Market population; for the speaker had on some great holiday visited a museum of curiosities. "That's a mummy--most likely a King of Egypt, which died three or four thousand years ago and was preserved in bandages just as you preserve inguns in vinegar."

"A mummy indeed!" said a man, with a leathern apron on, who having emerged from the nearest public-house, had worked his way through the crowd with the well-meant purpose of rendering his assistance. "A rum looking mummy this here! It's uncommon like leather."

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Connell, 'Bibliomania: Book Collecting, Cultural Politics, and the Rise of Literary Heritage in Romantic Britain' (p. 27).

Thus speaking, the aproned individual took up a piece of the smashed countenance; and first breaking it into minuter fragments, he put a morsel between his teeth. (*Court VIII.171*)

The first speaker, with his amateur knowledge, is worth mentioning I think as an instance of the success of the kind of cultural openness that Reynolds prized. His 'holiday' visit to a museum has granted him a modicum of the contextual knowledge that seems to have been the primary factor separating working- and upper-class readers. More interesting still, the intervention of this 'superior' specimen helps to illuminate what is happening for the benefit of that portion of Reynolds's audience which has not shared his opportunities. That is, this interjection, which describes for the reader in detail what a 'mummy' *is*, helps to compensate for the informational gaps mocked by Collins in 'The Unknown Public'; acting as a neat exemplar of Reynolds's inclusive compositional strategy. Having the passer-by explain to the crowd, Reynolds is able to explain to his reader without emphasising or exposing her ignorance.

However, it is the cobbler who is the real star of this story. Confirmed in his initial diagnosis by his additional, more tactile engagement with the mummy (or text), the cobbler insists in the face of Fossilton's outrage that the product he has paid so much for is merely a sham. "Mummy indeed," he says. "I haven't been a cobbler for these twenty-three years without knowing summut about the article I works with." Removing his green-shaded glasses, and inspecting the mummy through 'his naked eyes', Fossilton has no choice but to concede: exposing him to the unfortunate experience of being 'egregiously laughed at' in the open street (VIII.171).

Quite evidently, the scene subverts traditional interpretative hierarchies. Fossilton, the expert, educated and wealthy, is out-read by a cobbler coming out of the pub. The implication is clear. Reynolds suggests that too narrow a focus on the intangible, immaterial text can

blind the reader to the truth of what is before him: that too much focus on the idea of the forest might result in missing altogether the physical presence of the trees that compose it. More specifically, also, the scene suggests a reevaluation of the technical, immediate knowledge that comes from working with one's hands. The cobbler's intimacy with the leather that has provided his income for the past two decades affords him his own particular expertise: more directly useful, and more relevant, than Fossilton's purely theoretical intelligence.

Reynolds makes a similar point with perhaps even less subtlety in the story of the other forger with which this chapter is concerned: a gallery-owner named Shrubsole, who appears in the first volume of the fourth serial of Reynolds's work. The profuseness that characterises the *Mysteries*' narrative strategy is also evident in the contents of the shop holding Shrubsole's wares. Shrouded in both moral and physical 'semi-obscurity', Shrubsole's gallery is remarkably capacious. Reynolds spends time cataloguing the artworks the shop contains: listing them both by subject-matter and by author in a repeated rhetorical pattern that reinforces the message of plenitude.

Portraits, landscapes, naval and military battles, river-scenes, animals, flowers, cities, ruins, angels, devils, historical and religious designs,--in a word, every description of subject might be viewed... And if the visitor were not satisfied with what he beheld on the ground-floor, he was escorted to the first and second storeys, all of the rooms of which were likewise filled with pictures.

Raphaels, Michael Angelos, Correggios, Titians, Guidos, Rembrandts, Vandykes, Claudes, Poussins, Murillos, Hogarths, &c, were as plentiful in Mr Shrubsole's establishment as blackberries on any hedge in England at the proper season. (*Court* III.186)

As with the items in Bealby's rooms, the whole description is calculated to undermine the claims to profundity and uniqueness on which fine art's value traditionally rests. Offering the viewer 'angels', 'animals' and 'river-scenes' in indiscriminate profusion, both Reynolds'

catalogue and Shrubsole's collection trivialise the subjects of the paintings they present; reducing this fundamental aspect of each picture's identity to an aesthetic preference on the part of the purchasing spectator. Not interested in 'ruins' or 'religious designs'? No matter, simply try another floor.

The implied ease of substitution seems to detach the paintings' surface appearance from any deeper significance, reducing the works to a merely decorative function. Similarly, the reiterated emphasis on quantity devalues the pictures by the very ease of their availability. Scarcity is an important part of what goes to distinguish fine art from the mass-produced; according to the Romantic aesthetic ideal, a true artwork is the single product of an individual hand. Depicting a gallery not only bursting at the seams, but with contents readily divided into a series of popular subjects, Reynolds deftly suggests that these high-value products are rather less distinctive than their admirers might like to believe: 'as plentiful as blackberries... on any hedge in England' (III.186) – or as the oysters and lollypops in shops selling penny novel-journals.

So much for the gallery itself. But just as with Bealby and Fossilton, Reynolds's real satirical bite makes itself felt in his depiction of Shrubsole's customer. Like Fossilton, this figure, an aristocrat named 'Sir Brinksby Bull', provides Reynolds with an opportunity to comment on traditional reading elites. Like Fossilton, Bull displays an enthusiastic adherence to the cultural imperative that values artistic depth over surface appearance: and perhaps even more than Fossilton, he is made ridiculous by this belief.

Desperate to distinguish himself by a demonstration of his good taste, Bull is convinced by Shrubsole to purchase as 'a Rembrandt' a canvas 'painted all over a very dark and dingy brown'. Far from being dissuaded by his own inability to 'discover a single outline' in the painting's 'dark and obscure void', the self-aggrandising Bull counts on this very obscurity as

guarantee of the picture's superiority (III.187). '[H]e knew that his reputation as a connoisseur would rise to the very zenith by the mere fact of possessing a picture of such extraordinary merit that no one could understand it!' (III.186) This is consumption as performance; the opposite of the correspondents who wrote to the penny papers for advice without sparing a concern for the ignorance they exposed.

Evidently, the value Bull accords to the painting's incomprehensibility stands for more than simply the snobbery the passage condemns. Reynolds is not just criticising Bull and his equivalents for the curatorial one-upmanship that leads them to such extravagant extremes (Bull pays £500 for his plain brown canvas). Instead, he is questioning the whole belief that a work's opaque profundity is a measure of artistic value. The suggestion is lent additional strength by the circumstances in which Bull eventually acquires the picture: initially shown a conventional Rembrandt copy, he specifically requests a more chromatically obscure example. "[M]y opinion is," Bull tells Shrubsole and the reader,

"that the dark pictures are the finest specimens of the old masters... those magnificent works in which... the shades are so—so—ahem!—so solemn and imposing in their obscurity, that to the inexperienced eye the whole picture seems nothing more or less than a black mass—whereas *we*, Mr Shrubsole—*we*, who are connoisseurs, can soon distinguish the fine portrait like an angelic countenance peeping forth from the midst of a night intensely dark." (*Court* III.187)

The attraction of such paintings lies in their inaccessibility: their impenetrability to 'the inexperienced eye'. Bull, insecure, seeks the reassurance of his own superiority conveyed in the successful discernment of the 'fine portrait' beneath the murk.

This is the same gesture that distinguishes Collins's insistence on the illegibility of the unknown public. Positioning something as difficult to know, and then demonstrating one's own privileged knowledge of that subject, grants one (at least in theory) a superior cultural

status. Indeed, thinking back to the critical discourse of surface reading that has punctuated this chapter, it is possible to align Bull's (and to a lesser extent, Fossilton's) position here with that of the academic establishment in its historic enthusiasm for hermeneutic reading. Rita Felski, in an article on the rise of surface reading, comments that the 'suspicious reading' against which the movement positions itself grew out of 'the scramble to shore up academic authority'. Claiming that the meaning of literary texts is not manifest on their surface, but hidden in a hinterland of repressed ideologies, creates an opening for the expertise of the truly discerning professional. In Felski's words, 'the hermeneutics of suspicion... assigns a unique depth of understanding to the trained reader or theorist, equipped to see through the illusions in which others are immersed.'<sup>101</sup> Emphasising the impenetrability of literary texts to the untrained eye also emphasises the skill (and hence, the value) of those able to see through them: the trained academic reader.

In this context, Reynolds's portrait of Sir Brinksby Bull, deluded and self-congratulatory before the darkness of a plain brown picture, might act not only as an analogy for the literary critic, but as a condemnation of that large swathe of academia which has historically written off Reynolds's work. Bull's belief that the true artwork gives up its contents only reluctantly aligns him with a longstanding literary-critical tradition that has privileged works based on their psychic depth. It is this attitude that still sees melodrama 'disparaged' as 'aesthetically defective'<sup>102</sup> and this attitude that for so long excluded popular forms from serious critical consideration. Suggesting that such an approach has more to do with the critic's self-importance than with a genuine concern for artistic quality, Reynolds offers a penetrating criticism which ultimately suggests that there is something fundamentally dishonest in the notion of an art form that is not universally accessible.

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<sup>101</sup> Rita Felski, 'Suspicious Minds', *Poetics Today*, 32 (2011), 215-34 (p. 218).

<sup>102</sup> Worth, *Dickensian Melodrama: A Reading of the Novels*, pp. 1, 3.

The uncomfortable accuracy of this analogy points to another important aspect of Reynolds's forgery scenes. Like Fossilton, made vulnerable by his naked enthusiasm for his wares, Bull's self-regarding motivations have the unintended consequence of rendering him entirely transparent. Shrubsole, on the lookout for an easy mark, 'see[s] through' his visitor 'as if his entire form were made of glass' (III.186-87).

In his depiction of Fossilton and Brinksby Bull, open books before the evaluating gaze of the forgers who exploit them, Reynolds suggests that their whole breed of self-regarding, self-consciously intellectual reader is vulnerable to the same manipulation. This is, of course, the possibility by which Richard Markham is disturbed when he encounters the deceitful beggars: the suggestion that the sympathy and the money that he has donated have been swindled from him because he is too easy to read. The implications are disquieting for the self-styled reading elite. If the wealthy are really so easily seen through, then they leave themselves continually exposed to the machinations of a more penetrating working class. As the last section of my chapter will explore, the final instalment of Fossilton's story addresses this worry directly.

## 1.4 Barney the Burker: The commodity comes to life

Reynolds's decision to use the image of a mummy in Fossilton's story puts his serial ahead of its time. The real trend for English-language mummy fiction came at the fin de siècle, when writers like Joseph Conrad, H. Rider Haggard and Arthur Conan Doyle all made essays in the genre.<sup>103</sup> Suggestively, Nicholas Daly has argued that the mummy stories were a way for late-Victorian society to process 'changes in... material culture': specifically, 'a shift in the British economy that caused people... to conceive it in terms of consumption rather than production.'<sup>104</sup> Daly associates the mummy with the decorative goods which in the last decades of the nineteenth century flooded into the country from around the British Empire. All those products whose origins could not really be known might be conceived, he argues, as a kind of foreign invasion in miniature. The suggestion is made more tangible, and more threatening, because the mummies in the stories Daly examines have a tendency to reanimate. 'The stories helped the reader process their fears about the inscrutability of the objects in their home (and the possibility that these objects might exert some kind of control over them, the purchaser)': but, framing these encounters within the obvious fantasy of an encounter with a living mummy, Daly argues that the ultimate effect of 'the mummy story' is to restore a sense of order in the real world 'outside its bounds'.<sup>105</sup>

In fact, as in the stories Daly describes – and as one would expect given the prevailing motif of Reynolds's text – Fossilton's story does conclude with a mummy coming to life. Unlike Daly's Egyptian tales, however, this revivification does not take place on a fantasy plane (for example, in a dream, or through supernatural causes) but offers the much more

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<sup>103</sup> That said, one of the pieces discussed by Daly (Theophile Gautier's *Le Pied de Momie*) was published in French in 1840, although the English translation did not appear until 1908. Reynolds read French and so it is certainly possible that he encountered Gautier's story in its original form.

<sup>104</sup> Nicholas Daly, 'That Obscure Object of Desire: Victorian Commodity Culture and Fictions of the Mummy', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 28 (1994), 24-51 (p.26).

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p.47.



terrifying spectre of a working-class criminal invading the middle-class home. Where, therefore, Daly suggests that the fin de siècle mummy fictions contribute to a perverse sense of security in the world beyond their bounds, Reynolds's variant has to be read as presenting a genuine threat to its middle-class readers; and an opportunity to its more substantial working-class audience.

So, to the concluding part of Fossilton's tale. Having been enlightened by his working-class interlocutor as to the truth of the mummy for which he has paid, Fossilton's disappointment is further compounded as Bealby succeeds in making him the victim of a further fraud. Returning to the curiosities-dealer to demand an explanation, Fossilton receives a refund instead, along with a second case supposedly containing a replacement specimen. There has been a mistake, Bealby tells him; and Fossilton's passionate desire for a mummy of his own is enough to make him gullible. Taking the case home in order to indulge in the unwrapping he has anticipated for so long, Fossilton finds himself victim of a final unpleasant surprise. Wrapped up (and blacked up) inside the box is not the corpse of an Egyptian royal, but the living body of a working-class criminal: Barney the Burker, one of the series' central antagonists; who has paid Bealby a substantial sum to convey him in hiding out of the house after his escape from the cells of a police-station nearby.

In a scene worthy of the best schlock horror, Barney rouses himself under Fossilton's quizzical gaze.

Mr Fossilton stooped lower down, and looked closer and closer into the case... If this were a mummy it was the most extraordinary one... he had ever seen... Doubtless it was some wondrous novelty in the sphere of what we may term Mummyism...! Enraptured with the thought, Mr Fossilton opened the glass case, and was in the act of stretching forth his hand to touch the countenance of the supposed mummy—when the Burker suddenly opened his eyes and raised himself up to a sitting posture! (*Court* VIII.174)

The image of Barney, reanimated in terrifying style in the quiet of Fossilton's study, succeeds in suggesting the dangers inherent for a society that combined an insistence on reading through or beyond the surface with the determination to alienate or objectify the poor. As Daly notes, the mummy is 'a complex figure sharing both subjective and objective traits'.<sup>106</sup> The same is true of the nineteenth century's commodified working class; or more narrowly, of the beggars whose deceptiveness Richard Markham finds so disappointing. Andrew Miller, writing on Thackeray's Becky Sharp, describes her behaviour in terms which are helpful here. 'Becky represents the triumph of capitalist exchange... manipulating individuals and social procedures to get something for nothing... Becky lives her life—social and erotic as well as economic—on "nothing a year".'<sup>107</sup> Like Becky, the swindling beggars of the St Giles slum are willing and able to modify (and commodify) themselves in service of their own financial well-being. Unable (or unwilling) to attract charitable donations as genuine subjects, they deliberately objectify themselves into the exaggerated figures of suffering that they know are likely to prove aesthetically pleasing to the upper class.<sup>108</sup>

This idea of the beggar (or the commodity) as aesthetically gratifying – the suggestion that what is being paid for is requited desire – is also put forward in the mummy stories of the late Victorian period. As Daly points out, and as Ellie Dobson has more recently explored,<sup>109</sup> the mummy fictions of the late nineteenth century in particular often posit a romantic relationship between mummy and man. Theophile Gautier's short story 'Le Pied de Momie', published in French in 1840 but only translated in 1908, offers a specimen instance. The protagonist purchases a mummified foot for use as a paperweight, from a curiosities dealer

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., pp. 26, 36.

<sup>107</sup> Miller, 'Vanity Fair through Plate Glass' (p. 1049).

<sup>108</sup> A particularly extreme and horrifying instance of this same modification appears early in the *Mysteries*' first volume, when a working-class woman decides to blind her young daughter in order to make her a more appealing object of charity: "There's nothin' like a blind child to excite compassion," she says. (*London* I.45)

<sup>109</sup> Ellie Dobson, 'Magical Bodies: The Supernatural Appeal of the Ancient Egyptian Female Body at the Fin-De-Siecle', in *Women in Literature: Centre for the Study of Women and Gender Graduate Seminar Series*, (University of Warwick, 2014).

whose shop seems to anticipate Bealby's miscellaneous jumbled rooms: 'All ages and all nations seemed to have made their rendezvous there.'<sup>110</sup> He takes the foot home and (after a night out with friends) dreams of its owner, the beautiful Princess Hermonthis. Munificently agreeing to return her severed limb, he asks for the hand of the princess in exchange; although her father denies the match on the grounds of the disparity in age. Similarly, H. Rider Haggard's 'Smith and the Pharaohs' (1921) tells the story of an English clerk who falls in love with an Ancient Egyptian after seeing the cast of her head in the British Museum, and travels to Egypt in the hope of obtaining her corpse.<sup>111</sup>

Sexualising the mummies in these stories might seem at first to do little to subvert the subject-object relation; but it does clearly call into question the collector's academic detachment. The mummy as fetish, invested with a mystical desirability that comprises more than a hint of erotic frisson, stands for something quite different than the mummy as specimen, drily informative relic of an antique culture. I would argue that the working-class beggar (perhaps, indeed, the working-class reader) occupies the same imaginative space. John Forster's famous phrase, describing Dickens's response to St Giles, is 'the attraction of repulsion'.<sup>112</sup> Like the 1830s crowds flocking to public 'unwrappings' of Egyptian mummies,<sup>113</sup> or indeed like Collins with his eye irresistibly drawn to the seductive, pervasive presence of the penny press, the droves of wealthy revellers who were stalking the slums at this period shared a motivation that lay somewhere between disgust and desire.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Theophile Gautier, *The Mummy's Foot* (New York, NY: Weiser Books, 2012), p. 1.

<sup>111</sup> H. Rider Haggard, 'Smith and the Pharaohs', in *The Best Short Stories of H. Rider Haggard*, ed. by Peter Haining (London: Joseph, 1981), pp. 148-91.

<sup>112</sup> John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. I.19.

<sup>113</sup> Daly begins his article with an account of these spectacles, which seem to have been immensely popular for a short period during the 1830s before slipping out of fashion in the subsequent decades.

<sup>114</sup> For the popularity of 'slumming' expeditions in the early nineteenth century, see Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 111; Renton Nicholson, *Autobiography of a Fast Man* (London: Savill and Edwards, 1863), p. 83; Edmund Hodgson Yates, *Edmund Yates: His Recollections and Experiences* (London: R. Bentley & Son, 1884), p. I.284.

Bealby knows that his false antiques are “‘are not worth eighteenpence, unless somebody takes a fancy to them’” (VIII.162). The mummy narrative similarly ‘implies that the relations of consumers and commodities are fundamentally... desire-driven’.<sup>115</sup> Customers are willing to pay for what they want, in any or every sense of that multivalent word. The implications are serious. To fetishise an inanimate object is already to grant it authority. When the commodity being desired is a living, breathing, working-class or female body, there is at least the potential for a dramatic shift in the power relationship. What if, like the mummy, this commodity should come to life?

This possibility is one which my next chapter will discuss, considering in more detail what Reynolds’s depiction of the privileged reader as a desiring consumer might do to the period’s cultural hierarchies. For this chapter, though, I would argue that in and of itself, Reynolds’s treatment of forgeries and the commodity-status of art constitutes a penetrating commentary on the aesthetic value-systems propagated by the period’s elite. Disputing the notion that incomprehensibility is somehow an indication of artistic superiority, Reynolds upsets traditional orders of knowledge, making the case for his own accessible popular fiction and challenging the comfortable cultural superiority of the upper class.

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<sup>115</sup> Daly, 'That Obscure Object of Desire: Victorian Commodity Culture and Fictions of the Mummy' (p.27).

## Pornographic galleries and secret museums: obscenity, censorship and the literary mass market



Figure 3

The body with which this chapter begins takes the form of a living statue, provocatively posed in the unprepossessing surroundings of a London slum. It belongs to the aristocratic Cecilia Harborough, whose separation from her husband Rupert (on the grounds of their mutual dislike) has prompted her to launch a fervid campaign for the amorous attentions of a local vicar. ‘Eminently handsome’ and radiating with ‘manly beauty’, Tracy is also vowed to celibacy (*London* I.383): but it does not take long for his continence to crumble. Cecilia’s attack on Tracy’s heart is both efficient and direct. Attending his Sunday sermon, she pretends

to faint; securing an audience in the close confines of the vestry, where she is able to display her considerable charms to their best advantage. When Tracy offers to walk her home, she favours him with ‘one or two delicate... allusions’ to his ‘eloquence’, squeezes his hand on leaving him and renders him entirely hers (I.384). By the time of their third encounter, she is ‘avow[ing] her love’ (I.388); and at their fourth, she charms him absolutely into abandoning his vows, in a scene whose histrionic passion lends it considerable humour.

“I cannot conceal it from myself,” exclaimed Reginald, giving way to the influence of his emotions: “it is true – that I love you!”  
“Oh, am I indeed so blest?” faltered Cecilia. “Tell me once more that you love me!”  
“Love you!” cried the rector, unable to wrestle longer with his mad desires: “I worship—I adore you—I will die for you!”  
He caught her in his arms, and covered her with burning and impassioned kisses.  
(*London* I.390)

After this initial night of wild desire, however, Tracy begins to think better of himself, and tells Cecilia that their affair cannot continue (I.391). It is at this juncture that Reynolds’s resourceful heroine devises the unlikely strategy realised in the image above. Taking advantage of the opportunity offered by a passing hag, Cecilia installs herself as a living exhibit, summoning Reginald to her presence on the pretext that ‘a foreign sculptor—a poor Italian’ wishes the rector to examine his work (I.394).

The scene plays out exactly as Cecilia intends. Reginald is disarmed by her lovely appearance, stunned into lustful ‘wonder’ even before he begins to recognise the shape of his erstwhile lover in the supposed stone (I.395). Of course, he does not have long to wait before he is able to act on his desires.

"Yes — yes!" he suddenly exclaimed... "there is something more than mere senseless marble here! The eyes shoot fire — the lips smile — the bosom heaves — Oh! Cecilia — Cecilia, it is yourself!"

As he spoke he rushed forward: the statue burst from chill marble into warmth and life; — it was indeed the beautiful but wily Cecilia — who

returned his embrace and hung around his neck; — and the rector was again subdued — again enslaved! (*London* I.395)

This second enslavement is more complete: Reginald no longer attempts to resist Cecilia's charms, abandoning himself instead to luxuriant sin.

There is an obvious correspondence between this scene and those in the forgers' dealing-rooms described in my previous chapter. Just as Fossilton and Brinksby Bull are made vulnerable by their desire for the status afforded by the forgers' exotic commodities, so Reginald Tracy's unrestrained *sexual* desire makes it easy for Cecilia to manipulate him as she wants. Refiguring the commodity in the form of a beautiful woman, Reynolds further develops what I have already described as a coherent theory of aesthetics and power. Like the swindling beggars of the London slums, Cecilia exploits her own object-status in order to reclaim a cultural authority that, as a beautiful woman, she would conventionally be denied.

But as this chapter will explore in detail, the scene also succeeds in challenging ideas about the relationship between fine art, popular culture, and pornography. Reynolds's serial was condemned by contemporary critics for its sexually explicit content: of which Cecilia and Reginald's passionate liaisons are a representative sample. In the mid-nineteenth century, this accusation was loaded with political meaning: an association which Reynolds both acknowledges, and seems to dispute, in a passage from his 1839 *The Modern Literature of France*:

That certain political pamphlets or articles in liberal journals may more or less guide the public mind, and teach the indolent and careless to think for themselves, is certain; but that works abounding with voluptuousness and licentiousness can produce the same results, is a speculation as palpably false, as it is adventurously put forward.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G.W.M. Reynolds, *The Modern Literature of France* (London: George Henderson, 1839), p. I.iv.

In this extract, Reynolds disputes the claim that the sexual frankness of French fiction could be blamed for the political upheaval the country had recently endured. To make this suggestion was to challenge an idea that was already firmly entrenched in English minds. Part of the reason for this might be found in Reynolds's straightforward admiration for the country he wrote about, and for its republican politics. Reynolds defended the 1830 revolution as 'the working of a great and glorious change in the liberties of a mighty people' (I.iv) and the book as a whole was an attempt to rehabilitate French literature in the eyes of a country that increasingly condemned it.

However, the passage is particularly provocative in the context of the *Mysteries of London*. Despite its phenomenal success, the serial was condemned by critics in terms which suggest an ulterior motive to the *Modern Literature*'s ingenuous defence. Riddled with Reynolds's republican ideology, the *Mysteries* also exhibits a sexual frankness 'relatively unique among contemporary writers'.<sup>2</sup> Across its twelve volumes, storylines deal not only with the more pedestrian issues of adultery and illegitimate birth, but with impotence, abortion, transvestism, voyeurism, incest and rape. Reynolds's heroines are comically uniform in their porcelain, buxom beauty: all tiny ankles and perfect teeth, swelling bosoms and delicate skin; and the illustrations that begin to represent them have been indicted as early pornographic pin-ups. From the perspective of the period's conservative critics, the *Mysteries* 'abounded' in more 'voluptuous and licentiousness' than its working-class readers could be expected to ignore.

Appearing to offer a counterintuitive reassurance to those critics concerned about the radicalism of his work, Reynolds's rejection of the association between sexual explicitness and revolutionary politics is less reassuring to modern critical eyes. Asserting that sexually

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<sup>2</sup> Rohan McWilliam, 'The Mysteries of G.W.M. Reynolds: Radicalism and Melodrama in Victorian Britain', in *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J.F.C. Harrison*, ed. by Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), pp. 182-98 (p. 183).



explicit literature *could not* exert a political effect, Reynolds seems to expose his declared ideals as the product of a bid for commercial success. After all, if he really intended to enlighten a benighted working class, surely he would have restricted his campaign to the ‘political pamphlets’ and ‘liberal journals’ accredited here as more reliably radical in their effect? By this measure, the *Mysteries* is revealed as a lowest-common-denominator attempt to capitalise on the desires of a culturally ignorant underclass; in the words of Jonathan Rose, ‘sensational trash, verging on pornography’.<sup>3</sup>

However, as Tracy’s example shows, the point that Reynolds’s argument is intended to make relates less to the inclusion of sexual content (which can, as I will argue, be an extremely radical act) and more to the notion that the working-class reader was entirely at the mercy of his passionate response. The association between literary sex and revolution was founded on an image of the period’s vulnerable readers (women, adolescents and the working class) as governed by emotion over which they had little control. Confronted with a complex cultural text, for which their education had only inadequately prepared them to respond, these subordinated cultural groups were likely to react with a subversive violence. The notion was important (and Reynolds chose to attack it) because it justified the cultural censorship practised by the period’s educated ruling class. Faced with a literary marketplace that threatened to multiply out of all control, it is not surprising that the period’s critics should respond with the argument that the new mass reading audience was not equipped to discriminate what it read: that it was vulnerable to exploitation by writers like Reynolds. But it is surprising that present-day critics should perpetuate the notion of the *Mysteries*’ cultural insignificance. As this opening argument shows, Reynolds’s text neither ignores nor elides the difficulties of operating in a commercialised cultural marketplace. What it does is to expose this market’s radical implications.

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (London: Yale Nota Bene, 2002), p. 125.

## 2.1 The Secret Museum: pornography and popular fiction at the early nineteenth century

Nineteenth-century discourse on obscenity is marked by a preoccupation with readership. As Lisa Sigel writes of the ‘sex panic’ at the end of the nineteenth century,

the issue of access forms the crux of the problem. Who could and who could not handle representations of sexuality? Who would be corrupted? What would be the social repercussions of that corruption? These seem to be the underlying questions.<sup>4</sup>

Such a focus betrays the close relationship between Victorian (and consequently, modern) notions of obscenity, and the concomitant rise of mass culture. Over the 1820s and 30s, developments in printing technology, transport and working class literacy combined to create a brand-new market in cheap, mass-produced literature, which could be distributed to a vastly increased audience at lower prices and in a greater volume than had ever been possible before.<sup>5</sup> For the conservative, educated elite, the prospect of a market flooded with unmonitored publications was a source of considerable anxiety. This manifested itself in an invigorated drive to define and regulate the obscene. Discourse (and eventually, legislation) on pornography during this period can therefore be seen to reflect wider concerns about the increased cultural enfranchisement of both women and the working class; which had their origin in parallels with revolutionary France.

Anxieties about the new mass market grew as the literature produced for it proliferated out of control. Initial offerings to this readership had emanated from the likes of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge; ‘purely instructive’ publications crafted for sober usefulness and educational value.<sup>6</sup> However, these drily factual journals did not

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<sup>4</sup> Liza Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> Lorna Huett, 'Among the Unknown Public: Household Words, All the Year Round, and the Mass-Market Weekly Periodical in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 38 (2005), 61-82 (pp.61-63).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Knight, *The Old Printer and the Modern Press* (London: John Murray, 1854), p. 280.

dominate centre stage for long. ‘Speculative printers began to reflect that the number of persons who wished to be amused must be very much larger than the number of those who desired to be instructed’;<sup>7</sup> and the market moved accordingly, ‘towards entertainment rather than improvement’.<sup>8</sup> By the 1840s, publications like Knight’s *Penny Magazine* and *Chambers’ Journal*, the great successes of the decade before, were jostling for space with a new variety of serials and weekly magazines. Miscellanies like the *London Journal* (founded 1842) and the *Family Herald* (founded 1843) combined scientific, historical and geographical content with sensational fiction, lurid illustrations and political invective. New and existing novels were serialised in penny parts, and fledgling authors began increasingly to target their work at the lucrative popular market. Although fiction had been deliberately excluded from the improving works of the 1830s, it ‘became of increasing importance in popular literature’ as the century wore on. ‘[I]ts growth, at a romantic and sensational level, amongst unsophisticated and working-class readers was phenomenal’.<sup>9</sup>

This movement away from the sober and improving, officially-sanctioned literature of the early, cheap publications, towards the ‘Gothic, criminally sensational and salacious’ fiction that replaced them, aggravated existing anxieties about the extension of the cultural franchise.<sup>10</sup> Lynda Nead, in *Modern Babylon* (2000), suggests a parallel between upper-class concerns about these period’s slums and those surrounding the cheap literature and images available on the streets. Like the squalid, overcrowded housing into which the working class were crammed (and which Chapter 3 of this thesis will discuss in some detail), ‘[o]bscenity was an obstacle in the path of improvement. It represented values and desires that were antithetical to those of the modernisers and improvers’: ‘those desires and places in the midst

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Frost, *Forty Years’ Recollections, Literary and Political* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Seale and Rivington, 1880), p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription of Values in Word and Image* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004), p. ix.

<sup>9</sup> Victor E. Neuberg, *Popular Literature: A History and Guide* (London: The Woburn Press, 1977), p. 144.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth Century British Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 13.

of modernity that resisted the rational structures of government'.<sup>11</sup> Acting as 'channels for unregulated fantasy', obscene books and prints threatened to create in their readers a kind of mental slum landscape, even more impossible to penetrate and police than the passages and alleyways of the 1840s rookeries.<sup>12</sup>

Initially manifested in a noisy critical discourse on the subject of the London penny press, these concerns about what the working class was reading found additional expression in an increasingly vocal censorship lobby. The Society for the Suppression of Vice (SSV), formed in 1802 as a response to the threat of English Jacobinism, was for the first half of the century the primary agent in persecuting pornographers of any variety, founding its cases on amendments to the Vagrancy Act (in 1824 and 1838) which made it 'illegal to expose "obscene or indecent exhibition" to view in a public place'.<sup>13</sup> By 1857, the SSV had embarked on 159 prosecutions, 'with convictions being secured in all but five instances'.<sup>14</sup> But the financial cost of bringing individual lawsuits, coupled with the fact that even a guilty verdict did not compel the defendant to surrender his stock (so that family or colleagues could easily continue the trade), limited the Society's power and prompted them to press for further legislation. It was a long campaign which culminated in 1857, with the passing of Lord Chief Justice Campbell's Obscene Publications Act.

Whilst it had taken the SSV years of lobbying to achieve this change, Campbell was able to take his bill from initial interjection to fully ratified law in the short space of two months: evidence less of his personal power than of the timeliness of the legislation. Given the speedy (though not unproblematic) passage that the Act enjoyed, it is particularly significant that the terms in which Campbell broached the issue of obscenity referred

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 150, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>13</sup> Colin Manchester, 'Lord Campbell's Act: England's First Obscenity Statute', *Journal of Legal History*, 9 (1988), 223-41 (p. 225).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

explicitly to the development of the new literary mass-market. This is the moment when he first raised the subject, during a House of Lords debate on the sale of poisons:

From a trial which had taken place before him on Sunday, he had learned with horror and alarm that a sale of poison more deadly than prussic acid, strychnine, or arsenic – the sale of obscene publications and indecent books – was openly going on. It was not alone indecent books of a high price, which is a sort of check, that were sold, but periodical papers of the most licentious and disgusting description were coming out week by week, and sold to any person who asked for them, and in any numbers.<sup>15</sup>

Campbell is explicit from the outset about the cause of his concern: not merely the fact that these ‘indecent books’ exist, but that they are being widely, cheaply and indiscriminately distributed. His reference to the publications’ format – ‘periodical papers... coming out week by week’ – is notable: weekly serialisation was the hallmark of the new popular market.<sup>16</sup>

This emphasis on pornography’s incriminating accessibility was only exacerbated as the Obscene Publications Act moved beyond the Houses of Parliament into the courts of law. In 1868, an influential ruling by Alexander Cockburn, Campbell’s successor as Lord Chief Justice, set the terms by which obscene materials are still evaluated today; defining ‘obscenity’ as matter whose ‘tendency... is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall’.<sup>17</sup> This definition (known as the Hicklin rule) emphasises the same issue that gave Campbell such concern: the ‘hands’ into which pornography was likely to ‘fall’. ‘The judgement passed on pornography changed based upon where, when, and by whom it was viewed’.<sup>18 19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> HC Deb 11 May 1857, vol 105 cols 102-104 (col 103).

<sup>16</sup> Lorna Huett, in a much-quoted article, describes Dickens’s decision to adopt the format for *Household Words* as a deliberate attempt to appeal to the working class: ‘A sense of contagion began to hang around the weekly serial... throughout the first half of the century.’ (Lorna Huett, ‘Among the Unknown Public: Household Words, All the Year Round, and the Mass-Market Weekly Periodical in the Mid-Nineteenth Century’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 38 [2005], 61-82 [p. 66].)

<sup>17</sup> Craig R. Ducat, *Constitutional Interpretation: Rights of the Individual* (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2008), p. 540.

<sup>18</sup> Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914*, p. 4.

In *The Secret Museum* (1987), Walter Kendrick offers a history of the modern word ‘pornography’ which reinforces this link between definitions of obscenity and anxieties about the accessibility represented by the new mass market. From the Ancient Greek meaning ‘writing about prostitutes’, before 1800 ‘pornography’ was both rarely used and tended to refer, when it did appear, to scientific writing rather than erotic material. Citing a series of supporting examples, including an 1864 edition of Webster’s dictionary which defines ‘pornography’ as the kind of ‘licentious painting... [to be found] in Pompeii’,<sup>20</sup> Kendrick contends that the word acquired its modern meaning through an association with the relics recovered from the Italian city. As he recounts, archaeologists and historians investigating the site after its rediscovery in 1748 were disconcerted by the volume of erotic materials that they found amongst the ruins: not only artworks but household objects bore representations of acts and body parts that nineteenth-century sensibilities would certainly have kept concealed. ‘[I]f Pompeii’s priceless obscenities were to be properly managed, they would have to be systematically named and placed. The name chosen for them was “pornography”, and they were housed in the Secret Museum.’<sup>21</sup>

As Kendrick implies, this division was not merely taxonomic. Protected from destruction by its historical importance, Pompeii’s ‘pornographic collection’ was segregated into a separate room of the Naples museum in which objects from the dig were stored;<sup>22</sup> a separation mirrored in the printed catalogues detailing the finds. Where they were not ignored altogether, details of Pompeian erotica were typically isolated in separate volumes or

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<sup>19</sup> The extent to which Cockburn’s judgement influences the law today is evinced in the case of Michael Peacock, unsuccessfully prosecuted in January 2012 for distributing hardcore pornography by mail: ‘The jury decided that the audience could not be “depraved and corrupted” by material it had actively sought out’. (Peter Beaumont and Nichi Hodgson, ‘Obscenity Law in Doubt after Jury Acquits Distributor of Gay Pornography’, *The Guardian*, [2012] <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/law/2012/jan/07/obscene-publications-act-future-doubt>> [accessed 1 September 2014].)

<sup>20</sup> Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York, NY: Viking, 1987), p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

obscured between lengthy passages of untranslated Greek. Both techniques were designed to deter the same opportunistic ‘readers’ that the locked room at the Museo forbade: ‘women, children, and men lacking the price of admission’.<sup>23</sup> Pornography, by definition, was work that these uneducated readers could not be trusted to understand.

The social division that the secret museum enacted reinforced the division between vulnerable and sophisticated reading audiences and thus authorised the protective censorship of the obscenity laws. The group not excluded from Pompeii’s pornographic relics was comprised of wealthy (implicitly, educated) men; a distinction which reflected the notion that *this* readership was able to control its responses to these sexually provocative texts. M.L. Barré, the French historian whose ‘compilation of 1875-77’ provides the title for Kendrick’s research,<sup>24</sup> advised his scholarly readers as follows: ‘In the exercise of his holy office, the man of science must neither blush nor smile. We have looked upon our statues as an anatomist contemplates his cadavers’.<sup>25</sup> Such a spirit of scientific detachment was considered beyond the grasp of those whom the Secret Museum excluded; the same groups targeted by the Hicklin rule, with its characterisation of the victims of pornography as ‘those whose minds are open to... immoral influences’. Faced with the unmonitored flood of stimulation that cheap print culture represented, certain inexperienced and vulnerable audiences could not be held accountable for their emotional response.

Critical work on this belief, which acquired a new urgency with the development of mass market literature, has tended to focus on women: themselves a relatively new constituency, drawn to the novel as it evolved during the eighteenth century. Kate Flint’s *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (published in 1993) explores in some detail the beliefs about

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> ‘The eighth and last volume’ of Barré’s book described the “‘pornographic collection’” under the heading of the ‘*Musée Secret*’. (Ibid., p. 14.)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 15. The metaphor has uncomfortable resonances in the context of the period’s trade in working-class bodies, discussed in Chapter 3.

women's emotional suggestibility that informed attitudes to female readers throughout this period. W.R. Greg's 'False Morality of Lady Novelists', printed in the *National Review* in 1859, provides a representative example.

[W]omen, who are always impressionable, in whom at all times the emotional element is more awake and more powerful than the critical, whose feelings are more easily aroused and whose estimates are more easily influenced than ours...<sup>26</sup>

The 'ours' is particularly telling: this 'excess of feeling and correspondent lack of rationality' was precisely what 'disqualified [women]... from full bourgeois subjecthood'.<sup>27</sup> But 'the issue of reading and its effects did not concern women alone'.<sup>28</sup> Defining the period's quintessential vulnerable reader, Kendrick unites her various qualities under the Dickensian label of the Young Person: 'condens[ing] into a single image the inchoate energies latent in women, children, and the vague conglomerate known as "the poor"'.<sup>29</sup> All of these vulnerable groups were subject to the same disempowering emphasis on their emotional vulnerability and lack of self-restraint. The fiction that these audiences exerted less control over their responses, not only to texts but to the world around them, was what served to alienate and differentiate them from the rational, educated and (inevitably) wealthy men who governed them.

Depicting particular readers as impressionable and volatile might have justified the continuing cultural authority of the governing classes; but the distinction also fuelled anxiety about specific literary genres which deliberately sought to elicit an emotional response. Such literature threatened to excite the 'inchoate energies' of the vulnerable reader in dangerous and unpredictable ways: and whilst 'the threat was perceived principally in sexual terms...

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<sup>26</sup> Cited in Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Nicola J Watson, *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel, 1790-1825* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*, p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*, p. 91.



“sex” itself was an image, a vivid substitute for other dangers’.<sup>30</sup> Although pornography caused considerable concern, it was not the only (nor even the primary) genre to do so. In particular, early- and mid-nineteenth century responses to pornography are usefully read in the context of French sentimental fiction: which deliberately appealed to its readers’ susceptible sympathies and which was repeatedly linked, by British critics, to the country’s 1830 revolution.

As Flint attests, ‘The French novel was a topos familiar in Victorian reviews and other cultural forms, carrying with it... generic assumptions of its power to corrupt’.<sup>31</sup> Over the eighteenth century, French writers had developed a new kind of literature, described by Marilyn Butler in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975) as ‘shift[ing] the emphasis from the action – what a character does – to his response to the action’.<sup>32</sup> Privileging the personal, internal responses of their vulnerable and attractive protagonists (‘very often young and inexperienced... or more positively, radiantly innocent’),<sup>33</sup> sentimental novels (Butler contends) were closely associated with a radical, Jacobinite emphasis on the freedom and consequence of the individual in the face of an oppressive, authoritarian society; sharing ‘a notion of exquisite individual sensibility which... was essentially self-authorizing rather than produced by subjection to any social structure’.<sup>34</sup> This ‘exquisite individual sensibility’ was cultivated in the sentimental *reader* by having them imaginatively share the experiences of the novels’ protagonists, projecting themselves into the adventures that they read. ‘Reading these works demands the same kind of energy as living through the events they describe:’

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*, p. 138.

<sup>32</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> Watson, *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel, 1790-1825*, p. 24.

Butler suggests: 'it is a positive, ever-varying emotional response... an experiential self-surrender... sympathy'.<sup>35</sup>

This sympathy, and the emotional reaction it entailed, was at the heart of conservative responses to sentimental fiction. 'One way in which reading supposedly proved dangerous to women was their tendency to identify with the heroines of the novels they read':<sup>36</sup> 'to forget that reality and fiction were not the same'.<sup>37</sup> The Young Person interacting with sentimental fiction or its descendants was likely not only to internalise, but to apply in her day-to-day life, 'the moral relativism implicit in the sentimental movement... subjectivity, emotionalism, indulgence towards human weakness, and belief in sexual freedom'.<sup>38</sup> As such, it is telling that pornography shares this emphasis (though perhaps not surprising: 'France was the customary source of imported pornography').<sup>39</sup>

Just as the sentimental novel relies on the reader's self-projection into the person of its protagonist – permitting interaction with fictional characters and situations that has all the directness of lived experience – so too does pornography (and erotica) encourage a close identification between reader and sexually adventuring narrator. One obvious mechanism by which this is achieved is pornography's habitual adoption of the first-person voice; Steven Marcus, in *The Other Victorians* (1974), suggests an additional technique in the attempted erasure of the genre's fictional origins. '[H]owever realistic a novel tries to be it is always conscious of itself as a story, as something made up. Pornography tries precisely to subdue or extinguish this consciousness'.<sup>40</sup> This elision of the difference between fiction and reality was

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<sup>35</sup> Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, p. 18.

<sup>36</sup> Ana-Isabel Aliaga-Buchenau, *The "Dangerous" Potential of Reading: Readers and the Negotiation of Power in Nineteenth-Century Narratives* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*, p. 92.

<sup>38</sup> Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, p. 33.

<sup>39</sup> Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*, p. 150.

<sup>40</sup> Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England*, 2nd edn (New York, NY: WW Norton, 1974), p. 38.

precisely calculated to alarm conservative minds; it threatened to excite the same dangerous energies that literary censorship was intended to restrict.

However, as their common national origin suggests, the link between popular pornography and the revolutionary ideals of sentimental fiction went beyond this shared affective goal. The direct association commonly made between the two is evinced in an article of 1836, published in the *Quarterly Review*. The piece, a review of contemporary French novels and their authors, condemns the ‘demoralising characteristics’ of the books it describes in terms which closely anticipate Campbell’s objections to the cheap pornography of the 1850s:

The habit of *labelling* vials or packets of POISON with that cautionary description may, though very rarely, have prompted or facilitated a murder or a suicide--but how many ignorant and heedless persons has it not saved from destruction! Since we cannot prohibit the sale of poison, and since every one knows that opium and arsenic are to be had at every apothecary's shop, the common sense of mankind demands that the danger should be pointed out in legible characters. These considerations induce us to bring to the attention of our readers the novelists of the modern French school...<sup>41</sup>

Although the anonymous journalist cites the ‘enthusiastic licentiousness’ of the works on which he writes as the initiating source of his anxiety, he repeatedly emphasises the causal link between sexual corruption and revolutionary thought. Here, as indeed elsewhere, the case invoked to prove the point was that of Rousseau; execrated for his publication of both *La Nouvelle Heloise* (‘an apology for incontinence and adultery’) and the *Contrat Social* (1762), with its ‘absurd and fatal doctrine of the practical *sovereignty of the people*’.<sup>42</sup>

Sentimental fiction, and the pornography with which it was both formally, geographically and politically associated, was read as ‘at once fomenting revolution and perfectly figuring its logic: seducing its readers into infidelity on all levels’.<sup>43</sup> Like

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<sup>41</sup> ‘Art III’, *Quarterly Review*, 56 (1836), 65-131 (pp. 65-66).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71.

<sup>43</sup> Watson, *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel, 1790-1825*, p. 2.

Rousseau's Julie, ignoring her father's plans to pursue a relationship with her tutor St-Preux, sentimental heroines disregarded parental authority to make their own romantic choices. This popular plot was politicised by the widely accepted parallel between the structure of the private family and that of the public realm: '*states and nations are but families upon a larger scale*'.<sup>44</sup> Given this synecdochic association, the heroines' acts of 'sexual rebellion' were readily reinterpreted as a revolutionary fable: with the correspondence between women and the working classes reinforced by that series of political developments in which the people had rebelled against 'the *ancien regime* for which [the sentimental father] stands'.<sup>45</sup> This was the real threat promised in popular fiction and pornography: not merely the moral and sexual corruption of its readers, but the inculcation of revolutionary sentiments and desires.

The association between sentimental novels and nineteenth-century censorship discourse plays a central role in informing attitudes to Reynolds's *Mysteries of London*: a popular serial which drew for inspiration on its author's admiration for the literature of France. Like the revolutionary narratives of sentimental fiction and libertine pornography, both Reynolds's serial and the conservative opprobrium which met it were centred on the controversial figure of the female reader, and on her objectified representation in art. 'In our culture it is predominantly men (as subjects) who observe women (as objects)';<sup>46</sup> and as the quintessential cultural object, women were habitually invoked to stand for the wider non-traditional reading audience. As the next section of this chapter explores, the scenario that provoked the most concern was the female reader's encounter with her own, sexualised, simulacrum: the woman standing before a picture of herself. Symbolising the young person before the forbidden work of art, the relationship was dangerous in its subversive reflexivity. If women were the audience properly banned from the pornographic museum, they were also

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Dutton, cited *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>46</sup> Jenjoi La Belle, *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking-Glass* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 53.

the principal actors in its art. Their consciousness of their own, aestheticized representation raised the disturbing possibility that this art might come to life.

## 2.2 Pin-ups and Passivity: The *Mysteries* as mass culture

When Reynolds died in 1879, none of the serious newspapers published an obituary; so that the longest tribute to his life and work outside the popular press appeared in the *Bookseller*, a trade magazine. Correspondingly longer than the journal's usual tributes, the article obeyed generic dictates in complimenting Reynolds's popularity, and even his literary skill; but when it came to his most notorious serial, *The Mysteries of London*, an inevitable note of caution crept in. The journalist divided Reynolds's fictions into the 'historical' ('unexceptionable in their tendency') and the 'romantic' ('in a single word – sensuous'), identifying the *Mysteries* as 'the chief offender' amongst the latter.

Mr Reynolds appears to delight in carrying his heroines into the most dangerous company, and exhibiting them in the most equivocal and compromising situations. He deals not so much in the vulgar and ordinary incidents of murder, fire, and robbery, as in the sensational and exciting topics of love, seduction, persecution, and moral guilt... In too many instances this clever writer has, we regret to say, administered the poison and forgotten the remedy... He has given wings to his too warm imagination, without taking heed of the mischief likely to be engendered, by the perusal of highly-tinted romance, in the minds of the half-educated girls by whom his novels are principally patronized.<sup>47</sup>

Given the nineteenth-century association between popular fiction, pornography and revolution, it is not surprising to find Reynolds's 'highly-tinted romance' unpopular amongst the period's literary establishment. Not only did the serial enjoy enormous commercial success – amongst an audience identified as 'half-educated girls' – it combined the sexual content to which the *Bookseller* alludes with an open admiration for French republican politics. To many critics it must have seemed a kind of nightmare vision of what mass market literary culture might become.

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<sup>47</sup> 'Obituary for G.W.M. Reynolds', *The Bookseller*, 260 (1879), 600-01 (p. 601).

However, in the light of the political and social changes that the centuries have seen, it does seem surprising that Reynolds's work, condemned by his nineteenth-century peers, has continued to be dismissed by literary critics on remarkably similar grounds. Jonathan Rose, in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2002), calls the *Mysteries* 'sensational trash, verging on pornography' (as cited in the introduction to this piece);<sup>48</sup> and in *The Secret Museum*, that history of the nineteenth century obscene, Walter Kendrick derides Reynolds's novels as 'mere pot-boilers, not intended to be literature'.<sup>49</sup> Given that the critical context in both cases suggests an interest, either in popular or sexually explicit material, it seems to be the *combination* of content and audience by which Reynolds's work is doomed. It is a suggestion which brings us right back to Lord Campbell, with his assertion that pornographic literature at 'high prices' shouldn't give cause for concern. Prices and (particularly) sales figures are equally central to twentieth-century discourse on mass culture: exposing an unexpected continuity in attitude towards the popular audience that these numbers represent.

The ease with which Reynolds has been recently dismissed is a function, in part, of a broader shift in critical responses to mass-market fiction and pornography: away from early nineteenth-century anxieties about its revolutionary potential, towards a twentieth and twenty-first century contention that such literature is dangerous primarily for its lack of political soul. As Juliet John observes, 'the idea that mass culture puts profits before people, caters for the lowest common denominator, and anaesthetises rather than awakens political consciousness has been a recurrent concern in contemporary cultural theory'.<sup>50</sup> Participating in a capitalised literary marketplace, commercial fiction (so the argument runs) cannot hope to succeed unless it conforms to a conservative, conformist world view. Driven by profit and

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<sup>48</sup> Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, p. 125.

<sup>49</sup> Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*, p. 79.

<sup>50</sup> Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 27.

the need to attract readers in volume, such fiction necessarily begins to homogenise, moving away from the original, individual vision associated with genuine radical art towards ‘the production of standardised commodities’.<sup>51</sup> That is, ‘it uses the techniques of art not to produce a genuinely aesthetic effect but to make a profit’.<sup>52</sup> A work’s commercial profitability is therefore read as exerting a negative effect on its artistic value. This is summarised by Terry Lovell as the belief that “‘literature’ cannot be written in order to make money without undermining its literary status’.<sup>53</sup> Given this negative association between volume of sales and literary, or political, worth, it is not surprising that the *Mysteries*, an enormous mass-market success, should find its political motives suspected.

This is the view that inflects Reynolds’s reception in Iain McCalman’s *Radical Underworld* (1988). McCalman provides what is for me the most surprising example of the modern critical tendency to condemn Reynolds’s work. Chronicling the history of radical politics in London during the early nineteenth century, the book establishes a history for contemporary mass-market pornography that seems, by rights, to have Reynolds at its centre. McCalman associates commercial pornography with the radical pressmen who are the objects of his study; pointing to the established association between sexual libertinism and the ‘sceptical rationalism’ of radical thought.<sup>54</sup> Libertinism’s emphasis on individual authority and freedom of choice reflected contemporary radical ideals: so that ‘[p]ressmen like [George] Cannon, [William] Benbow and [William] Dugdale, who prided themselves on being sophisticated philosophes, could hardly fail to be touched by this underside of the Enlightenment’.<sup>55</sup> Crossing the Channel to England, libertine ideas intersected with the ‘bawdy or obscene populism’ that had developed in the 1810s and 20s as a response to the

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<sup>51</sup> Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 158.

<sup>52</sup> Robert C Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 18.

<sup>53</sup> Terry Lovell, *Consuming Fiction* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 75.

<sup>54</sup> Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 208.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*



Prince Regent's notoriously profligate behaviour. 'Before long, the Holywell Street print shops, which at the start of the century had been turning out political pamphlets, became the heart of the market in commercial pornography'.<sup>56</sup> *The Mysteries*' first publisher, George Vickers, was himself 'a well-known unstamped pressman' working out of Holywell Street,<sup>57</sup> and Reynolds's serial, with its stories of voracious marquises, insatiable society ladies, and the complicated love life of the Prince himself, seems to belong amongst this radical literature. He certainly professed to share its intention to expose the 'crimes, vices and hypocrisies of the ruling classes':<sup>58</sup> as Rohan McWilliam records, 'issue after issue of his periodicals attacked the undemocratic nature of the Victorian state and blamed social evils on the aristocracy'.<sup>59</sup>

However, McCalman's suspicion of mass-market literature leads him to a different interpretation of Reynolds's work. Acknowledging commercial pornography's radical origins, he goes on to suggest that the political associations of this kind of fiction were short-lived. 'By the end of the twenties, it must have been difficult to be a professional trader in pornography and to retain credibility in radical circles':<sup>60</sup> and by the beginning of Victoria's reign, the association between pornography and radical politics had been entirely lost:

This long tradition of pornography was no "counter-culture"... it was too hollow and fantastic... too commercially expedient to be a subversive cultural force. At best it peddled masturbatory fantasies for frustrated upper-class males; at worst it popularised debased versions of the cruelty, violence and perversion of the Marquis de Sade.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 205-06.

<sup>59</sup> McWilliam, 'The Mysteries of G.W.M. Reynolds: Radicalism and Melodrama in Victorian Britain', (p. 182).

<sup>60</sup> McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840*, p. 216.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

The date of the *Mysteries* ' publication (1844-56) places Reynolds firmly on the wrong side of this dividing line. Despite his caveat about early bawdy literature (it was radical 'whatever its commercial objectives'),<sup>62</sup> the move into mass-market production means, for McCalman, an inevitable loss of political momentum: Reynolds's work is 'too commercially expedient to be... subversive'. He dismisses the *Mysteries* as a 'smutty publication' and says no more about it.<sup>63</sup>

The shift that McCalman traces, away from radical libertinism and towards the 'masturbatory fantasies' of 'upper-class males', does seem to reflect a genuine trend in nineteenth-century pornographic culture. In *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England* (2002), Lisa Sigel offers a history of the genre that corroborates McCalman's account. 'Early nineteenth century pornography saw sexuality as happening through women', she writes, 'not only to women, as later works would do'.<sup>64</sup> Like McCalman, Sigel associates eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century pornography with the libertine ideals of French sentimental fiction, and with its emphasis on the centrality of female desire: so that, for example, in John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1748), 'the author's use of women's bodies and women's sexuality formed part of an attempt to refocus the social order. Societal liberation would come from within women's bodies'.<sup>65</sup> In contrast, as the century wore on, 'the point of [pornographic] works shifted from a consideration of new sexual and social possibilities to a demonstration of penile conquest of the vagina... women's place in revolutionary sexuality began to shift from subject/actor to object.'<sup>66</sup> Although pornography

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>64</sup> Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914*, p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

still sought ‘to unseat the privileged through critique, mockery and attack, in the process it fed off women, the young, the poor and the foreign’.<sup>67</sup>

I am not, therefore, disputing McCalman’s suggestion that there was a significant shift in the nature of pornography over the nineteenth century; that it moved from championing the same socially excluded groups associated with the developing mass literary market, into stereotyping and objectifying them. However, I disagree with his (and the other cited critics’) conclusion about the nature of Reynolds’s text. Without wanting to cast unwarranted aspersions, neither McCalman, Kendrick nor Rose seems to have devoted much attention to the *Mysteries* before making their judgement on the work: Kendrick, incredibly, relies for his account on the testimony of a dictionary of *British Authors of the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1936. But the crucial question, whether the *Mysteries* exploits or empowers its female characters, has different answers depending on whether you examine the serial’s pictures (quick and easy to do) or its printed text (forbiddingly long); and also (most fundamentally of all) whether you identify Reynolds’s readers with McCalman’s ‘frustrated upper-class males’, or with the ‘half-educated girls’ described in the *Bookseller* obituary.

So: to those incriminating pictures. The *Mysteries* included a large number of illustrations: 624 in total, one for every week of publication. In the absence of a separate wrapper (which would have doubled the price), these large woodcut images effectively served as the front cover for every weekly instalment, occupying two-thirds of the number’s first page. As Henry Mayhew reports (citing an ‘informant’ among the London costermongers), this gave them a central role in attracting new or casual readers.

“I have known a man, what couldn’t read, buy a periodical what had an illustration, a little out of the common way perhaps, just that he might learn from someone who could read, what it was all about ... Now here,” proceeded my friend, “you sees an engraving of a man hung up, burning over a fire, and

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

some costers would go mad if they couldn't learn what he'd been doing, who he was, and all about him. 'But what about the picture?' they would say, and this is a very common question put by them whenever they see an engraving.'<sup>68</sup>

As such, it is not surprising to find that most of the *Mysteries*' pictures serve a narrative function, illustrating a key plot point from that week's instalment; which is often as sensational as Mayhew's correspondent prescribes (a drowned body, a snake attack, a suicide attempt). However, from the second series onwards (so from 1846), another distinct genre of picture begins to appear. Rather than depictions of events taking place, these are static, head-and-shoulders portraits of the model's female characters, usually wearing low-cut clothing and staring provocatively out at the reader. Reflecting Sigel's description of the women objectified by later Victorian pornography, the pictures certainly threaten to confirm McCalman's perspective on Reynolds's reductively commercialised text.

[In the later nineteenth century] the reclining or partially reclining female figure with an oval face and bared breasts became the staple image of sexuality... Bared breasts demonstrated women's position as receptive and sexualised regardless of the circumstances... [they] became the central token of sexuality in pictorial representations much as seduction became the main theme in narrative representations.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (New York, NY: Dover, 1968), p. 1.25.

<sup>69</sup> Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914*, p. 47.



Figure 4

As in the pornography that Sigel describes, the women of these illustrations are ‘objectified by [their] beauty’:<sup>70</sup> more specifically, by this beauty’s uniformity. The characters are strikingly alike: not only in their ‘oval faces’ but their curled hair, dark eyes, arched eyebrows, pouted lips; and their delicate hands, modelling the physical contact that the reader can only imagine and desire. On the basis of these images, it is easy to see why McCalman might decide to dismiss Reynolds’s work as pornography long-detached from its genuine radical origins.

But to dismiss even these limited, illustrated heroines is to forget the crucial fact that in the nineteenth century, when it came to obscenity the question of access was just as (or more) crucial than the content of a work. What a text, or an image, meant, was fundamentally inflected by the question of who was looking at it: and the readership that the *Mysteries* enjoyed was quite different to that which McCalman implies that it appealed. Certainly, the sources on the topic are limited: the *Bookseller* obituary, a reference by Henry Mayhew, the testimony of a Manchester bookseller to the Parliamentary Stamp Committee in 1851. The ‘Notices to Correspondents’ columns in *Reynolds’s Miscellany* and, before that, the *London*

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<sup>70</sup> Lori Hope Lefkowitz, *The Character of Beauty in the Victorian Novel* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 18.

*Journal* can be traced to offer a kind of picture of the people of whom Reynolds's audience was chiefly comprised: but the columns are frustratingly indirect, withholding readers' letters in favour of editorial replies, to correspondents hidden behind pseudonyms that disguise age, sex and education. Nevertheless, even this limited information makes it clear that the readers of Reynolds's work bear little or no resemblance to the 'frustrated upper-class males' described by McCalman as the principal audience for commercial Victorian pornography. The *Notices* suggests an audience of clerks, servants, and apprentices: the literate urban working class. More controversial still, not only the *Bookseller* obituary but Abel Heywood, the Manchester newspaperman, explicitly mentions the *Mysteries*' female readership: 'a great many females buy the *Court of London*', Heywood told his Parliamentary audience in 1851.<sup>71</sup> And indeed, given the *Mysteries*' enormous sales, the mention of women should not really be a surprise: as Nina Baym reminds us, 'half or more of the novel-reading youth were females'.<sup>72</sup>

It is a crucial point because upper-class men were the traditional audience for respectable culture in all its forms. To return to Kendrick's useful construction, they were the audience invited *in* to the secret museum. The 'half-educated girls' identified by the *Bookseller* as 'principally comprising' the readership of the *Mysteries* embodied, on the other hand, those who were excluded. Even if the *Mysteries* did represent the 'masturbatory fantasies of frustrated upper-class males', the fact that it was doing so in a format available to a female, working-class audience made it already and inherently subversive: because it challenged the upper-class monopoly on this particular type of representation. Showing these pictures to his working-class readers, Reynolds was challenging a critical discourse that

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<sup>71</sup> -, 'Parliamentary Papers, Report of the Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps', (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969), p. 378.

<sup>72</sup> Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 53.

depicted them as unprepared for anything more exciting than an educative sermon in the *Penny Magazine*.

That nineteenth-century obscenity legislation was more about context than it was about content is made clear in contrasting Reynolds's provocative women against another image to which they bear a remarkable resemblance; but which neither nineteenth- nor (presumably) twentieth-century critics have sought to condemn. Invoked in an 1857 debate on the proposed obscenity act, Correggio's painting 'Jupiter and Antiope' (1523) makes for an instructive comparison. As discussed in the section above, Lord Campbell's Obscene Publications Act enjoyed a speedy passage through Parliament: but on its second reading, as a bill in the House of Lords, it met with some objections. Although they shared their colleague's desire 'to suppress this great and crying evil',<sup>73</sup> on this occasion many of the Lords expressed concern about the scope of the reforms he had proposed. Campbell suggested that police should be allowed to search shops and residences for incriminating material (which they might then destroy) on the strength of a single accusation. For Lord Lyndhurst, whose intervention I will quote at length, the possible consequences were significant:

Suppose now a man following the trade of an informer, or a policeman, sees in a window something which he conceives to be a licentious print. He goes to the magistrate, and describes, according to his ideas, what he saw; the magistrate thereupon issues his warrant for the seizure of the disgusting print. The officer then goes to the shop, and says to the shopkeeper, "Let me look at that picture of Jupiter and Antiope." "Jupiter and what?" says the shopkeeper. "Jupiter and Antiope," repeats the man. "Oh! Jupiter and Antiope, you mean," says the shopkeeper; and hands him down the print. He sees the picture of a woman stark naked, lying down, and a satyr standing by her with an expression on his face which shows most distinctly what his feelings are and what is his object. The informer tells the man he is going to seize the print, and to take him before a magistrate. "Under what authority?" he asks; and he is told—"Under the authority of Lord Campbell's Act." "But," says the man, "don't you know

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<sup>73</sup> HC Deb 11 June 1857, vol 146 cols 327-338 (col 329).

that it is a copy from a picture of one of the most celebrated masters in Europe?" ... a copy of a famous Correggio which hangs in the large square room of the Louvre, right opposite an ottoman, on which are seated daily ladies of the first rank from all countries of Europe, who resort there for the purpose of studying the works of art in that great gallery.<sup>74</sup>

Lyndhurst's example could hardly be better chosen. 'Jupiter and Antiope' might be hanging in the Louvre: but the resemblance between Correggio's classical heroine and the 'pornographic' women of the *Mysteries*' illustrations is inescapable.



**Figure 5**

Although I have chosen the most similar of the *Mysteries* pictures – a portrait by the engraver E. Hooper of Ernestina Dysart, a character from the serial's fourth series – the likeness, not only between both pictures but to Sigel's definition of the objectified pornographic heroine, is striking. Both women are depicted reclining, as Sigel prescribes, in sexually suggestive poses; both have their curly hair loose on their shoulders, and their arms raised the better to project their breasts. Hooper's woman is, perhaps, the more assertive; looking out at the

<sup>74</sup> HL Deb 25 June 1857, vol 146 cols 327-338 (cols 330-331).



viewer where Correggio's Antiope lies inert, vulnerable, before the satyr who models his gaze. But in every fundamental point the pictures are identical.

Although Lyndhurst's example is a particularly happy one, there is a wide field from which he might have chosen to almost precisely similar effect. As John Berger's famous description reminds us, the difference between the pornographic heroine and the Western classical nude is in many points so close as to be almost non-existent.

In other non-European traditions... [if] the theme of a work is sexual attraction, it is likely to show active sexual love between two people... [But] In the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him... a stranger – with his clothes still on.<sup>75</sup>

The suggestion recalls the fundamental principle on which Victorian obscenity legislation was based: the idea that even mildly provocative art was properly restricted to the detached, dispassionate gaze of the educated man. Women and the working classes were necessarily excluded because their reactions could not be trusted: the working-class policeman, bristling with outrage at the 'disgusting print', reacts as ignorantly and impulsively as his nature dictates.<sup>76</sup> If Victorian censorship laws can be seen as a kind of cultural curation, Lyndhurst is worried that Campbell's proposal portends a society curated by the working class.

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<sup>75</sup> John Berger and others, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC, 1972), pp. 53-54.

<sup>76</sup> Much as I disagree with the conservative agenda that prompts Lyndhurst's intervention, it is worth noting that his fears were recently realised in an incident at a London gallery. The *Evening Standard* reported as follows: 'There were no complaints from the public when a Mayfair gallery exhibited a dramatic modern rendering of the ancient Greek myth of Leda and the swan in its window. But the sensitive souls of the Metropolitan Police took a different view when they spotted Derrick Santini's photograph of a naked woman being ravished by the bird. An officer took exception as he passed the *Scream* gallery in Bruton Street on a bus. He alerted colleagues and two uniformed officers from Harrow arrived to demand the work be removed. Jag Mehta, sales director at the gallery... said: "We asked them what the problem was and they said it suggested we condoned bestiality, which they said was an arrestable offence"... "The explanation that the picture was based on a legend that had inspired countless generations of artists failed to cut the mustard with the police, she said. "They didn't know anything about the myth. They stood there and didn't leave until we took the piece down." Ignorant policemen, classical precedent: it is all there as Lyndhurst imagined it. Best of all? 'Ms Mehta pointed out that for prim Victorians, the myth of how Zeus, in the form of a swan, raped young Leda and produced Helen of Troy, was an acceptable form of erotica.' ! (Louise Jury, 'Feathers fly at the police station over gallery's 'bestial' Leda and the Swan', *Evening Standard*, 27 April 2012, p. 1.)

The metaphor is reinforced by the strategy by which Lyndhurst defends the worth of Correggio's painting: its inclusion in 'that great gallery, the Louvre'. His emphasis on the picture's open display, in the gallery's 'large square room' with its audience of 'ladies of the first rank', implicitly contrasts it with that more dangerous material (Reynolds's serials, the Pompeiian artefacts) before which no respectable woman would be seen. But in fact, I would argue that 'Jupiter and Antiope's' inclusion in the Louvre actually *aligns* it with the pornography of Pompeii. Neither is absolutely obscene in the sense that Campbell's act had condemned: 'works written for the single purpose of corrupting the morals of youth'.<sup>77</sup> Rather, although both are open to the sexual misconstructions of the naïve or vulnerable reader, they each exhibit a value that protects them from the Act's destructive force. The archaeological significance of the Pompeiian relics demanded that they be retained, just as the artistic merit of Correggio's piece justifies its continued preservation and display. The museum is a signifier of this cultural value.

Nineteenth-century critics' anxiety about the Young Person's tendency to misidentify cultural materials (art as pornography, pornography as art) is attested by the volume of criticism on Reynolds which emphasises the *Mysteries*' dangerous ambiguity: its apparently deliberate façade of respectability. This was clearly a focus of serious concern. Walter Kendrick, for example, cites the American physician Dr Sanger, writing in an 1858 *History of Prostitution* (pornography in the word's original sense). In a defiant act of cultural curation, Sanger refused even to name the target of his attack ('those who are ignorant of [his name] would only be injured by its disclosure');<sup>78</sup> but Kendrick confidently associates the passage with Reynolds.

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<sup>77</sup> HL Deb 25 June 1857, vol 146 cols 327-338 (col. 329).

<sup>78</sup> Cited in Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*, p. 79.

[He] has written and published more disgustingly minute works, under the guise of honest fiction, than ever emanated from the Parisian presses. He writes in a strain eminently calculated to excite the passions, but so carefully guarded as to avoid absolute obscenity, and embellishes his works with wood-cuts which approach lasciviousness as nearly as possible without being indictable...<sup>79</sup>

The accusation is that Reynolds deliberately restrains the content of his work, maintaining a level of propriety calculated to corrupt his suggestible audience without fear of prosecution. The suggestion reinforces the importance of the gallery's authenticating authority: out on the street there are materials so determinedly subversive that even the Obscene Publications Act can't touch them. The idea that the *Mysteries* attempts to conceal its true nature under the appearance of respectability is interesting, too, for its reflection of that modern critical discourse that criticises mass culture for masquerading as genuine, meaningful art.

'Jupiter and Antiope' only risks misreading when it is mistaken for an item of mass culture: copied and exhibited in one of the London print shop windows in which the period's cheap pornography was conventionally displayed. Translated into these terms, Lyndhurst's scenario resonates uncomfortably with that anti-mass-culture criticism that takes issue with popular culture as emulating the appearance and techniques of art: in the twentieth (and twenty-first) century as in the nineteenth, art is valued by a uniqueness which also entails exclusivity.<sup>80</sup> Although the Correggio painting's display in the Louvre permits an audience of 'ladies' (that the Pompeiian museum excludes), those women enjoying this safely pre-filtered culture are also enjoying the advantage of their 'rank'. One wonders how many 'half-educated girls' (particularly how many London girls) made their way into the Parisian gallery's halls. Just as early slum clearances destroyed working-class housing without making

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> I am thinking here particularly of the Frankfurt School of criticism, for example the writings of Walter Benjamin. In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin asserts that any mass-produced cultural artefact necessarily lacks an essential quality of art: 'its [unique] presence in time and space'. (Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction* [London: Penguin, 2008], p.3.)

any (suitable) provision for its replacement, so the obscenity act (and its anti-popular print media bias) failed to acknowledge the privilege of its authors. For the majority of Reynolds's readership, the alternative to cheap print culture was not more acceptable media, but no access to print media at all.

The Secret Museum, thus interpreted, adopts a double function: protecting the Young Person from the corrupting influence of media with which she was ill-equipped to deal, it also acted to protect these valuable texts from the misinterpretation of an officious working class. Forbidden access to street pornography but unable to access the more exclusive alternative, the curious Young Person's future looks bleak. One wonders how Lyndhurst's policeman, who had never seen the Louvre, might be expected to contextualise what he saw? The continuing exclusivity that the Obscene Publications Act demanded was essentially a mechanism for perpetuating the ignorance of the readers on whose lack of cultural knowledge it depended. Without access to the same spectrum of culture that the educated classes accepted as their right, the working class (and the women whom they paralleled) would have continually to be protected by their better-read superiors. It is a notion whose convenient circularity (reinforcing existing structures of power) Reynolds struggled to expose: in an argument which itself gives the lie to modern portraits of his serial as exploitative trash.

### 2.3 The Exploitative Curator: Reconfiguring the Secret Museum

Although modern critics have concurred with Reynolds's nineteenth-century contemporaries in representing *The Mysteries of London* as pornography, comparisons with artworks accorded higher cultural value suggest that the accusation is more a reflection of context than content. The premise of the Secret Museum at Pompeii was the need to protect certain, vulnerable audiences from material that might damage their fragile morality. Reynolds's serial was a cause for concern not because of the material it contained, but because that material was widely available to an audience characterised as suggestible and naïve. Twentieth- and twenty first-century accounts that represent Reynolds's work as reductive and market-driven neglect this central question of readership (and the radical possibilities that widely available print literature represented) in favour of an unthinking opposition to commercialised culture that echoes the prejudice of their Victorian predecessors. That Reynolds should be criticised in these terms is all the more surprising given that it is an issue with which he explicitly engaged, both in his own critical writing and in the *Mysteries* itself, challenging the qualitative distinction between male and female (or upper- and working-class) readers and exposing the period's censorship discourse as a bid to maintain cultural control.

The Secret Museum at Pompeii (like the 1857 Obscene Publications Act for which, in this chapter, it stands) depended on the premise that certain inexperienced readerships were particularly vulnerable to the emotional effects of literary and visual representations. Less cultured, less disciplined and with a more naturally passionate nature, women, children and the working class were continually susceptible to the literature they read; while their wealthy, male contemporaries could step back with an educated critical detachment. Umberto Eco's notion of the 'second level reader', in *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990), is useful here. Eco suggests that every text contains not one implied, or ideal reader, but two: the 'first level, or

naïve' reader, who responds with simplicity and immediacy to the letter of the work, and 'a second level, or critical one', who can appreciate more fully the 'narrative strategy' of what he reads.<sup>81</sup> Nineteenth century models of the vulnerable Young Person restricted her to a first level reading. Faced with a frieze of Pompeiian nudes, she would be unable to control her initial (presumably, sexual) response; while the educated man would be beneficially able to consider the historical significance of the piece. Christopher Pittard, writing on the sensation fiction of the 1860s, makes a precisely similar point.

Historically, the passive readers identified by critics and social commentators were women, the young and the working class, all seen as susceptible to the moral threat of the sensation novel and the penny dreadful. By contrast, the educated male middle-class reader obviously possessed enough cultural competence not to be seduced by such narration.<sup>82</sup>

This narrative of readerly vulnerability was echoed in contemporary discourse around London street pornography – especially visual materials – which emphasised its hypnotic power over the vulnerable viewers it entrapped. Whilst Campbell, suggesting a new obscenity bill, had made weekly serialised literary texts the explicit focus of his concern, Lynda Nead associates the 1857 Act with the parallel rise in cheap erotic prints. These concerns tended to focus on London's Holywell Street (home of McCalman's radical pornographers, as well as the *Mysteries*' first publisher George Vickers); but from the 1850s onwards 'obscene images were conspicuously displayed in print-shop windows throughout the metropolis',<sup>83</sup> exemplifying the increasingly 'public, visible, and unavoidable' nature of the new mass-market pornography.<sup>84</sup> The 'casual visual consumption' enabled by this display of feminine flesh made cheap images still more radically accessible than the texts by which they were often accompanied: as evinced in the testimony of Henry Mayhew's costermonger, even the

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<sup>81</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1990), p. 55.

<sup>82</sup> Christopher Pittard, 'From Sensation to the Strand', in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 105-16 (p. 109).

<sup>83</sup> Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London*, p. 149.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

illiterate (those ‘what couldn’t read’) could be drawn in by a curious print.<sup>85</sup> But, typically, there was one specific group identified as particularly vulnerable to the print-shops’ dubious attractions.

Women... were believed to be especially prone to the colour, composition and effects of the images displayed in print-shop windows. Thus arrested, they halted their passage through the city and became absorbed and aroused by the power of the visual.<sup>86</sup>

This image of the female reader, ‘sexually entranced... in the middle of the metropolis’, was a source of particular anxiety given the growing emphasis (in both pornographic and mainstream culture) on women’s sexual passivity.<sup>87</sup> Female virtue had always been imperative in a society founded on patrilineal inheritance, but during the nineteenth-century, expectations as to what a ‘pure woman’ might be became much more restrictive. ‘[B]y the beginning of the nineteenth century,’ writes Ruth Yeazell, ‘writer increasingly tended to locate modesty in the mind... it was “the glory of a delicate female to be unconscious” of all “unbecoming knowledge”’.<sup>88</sup> Like the growing passivity of pornographic heroines, this expectation not just of innocence, but of absolute ignorance on the part of the virtuous young woman might be read as a reaction to the rebellious heroines of sentimental fiction. For example, the journalist writing for the *Quarterly Review* on the dangers of contemporary French literature had felt compelled to emphasise that ‘in a civilized society, the corruption of female virtue is the worst and most irretrievable of all corruptions’.<sup>89</sup> At the same time, the continued emphasis on women’s emotional vulnerability (and their powerful capacity for sympathy) implied a dangerous sexual parallel. ‘Victorian medical texts presented women not as passionless, but as sexually dormant, needing to be

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<sup>85</sup> Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, p. I.25.

<sup>86</sup> Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London*, p. 188.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>88</sup> Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 56.

<sup>89</sup> ‘Art III’, p.130.

aroused by a partner’;<sup>90</sup> and ‘if women remain[ed] modestly unaware that they love[d] until they [we]re asked to marry, their desires [would] remain safely in the keeping of their husbands’.<sup>91</sup> But if literature could exert such a powerful effect on female sympathies; and if mental corruption was as fatal as a physical fall; then the possibility of a woman’s latent sexual energies being unleashed through contact with a sexually provocative text threatened their purity on a very meaningful level. As Patrick Brantlinger, in *The Reading Lesson* (1998) records, it was a threat that was repeatedly figured in plots of seduction through text: often (predictably) the *Nouvelle Heloise*, but even (in the sensationalist gothic of Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* [1796]), an attempt at sexual corruption via Bible.<sup>92</sup> This mattered because, as the reference to sentimental fiction reminds us, women’s sexual liberation betokened the rise of the radicals and the fall of decent society.

This belief in the Young Person’s emotional responsiveness appears to have been extremely widely held, recurring in criticism around mass market literature throughout the nineteenth century. However, it was also a view with which Reynolds explicitly disagreed. His greater faith in the detachment of the readers whom he served is evinced in this extract from his 1839 *Modern Literature of France*, a work conceived with the notion of contradicting the negative image of the country’s fiction put forward in journals like the *Quarterly Review*. Dismissing the *Review* piece cited above as ‘the most desperate attack ever made upon a foreign nation by the pen’,<sup>93</sup> Reynolds made his case for a more open literary treatment of sexuality.

The strict conventional uses of English society prevent the introduction of highly-coloured passages into works of fiction; and thus, in an English book which professes to be a history of man or of the world, the narrative is but half told. In France the whole tale is given at once; and the young men, and young females do not there enter upon life with minds so circumscribed and narrow

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<sup>90</sup> Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 106.

<sup>91</sup> Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel*, p. 51.

<sup>92</sup> Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth Century British Fiction*, p. 43.

<sup>93</sup> Reynolds, *The Modern Literature of France*, p. I.iii.



that the work of initiation becomes a ruinous task. We do not become robbers because we read of thefts; nor does a female prove incontinent on account of her knowing that such a failing exists. The pilot should be aware of rocks and quicksands, that he may know how to avoid them.<sup>94</sup>

Querying the theory that naïve reading audiences were liable directly to imitate what they read, Reynolds disputed the fundamental principle by which nineteenth-century censorship was justified. Rather than depicting working-class (and female) readers as necessarily bound to Eco's first-level response, Reynolds puts the emphasis on giving this audience the tools to think critically for itself: to become effective second-level readers.

The suggestion that it is a lack of knowledge, rather than an innate incapability to understand, that makes the reading Young Person vulnerable to exploitation (so that 'the work of initiation becomes a ruinous task') puts a more sinister spin on the Secret Museum. As Lisa Sigel suggests, 'The social implications of "filth" in the wrong people's hands did more than expose hypocrisy: it exposed sexuality as a method of social control'.<sup>95</sup> Rather than paternally caring for the vulnerable, the cultural curation that censorship implied was about keeping subordinated cultural groups ignorant and open to manipulation. Patrick Brantlinger rightly observes that 'the only sure way to keep working-class readers from being violated by improper reading was to keep them illiterate'.<sup>96</sup> rendering them conveniently dependent on those who *were* authorised to read. Reynolds himself was quite clear in his belief that 'the rich, generally, are not anxious that the poor should obtain any facilities of instruction, for fear that education will open their eyes to the true nature of their condition'.<sup>97</sup>

Reynolds did not restrict his claims about censorship and cultural control to his non-fictional work. Many scenes and storylines in the *Mysteries* itself tackle issues of readerly

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. I.xvii-xviii.

<sup>95</sup> Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914*, p. 154.

<sup>96</sup> Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth Century British Fiction*, p. 32.

<sup>97</sup> G.W.M. Reynolds, 'Letters to the Industrious Classes: Letter 1:- General Address', *Reynolds's Miscellany*, 1 (1847), 199-200.

vulnerability, media manipulation and the emotional power of art. But there's one particularly apposite moment in the serial's fourth series, depicting an alternative Secret Museum that betrays all the moral and political corruption of its upper-class curators. The series is the first to be definitively focused on a female protagonist, the beautiful and mysterious Venetia Trelawney: and it is she who is the heroine of this definitive scene.

Courted over the course of a week by six aristocratic suitors (including the Prince of Wales), Thursday finds Venetia in Albemarle Street, at the home of the elderly Marquis of Leveson. Other suitors have come to visit her at home: but Leveson's objective in extending this invitation is rapidly elucidated, as Venetia is left alone in 'a gallery... filled with pictures and statues' (*Court* III.218). What ensues comprises a cynical commentary on the cultural curation that this chapter has discussed.

The first object which she... contemplated... was a sculptured group of the Three Graces, as large as life; but as she gazed upon the exquisite work of art, the thought imperceptibly stole into her mind that instead of being characterised by that charming air of innocence with which those heathen personifications are usually invested, there was something deeply sensuous in the countenances and attitudes of the statues. (*Court* III.219)

Her curiosity aroused, Venetia walks on, encountering more sculptures of classical scenes (Leda and the swan, Mars and Venus in Vulcan's net) which become 'successively more and more indelicate' (III.219). It rapidly becomes apparent that the gallery as a whole is intended to excite its reader's sexual desires: 'gradually to lead on the imagination from the first petty shock, through all the phases of enhancing allurements, into the crowning grossness of the most nude and undisguised lasciviousness' (III.219). Most gloriously of all, given the context of Lyndhurst's proprietary concerns, is the description of the final piece, that which finally drives Venetia from the room. This is the moment when Leveson's painted pornography displays itself in all the 'naked truth' of its intent:

as she was retreating towards the door by which she had entered the gallery, her eyes fell upon one of the pictures suspended to the wall. The subject was the Rape of the Sabines: in fact, the picture was to a certain degree a copy of Reubens' splendid master-piece that is now preserved at the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square:—but the copyist had so enhanced the indelicacy of the scene, and had heightened its details into such voluptuous effects, that it burst upon the gaze like the sudden exposure of an orgie in a brothel.

With glowing cheeks, flashing eyes, and palpitating bosom, Venetia Trelawney rushed back into the refreshment-room. (*Court* III.219)

Particularly pleasing for its almost preternatural anticipation of Kendrick's curatorial metaphor, the passage as a whole represents a direct challenge (on several fronts) to mid-century discourse around the literary mass market.

Writing on the *Mysteries*' first series, Juliet John suggests that

Reynolds's implication is that the cultural marketplace functions on a shifting continuum so that if so-called high art is intertwined with commercial art, then the logic of the market necessitates that commercial and high art are intertwined with pornography.<sup>98</sup>

Although the commercialised discourse John discusses is not present in this scene, Reynolds's reference to Rubens' 'Rape of the Sabines', 'now [and still] preserved at the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square', certainly challenges the distinction between art and pornography that inclusion in (or exclusion from) a gallery enacted. Although the picture is a 'copy' with its 'details enhanced', it still acts as a reminder that the distinction between art and erotica might be negligibly fine. This was, of course, the basis on which Reynolds's own work had been criticised; in terms which closely echo the language he himself employs to discuss the exhibits in Leveson's pornographic museum. Compare this description from the bookseller Abel Heywood, struggling to qualify the *Mysteries*' obscenity, with Reynolds's account of Leveson's Mars and Venus:

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<sup>98</sup> Juliet John, 'Reynolds's 'Mysteries' and Popular Culture', in *G.W.M. Reynolds: Nineteenth Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*, ed. by Anne Humpherys and Louis James (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 163-77 (p. 173).

[S]ome look upon [*The Mysteries*] as an indecent publication; it is not in reality an indecent publication, because I do not believe that any words appear that are vulgar; but certainly the language is of a most exciting kind, and directed to excite the passions of its readers.<sup>99</sup>

As a specimen of art the design and execution were inimitable: but the beauty of the Goddess of Love was so intimately blended with an expression of wantonness, that the very effigy appeared to glow and palpitate as if ready to burst into the ardour of ungovernable passion. But still there was nothing that could possibly shock or disgust the female mind... the impression produced was that of a highly-wrought scene in a novel, where the artifice of well chosen language and the fascinations of poetic description flimsily wrap up the naked truth. (*Court III.219*)

Unlike Lyndhurst's interfering policeman, Reynolds is not (I think) arguing that art like 'The Rape of the Sabines' or 'Jupiter and Antiope' should be destroyed as inherently corrupt; although he does echo (or anticipate) his critics both in recognising the seductive power of art, and in emphasising the danger that this overlap presented to a reader made vulnerable by their cultural naivety.

Although the closeness of art to pornography was an observation common to the period's conservative critics, Reynolds's narrative crucially differs in its perception of where the danger of this circumstance is found. Lyndhurst's narrative had emphasised the ignorance of the misreading working man; Sanger's criticism was founded in suspicion of the professional author's seductive tricks. But in his model of Leveson's Secret Museum, Reynolds exonerates both the vulnerable Venetia, and the anonymous 'copyist' who had perverted Rubens work; instead firmly placing the blame on the upper-class curator of this seductive spectacle. Leveson's private gallery represents the cultural marketplace over which the period's ruling class was struggling to exert authority (through obscenity legislation and through their own museums, both public and clandestine). His construction of a curatorial narrative by which his female victims might be led into self-betrayal has therefore to be read

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<sup>99</sup> -, 'Parliamentary Papers, Report of the Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps', (p. 374).

as a figure for the political manipulation of the reading Young Person at the hands of a censoring government.

Reynolds had argued that it was in the interest of the rich to maintain the ignorance of the poor: whether for the physical exploitation Leveson's gallery anticipates (and which governed the central melodramatic narrative of the working-class heroine, seduced by a wealthy man) or out of the more directly threatening concern that 'education' would 'open... the eyes' of the working class 'to the reality of their [subordinated] condition'. That his contention was at least partially right is borne out in a passage from Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* which describes a reading audience's reaction to the very extracts described above. This is one of the few surviving accounts of Reynolds's working-class readership: it is the only one that directly describes their immediate response to the work. Mayhew is reporting the testimony of 'an intelligent costermonger', *London Labour's* source on the literary habits of his peers; and in keeping with the man's report that 'Reynolds is the most popular man among them',<sup>100</sup> it is their response to the *Mysteries* that's detailed. The setting for this anecdote is 'the courts where [the costermongers] live': looking rather different from their Gothicised twins on the 'fine summer evenings' that are here described, with 'any neighbour who has the advantage of being a "schollard" reading aloud to his fellow working men'.<sup>101</sup>

As can be seen from the opening line, the extract given by Mayhew's informant (and reproduced in his text) follows directly from the scene described above. The cut-off is significant, because taken out of context the passage threatens to reinforce prejudices about both Reynolds and his readers.

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<sup>100</sup> Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, p. I.26.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. I.25.

*'With glowing cheeks, flashing eyes, and palpitating bosom, Venetia Trelawney rushed back into the refreshment-room, where she threw herself into one of the arm-chairs already noticed. But scarcely had she thus sunk down upon the flocculent cushion, when a sharp click, as of some mechanism giving way, met her ears; and at the same instant her wrists were caught in manacles which sprang out of the arms of the treacherous chair, while two steel bands started from the richly-carved back and grasped her shoulders. A shriek burst from her lips – she struggled violently, but all to no purpose: for she was a captive – and powerless!*

*'We should observe that the manacles and the steel bands which had thus fastened upon her, were covered with velvet, so that they inflicted no positive injury upon her, nor even produced the slightest abrasion of her fair and polished skin.'*

Here all my audience," said the man to me, "broke out with— 'Aye! that's the way the harristocrats hooks it. There's nothing o' that sort among us; the rich has all that barrikin to themselves.' `Yes, that's the b— way the taxes goes in,' shouted a woman.<sup>102</sup>

For many modern readers, this extract will be their only interaction with *The Mysteries of London*: certainly with this particular scene, taken from a volume so deep into Reynolds's work. That this should be so is both disappointing, and illuminating. All palpitating bosoms and 'flocculent' cushions, the passage corroborates the conventional conception of Reynolds's work as inanely pornographic. Moreover, with the preceding scene lopped off, the jump from pornography to politics – from Venetia's sexually loaded situation to the listeners' anti-aristocratic cries – is not an obvious one; so that Reynolds's readers risk being understood as both emotionally vulnerable and of dubious critical sophistication. Are they jealous of Leveson's sexual success? At the very least the implication is that their anger is sparked only by his use of force.

Given its proper context, however, the reaction that Mayhew's correspondent describes is revealed as a second-level response on the part of a critically enlightened working class. The readers' outrage is a product not only of Leveson's intended assault on Venetia; but the narrative of cultural exploitation it enacts. Mayhew's original leaves an

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., pp. I.26-27.

implied logical leap into which it is easy to insert a prejudiced assessment of the costermongers' interpretative capabilities. But the gallery scene as it is told in full offers ample justification for their expressions of anti-government feeling. The additional context demands a re-evaluation, not only of Reynolds's serial but of its readers as well: a suggestion which returns us to the critical assertion which with this chapter began.

That certain political pamphlets or articles in liberal journals may more or less guide the public mind, and teach the indolent and careless to think for themselves, is certain; but that works abounding with voluptuousness and licentiousness can produce the same results, is a speculation as palpably false, as it is adventurously put forward.<sup>103</sup>

Read in the context of the gallery scene, it becomes clear that Reynolds is not claiming that 'voluptuousness and licentiousness' are inherently in conflict with political effect. Rather, he queries the effectiveness of any work that does not teach its readership 'to think for themselves'. Thus interpreted, the passage refuses the conservative comfort it had seemed to provide. Rather than reassuring critics that sexually charged fiction could have no political consequences, Reynolds raises the spectre of a working-class audience not only full of anger, but with an articulate understanding of their grievances and desires. As the final section of this chapter will evince, Reynolds's desire to upset the hierarchy of interpretative control threatened the additional consequence of inspiring his 'vulnerable' readers with a sense of their true, dangerous authority.

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<sup>103</sup> Reynolds, *The Modern Literature of France*, p. l.iv.

## 2.4 Animating the Image: Reynolds's subversive women

Venetia's experience in Leveson's gallery amply demonstrates Reynolds's concern about how censorship could be used to manipulate the culturally naive. As such, the *Mysteries*' sexual content – even the objectified women of its illustrations – demands a more thoughtful reading than it has historically received. Keeping women and the working class in ignorance maintained the authority of the governing elite. This social control could only be challenged if these vulnerable readers were offered an alternative cultural education, in compensation for the more formal schooling that their leaders had received. This would not only allow this audience to enjoy the literary and artistic media from which their ignorance had previously excluded them;<sup>104</sup> but would also offer them the chance to regain control over their own objectified image. It is in this context that we can understand the scene with which my chapter began: with Cecilia as a representative, not just of the debauched aristocracy, but of a supposedly vulnerable female cultural subject demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of the sexual dynamics of art.

Reynolds's serial figures the process of cultural education through a series of scenes in which women are confronted with images of female bodies. Mimicking the relationship between the reading Young Person and the sentimental heroine so dangerously like herself, these encounters include bodies explicitly mediated through artistic representation, in the form of a dramatic performance, a painting or a book; as well as those objectified through ekphrastic vocabulary ('there she stood in the middle of the apartment, like a grand statue of classic beauty' [*Court* V.263]) or the allusive framing of a mirror. In all cases, interaction with this model of herself presents the perceiving female character with the chance to take

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<sup>104</sup> Reynolds and the *Mysteries*' second publisher, John Dicks played a central role in facilitating working-class access to what they saw as the best of existing canonical literature. As discussed in my previous chapter, Reynolds frequently offered his readers cultural advice through the medium of the 'Notices to Correspondents' columns in his *Miscellany*. Dicks made a more direct intervention in the market, publishing the first penny editions of Shakespeare's plays.



control of her own, inevitably objectified body. Understanding how they are ‘supposed’ to appear – that is, how the ideal woman is depicted by and for her traditional audience of men – the most confident of these heroines practise what they have learnt, adjusting their own self-presentation in response. Reynolds’s female characters are not merely figures to be looked at through the governing eyes of men. With an assured control of their image, and a confident knowledge of how men will read their cues, the seductive women of the *Mysteries of London* are able to manipulate their readers in ways which echo the supposed relationship between mass-market fiction and its audience.

British anxiety around French sentimental fiction was founded in the notion that female readers were likely to be unduly influenced by its disobedient heroines: seeking to emulate the rebellion of which they read. As the anxiety around such literature and its incursion into ‘ladies’ book-clubs’ suggests,<sup>105</sup> women’s interaction with these dangerously rebellious precedents caused conservative critics considerable concern. But as we have seen, many nineteenth-century critics were equally concerned at the prospect of women seeing the *Mysteries*’ illustrations: whose female subjects seem as passive and objectified as even the most violent misogynist might desire. The circumstance corroborates this chapter’s contention that, when it came to obscene materials, what was represented was less important than the audience that beheld it. When women *looked at women* it was fundamentally different to when the same images were looked at by men. Specifically, it shifted women’s relationship to their own representation: rather than merely an object to be seen, a woman looking at herself becomes a perceiving subject, with all the reallocated power that the change of roles implies. Sigel, writing on the cheap pornographic postcards that provoked the ‘sex panic’ of the 1890s, clarifies the point:

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<sup>105</sup> ‘Art III’, p.66.

The expansion of access to sexual representations radically undermined the socially prescribed relation of people to ideas... Being able to view representations of bodies, rather than be represented as bodies, transformed the meaning of these images and undermined the basis of social control that remained implicit in them... women, children, the working classes and people of colour violated their “categories of being” as objects when they laid claim to the same prerogative of aesthetic objectification as had their social betters.<sup>106</sup>

Female access to ‘sexual representations’ of which women were the subject offered them the ‘prerogative of aesthetic representation’: threatening to reconstitute them as authors of themselves.

Ellen Bayuk Rosenman’s ‘Spectacular Women: *The Mysteries of London* and the Female Body’ (1996) explores this model of reflexive sexuality in Reynolds’s work, although Rosenman does not broaden her discussion to consider the wider political implications of the trope. As Rosenman acknowledges in this piece, the *Mysteries* does include a number of heroines as limp and passive as any in Victorian fiction; even in the first series, with which her article exclusively deals. She singles out (the forgettable) Isabella Alteroni: who ‘does little in the course of the novel except wait for [her fiancé] Richard to prove himself to her father’.<sup>107</sup> But, as the bulk of the article makes clear, the serial includes more (and more memorable) women who are dynamic, active, and in control of their sexuality. Rosenman focuses on Ellen Monroe, a heroine of admirable resourcefulness who manages to support herself and her bankrupt father through the judicious exhibition of her parts. Modelling initially for a sculptor, then (successively) for an artist, a photographer, a mesmerist, and finally performing as a dancer and tragedian, Ellen’s career might seem to argue against the objectification to which her sex is made subject: her beauty is the only asset that she has able to exploit. In fact, the ramifications are more complex. As Juliet John contends, Reynolds is not against the working classes making the most of whatever capital they command.

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<sup>106</sup> Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914*, p. 151.

<sup>107</sup> Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, ‘Spectacular Women: The “Mysteries of London” And the Female Body’, *Victorian Studies*, 40 (1996), 31-64.

The cultural “bazaar”, for Reynolds, exchanges products and capital like any other market, and “the people” should access and exploit its possibilities in a society where they are denied so many kinds of capital. <sup>108</sup>

Ellen’s experiences as an artist’s model do leave her vulnerable: her single excursion into prostitution (at the hands of the series’ villain, the pseudonymous Montague Greenwood) results in an illegitimate child, whose existence initially threatens to jeopardise her happiness. But, as Rosenman acknowledges, she ultimately escapes the tragic fate conventionally reserved for the unmarried mothers of Victorian canonical fiction. Marrying her erstwhile seducer, she legitimises her child; and when he is killed ‘by his perfidious valet’, the circumstance leaves ‘Ellen and her adored infant to retire comfortably and happily, with the full approval of the other characters, the author, and presumably, the reader’. <sup>109</sup>

Ellen’s ability to control her situation is a wider function of the specifically sexual self-awareness that her continual objectification has permitted her to gain. ‘[T]he very processes of representation that make her available for this gendered consumption simultaneously produce Ellen as a sexual subject’. <sup>110</sup> Rosenman focuses in detail on a scene in which Ellen (kidnapped by Greenwood, and alone) loses herself in the contemplation of her own naked body in a full-length mirror. Despite Ellen’s decidedly uncomfortable situation, the image of her own spectacular body is sufficient to distract and even to arouse her.

The mirror reflected to her eyes a countenance that had been deemed worthy to embellish a Venus on the canvass of a great painter. In that same faithful glass was also seen a form the beautiful undulations and rich contour of which were perfectly symmetrical, and yet voluptuously matured... Ellen smiled - in spite of herself, - smiled complacently - smiled almost proudly, as she surveyed her perfect form in that mirror. (*London* I.280)

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<sup>108</sup> John, 'Reynolds's 'Mysteries' and Popular Culture' (p. 176).

<sup>109</sup> Rosenman, 'Spectacular Women: The "Mysteries of London" And the Female Body' (p. 34).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

The moment, with its reference to the painted Venus, echoes a spectacular, earlier scene, in which Ellen walks her pursuer through a gallery of classical images all modelled on herself.

Taking Greenwood by the hand, Ellen led him towards the picture.

"Do you see any thing that strikes you strangely there?" she said, pointing towards the work of art.

"The scene is Venus rising from the ocean, surrounded by nereids and nymphs," answered Greenwood.

"And you admire that picture much?"

"Yes - much; or else I should not have purchased it."

"Then have you unwittingly admired me," exclaimed Ellen; "for the face of your Venus is my own!" (*London* I.217)

The juxtaposition between the two scenes makes Reynolds's implication clear:

'Through her work as a model, Ellen has developed a kind of body-consciousness and re-appropriates her image for her own desire'.<sup>111</sup> The narrative as a whole represents a threatening challenge to the conventional narrative of female initiation; which demanded that 'female consciousness – and sexuality – be awakened' only at the husband's command.<sup>112</sup>

But the ramifications of the cultural consciousness both inculcated by the *Mysteries* and enacted in its pages went beyond the sexual self-awareness enjoyed by Ellen and her many narcissistic peers. Greenwood's bid for possession (his kidnap attempt) is the product of lust rekindled by Ellen's performance onstage: attesting the power which female performance could exert over the men whom it addressed. Although, in this instance, the effect is inadvertent (Ellen does not realise Greenwood is in the audience), many of the *Mysteries*' most resourceful heroines deliberately manipulate their physical appearance to exploit and profit from this masculine desire.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>112</sup> Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel*, p. 53.

One such heroine is Venetia Trelawney, the apparent innocent exposed to the malevolent machinations of the curating Marquis. In fact, it becomes clear over the course of the series' development that Venetia is anything but culturally naïve. Her whole persona (from exotic name to provocative naivety) is the product of a feminine plot: she has been co-opted by an older woman, Miss Bathurst, to re-establish her influence at court (by becoming mistress to the Prince of Wales). As with Ellen's self-pleasuring display, Venetia's confident sense of herself is exhibited in her own interaction with the mirror:

advancing towards the mirror, she surveyed herself with looks of joyous triumph. But suddenly altering the expression of her features, she assumed an air of haughty indignation—then of proud defiance—and then of cold contempt... suddenly bursting into a melodious laugh, which rang merrily through the room, she flung herself upon a sofa, exclaiming, "What an excellent actress I should make!" (*Court* III.15)

In the context of a gender discourse continually concerned that 'the modest woman's virtue was only a seeming',<sup>113</sup> it is easy to see why Reynolds's self-possessed heroines were the cause of so much conservative concern. They did more than model familial rebellion: they deliberately taught their female readers to deceive. Cecilia plays on her feminine charms to manipulate Reginald to her will; but Venetia's exploitation of her own good looks affords her considerable political power, placing her for some time in the influential position of mistress to the King. This ascent to political supremacy makes Venetia one of the serial's most interesting characters, a status that is only magnified by the happy ending that Reynolds affords her. After sleeping her way through what feels like most of the court, she settles down with a loving husband in rural retirement (*Court* IV.407-408).

Returning to the scene with which my chapter began, then, I would argue that Cecilia's successful, seductive performance makes a point about the educated readers that Tracy represents. His passionate reaction to the sight of Cecilia's classically sculpted body

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<sup>113</sup> Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel*, p. 11.

challenges the premise of educated critical detachment by which the period's censors justified their authority. Recasting the Secret Museum at Pompeii in a decidedly seedy light (how much pleasure is really being taken in those pornographic friezes?), the suggestion more importantly reveals the vulnerability behind the supposed 'power of male spectatorship'.<sup>114</sup> Men's commanding comprehension of what they saw was premised on the ingenuousness of the objects represented: the women and working classes whose emotional naivety was the basis of their critical disqualification. But if these culturally subjected groups were to master the vocabulary of their own representation (as Cecilia masters that of classical art), then the perceiving male subject was himself vulnerable to exploitation. The nineteenth-century emphasis both on women's emotional impressionability, and on men's critical detachment, demonstrates the power of this fundamental fear: that the discourse of female ingenuousness was a lie, and that men were being continually deceived by the innocent appearance of the women whom they 'read'. As Helena Michie observes, 'Nineteenth-century fiction in both Britain and America is haunted by paintings of women coming alive'.<sup>115</sup> Reynolds, with typically melodramatic excess, merely translates the metaphor back into reality.

The story of Cecilia and Reginald Tracy demonstrates the radical potential of an uncensored cultural sphere: a possibility for which Reynolds consistently crusaded. Defending his working-class and female readers, he exposed the campaign for their continued cultural exclusion as tendentious and fundamentally unsound. Given the appropriate critical tools, these readers would respond with the same sophistication as the more traditional literary elite. The *Mysteries of London* represents a movement towards this cultural education: teaching women (and the working class) how they were seen, Reynolds offered his readers the change to regain control over their own contested representation; and to exert an

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<sup>114</sup> Lori Hope Lefkowitz, *The Character of Beauty in the Victorian Novel* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 18.

<sup>115</sup> Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 107.

answering effect on the society that sought to limit and objectify them. That is the possibility that popular culture – and even popular pornography – presents.

## The Child in the Cupboard: Reynolds's radical Gothic



Figure 6

In the course of the architect George Godwin's incursions into the slum housing of mid-century London, he reports one incident whose horror persists in the memory. '[T]he other day, when opening a cupboard in a miserable room in the neighbourhood of Gray's-inn-lane, we found, shut up with the bread and some other matters, *the body of a child*, without a coffin.'<sup>1</sup> Godwin, whose work took shape in a series of articles for *The Builder* before being published as *London Shadows* in 1854, was a sympathetic observer. Liberal in his social attitudes and campaigning to improve the lot of the paupers whose dwellings he describes,

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<sup>1</sup> George Godwin, *London Shadows: A Glance at the 'Homes' of the Thousands* (London: George Routledge, 1854), p. 28.



Godwin is forthright about the need to change such practices, which he sees as bound up with a working-class ‘prejudice... against the removal of the bodies until they are taken to the graveyard’.<sup>2</sup> The improved living conditions Godwin hopes to see established in the slums demand cooperation from those whom he wishes to help. Keeping bodies at home for the ‘length of time’ which ‘poverty... obliges’ contributes not only to the spread of disease, but to social misunderstandings about the poor and their humanity.<sup>3</sup>

Godwin’s point may be a practical one, but the image of the child’s body ‘shut up with the bread’ carries substantial metaphorical force. *London Shadows* deals, as its title suggests, with the murky underworld inhabited by the poor; the back-streets and alleyways behind the bright new roads constructed by the “improvers” of the early nineteenth century. As such, the discovery of the child’s unburied body could be read as exemplifying the topography Godwin describes. Just as the Gothic castle promised corpses concealed behind every door, the dead child hidden in this Gray’s Inn cupboard suggests further neglected bodies, tucked in to in all the unseen corners of the city. In these dark, overcrowded pockets of misery, any kind of unimaginable horror might be found.

This Gothic model of the capital’s underworld is central to G.W.M. Reynolds’s *Mysteries of London* (1844-56): a similarity explicitly recognised in the introduction to Godwin’s work, which uses the phrase ‘the “Mysteries of London”’ to refer to the slums and their inhabitants.<sup>4</sup> Filled with dungeons, cellars and tombs, ‘Reynolds’s is a double London that hides underground passages and secret hideaways behind bland facades’.<sup>5</sup> More suggestively, as Godwin’s discovery might lead us to expect, Reynolds’s fictional London is

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Alison Milbank, ‘The Victorian Gothic in English Novels and Stories, 1830-1880’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 145-66 (p. 148).

overflowing with the displaced bodies of the dead. In the *Mysteries*, corpses appear embalmed in museums (*Court* V.146-152); mummified in sarcophagi;<sup>6</sup> walled over in the pillars of bridges (*Court* I.318-321); and dug up from underneath the kitchen floor (*Court* II.330-334). Perhaps the most symbolically resonant of all these scenes of disinterment is that illustrated at the head of this chapter. Henry Anelay's illustration to the third series of Reynolds's work depicts Caroline Waters, a pregnant prostitute, exploring the 'midwife's' house where she has been sent to give birth to her illegitimate child. Disquieted by sounds of violence in the night, and seeking 'an hour's companionship' with one of the house's other inhabitants, she stumbles instead into a 'lumber-room'; and discovers not only a 'skeleton!' in 'a tall black wooden case', but a row of deformed babies in jars along the shelf (*Court* I.86-87).

The appearance, in Caroline's story, of a literal skeleton in the cupboard puts the episode in danger of straying into inadvertent comedy: but this physical manifestation of what is now a familiar metaphor typifies the narrative strategy of Reynolds's melodramatic work. As my first chapter explores in some detail, melodrama is a genre which operates at surface level. Emotions are externally manifested through physical gesture, characters' moral standings and allegiances are openly declared, and it is through the repetition of conventional plots and themes that more complex ideas can be explored. This exteriority is maintained in the way that melodrama handles metaphor. Specifically, in Reynolds's work, images which in realist fiction would be merely rhetorical or illustrative devices tend to be given a more physical realisation. The skeleton that Caroline finds in the cupboard is just one of the more obvious examples of this tendency; and like those other examples (like all the resurfacing bodies with which this thesis is concerned) it repays the critical consideration that this chapter is concerned to provide.

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 1 for a detailed analysis of this example.

Whatever the metaphorical implications of the scene with Caroline Waters, it is fiction: whereas Godwin's discovery of the child's dead body is at least apparently a matter of historical fact.<sup>7</sup> This chapter finds a way into the *Mysteries* through a comparison between these two events, unpicking the threads of both metaphor and reality as they run through Reynolds's text. Early Victorian London, like the serial in which it was fictionalised, offered clear structures of meaning in which the bodies of the poor were systematically objectified. The child in the slum-house cupboard, the skeleton in the chest, and the 'monstrous' babies in jars on the abortionist's shelf all demonstrate the consequences of a social system which ordered itself through the alienation of large swathes of its population.

Reynolds's serial is centrally preoccupied both with illustrating this social injustice, and with projecting its future consequences: drawing on the tropes and structures of the Gothic to do so. As the first section of this chapter seeks to establish, this rhetorical decision was not taken in isolation. The notion of the Gothic slum is demonstrably evident throughout the non-fictional discourse of the early Victorian period and was typically deployed for specific, political ends that conflicted with Reynolds's own. Commentators in the 1840s and 50s used the notion of a Gothic city to characterise the slums and their inhabitants as belonging to an outdated and (thankfully) disappearing criminal past. In the context of this contemporary discourse, and like Godwin's story of the child in the cupboard (which threatens to categorise the poor as lacking in fundamental human decency), Reynolds's Gothic might be seen to act in service of that goal. Such a reading would associate the *Mysteries* with the anti-poverty prejudice implicit in such rhetoric; lending weight to the accusations of critics who have dismissed Reynolds's work as a hypocritical populist fantasy.

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<sup>7</sup> I have not been able to find external confirmation of Godwin's report, but the account seems eminently plausible. Elizabeth Hurren, in *Dying for Victorian Medicine* (2012), gives details of several cases in which members of the working class got into trouble with the law for keeping the bodies of dead relatives in their home.

The second part of the chapter suggests that Reynolds, writing the *Mysteries*, in fact participates in a counter-movement which seeks to emphasise the *modernity* of the slums. One important way in which he does so is through his invocation of the Anatomy Act of 1832. This legislation was brought in under pressure from the medical profession, struggling with a shortage of subjects to dissect: Parliament solved the problem by offering doctors access to the bodies of unclaimed paupers dying in state institutions. This established a marketplace in the bodies of the working class which operated throughout the nineteenth century, the nature and scale of which was protected by a deliberate conspiracy of political silence. The Act and its enforcement make for a compelling comparison with contemporary discourse on the slums. In both cases, the technological and economic progress by which the Victorian period was distinguished can be seen to have advanced over or through a hidden working class whose treatment separated them from the rest of their society.

What is at issue in the characterisation of early Victorian London as a Gothic space is the nature of the secrets represented by the working class bodies that the period's slum literature set out to expose. Contradicting the contemporary impulse to characterise London's slums as a disappearing relic of the criminal past, Reynolds emphasises the continuing culpability of the wealthy in the ongoing subjection and erasure of the poor; drawing on a radical Gothic tradition into which Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* might also be placed. As the final section of my chapter explores, Reynolds further echoes Shelley in a repeated motif which refigures the image of the displaced corpse. Like the creature in *Frankenstein*, constructed from reclaimed bodies and seeking revenge on the society that has rejected him, Reynolds completes his Gothic vision of the city by peopling it with the monstrous figures of the dehumanised working class.

### 3.1 Two houses in Smithfield: mythologizing the slum

In August 1844 two houses in Smithfield were demolished. Their destruction came as part of one of the many improvement projects that reshaped London in the early decades of the nineteenth century; but these houses were unusual for the public interest they attracted. *The Globe* reported on August 5 that ‘the applications are becoming more numerous daily for tickets of admission to view the two strangely-constructed houses at the northern end of New Farringdon-street’.<sup>8</sup> Luminaries such as Lord Lonsdale, the postmaster-general, and the Duke of Cambridge, an uncle of the Queen, were reported as having visited the site. As the testimony of the local missionary reveals, this was not simply a case of architectural curiosity.

Great excitement has lately prevailed on my district, in consequence of the houses, Nos 2 & 3, West-street, being open for the inspection of the curious... From all accounts it appears that these houses have ever been the resort of the most notorious and abandoned individuals of the metropolis... among others are Jonathan Wild, Jack Sheppard, Jerry Abershaw, and Dick Turpin.

Many are the strange incidents said to have taken place within these walls, and... there is no doubt, from their situation—being by the side of the Fleet Ditch...—their dark closets, trap-doors, sliding panels, and means of escape, they were among the most secure erections for robbery and murder.<sup>9</sup>

Although they were only briefly open to the public before finally being pulled down, the West Street houses were more than just a few days’ wonder, remaining current in the popular imagination for the next fifteen years at least. Thomas Beames, in his 1850 *The Rookeries of London*, remembers that ‘some few years since, a thieves’ house in West Street was the popular exhibition of the day’.<sup>10</sup> Garwood’s book, in which the above description is reported, was published in 1853. The *Quarterly Review* discussed the houses in an article of August

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<sup>8</sup> ‘A Discovery in Smithfield’, *The Globe*, 5 August 1844, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> John Garwood, *The Million-Peopled City; or, One-Half of the People of London Made Known to the Other Half* (London: Wentheim and Macintosh, 1853), pp. 45-46.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Beames, *The Rookeries of London: Past, Present, and Prospective* (London: Thomas Bosworth, 1850), p. 75.

1855;<sup>11</sup> and George Godwin, in 1859, recalled stories of ‘Jack Sheppard and Jonathan Wild... with tales of murder and robbery [and] of deceitful trapdoors’ being told amongst the public during the course of the works along the Fleet.<sup>12</sup>

As Godwin’s account of the story makes clear, an important key to the houses’ attraction can be found in the popular myth of their inhabitants. ‘Jonathan Wild, Jack Sheppard, Jerry Abershaw and Dick Turpin’, first immortalised in the eighteenth-century Newgate Calendars, had been transposed in the 1830s to the enormously successful fiction of writers like Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Harrison Ainsworth.<sup>13</sup> Characterised by its sympathetic approach to the criminals it depicted, Newgate literature was feared by critics for its ‘mixed motives and mixed morality’, deemed likely to confuse not only its ‘middle-class readers’ but (more seriously) ‘the lower-class audiences of stage adaptations’.<sup>14</sup> These anxieties were compounded in 1840, when the MP Lord William Russell was murdered by his valet Benjamin Courvoisier. Matthew Buckley highlights the ‘one significant, highly publicized detail of the crime: Courvoisier claimed, in his second of several confessions, that the idea “had come to him upon reading [Ainsworth’s 1839-40 novel] *Jack Sheppard*’.<sup>15</sup> Although the connection was at best doubtfully authentic, it caught the popular imagination, shattering the Newgate novels’ already doubtful claims to respectability and cementing Sheppard’s image as an icon of working-class rebellion.

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<sup>11</sup> Cited in Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society*, 3rd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 180.

<sup>12</sup> George Godwin, *Town Swamps and Social Bridges*, The Victorian Library, 1st reprinted edn (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972), p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Turpin appears in Ainsworth’s 1834 novel *Rookwood* while his *Jack Sheppard* was published in 1839. Bulwer Lytton drew on the story of John Thurtell (whose knife *The Morning Post* reported as being found in the West Street Houses) in composing *Pelham* (1828). (‘The Extraordinary House in West-Street, Smithfield’, *The Morning Post*, 7 August 1844, p. 8.)

<sup>14</sup> Lyn Pykett, ‘The Newgate Novel and Sensation Fiction, 1830-1868’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 19-39 (p. 30). The most comprehensive study of Newgate literature is still Keith Hollingsworth, *The Newgate Novel, 1830-1847* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1963).

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Buckley, ‘Sensations of Celebrity: Jack Sheppard and the Mass Audience’, *Victorian Studies*, 44 (2002), 423-63 (p. 426).

The link between the West Street houses and this tradition of subversive literature was explicitly acknowledged in the media of the day. Reprinting, on 6 August, the article that had appeared in the previous day's *Globe*, the *Times* added an editorialising comment:

We trust that the curiosity which these dens of infamy have excited will not be turned to account by any of those horror-mongers, who, to eke out the meagreness of their own invention, have too successfully endeavoured to make heroes out of housebreakers and highwaymen, and to gloss over all the obscene joys and miseries of vice. The attempt, if it is made, will deserve the severest reprobation.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately for the editors, their injunction did not take effect. The first instalment of *The Mysteries of London* was published seven weeks later: its first scene, a run-down Smithfield house, inhabited by criminals and perched over the foetid Fleet Ditch.

Reynolds's opening scene serves efficiently to establish the serial's tone. It begins with an effeminate young aristocrat (later revealed to be a woman by the name of Eliza Sydney, but referred to by male pronouns throughout the scene) walking through the 'the foul and filthy arena' of Smithfield meat market (*London* I.3). Under a darkening storm, Eliza seeks shelter amongst the houses on the market's edge. '[S]hocked' by the poverty that her hurried exploration reveals, she gazes at the 'narrow and dirty streets' with 'wonder, disgust, and alarm' before eventually finding shelter in a house that seems abandoned (I.3). She is unpleasantly surprised by the entrance of two criminals, Dick Flairer and Bill Bolter, who discuss their plans to burgle the Holloway home of a wealthy Mr Markham that night. When they discover that Eliza is listening in the next-door room, they throw her kicking and screaming through a 'trap-door' into the 'gurgling' Fleet (I.7). Improbably, she survives the experience; recounting it unwittingly, six chapters and four years later, to the son of the same

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<sup>16</sup> 'The Old Houses in West-Street, Smithfield', *The Times*, 6 August 1844, p. 8.

Mr Markham whose dwelling her anonymous correspondence has been able to protect from plunder.

Setting the tone for twelve years of serialisation, the details of this Smithfield encounter anticipate several of the central motifs of Reynolds's work. It is significant that the first character we encounter is Eliza, a woman disguised as a man. Her situation speaks to the same questions about appearance and reality, surface and depth explored in the first chapter of this thesis; to the interest in female performativity described in Chapter 2; and to the cross-class and gender disguises discussed in more detail in my final chapter. Moreover, Eliza's unexpected survival can be read as a variation on the 'resurfacing body' motif. Apparently killed off in a death which mimics a burial (or perhaps a hangman's drop), she reappears not only healthy, but transformed. Her escape, which comes in time to foil her attackers' criminal schemes, contributes to Reynolds's emphatically argued claim that nothing – neither secrets nor people – can be permanently repressed.

The story of Eliza in the Smithfield slum also evokes another key aspect of Reynolds's work: its emphasis on an underworld hidden intimately close at hand. Telling the story of her experience to Markham's son, Eliza stresses her surprise at the immediacy of what she saw.

I could not have conceived that so filthy and horrible a nuisance could have been allowed to exist in the midst of a city of so much wealth... It seemed to me that I was wandering amongst all the haunts of crime and appalling penury of which I had read in romances, but which I never could have believed to exist in the very heart of the metropolis of the world. (*London* I.22)

This juxtaposition between 'wealth' and 'appalling penury', not in 'romances' but in the present-day London streets, was fundamental both to the sensation provoked by the West Street houses and to the urban Gothic literature of which Reynolds was a key pioneer; and it is the significance of this idea of the Gothic city that this section of the chapter will go on to explore. Referring to the West Street houses in the opening pages of his work, Reynolds



declares allegiance to an aesthetic which came loaded with conflicting ideological intent. Just as the Gothic castle hoarded the gruesome relics of its feudal past, much early Victorian writing on the city characterised the slums as the dangerous leftovers of London's own disreputable history. Bringing notions of Newgate antiheroes vividly to life in the London of the 1840s, the West Street houses contributed to a developing popular narrative which associated the slums with a chaotic, criminal eighteenth-century city. It was a story that had substantial ramifications for the way in which these areas and their inhabitants were treated.

It is important first to understand in full what the West Street Houses meant. They struck a chord in the public mind not only for their reference to the Newgate criminals, but because their physical construction modelled in miniature a popular contemporary conception of the slum. The specifics of how the slums were imagined at this time can tend to be obscured by the fact that most existing critical literature on slum London is weighted towards the second half of the century. Seth Koven's 2004 *Slumming* is a good example:<sup>17</sup> although Koven's subtitle claims an interest in the 'Sexual and Social Politics [of] Victorian London', the earliest of the texts with which the book deals is James Greenwood's *A Night in a Workhouse*, published 1866. Koven's work complies with a longstanding critical narrative in placing the industrial North at the heart of pre-1850 social debate; with London, specifically the East End, moving to the forefront of political attention only at or after the Great Exhibition.<sup>18</sup> 'If Manchester, with its filthy industrial landscape... was the shock-city of early Victorian Britain,' Koven writes, 'London, with its dramatic contrasts between remarkable wealth and squalid poverty, increasingly preoccupied social commentators from mid-century

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<sup>17</sup> Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> This suggestion dates back at least as far as Asa Briggs's influential 1963 study, *Victorian Cities*. Briggs begins his study with 1840s Manchester and ends it with London, focusing on the capital only as it appeared during 'the last twenty years of Queen Victoria's reign'. Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, Pelican Books, rev. edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 311.

onward.’<sup>19</sup> Judith Walkowitz’s *City of Dreadful Delights* (1992) makes the same implication with its exclusive focus on ‘late-Victorian London’;<sup>20</sup> and even Gareth Stedman Jones, whose *Outcast London* (1971) looks back further than most other works of its kind, locates the point at which urban discourse began to ‘centre... increasingly on London’ in the years ‘after 1850’.<sup>21</sup>

The distinction matters because the city familiar from accounts like Koven’s and Walkowitz’s is importantly dissimilar to that which provided the context for Reynolds’s *Mysteries*. The story of London in the late nineteenth century is that of the East/West divide. An increasingly stark ‘geographical segregation of the city’, along class and income lines, transformed the impoverished East End into what Stedman Jones describes as ‘an immense *terra incognita* periodically mapped out by intrepid missionaries and explorers’;<sup>22</sup> ‘an exotic heart of darkness’ which both fascinated and frightened those who read about it.<sup>23</sup> The journalists who made their names from their ventures into this unknown territory colluded in emphasising the distance between the classes. Peter Keating describes this impulse, in a passage: ‘[t]he social explorer wants to inspire others to follow his example... but if he makes the journey seem too easy then no real challenge is offered and his main purpose is defeated.’<sup>24</sup> The vision thus created was that of London as a city split in two, the wealthy peeping with increasing curiosity over a fearsomely fortified class barrier.

This linear separation between poverty and affluence, East and West, has gained imaginative currency in conceptualising London’s slum landscape. But the early Victorian

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<sup>19</sup> Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*, p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society*, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 14.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Burgan, *Mapping Contagion in Victorian London: Disease in the East End*, ed. by Debra N. Mancoff and D.J. Trela, *Victorian Urban Settings: Essays on the Nineteenth Century City and Its Contexts* (New York, NY: Garland, 1996), p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Keating, *Into Unknown England, 1866-1913: Selections from the Social Explorers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), p. 15.

capital possessed ‘a distinctive geographical pattern of poverty all its own’. As Peter Keating writes:

Earlier in the Victorian period no special significance was attached to the East End. Slum priests, journalists, foreign visitors and social reformers referred to it frequently but they did not seize upon it as epitomizing central social problems... For the early and mid-Victorians, the slum areas of St Giles’s, the Seven Dials, Drury Lane, and the Borough, represented working-class London at its worst, and when Whitechapel, St George’s-in-the-East, or Bethnal Green were added to the list it was in order to emphasise the wide-spread nature of the life described.<sup>25</sup>

If the slums of the later nineteenth century were held at arms’ length in the ghettos of the East End, the early 1840s saw paupers’ accommodation scattered through central London, tucked in pockets behind wealthier houses and streets. W. Weir’s 1842 description of the road that ran through the period’s most notorious slum, St Giles, emphasises the physical proximity of these different class spaces.

[It is] an airy thoroughfare along which no small portion of the ease and affluence of London is daily rolled in cab, ‘bus, or in their own private vehicles... little thinking of the squalid scenes that lurk behind [the shop-fronts]—in the “back-settlements”, as they are poetically named by the natives.<sup>26</sup>

Weir’s appreciation of the ‘poetically’ apposite attribution ‘back-settlements’ recognises the extent to which, in these early days of its existence, the idea of the slum depended on this before/behind relationship; with ‘handsome streets’ acting as ‘screens’ for the ‘misery’ beyond.<sup>27</sup> ‘Many unwholesome parts of London in the fashionable west... are hidden

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Keating, 'Fact and Fiction in the East End', in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. by H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 585-602 (p. 586).

<sup>26</sup> W. Weir, 'St Giles Past and Present', in *London*, ed. by Charles Knight (London: Charles Knight, 1842), pp. 257-72 (p. 270).

<sup>27</sup> Beames, *The Rookeries of London: Past, Present, and Prospective*, p. 24.

between the large squares, and in passages leading from good streets', wrote George Godwin in 1854.<sup>28</sup>

H.J. Dyos's 1967 article, 'The Slums of Victorian London', offers an etymology that confirms this claim. Though the word 'slum' was already in use early in the nineteenth century, in the 1820s 'the word had three distinct meanings' (a kind of tavern, the slang language of gypsies and criminals, 'a room in which low goings-on occurred'). It was Pierce Egan's *Life in London* (1821), a phenomenally successful account of the city 'sprees' of three wealthy young men, which popularised the use of the phrase 'back-slum' to refer to whole areas; with 'Egan defin[ing] the term in a foot-note... as "low, unfrequented parts of the town"'. Dyos cites Dickens as a further example: 'In a letter of November 1840... he wrote, "I mean to take a great, London, back-slums kind of walk tonight.' The formulation 'back-slum', although it was soon shortened, emphasises the degree to which, in these early days of the word's employment, slums were conceived as existing *behind* the more prosperous city streets.<sup>29</sup>

This distinctive geography owed its development to the same impetus that brought down the West Street houses: the 'improvements' of the early nineteenth century. The West Street works were part of a larger programme that removed many of the slum districts lining the Fleet River, culminating in the completion of Farringdon Road and the river's complete sublimation underground. This was only one among the many such projects which altered the face of the early nineteenth-century capital, as London's builders and architects responded to the changing demands of an increasingly industrialised nation with large new thoroughfares connecting the city's commercial districts. Cannon Street (1846-54) and Commercial Street (1843-45, with an extension in 1857) join New Oxford Street as the most famous examples of

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<sup>28</sup> Godwin, *London Shadows: A Glance at the 'Homes' of the Thousands*, p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> H.J. Dyos, 'The Slums of Victorian London', *Victorian Studies*, 11 (1967), 5-40.

this new London, mapped out in the early years of Victoria's reign.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, railways were branching out from the city's interior, as terminals multiplied with increasing speed. Euston, opened in 1837, was central London's first railway terminal, running trains to Birmingham; others soon followed, including, in 1840, Bishopsgate station, from which the Eastern Counties railroad ran through Shoreditch out to Mile End and into East Anglia.<sup>31</sup>

Most of these developments saw older, overcrowded districts of pauper housing cleared to make way for the new construction. The reason for this was primarily financial. Railway companies, obliged to pay compensation for buildings destroyed in the service of construction, 'avoided wherever possible the business premises and better class of residences, and scheduled their routes to pass through working-class areas'.<sup>32</sup> '2850 homes were flattened by the building of the London and Blackwall railway' in 1836, Roy Porter writes,<sup>33</sup> and Gareth Stedman Jones estimates that this kind of activity 'accounted for the displacement of not far short of 100,000 persons between 1830 and 1880'.<sup>34</sup> Despite the pragmatic origins of this behaviour, it did not take long before slum clearance was established in the public mind as a positive consequence of urban improvement; with builders emphasising the gentrifying consequences that had once been seen merely as an incidental effect of their work. In 1835, when the developers made their application for the very Smithfield project that brought the West Street houses to light, they claimed as one of its most important advantages 'the removal of a description of buildings that have long been a hotbed of disease, misery and crime.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994), p. 266.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony S. Wohl, *The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London* (London: Transaction, 2002), p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> Porter, *London: A Social History*, p. 231.

<sup>34</sup> Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society*, p. 169.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in H.J. Dyos, 'Urban Transformation: A Note on the Objects of Street Improvement in Regency and Early Victorian London', *International Review of Social History*, 2 (1957), 259-65.

This kind of wholesale demolition of slums was construed as a straightforward route to gentrification: with nowhere suitable to live, it was argued, the poor would have no choice but to remove themselves to more suitable dwellings elsewhere. But the blunt force tactics adopted by the early improvers in tackling the slums in fact only made the situation worse, further complicating the already labyrinthine architecture of London's poorest districts. As Edwin Chadwick observed in 1842, the poor were less portable than the improvers' ideas suggested: '[t]he workman's "location"... [was] generally governed by his work, near which he must reside.'<sup>36</sup> Constrained by employment whose unpredictability required them to be on the spot, and which was, in the case of artisans, often carried out in the home, the working classes had often only a small radius of possible movement. Transportation from the suburbs was still expensive and inconvenient; and so, when their homes were torn down, they were forced into the pockets of cheap central accommodation that still remained.<sup>37</sup> The result was a dangerous aggravation of what was already chronic overcrowding: 'the Rookeries which are still uninvaded,' wrote the clergyman Thomas Beames, 'are crowded where even before they were thronged'.<sup>38</sup>

This was, of course, the process which had originally led to the formation of London's courts and alleyways; the cramming of too great a human mass into too small a capacity. Exacerbated by the improvers' changes, the effect was to transform the slums from a "back-space" into something still more hidden and subterranean. Contemporary accounts describe how houses, floors and then rooms were let and sublet, culminating in the not uncommon spectacle of four families inhabiting the four corners of a single room. 'Yards and gardens

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<sup>36</sup> Edwin Chadwick, *Report to Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department, from the Poor Law Commissioners, on an Inquiry into the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, (London: W. Clowes and Sons for HMSO, 1842), p. 231.

<sup>37</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones explores the predicament in detail. (Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society*, pp. 169-70.)

<sup>38</sup> Beames, *The Rookeries of London: Past, Present, and Prospective*, p. 62. Roy Porter offers an exemplary quantification of this phenomenon in action: 'Twenty-seven dwellings, averaging five rooms, in Church Lane, Westminster, housed 655 people in 1841, but 1095 in 1847, a density increase in six years from 24 to 40 persons per house.' (Porter, *London: A Social History*, p. 268.)

were built over, passages and landings colonised and windowless cabins boarded off. Especially if there were good sized old houses with cellars and attics, a maze of human nests and burrows could soon come into being'.<sup>39</sup> Dozens of families around the metropolis lived in windowless cellars below the level of the sewage-swamped streets.<sup>40</sup> In 1854 George Godwin was prompted, by the worsening situation, to something like despair: 'It seems difficult to discover the climax of London poverty and destitution. In every depth there is a deeper still.'<sup>41</sup> Both physically and conceptually, the homes of the poor were increasingly underground spaces.

Defined by their position under or behind the city streets, it is not surprising that the slums of the early nineteenth century proved popular subjects for the writer's pen. As numerous critics have recognised, the depths (of the city, of society) are particularly fertile ground for literary invention. Peter Brooks describes the underworld of Eugene Sue's *Mystères de Paris* (1842-43) – an important inspiration for Reynolds's *Mysteries* – as 'that world which remains potentially storied'. '[T]he deviant, the shameful, the criminal' are the proper nucleus for narrative material,<sup>42</sup> and the secrecy of the world below ground is the natural element in which these aspects of society survive. 'The situation,' Brooks suggests

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<sup>39</sup> Kellow Chesney, *The Victorian Underworld* (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd, 1970), p. 95.

<sup>40</sup> These cellar-dwelling poor, who fit so perfectly into the prevailing, subterranean picture of the slums, seem to have exerted a particular fascination and are described by several of the social activists whose work I read in preparing this chapter. Weir, cited above, provides an example so callous it demands quotation: 'The classical reader may possibly retain from his schoolboy days a recollection of a race of people called Troglodytes— dwellers in caves, an intermediate species between the man and the rabbit. Their descendents still flourish in great force in Monmouth Street... It is curious and interesting to watch the habits of these human moles when they emerge... They have the appearance of being on the whole a contented race. At present, when the cold North-Easter of the income tax is about to sweep cuttingly across the face of the earth, we often feel tempted to envy those who, in their subterranean retreats, will hear it whistle innocuously far above their heads...' (Weir, 'St Giles Past and Present', p. 266.)

<sup>41</sup> Godwin, *London Shadows: A Glance at the 'Homes' of the Thousands*, p. 24.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Brooks, 'The Mark of the Beast: Prostitution, Melodrama, and Narrative', in *Melodrama*, ed. by Daniel Gerrould (New York, NY: New York Literary Forum, 1980), pp. 125-40 (p. 130).

elsewhere, 'is at least characteristic of the nineteenth-century novel, and to some degree of all narrative'.<sup>43</sup> David Pike, in *Subterranean Cities* (2005), provides a commentary:

The world above – the world of law, order, economy, conformity – is given structure and order by what it excludes beneath it as unfit... this is a symbolic gesture... reinforced during the nineteenth century by a realisation that the city itself was beginning to reflect the timeworn metaphysics.<sup>44</sup>

*Subterranean Cities*, focused on more literally underground locations (such as sewers, mines and catacombs) does not deal with rookeries and slums: but Pike's notion of 'the vertical city; a messy blend of half-truths and bygone myths that took over the representation of urban life' describes perfectly the situation of these mid-nineteenth century spaces.<sup>45</sup> Secreted away from the middle-class gaze, the hidden dwellings of the poor took on an air of fantasy, absorbing existing myths of the eighteenth century city and feeding into anxieties which carried a guilty frisson of excitement.

The West Street houses fed into this urban fantasy, operating on the 'half-truths and bygone myths' which Pike describes. Wild, Sheppard, Abershaw, Turpin and Thurtell themselves occupied an uncertain ontological ground, real historical figures whose stories had been repeatedly re-told in iterations that strayed ever further from truth. The supposed association between these men and the West Street houses served to further blur the lines between fact and fiction; so that the houses came to serve as a kind of tourist experience of a fantasised eighteenth-century cityscape. It is a process that has repeated itself in time. Discussing in a 2010 article the contemporary fetish for the spaces of the Victorian underground, Pike comments that 'what we are seeing is the Victorian itself, as a space of the past, taking on a subterranean identity and becoming assimilated in representation as a

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<sup>43</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 155.

<sup>44</sup> David L. Pike, *Subterranean Cities: The World beneath Paris and London, 1800-1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*



repository of suppressed and outmoded concepts and desires.<sup>46</sup> The curiosity that motivated the houses' aristocratic visitors is analogous to that which might prompt tourists in modern London onto a Jack the Ripper tour of Whitechapel and Spitalfields.

This thrill at gaining access to the hidden subtext of the city is one obvious reason for Reynolds's invocation of the houses in his work. Down to the very title, the *Mysteries of London* markets itself on giving the reader access to parts of the capital they could not ordinarily reach: '[S]hall we be charged with vanity, if we declare that never until now has the veil been so rudely torn aside, nor the corruptions of London been so boldly laid bare?' (*London* II.347) It was the promise on which myriad volumes about the city's underside had been sold, appealing to the same desire for that which is concealed or subsumed which (as my previous two chapters have described) Reynolds saw as presenting an opportunity for the objectified poor.

Unlike contemporary East London tours, however, which superimpose the Ripper's Victorian stalking ground over contemporary coffee shops and hipster boutiques, in the 1840s there was still an uncomfortable immediacy to the West Street houses. These were buildings that were only just being demolished, that were held up as in many ways exemplary of the contemporary slum, and which revealed themselves mere minutes from the wealth of the City. Lord Lonsdale's journey to visit the houses took him only a mile and a half from his home in Carlton House Terrace; and *The Globe* reports that 'his Lordship and friends... expressed their astonishment that such a place could so long have existed in the heart of the metropolis'.<sup>47</sup> Echoed by Reynolds in Eliza Sidney's experience, Lonsdale's 'astonishment' must have been tinged with anxiety. What else might the city be harbouring unseen?

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<sup>46</sup> David L. Pike, 'Afterimages of the Victorian City', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15 (2010), 254-67.

<sup>47</sup> 'A Discovery in Smithfield', p. 3.

It is an anxiety vividly brought to life in the closing image of the local missionary's account of the West Street cribs. He describes being surprised at the revelation of the house's secrets – the 'dark closets, trap-doors, sliding panels and means of escape' that made them so fascinating to the tourists who came to see them – because he was already intimately familiar with its interior.

During the last three years, [he writes,] I have visited this dismal place upwards of one hundred and fifty times... [and] I have frequently addressed [the inhabitants], standing unconsciously on one of the trap-doors before referred to.<sup>48</sup>

Although apparently a report of real-life events, the image is loaded with symbolic meaning. The missionary, crusading Victorian Christianity at its most exemplary, stands poised and unknowing on the brink of the thieves' trapdoor. He might be an embodiment of the fears which developed around the slum districts lurking between the lines of the middle-class city: fears of 'a hardened semi-criminal race of outlaws, safe from public interference within ancient citadels of crime and vice'.<sup>49</sup>

As Robert Mighall has observed,<sup>50</sup> this image of horror lurking just below the surface was precisely what made Reynolds's new urban Gothic so effective. The novels that typified Gothic's first wave, in the 1790s, were characteristically set amongst the castles of medieval Europe, the brigands and banditti with which the landscape was populated neutered of most of their terrors by their geographically and temporally distant location. By contrast, Reynolds and his fellow practitioners explored a landscape of dangerous proximity, where 'the slum backed onto the mansion'<sup>51</sup> and a single wrong turn could precipitate a Londoner into a vortex of deviance and crime. Describing, for instance, the 'low, dark and filthy passages'

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Garwood, *The Million-Peopled City; or, One-Half of the People of London Made Known to the Other Half*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>49</sup> Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society*, p. 180.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 41.

<sup>51</sup> Keating, 'Fact and Fiction in the East End', (p. 593).

opening out of Borough High Street, Reynolds comments that ‘the mere aspect’ of their entrances ‘compels the passer-by to get into the middle of the way, for fear of being suddenly dragged into those sinister dens’ (*London* II.187). It is not clear whether the dragging might be done by some dark tentacle, or simply the consequence of the irresistible pull of the depths. In any case, the threat was chillingly close.

The subterranean quality of London’s pauper districts, alongside their tantalising proximity to respectable spaces, make it easy to understand how Gothic representations of the slums gained currency. The image plays on the same dynamic of surface and depth with which nineteenth-century society seems to have been so fascinated, and which the *Mysteries* so deftly explores and exploits. In this instance, Reynolds’s confident handling of the developing urban Gothic genre was no doubt in large part responsible for his work’s success. However, the *Mysteries*’ participation in this literary trend is complicated by the political associations that the genre accrued. Gothic had a generic history of its own and imposing its narrative structures onto the nineteenth-century city suggested parallels that can seem to conflict with the political views Reynolds expressed elsewhere. Specifically, conceptualising the poor as the remnants of a secret, shameful past, hidden like the documents or the corpses in a Gothic castle, made the same association between poverty and criminality that lay implicit behind the New Poor Law of 1834. Certain commentators, including many of the period’s ‘improvers’, drew on the link between the slums and the Newgate criminals in order to justify the comprehensive demolition of paupers’ housing; a strategy which, as we have seen, only compounded the miseries of the slums’ inhabitants.

The ease with which the prevailing model of the subterranean slum could blur into a conviction that the slum’s inhabitants were somehow suspicious is evinced in the testimony of a London policeman, cited by Kellow Chesney in *The Victorian Underworld* (1970).

According to a senior police officer... a pursuer would find himself “creeping on his hands and knees through a hole two feet square in a dark cellar entirely in the power of dangerous characters” who might be waiting on the other side; while at one point a “large cesspool, covered in such a way that a stranger would likely step into it” was ready to swallow him up.<sup>52</sup>

These are the words of a policeman used to pursuing criminals through the slums: but it is easy to see how the account reconfigures a slum architecture forced into being by harsh necessity into a schema deliberately intended to deceive. Qualities like the darkness and the badly-covered cesspit must have contributed significantly to the miseries of the slums’ inhabitants; but here they are reframed as traps deliberately engineered by a criminal class seeking to conceal its illegal activities. This is important because it suggests a change in feeling, away from sympathy for those unfortunate enough to live in these conditions, and towards suspicion about what they might be getting up to down there in the dark.

A clear example of precisely this perspective can be found in Charles Knight’s *London* (1841-44), a kind of coffee-table encyclopedia of the city’s history and culture. As the former editor of the *Penny Magazine*, a subsidised publication which had been rapidly superseded by the development of a commercial penny press,<sup>53</sup> Knight’s relationship with Reynolds (and his working-class audience) was antagonistic: writing his memoirs some years later, it is apparent that the sore still rankled. “The Penny Magazine”... could not contend with a cheapness that was wholly regardless of quality; and it could not hold its place amidst this dangerous excitement’.<sup>54</sup> In a piece comparing the present-day city with its eighteenth-century manifestation, Knight’s verdict on the ‘dangerous classes’ still living in London suggests another reason for his journal’s failure to connect with an audience he cannot have respected. Predating the West Street houses’ discovery by three years, the whole premise of

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<sup>52</sup> Chesney, *The Victorian Underworld*, p. 110.

<sup>53</sup> It was backed by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, whose rather fearsome title provides an intimation of the starchy content deemed suitable for the *Penny Magazine*.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Knight, *The Old Printer and the Modern Press* (London: John Murray, 1854), p. 280.

the chapter, with its focus on the previous century, serves to distance the poor from the “respectable” inhabitants of contemporary London; consigning them to an uncivilized and largely eliminated past. Knight’s choice of imagery goes further still.

[A]lthough portions of their territory have since been occupied by the streets and dwellings of the more reputable and comfortable classes, they have not retaliated by taking up new quarters—they have rather shrunk like snails deeper into their shells at the approach of incompatible neighbours.<sup>55</sup>

The poor and the criminal, conflated by contrast with the reputable and comfortable, are reduced by Knight’s simile to the level not even of animals, but of molluscs.<sup>56</sup>

Isolating the poor into an emotionally and socially distant past, Knight’s Podsnappian confidence in progress bespeaks a combative approach which saw every slum clearance as a victory for the forces of right. There is a suspicious conjunction of (perceived) charity and (definite) convenience in such a belief, suggested in Dyos’ description of the improvement mania as a ‘relentless opportunism for the demolition of the ugly, unhealthy, overcrowded – above all, commercially unjustifiable – bits of the ancient city.’<sup>57</sup> George Godwin supports the assertion:

New streets are made without the slightest provision for the poor people who are turned out: and they are forced to quarter themselves where there is no room for healthful existence. The question, where they are to go, never troubles the improver.<sup>58</sup>

The suggestion that improvers effectively criminalised the poor in order to justify their own commercial projects lends a gratingly hypocritical tone to the assertion with which Knight

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<sup>55</sup> Charles Knight, *London*, (London: Charles Knight, 1841-44), p. II.352.

<sup>56</sup> It seems to have been a favourite image with *London*’s contributors: W. Weir, in the chapter on St Giles from which I have already quoted in imaging the slums, gives the following description of the rookery: ‘It is one dense mass of houses... one great maze of narrow crooked paths crossing and intersecting in labyrinthine convolutions, as if the houses had been originally one block of stone eaten by slugs into innumerable small chambers and connecting passages.’ (Weir, ‘St Giles Past and Present’, p. 267.)

<sup>57</sup> H.J. Dyos and D.A. Reeder, ‘Slums and Suburbs’, in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. by H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 359-86 (p. 365).

<sup>58</sup> Godwin, *Town Swamps and Social Bridges*, p. 2.

concludes his account: that '[t]here was greater callousness to suffering [in the eighteenth century] than there is now'.<sup>59</sup>

Knight's connection of the slums with a reclusive criminality elided the real unhappiness their inhabitants endured. This perspective presents problems for a reading of Reynolds's work because it is grounded in the same literary tradition on which he drew: that is, Knight exploits the conventions of Gothic in order to strengthen his case. Developing in the wake of the French Revolution, Gothic told stories about the move towards modernity: about exposing and moving beyond the crimes of a less civilised past. The corpses concealed in Gothic's cupboards, cellars and dungeons connote the grisly relics of outdated social systems: the excesses of Catholicism or of an 'old, dark, feudal order'.<sup>60</sup> Locating the working-class poor in the position of these Gothic dead, Knight (like the others who shared his perspective) implicitly associates their plight with a disappearing social order. Claiming the role of the modernising Gothic heroine, bringing illumination to these dark recesses, Knight associates himself and the improvers with an enlightened, civilising modernity.

This Gothic reading of London's history means that any reading of the slums as historical relics becomes potentially problematic. Even Thomas Beames's sympathetic lamentation that 'that the close alley, the undrained court, the narrow window... should still remind us of what London was once for all—what it still is to the poor'<sup>61</sup> seems by implication to shrug off responsibility. If the rookeries are read as 'sad memorials of the past', we in the present need not feel guilt at their condition.

This suggestion is substantiated by the careful deliberation which marks Friedrich Engels' 1845 attempt to tell an alternative story. Engels, who visited Manchester in the year

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<sup>59</sup> Knight, *London*, p. II.362.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Miles, 'The 1790s: The Effulgence of Gothic', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 41-62 (p. 46).

<sup>61</sup> Beames, *The Rookeries of London: Past, Present, and Prospective*, pp. 17, 41.

that the *Mysteries* first started, describes a slum geography which parallels that of the English capital. But he explicitly refuses to relegate responsibility to the past.

Of the irregular cramming together of dwellings in ways which defy all rational plan, of the tangle in which they are crowded literally one upon the other, it is impossible to convey an idea. And it is not the buildings surviving from the old times of Manchester which are to blame for this; the confusion has only recently reached its height when every scrap of space left over... has been filled up.

... True, this is the *Old Town*, and the people of Manchester emphasise the fact whenever anyone mentions to them the frightful condition of this hell upon earth; but what does that prove? Everything here which arouses horror and indignation is of recent origin.<sup>62</sup>

The precisely stated distinction – ‘it is not the buildings surviving from the old times... which are to blame’ – is necessary only because so many of Engels’s peers explicitly labelled the slums as belonging to times gone by. Asserting that the ‘horror and indignation’ of the slums ‘is of recent origin’, Engels denies the easy comfort of this supposition: forcing his readers to confront their own culpability as part of a social system which forced these conditions on its poor.

When Reynolds drew on the West Street houses in the opening pages of his serial, he risked association with an attitude like that of Knight. The invocation of such a popular tourist sensation might have succeeded in attracting attention to Reynolds’s work; but the houses’ link to the criminals of the eighteenth century seems to reinforce the association on which Knight’s complacency is founded, lending additional credence to a vision of the slums as carefully safeguarded strongholds of crime. This mattered, particularly, because there was a close relationship at this period between London’s literary representation and its real-life development. Writers like Reynolds and Dickens ‘brought the connection between slums and

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<sup>62</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 88, 92.

crime before a... large and impressionable audience',<sup>63</sup> and, as Gareth Stedman Jones observes, 'the street clearance of the 1840s and 50s included nearly all the quarters embellished with surreal horror by literary imagination'.<sup>64 65</sup>

In fact, despite his use of the West Street houses, Reynolds's depiction of the slums has much more in common with Engels than with Knight. While the choice of an urban gothic setting risked associating Reynolds with a perspective that consigned the poor at a safe historical distance, throughout the pages of the serial it is easy to see Reynolds deliberately challenging the suggestion that the slums were a problem of the past. From the Prologue's statement that 'with Civilization does Vice go hand in hand' (I.1), the *Mysteries* repeatedly makes the case that that the poverty suffered in contemporary London is a direct consequence of the same capitalist social system that supports the lifestyle of the rich. The poor are described as 'that living mass of demoralization, squalor, and wretchedness, which forms the tremendous refuse of our barbarous system of civilization.' (VIII.410): 'that system of society where all the wealth is in the hands of the few, and all the misery is shared by millions.' (I.151)

Reynolds's deployment of Gothic in his portrayal of the slums is carried out in a psychological, rather than an historical, mode. Rather than constituting the poor as the vanishing secrets of a distant past, the *Mysteries* suggests that they are evidence of a guilty and immediate personal history: prefiguring the more intimate secrets on which the sensation fiction of the 1860s would draw for its own brand of thrill. Like these sensational secrets,

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<sup>63</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London*, p. 70.

<sup>64</sup> Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society*, p. 180.

<sup>65</sup> As Dickens noted in his 1850 preface to the Cheap Edition of *Oliver Twist*, this intimate relationship between the real and the literary city could have unforeseen consequences. He describes a speech made by London alderman Sir Peter Laurie at a meeting during the previous year, in which Laurie asserted that Jacob's Island, the Bermondsey district where Bill Sikes meets his end, 'ONLY existed in a work of fiction, written by Mr Charles Dickens ten years ago'. Dickens pointed out Laurie's own appearance in his 1844 Christmas novel *The Chimes* and wondered whether the alderman might care to give comment on his own ontological standing in light of that fact. (Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* [London: Penguin, 2002], p. xxix.)



exposing the frauds by which the supposedly respectable middle-class family is underpinned, the suppressed presence of the working poor reveals the city's corrupt economic foundation.

While Reynolds's invocation of the West Street houses associates him with a conservative movement which sought to implicate the poor in their own condition, the *Mysteries* explicitly disavows such associations. Instead, Reynolds espouses a more radical Gothic that draws deliberate connections between the slum-dwelling poor and the rich; depicting the slums not as relics of a guilty past, but as the direct consequence of contemporary social development. The distinction, in the *Mysteries*, is not between the past and the present; but between what society will admit to and what it hides.

### 3.2 The 1832 Anatomy Act: dissecting the Victorian poor

So far, this chapter has offered a story of two competing Gothics. The story which the period's slum 'improvers' told relied on a reading of the urban working class as the direct descendants of an eighteenth-century criminal poor, perpetuating the corrupted values which had made the city of the previous century such a dangerous place to be. In this reading of the urban landscape, the gradual erosion of working-class slum housing represented a victory for civilisation. In contrast, the model put forward by liberal reformers drew an explicit association between the urban working class and the wealthy who relied on their labours for support. Poverty, in this interpretation, was not a remnant of the city's previous degradation but the product of its supposed evolution. In this construction, the deliberate social erasure of the working class comes to seem not a product of carelessness, but of guilt: the behaviour of a society which knows that it has something to hide. In this section, I suggest a parallel which helps to corroborate Reynolds's point by demonstrating one situation in which the wealthy classes did demonstrably collude to silence the truth about the oppression of the working class.

Both the models of the Gothic city that I have described centre on the slum-dwellers' concealed bodies. Hidden in the city's narrative depths, the poor took the place of the 'secrets' described by Jerrold E. Hogle as central to the Gothic site; the comparison made more compelling by a generic tendency to embody 'unresolved crimes or conflicts' as 'ghosts, spectres or monsters' which haunt its central characters.<sup>66</sup> This is true both of Knight's conservative, and Reynolds's more avowedly liberal, interpretation. What is crucially different, however, is the two writers' construction of what these spectral figures really meant. Knight depicts the poor as the spectres of a criminal eighteenth-century past,

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<sup>66</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-20 (p. 2).

perpetuating the disorder and corruption that characterised the city of the century before. Eliminating these remnants, his confident account suggests, is a certain solution to the problems they represent. Cleaning off the traces of its past, the city can move forward into a bright new Victorian dawn.

In contrast, Reynolds's serial associates poverty, crime and discomfort with modernity. In his reading of the city, the poor are not the residue of a previous, less civilised society; but the waste material sloughed off by the present-day rich. As this section of my chapter will explore, this alternative vision acquires considerable rhetorical force through the *Mysteries*' invocation of the 1832 Anatomy Act. Understanding the symbolism of the West Street houses helps to contextualise Reynolds's London in a (contentious) wider narrative of the Gothic city. Understanding the Anatomy Act offers another enlightening connection. This piece of legislation designated the bodies of the 'unclaimed' poor as legally subject to anatomical dissection. Like the city 'improvements' of the early nineteenth century, the Act served an obvious practical purpose, allowing the country's doctors to be more comprehensively trained. But, like the improvers' determined assault on the slums, it also exacerbated existing social injustice; primarily serving the interests of the wealthy at the exclusive cost of the poor.

Like the slums, the Anatomy Act seems to lend itself to melodramatic realisation, given the genre's dependence on metaphor. 'An instrumental and symbolic degradation of poverty',<sup>67</sup> the Act disempowered and objectified the working class at the most fundamental level: seizing control over their bodies after death in an act which seems to symbolise the period's violent class antagonism. The displaced bodies with whose discovery this chapter began evoke the Anatomy Act's wide-reaching implications; and knowledge of its history

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<sup>67</sup> Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, 2nd edn (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), p. 266.

offers a new perspective, not only on the image of Caroline and the skeleton in the cupboard, but on the entirety of Reynolds's serial text.

Indeed, the Anatomy Act seems to be fundamental to the imaginative structures of Reynolds's work. As such, this section will seek to offer a comprehensive account of its history. In doing so I draw primarily on two major studies of the Act and its effects: Ruth Richardson's *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* and Elizabeth Hurren's *Dying for Victorian Medicine*. Published in 1987, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* was the first major study of the Act, exploring the circumstances of its introduction alongside the cultural context that made it so controversial. Appearing a quarter of a century later, *Dying for Victorian Medicine* (2012) offered a new perspective (and significant new research), exploring the mechanics of the anatomy trade and, most touchingly, the legislation's day-to-day effects on the nineteenth century working class. Centring my account on these two important studies, as well as Parliamentary evidence from the time, this section of my chapter offers a summary history of the act and seeks to explain why this medical reform, enacted at the highest level of government, is so crucial to my understanding of Reynolds's mass-market literary text.

Passed into law in July 1832, the Act was officially concerned with 'Regulat[ing] Schools of Anatomy'. Central to its purpose, however, and recognised in both Parliamentary and public debate as the fundamentally important point at issue, was the solution of a problem agitating the surgical profession: a shortage of subjects to dissect. Until this point the practice had been governed by the Murder Act of 1752, under which the only bodies legally granted to anatomists were those of executed murderers. With dissection recognised as an essential part of any medical education, this necessarily limited source had always been

inadequate; and the extra-legal methods of supply traditionally exploited by pragmatic anatomists were becoming increasingly problematic.<sup>68</sup>

Recognising the insufficiency of the Murder Act's provisions, enterprising English, Welsh and Scottish anatomists had historically supplemented its supply with bodies exhumed from churchyards shortly after burial. Richardson dates the beginning of this practice to the period 1675-1725, when dissection was still governed by Tudor legislation that limited the bodies officially available to six *per year*. At this stage, it seems likely that doctors themselves had a hand in exhuming the bodies they required;<sup>69</sup> but Richardson suggests that as the century progressed, surgeons intent on professionalization began distancing themselves from the process of disinterment. '[F]earful of punishment, riot, prosecution, and damage to their reputations', by the late eighteenth century 'anatomists look to have delegated the job almost entirely', she reports.<sup>70</sup> In the vacuum thus created appeared the resurrection men, working-class gangs who saw an opportunity for profit in the doctors' steady demand for flesh.

The surgeons' increasingly uneasy relationship with these suppliers was at the root of the initial Parliamentary petitions submitted by anatomists' lobbying groups as early as 1810. Doctors' developing professional status and a rising middle class had seen an influx of students into the medical profession; resulting in greater demand for corpses and a consequent rise in price. The problem was exacerbated by growing public feeling (and an increased willingness to take action) against the resurrectionists, making the pursuit both more difficult and more dangerous, and further inflating the cost of every corpse. Doctors

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<sup>68</sup> In a House of Commons debate on 17 January 1832, Sir Robert Inglis (the Conservative MP for Oxford University) reported having 'ascertained, that during last year there were only eleven bodies which could be legally disposed of as subjects, and these were to supply 800 students of medicine.' (HC Deb 17 January 1832, vol 9 col 578.)

<sup>69</sup> A practice still current among Scottish medical students in the early nineteenth century: Hurren describes how some students appear to have paid for their courses 'in kind', i.e. by providing corpses for the schools (p. 27).

<sup>70</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, p. 57.

testifying before the 1828 Select Committee report paying ‘from eight to ten guineas’ for a body that would have cost just ‘one to two guineas’ three decades before.<sup>71</sup> Anxious to stop students defecting to the Parisian schools (where subjects were in greater supply), many anatomists subsidised specimen costs out of their own pockets. Unable to compete with the hospitals, some smaller anatomy schools were driven out of business altogether.

The Bill initially submitted to Parliament in 1828, by the Dorset MP Henry Warburton, sought official approval for an alternative source of subjects. As recommended by the Select Committee, the Bill proposed to offer the anatomists access to the bodies of paupers dying ‘unclaimed’ in the country’s workhouses and hospitals. Politicians objecting to the Bill both on this first, thwarted and later its second, successful passage through Parliament pointed out that the solution was heavily biased along class lines, with ‘the bodies of the poor... to be used for the benefit of the wealthy’.<sup>72</sup> In the words of Radical MP Michael Sadler, the Act ‘spared the better classes of society’ while it ‘weighed peculiarly heavily on the poor’.<sup>73</sup> The parallel with the slum-clearing railway companies, which minimised ‘compulsory purchase prices’ by ‘avoid[ing] wherever possible the... better class of residences’, and cut swathes through the overcrowded slums, is irresistible.<sup>74</sup>

The issue of social injustice would not be enough to stop the Bill. Anticipating a supply ‘many times’ that which the resurrectionists could provide,<sup>75</sup> and a new respectability for the medical profession once it cut ties with these disreputable suppliers, the Anatomy Act’s supporters defended their cause vociferously. If the poor *were* more likely to be touched by the Act’s implications – what then? It was they who primarily stood to profit from

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<sup>71</sup> *Report by the Select Committee on Anatomy*, (London: House of Commons, 1828), p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> Tim Marshall, ‘Frankenstein and the 1832 Anatomy Act’, in *Gothic Origins and Innovations*, ed. by Allan Lloyd Smith and Victor Sage (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 57-64 (p. 62).

<sup>73</sup> HC Deb 15 December 1831 vol 9 cols 300-07 (col 304).

<sup>74</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London*, p. 37.

<sup>75</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, p. 125.

the improved standard of medical education, after all. The rich ‘would always be able to pay for the very best treatment’;<sup>76</sup> while ‘the poorer classes... [had] to seek for assistance at the hands of ignorant and ill-educated’ cheaper men.<sup>77</sup> More popular still was the reassuring claim that *nobody* would be personally hurt by the law. The Select Committee report reminded its readers that ‘where there are no relations to suffer distress, there can be no inequality of suffering, and consequently no unfairness shown to one class more than another’.<sup>78</sup>

The Act’s supporters were also energetic in vilifying their opponents as Luddites, obstructing important scientific progress on the basis of an unjustifiable and superstitious ‘prejudice’ on the part of the ‘lower orders’<sup>79</sup>. Of course, more than one objector pointed out that not one of the MPs supporting the Act had promised his body to the cause.<sup>80</sup> In any case, this particular scorn seems especially unjust given that the Murder Act – which was still governing the practice at this point – explicitly framed dissection as a punishment: a ‘further Terror and peculiar Mark of infamy’ which might be chosen as alternative to gibbeting for the disposal of a murderer’s body.<sup>81</sup> If the poor were indeed prejudiced against the notion of dissection, it was a prejudice which the forces of law had hitherto expended their energies to promote. The problem was exacerbated by the fact that, under Warburton’s initial proposals, murderers could still expect their bodies to be dissected: thus classing the most destitute alongside the most corrupt.

Initially, opposition in the Lords stopped the passage of Warburton’s bill. But when he reintroduced it in 1832, the atmosphere in Parliament had changed. The Reform Act was

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<sup>76</sup> HC Deb 17 January 1832 vol 9 cols 578-85 (col 585).

<sup>77</sup> HL Deb 2 February 1832 vol 9 cols 1148-52 (col 1150).

<sup>78</sup> *Report by the Select Committee on Anatomy*, p. 10.

<sup>79</sup> HC Deb 20 June 1827 vol 17 cols 1346-50 (col 1349).

<sup>80</sup> Hansard records a debate on 11 April 1832, during which objections to this or a similar effect were made by several MPs (‘Mr Hunt... He would move, that every Gentleman who voted for the Bill, as well as all sinecurists, should be given up for dissection.’ HC Deb 11 April 1832 vol 12 col 309-22 [col 316].)

<sup>81</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, p. 37.

already in place (neutralising the objections of lords like Wellington, who had seen the Anatomy Bill as likely to stir up the already restive poor); and the New Poor Law was looming on the political horizon. Richardson is explicit in linking the two pieces of legislation, calling the Act ‘an advance clause to the New Poor Law’.<sup>82</sup> Certainly, the threat of dissection promised to serve the purpose of the Law, by contributing to the workhouses’ deterrent effect. Elizabeth Hurren elaborates:

A summary of the Anatomy Act, like the New Poor Law, was supposed to be pinned to workhouse walls, church doors, and places where the poorest might congregate. The theory at the time was that if the labouring poor had knowledge of their predicament then they would see the folly of applying for welfare assistance.<sup>83</sup>

Certainly, it seems that while the threat of dissection was probably unlikely to dissuade a murderer from his deed, it could plausibly present a sufficiently horrible prospect to discourage a desperate pauper from seeking the help of the state.

Displaying the Anatomy Act on workhouse walls might have helped enforce the power of the institutions it adorned: but in fact, the Act was predominantly characterised in both its construction and implication by a carefully collusive legal silence. Elizabeth Hurren conducts a close reading of the text of the Act itself: a tissue of obfuscations and legal loopholes which repeatedly refused to ‘define... or describe’ its terms and which seemed purposefully designed to allow for the maximum interpretative leeway.<sup>84</sup> The same impulse is evident in the Parliamentary debates. From the moment when the legislation was first mooted, Hansard records demonstrate politicians consistently avoiding the subject, uncomfortably conscious of the topic’s public unpopularity. MPs knew that this was a highly controversial piece of legislation but – whether out of revulsion or because it was more

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>83</sup> Elizabeth T. Hurren, *Dying for Victorian Medicine: English Anatomy and Its Trade in the Dead Poor, c.1834-1929* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 21.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 28.



convenient not to know – they refused to enquire more deeply into its likely implications. In a debate of 11 June 1844, Sir James Graham declined to discuss the Bill: opining that ‘to the great majority of that House [the subject] was most revolting.’<sup>85</sup> Warburton further attempted ‘to inhibit public discussion of the Bill, by the closure of the press gallery during debate’.<sup>86</sup>

This particular attitude is powerfully evinced in the discussions around the Act and its enforcement which took place in June 1844: two months before the discovery of the West Street houses, and four before the publication of the *Mysteries* began. The issue had been raised by the Worcestershire MP, Peter Borthwick, later editor of the *Morning Post*. Borthwick objected to the Act on several counts. He highlighted the flaw in that reassuring argument which had characterised the use of unclaimed paupers’ bodies as a victimless strategy: pointing out that while ‘[t]he Act took account of the dead and the survivor... it wholly disregarded the feelings of the dying.’ This alone would have been enough to ruffle influential feathers: but Borthwick then went on to decry in some detail the ‘inhuman traffic and sale’ to which the bodies were subjected, explaining that ‘they were separated, and the different parts sold to students’.<sup>87</sup> Trafficking in corpses was bad enough; reducing the poor to their disparate parts seems to have been the final straw. It was certainly too much detail for some in the house to endure.

Lord [John] Russell said, that if all the proceedings under the Anatomy Act, were to be made subjects of continual discussion in that House, and if every inflammatory statement were to be made the ground of special inquiry, he was afraid they would be unable to withstand the clamour which would be raised, and that they would be obliged to repeal the Act.<sup>88</sup>

Russell’s hasty dismissal of Borthwick’s objections is absolutely symptomatic of the official attitude towards the Anatomy Act from the moment of its inception. As Sir James Graham

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<sup>85</sup> HC Deb 11 June 1844 vol 75 cols 523-34 (col 527).

<sup>86</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, p. 200.

<sup>87</sup> HC Deb 11 June 1844 vol 75 cols 523-34 (cols 524-25).

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, col 533.

remarked in the same Parliamentary session, ‘the silence with which it had been carried into execution was the best proof of its success’.<sup>89</sup>

What is particularly damning is that Borthwick was actually right. For all Graham’s contemptuous ‘doubt’ as to the plausibility of his objections, the picture he painted of the contemporary anatomical market was punctiliously correct. As Hurren’s detailed archival research reveals, the trade in working class bodies went on almost continually throughout the century; making considerable amounts of money for the hospital porters, ‘undertakers’ and workhouse overseers who acted as the surgeons’ primary suppliers. Crucially, and just as Borthwick had suggested, this trade was often in parts rather than in entire corpses.<sup>90</sup>

For Elizabeth Hurren, this butchery of the working-class body stands in for all the callous brutalities of the Act. Even those working class people who were able to read the Act would not have been made aware of the true extent of the violence likely to be done to a dissected body. ‘Never once in the original legislation was the cutting of the body into parts either discussed or explained clearly’.<sup>91</sup> Rather, the lawmakers who wrote it up relied on the convenient euphemism ‘anatomical examination’; which evoked a standard post-mortem (the body was opened to check for cause of death) rather than this wholesale deconstruction into parts. In fact, the working-class body sent for dissection would likely pass through several pairs of hands, reduced by a series of knives and scalpels to an unrecognisable pile of flesh that might ultimately occupy only a third of its former volume. Again, the parallel with the ‘improvers’ is suggestive. Just as the encroachments of shiny new streets compressed the

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., col 528.

<sup>90</sup> Hurren, *Dying for Victorian Medicine: English Anatomy and Its Trade in the Dead Poor, c.1834-1929*, p. 28.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. The distinction is particularly important because it seems likely that families might be willing to consent to a medical post-mortem but not to full-scale anatomical dissection. James Glennon, a police officer at Union Hall, responded to the Select Committee as follows: ‘You have heard of relations consenting to the bodies of their friends being examined in hospitals?—Many times. But such relatives would not have given consent to the bodies of their friends being dissected?—Certainly not.’ (*Report by the Select Committee on Anatomy*, p. 105.)

London working class into ever-reducing pockets of accommodation, so the process of anatomical dissection wore away at the bodies of the paupers absorbed in its system.

This was far from the only way in which the Act as it was enforced contradicted the prior assertions of its Parliamentary supporters. Indeed, as work by Richardson, Hurren and Helen Macdonald attests, the conspiracy of silence that made Borthwick's remarks so unwelcome extended to every facet of the Act's implementation; allowing those whom it served to flout its avowed limitations whenever it suited them to do so. Workhouse-keepers, surgeons, Members of Parliament, and the Anatomy Inspectors they appointed all colluded in systematically working outside the law, creating an official culture of secrecy under cover of which almost all of the Act's opponents' reservations were proven justified. Despite Warburton's assurances that 'the consent of the party himself while living' would be necessary before a corpse could be sent for dissection,<sup>92</sup> the Inspectorate encouraged 'a regime of presumed consent' within which paupers brought into the workhouse or hospital were almost never consulted about their wishes for their body's disposal.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, Richardson records how a Spitalfields clergyman was actually admonished by the English Inspector of Anatomy for documenting his parishioners' desires;<sup>94</sup> and Macdonald reports a manager chastised by a later Inspector for displaying the Act on the walls of his hospital wards, 'to alert patients to [its] provisions'. 'In Inspector Cursham's view, this was "very unbecoming" conduct in any professional man'.<sup>95</sup>

More egregious still, the question of what it meant for a body to go 'unclaimed' was consistently interpreted in the most convenient way. Simply declaring your relationship to the

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<sup>92</sup> HC Deb 15 December 1831 vol 9 cols 300-07 (col 307).

<sup>93</sup> Helen Macdonald, 'Procuring Corpses: The English Anatomy Inspectorate, 1842 to 1858', *Medical History*, 53 (2009), 379-96.

<sup>94</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, p. 241.

<sup>95</sup> Macdonald, 'Procuring Corpses: The English Anatomy Inspectorate, 1842 to 1858'. In fact the manager was obeying the letter of the law, which 'was supposed to be pinned to workhouse walls, church doors, and places where the poorest might congregate.' (Hurren, *Dying for Victorian Medicine: English Anatomy and Its Trade in the Dead Poor, c.1834-1929*, p. 21.)

dead, and your aversion to their dissection, was not enough. Working-class families living a hand-to-mouth existence were asked to pay contributions for a parish funeral; otherwise the workhouse would seek to recoup the costs of care by selling the body to the local medical school. Time was of the essence in finding this elusive cash. Although the Act mandated a 48-hour delay in sending bodies for dissection, families arriving to claim a loved one's corpse might well find it already despatched to the surgeon. Hurren, working from hospital documentation and newspaper reports, recounts the routine substitution of one dead body for another; with a corpse returned from the anatomist for burial as another, more recent, was sent off: so that families arriving to 'follow' the funeral might regularly accompany a stranger to his grave.<sup>96</sup> Every now and then, such deceptions were exposed; and over the century, a small number of these cases reached court.

Many of those who brought cases against the workhouses, hospitals or anatomists on the basis of an illegal dissection of their friend or relative were unsuccessful; this kind of substitution was hard to prove, after the fact. However, even the fact of the cases' prosecution seems to have impressed on the contemporary working class the dangers of releasing a loved one's body to the undertakers before the money could be found to bury it. The suggestion prompted a peculiar set of behaviours which were mocked by the uncomprehending upper- and middle classes. Ruth Richardson observes that

Public health reformers like Chadwick seem to have been ignorant and careless of the logic which lay behind the storage of corpses for days in overcrowded living accommodation, and revealed their ignorance when they inveighed against it in their many diatribes against the bestiality and moral depravity of the poor.<sup>97</sup>

As we saw in this chapter's opening paragraph, others were less obtuse. Godwin, finding that child's body in the cupboard of the Gray's Inn slum, recognised that it was a 'holy feeling'

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<sup>96</sup> Hurren, *Dying for Victorian Medicine: English Anatomy and Its Trade in the Dead Poor, c.1834-1929*, p. 37.

<sup>97</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, p. 278.

which prompted the parents to keep her close;<sup>98</sup> although his condemnation of the ‘prejudice’ against the morgues bespeaks a somewhat too complacent attitude about the faith one might place in the law.

Returning to the point where this chapter began, this seems to me to be the real context for all those unruly bodies, popping up and out so inconveniently in the popular literature of the day. Read in the context of the Anatomy Act and its administration, Godwin’s child in the cupboard acquires enormous political significance: standing as the symbol for a society whose self-serving innovations systematically dehumanised – and then chastised – its poor. It is against this background, too, that I would read the skeleton (and the babies in jars) discovered by Caroline in the abortionist’s lumber-room. The articulated skeletons on which students learnt anatomy derived from the same source as the scientifically interesting ‘monsters’ bottled and displayed in the medical museums of major universities. Caroline, impregnated and abandoned by her aristocratic lover, carrying a baby which nobody wants to live, is confronted on opening the cupboard with a symbol of her own position: simply a body to be exploited and cast aside.

The Anatomy Act was about much more than just the question of supplying the dissection tables of medical schools; which, in itself, is a not undesirable goal. But the specific circumstances of the Act’s implementation – its inescapable class injustice and its’ proponents disregard for their own rules – illustrate a much larger truth about attitudes to the poor. Sally Powell, whose chapter on ‘Black Markets and Cadaverous Pies’ gestures towards this notion, reads the ‘displaced urban corpse’ as a symbol of working class anxieties about industrialisation. ‘[S]uch cadaverous narratives,’ Powell contends, ‘constitute an articulation of the threat posed by city commercialism to the sanctity and survival of the working-class

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<sup>98</sup> Godwin, *London Shadows: A Glance at the 'Homes' of the Thousands*, p. 28.

individual.<sup>99</sup> As Powell recognises in her work, fear of the anatomist and of the industrialist were essentially equivalent. Both surgeon (hurriedly sticking the knife into an unclaimed pauper's corpse) and steelmaker (willing to sacrifice working-class limbs in the machinery of his profitable mill) might stand in for a society whose account of its working-class members was increasingly impersonal and economic. The further comparison with the slum clearance movement simply demonstrates how far the implications of this attitude extended.

Several points about the Anatomy Act and its enforcement offer suggestive points of contact with Reynolds's work. There are two on which I wish to focus. The first is the question of who was served by the legislation. The idea that the Anatomy Act 'was framed for the benefit of the poor' may have 'gained currency by repetition'; but Ruth Richardson, at least, is far from convinced by the claim.<sup>100</sup> She cites an 1865 investigation by Dr Joseph Rogers which revealed that it was actually the expanding middle classes whose medical situation was most improved. '[I]t would be a long time indeed,' Richardson goes on to suggest, 'before a surplus of well-trained doctors would become accessible to the very poor'.<sup>101</sup> Tim Marshall, writing in 1994, agrees that 'it was not [likely that] anybody poor would personally benefit from an improved system of medical education in the early to middle nineteenth century.'<sup>102</sup> Such observations seem to justify the MP Rigby Wason's characterisation of the Bill as 'a perfect specimen of hypocritical legislation',<sup>103</sup> aligning it with the conveniently charitable rhetoric which justified the 'improvement' works of the early nineteenth century. In contrast to later slum reformers who sought to address the real

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<sup>99</sup> Sally Powell, 'Black Markets and Cadaverous Pies: The Corpse, Urban Trade and Industrial Consumption in the Penny Blood', in *Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation*, ed. by Andrew Maunder and Grace Moore (Farnham: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 45-55 (p. 45). Powell's chapter also offers a suggestive gloss on the setting of Eliza's adventures in Reynolds's opening chapter, linking the dismembered animals at Smithfield meat market to the bodies of working class. As Elizabeth Hurren observes, Smithfield market was situated 'opposite the hospital entrance [St Bartholomew's]. Traders and clients often supplied the Dead-House.' (Hurren, *Dying for Victorian Medicine: English Anatomy and Its Trade in the Dead Poor, c.1834-1929*, p. 22.)

<sup>100</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, p. 211.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>102</sup> Marshall, 'Frankenstein and the 1832 Anatomy Act', p. 62.

<sup>103</sup> HC Deb 11 April 1832 vol 12 cols 309-22 (col 319).

deficiency in affordable, liveable housing, these early urban entrepreneurs were only concerned with the construction of their own commercial projects. Emphasising the socially beneficial consequences of their actions, they were able to pursue their own ends and congratulate themselves on doing it.

In fact – and this is the second crucial point – both the Anatomy Act and the urban ‘improvement’ drive exhibit a curious tension between exposure and concealment which I would argue is founded in their consciousness of this hypocrisy. Dissection and slum clearance both involved the opening up of previously private spaces – the interior of the body, the home. This revelation was framed by both Act and improvements’ proponents as facilitating social, scientific and economic progress. But at the same time, as I have already suggested above, the ultimate conclusion of both processes was the physical compression of the poor; perhaps with a hopeful view to their eventual disappearance. Squashed into ever smaller and darker recesses, the slums and their inhabitants were deliberately hidden from view; dissected and re-dissected into a hundred fragmented pieces, the bodies of the anatomised poor threatened to dissolve altogether.

The anatomical subjects were doubly suppressed, ignored by deliberately averted official eyes. But the same energetic devotion to ignorance can be observed in popular attitudes to conditions in the slums; an attitude evinced in the repeated revelations which nineteenth-century journalism was compelled to make of them. Hector Gavin, a doctor, introduces his *Sanitary Ramblings* (1848) with the confident declaration that

To believe that the middle and upper classes were fully cognisant that multitudes of their fellow beings have their health injured, their lives sacrificed... [and] their morals depraved... by the existence of well-defined agents, and yet to find them making no effort to alleviate, or to remove these misfortunes... would be to charge these classes with the most atrocious depravity... It is impossible to suppose that love and charity are so unknown in this great Metropolis... I have, then, but to lay bare the naked truth, as to the

state of one part of this vast city, and I believe that the hearts of many will be warmed and their spirits aroused to assist.<sup>104</sup>

Unfortunately, his optimism (and that of the many other writers who echoed his sentiments) does not appear to have been justified. Gertrude Himmelfarb thinks it curious, 'In view of the astonishment later expressed by... readers of Mayhew's work over the existence of an unknown world in their very backyards... to find [Chadwick's sanitary] report, a decade earlier, making the same claim to the discovery of the same unknown world.'<sup>105</sup> Apparently, a single exposure of the truth would not suffice.

George Godwin, whose 1854 *London Shadows* gives us that suggestive story of the unburied infant's body, had first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon at work. In 1859, Godwin produced a second volume, *Town Swamps and Social Bridges*. The book's introduction evinces the disillusion which the five-year interval had instilled in its author: 'Eloquent leaders are written on all sides, some speeches perhaps made, and then all the facts are utterly forgotten, and the evil goes quietly on, doing its deadly work, and will be rediscovered by-and-by, again to be consigned to a convenient oblivion.'<sup>106</sup> 'Convenient' is a pointed choice of word. The magnitude and severity of the condition of the slums, but above all their connection to the improvements and advancements that made the rest of London safer and more prosperous, made them 'a source of shame' so significant that the whole of society conspired to forget them.<sup>107</sup>

In the context of this determined collective amnesia, the revelations of Reynolds's *Mysteries* serve a strategic, political purpose. Continually reinforcing the direct connection between capitalist economic development and the increasing miseries of the poor, Reynolds'

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<sup>104</sup> Hector Gavin, *Sanitary Ramblings* (London: John Churchill, 1848), p. 3.

<sup>105</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, 'The Culture of Poverty', in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. by H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 707-36 (p. 718).

<sup>106</sup> Godwin, *Town Swamps and Social Bridges*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>107</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 2.



exposure of the London slums and their inhabitants serves rather to convict than to exonerate the rich. Insistently reminding his readers of the underside of this Imperial city – ‘not only the metropolis of Great Britain but... the metropolis of the world’<sup>108</sup> – Reynolds brings the guilty secrets of Victorian progress to light.

Construing the poor as secrets to be revealed might seem to deprive them of agency. Constituting them as passive objects to be exposed, as bodies rather than people, Reynolds might be accused of contributing to the same objectification as was effected by the strains of social discourse he condemned. In fact, as the final section of this chapter explores, Reynolds relied characteristically not on the pathos of the working-class dead, but on the more dramatic and effective image of the corpse reanimated. Realised most strikingly in the *Mysteries*’ portrayal of an urban ‘vampire’, it is a motif which situates Reynolds within a radical Gothic tradition tracing back at least as far as Mary Shelley, and *Frankenstein*.

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<sup>108</sup> James Grant, *The Great Metropolis*, facs edn (New York, NY: Gowland, 1985), p. I.21.

### 3.3 Disinterring secrets: resurrecting the working-class dead

That Reynolds made the association between the Anatomy Act and a wider pattern of social injustice is amply evinced in his portrayal, throughout the series, of several characters employed in the resurrection trade. One of the most striking aspects of the Select Committee report which informed the Anatomy Act is the attitude expressed by the Committee and its interviewees towards the grave-robbers who were the surgeons' principal source of supply. The fact that respectable doctors were forced to interact with these 'persons of the lowest and vilest class' was seen as one of the most significant disadvantages of the situation as it presently stood.<sup>109</sup> Committee members quizzed their witnesses with leading questions on the 'character of the exhumators';<sup>110</sup> and witness after witness repeated the assertion that these were men 'of the very worst description'.<sup>111</sup> Sir Astley Cooper, one of the period's most eminent physicians, gave a particularly vivid testimony to the bodysnatchers' immorality:

[They are] the lowest dregs of degradation. I do not know that I can describe them better; there is no crime they would not commit, and as to myself, if they would imagine that I should make a good subject, they really would not have the smallest scruple, if they could do the thing undiscovered, to make a subject of me.<sup>112</sup>

One particular point on which the witnesses all clamoured to concur was the suggestion that the bodysnatchers engaged in additional criminal activity beyond the robbing of graves. James Somerville, an assistant at a London anatomy school, described them as 'thieves [and] pickpockets'; and interviewing a surgeon named Joseph Green from St Thomas's hospital, the committee reminded him that 'some of [the resurrection men] have been actually thieves, and certainly men of very bad character', before they quizzed him on his feelings towards them. Finally, Samuel Twyford, a magistrate in the Worship-Street courts, opined that 'the

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<sup>109</sup> HL Deb 2 February 1832 vol 9 cols 1148-52 (col 1149).

<sup>110</sup> *Report by the Select Committee on Anatomy*, p. 17.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

character of the acting body-snatcher is most dangerous to society... a man throws away all virtue, who throws away all regard for public opinion; that is, the opinion of his own caste or rank in society.’<sup>113</sup>

Twyford’s verdict is particularly suggestive: resurrection men were ostracised from their community, he argued (something that seems more than plausible given the taboo against dissection) and with their reputation thus lost, they would not hesitate to plunge themselves into further criminal practices. This matters because – as Ruth Richardson suggests – the grave-robbery itself was often the initial step on a downward slope.

It is a fine irony if Sir Astley was thinking of Crouch [his supplier] when he called the resurrectionists the “lowest dregs” and adverted to their criminal propensities, since according to Sir Richard Owen it was Sir Astley who was personally responsible for Crouch’s introduction to the “profession”. If this calling corrupted Crouch, responsibility rests partly with the baronet.<sup>114</sup>

That is to say, the surgeons who were so disgusted by the criminality of the men with whom they worked were often directly or indirectly culpable for their initial essay into criminal behaviour.

The attitude of the select committee to the resurrection men seems important to me because it figures again the same narrative that can be discerned in the story of the criminal slum: the shifting of responsibility for a distasteful social problem (slum overcrowding; the desecration of the dead) onto a criminalised, ostracised working class. It is a story to which Reynolds repeatedly returns in the *Mysteries* and he does so, frequently, through the figures of resurrection men. In most cases, these are the working-class villains whose activities drive the narrative development of every series. Although Reynolds does express disapproval for much of these villains’ behaviour, he also tends to invite the readers’ sympathy when it

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>114</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, p. 71.

comes to their initial fall. The first-person autobiographical narratives of these criminal characters tell stories which conform to the same pattern of Sir Astley Cooper's supplier. Limited by circumstance, and encouraged by wealthier neighbours, into an initial illegal act, these men then find it impossible to regain respectability and are forced into ever more seriously corrupt activity. Reynolds further emphasises the direct relationship between wealth and working-class criminality in having these criminals, even at their worst, continue in the employment of their social superiors.

The first and perhaps most memorable of these villains is Anthony Tidkins, central antagonist of the first two volumes, known by the sobriquet 'the Resurrection Man'. Recounting his personal history to an audience of peers, Tidkins describes growing up on the coast 'in Walmer, in Kent' (*London* I.191). This is the area in which Reynolds was born and raised: a similarity which already suggests that he does not intend this character to be altogether unsympathetic. The suggestion is corroborated as Tidkins' account of his descent into poverty places him squarely in the victim's role. Tidkins' father has made his money not only in 'body-snatching' but in 'smuggling' goods for the town's wealthier inhabitants, who have 'encouraged him in his contraband pursuits' (I.191). All is well until, when Tidkins is twelve years old, his father is arrested. At this turn of events, the same neighbours who have previously been his best customers demonstrate an immediate change of heart.

The gentlemen who used to buy brandy of him talked loudly of the necessity of making an example of him: the ladies, who were accustomed to purchase gloves, silks, and *eau-de-cologne*, wondered that such a desperate ruffian should have allowed them to sleep safe in their bed; and of course the clergyman and his wife kicked me ignominiously out of door. (I.191)

Endorsing Tidkins senior's criminal activities only when they are clandestine and immediately beneficial, and distancing themselves from him and his family when they are exposed, the citizens of Walmer are demonstrating precisely the same behaviour exhibited by

the surgeons in their approach to the resurrection men. The parallel is emphasised as Tidkins himself is forced into further criminality by his social exclusion. His repeated attempts to find honest employment are universally frustrated: locals comment ‘*Like father, like son.*’ (I.192) Disheartened by his lack of success, Tidkins ultimately resigns himself to taking up his father’s profession: “I am sick and tired of being good.” (I.194)

Finally driven off the righteous path, Tidkins becomes nothing short of a social scourge. By the time that he is first introduced to the readers’ attention, he is not only the enterprising leader of a gang of burkers, but is hiring himself out enthusiastically to any wealthy patron for any villainy they might want to commission. And indeed, over the course of the series he participates in a number of crimes on behalf of wealthy patrons: carrying out at least one murder (and one unsuccessful attempt) in accordance with aristocratic desire. The same behaviour is evident in the several parallel characters who appear in the *Mysteries*’ later volumes: Tidkins is only the first example of a series of similar villains. Joe the Magsman, Chiffin the Cannibal and Barney the Burker are all recognisably variants on this theme: working class criminals, whose trade in death extends (as does Tidkins’) beyond grave-robbing to murder. Like Tidkins, all three make much of their income working on commission for wealthy employers.

Making these working-class villains into mercenaries working on behalf of the rich, Reynolds reinforces through repetition the message which he elsewhere more explicitly states: that is, that the misery (and criminality) of the working class is largely the responsibility of their wealthy enablers. The parallel is effective insofar as it makes a clear link with the Anatomy Act (and serves as a commentary on the injustice of the way in which the real-life resurrection men were served); but there are risks, I think, to conveying a message about aristocratic culpability through the person of such a confirmed villain. The Resurrection Man may be sympathetic as a child seeking to work honestly, but for most of

the series he acts primarily as an antagonist to the series' middle-class hero Richard Markham. Watching him torture and attempt to murder our hero, the lines of sympathy risk becoming blurred.

This is a problem which Reynolds himself seems to have recognised, and to which he comes up with an appropriately Gothic solution. In the same series of *The Mysteries of London* as that which recounts Caroline Walters' disturbing anatomical discoveries, Reynolds depicts a character whose experiences situate him as a more clearly sympathetic parallel to the serial's traditional resurrection men. Driven to desperation by a society which has repeatedly rejected him, working-class James Melmoth seeks an unusual revenge: exposing and despoiling the bodies of the dead. This apparently esoteric activity takes on particular significance in the context of the Anatomy Act and its provisions. 'One poor outcast against the whole aggregate of society' (VI.372), Melmoth seeks to humiliate the social system that has ruined him by drawing attention to the corpses of its victims. Given the use to which working-class corpses were regularly being put at this time, his actions convey a powerful message not only within, but outside the serial itself.

Melmoth is, for obvious reasons, one of the *Mysteries*' most memorable characters. Introduced under the chapter heading 'A British Working Man and His Family' (*Court* I.338), he appears in many ways to embody what Reynolds believed to be the industrious man at his best (and consequently, most oppressed). Melmoth speaks out for his political opinions, defends the women and children in his care (including Rose Foster, an orphan taken in by the family), and is not too proud to accept help when it is offered. In the London of the *Mysteries*, however, virtue is condemned to suffer; and Melmoth's experience is no different. Shown initially in the throes of starvation, after his reputation as a 'seditious fellow' has cost him his employment (I.339), his attempts to rescue Rose from the unwelcome attentions of the Prince Regent see him arrested and condemned to transportation. Although he is able to

escape from the ship before it leaves Great Britain, by the time that Melmoth returns to London his wife and children have been compelled to leave their lodgings, and are lost to him amongst the throng of the city. It is a final blow which tips him into madness; and which prompts him to a sacrilegious retribution.

There is some reason to associate Melmoth with Reynolds himself. The only significant letters in Reynolds's hand to survive in the collection of any major library are found in the British Library's Royal Literary Fund archive.<sup>115</sup> Dating between 1839 and 1842, they contain requests for pecuniary assistance; Reynolds appears to have been pursued by debts for several years following his return from Paris in 1836. Although he was never reduced to the state of desperation which the Melmoths are shown to endure – there is no suggestion that the Reynoldses ever went into a workhouse – he did spend time in Newgate; and the postscript to his letter of April 1842 informs the recipient that 'My wife and family, of four children, are all living with me at this moment in one room in the Queen's Bench Prison.'<sup>116</sup> The letter was unsuccessful, with Reynolds' request declined on unspecified grounds of character; but the connection with the Melmoths, struggling to feed their own family of four, is irresistible.

This association between character and creator lends additional significance to Melmoth's later career. Unable to remain passive against the society which has ruined him (and which will kill his wife and youngest child, as they starve to death on the London streets), Melmoth seeks 'a fiend's revenge' (*Court* I.371). Inspired by witnessing the funeral of one of his enemies, he begins to haunt the city's graveyards by night, exhuming and

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<sup>115</sup> The BL also holds two minor manuscript letters: one recommending a friend for membership of the (then) British Museum Reading Room; and the other recommending the songs included in his novels to the attention of the musician William Guernsey.

<sup>116</sup> London, British Library, MSS RLF M1077/3/957/1.

desecrating the bodies of the dead. Opening the scene on a night's despoliations, Reynolds has Melmoth declare his motives aloud.

"I will prove a terror to society—to *that* society whose system has driven me to despair. The deity made me a man: 'tis the world which has made me a monster. And a monster I will remain—performing the deeds of one—carrying horror into the bosom of the society whose outcast I am—striking terror into the soul of that community which cherishes the few favoured ones so fondly and leaves the millions to starve—to rot—to die!" (*Court* II.149)

Reading Melmoth as a figure for his author, it is easy to see in these violent resurrections a metaphor for Reynolds's work. Just as Melmoth seeks to shame society by exposing to light the corpses of its neglected dead, so Reynolds offers to cast an unblinking light into the dark recesses of the capital's corrupt institutions; dragging their skeletons out of the closets and into view. The choice of image is particularly effective. Casting Melmoth as a resurrection man meant that his story acts to follow through on the threat of his words; reminding the *Mysteries*' readers of the state-sanctioned violations to which working-class bodies were then regularly being subjected.

Neater even than this is the self-defence subtly enacted by Reynolds in his proxy's characterisation. Melmoth is highly unusual in being a resurrection man who does not exhume for financial gain. As the attitude of the Select Committee might suggest, the popular conception of the professional grave-robber was of a man so desperate for profit that he might readily slip into murder. But Melmoth does not seek to profit from his activities. Rejecting a monetary valuation of the unclaimed pauper's life, he has effectively broken free from the system. In choosing to desecrate the bodies rather than remove them for sale, Melmoth is speaking up for them, rehumanising them to be seen anew. The popular outrage that his actions provoke within the diegesis of Reynolds's story reflects on the wealthy's willingness to desecrate working class corpses in the name of medical science; but it also acts



to exonerate the serial's author from some of the unfriendly accusations to which he had been subjected. Associating himself with Melmoth's moral disinterest in money, Reynolds implicitly defied the legions of contemporary critics who had vilified him as a populist profiteer. Just as Melmoth's exposures are a matter of principle, so (Reynolds suggests to the reader) are his own.

Melmoth's story is sufficiently compelling as an analogy for Reynolds's literary practice; combining in a single, powerful plotline both a story of social injustice and a dig at the Act which enforced it. But Melmoth's declaration that 'the world has made me a monster' hints at a further suggestive significance to his tale, evoking a radical Gothic fable of two decades before. In the pain of his betrayal, the violence of his revenge, and even in the epithet of 'Vampyre' by which he is known, Melmoth echoes the experiences and behaviour of *Frankenstein's* Creature. Of course, there are important differences between Mary Shelley's 1818 novel and Reynolds's popular serial of the 1840s and 50s. But a comparison between the two texts reveals important commonalities, in a shared message of responsibility underpinned by the threat of revolt.

*Frankenstein's* longevity and continued popularity are founded on its allegorical quality. Just like Reynolds's melodramatic serial, Shelley's Gothic novel lends itself to symbolic interpretation; so that successive generations of critics have read into it their own particular concerns. In every case, what seems undeniable is that the novel centres on the question of responsibility shirked. Victor Frankenstein's vanity is certainly a fatal flaw: arrogating to himself the power of creating life, he justifiably invites a Faustian retribution. But it is Frankenstein's rejection of his own creation which the novel is really unable to forgive. Oscillating between sympathy and repulsion for each of its two central characters, *Frankenstein* evinces a keen anxiety about the treatment of the working class; responding to

the movement from compassion to alienation that would ultimately come to be embodied in the New Poor Law. The French Revolution, not yet forty years behind, was a reminder of the violence that such aristocratic arrogance might spark into life.

In Mary Shelley's novel, it is Victor Frankenstein who disinters bodies from their graves, 'combin[ing] the roles of resurrectionist and anatomist':<sup>117</sup> with the monster merely a passive recipient of the body parts of others. But I would argue for a parallel with Melmoth even here. Reacting to a world where the poor are conceived as less than human, Melmoth is a monster effectively comprised of the massed, crowded bodies of the objectified working class. Like Frankenstein's creature, therefore, he embodies a threat of retributive class violence; although, in this instance, he targets only the dead.

Melmoth's monstrosity makes him an extreme and perhaps an unlikely figure for the vengeance of the working class. But if we trace the parallel back to the Resurrection Man and his cousins in crime, then the threat of Reynolds's writing becomes more immediately apparent. Whether in the figure of an urban vampire or just of a murderer stalking the slums, Reynolds suggests that the developing capitalism of the nineteenth century is creating the very monsters by which its cities are haunted; a monstrous variation on Marx's observation that 'What the bourgeoisie produces, after all, are its own grave-diggers.'<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Marshall, 'Frankenstein and the 1832 Anatomy Act', p. 59.

<sup>118</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 79.

## Servants, secrets and sensation fiction: Reynolds and the nineteenth-century literature of crime



Figure 7

This chapter begins, like all my others, with a body. In this case it is the corpse of a stillborn baby, unrolled onto the attic floorboards of a London boarding school from its hiding place amidst the linens of a teacher's trunk. The child comes as an unpleasant surprise to the woman who discovers it, the school's headteacher Mrs Lambkin; whose open mouth and upraised hands situate Henry Anelay's illustration within a melodramatic tradition of

stylised, symbolic gesture.<sup>1</sup> She has only opened the case in search of ‘three [missing] silver tea-spoons’ (*London* II.120).

The reader, however, can anticipate what is to come almost from the very first moment of the child’s concealment. Recounting the story from the perspective of Lydia Hutchinson, the teacher amongst whose belongings the baby is found, Reynolds deliberately paces the scene for maximum suspense.

And now the school-mistress approached my trunk: she raised the lid — I leant against the wall for support. My clothes were tumbled out on the floor: at the bottom of the box was a small bundle, wrapped round with linen articles. The schoolmistress drew it forth — a terrific scream escaped my lips — the corpse of the infant rolled upon the floor! (*London* II.121)

The sequel is as inevitable as the fact of the revelation. Admitting responsibility for the child that Mrs Lambkin has found, Lydia is instantly dismissed from her post.

This turn of events seems particularly unfair in light of the fact that (in Lydia’s words) the disgrace (like the baby) “‘did not really belong to me’” (II.121). Lydia chooses to take the blame in order to protect her friend, Adeline Enfield, a wealthy pupil at the school; an act of loyalty which Adeline initially repays by helping her protector find alternative employment. When this second position proves unsuitable, however, it becomes evident that there is a limit to Adeline’s charity. Lydia’s new employer (the intimidatingly named Sir Wentworth Penfeather) subjects her to ‘importunities’ and ‘infamous proposals’ (*London* II.123); but when she contacts Adeline asking for her aid and advice, Lydia receives only a coolly worded refusal. ‘There are now no debts on either side’, Adeline writes; additionally remarking that

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<sup>1</sup> In his *Realizations* (1983) Martin Meisel discusses the vocabulary of symbolic gesture on which melodrama relied, reprinting extracts from an 1827 actor’s manual which detailed at some length the behaviour properly associated with a series of standard emotions (e.g. ‘*Grief*, sudden and violent, expresses itself by beating the head or forehead, tearing the hair, and catching the breath, as if choking...’). (Leman Thomas Reid, *The Road to the Stage*, cited in Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth Century England* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983], p. 6.)

Lydia's 'own good sense' should have 'taught [her] the immeasurable distance which lies between' them (II.123).

This rejection sets the pattern for the two women's future relationship. With no reference and no hope of honest employment, Lydia slips rapidly into poverty and prostitution. By the time that Reynolds's third-person narrator takes up her story, some years after these initial events, she is living on the streets; begging relief as Adeline (now Lady Ravensworth) steps from her gilded carriage. Denying their acquaintance, Adeline hurries into a nearby restaurant, leaving the woman for whose ruin she is largely responsible convulsing helplessly with sorrow at the side of the road.

Rescued by a passing good Samaritan, Viola Chichester (who is living in comfortable retirement after separating from a rakish husband), Lydia's situation improves. Mrs Chichester listens to her story, offers her emotional and financial support, and ultimately (perhaps most crucially of all) acts as a reference so that Lydia can re-enter employment. Advertising in the newspaper for work, Lydia is offered a position as a ladies' maid; and it seems that her troubles are over at last.

But inevitably (this is melodrama, after all) a further coincidence involving a honeymooning bride, a hurried departure and an impromptu exchange of serving-women sees Lydia arrive at Ravensworth Hall to take up her post. Improbably delighted to recognise her employer as her estranged friend, Lydia initially assumes that Adeline has engineered the situation as a 'token of kind remembrance': a deliberate act of reparation for her wrongs (*London* II.232). It is only when her expressions of gratitude are met by horrified rejection that Lydia's deference finally evaporates. "You have triumphed over me long enough," she tells Adeline, refusing the younger woman's attempts to pay her off. 'Demand[ing] permission' to remain in Adeline's service, Lydia outlines her plans for revenge (II.233):

"Before the rest of the world I shall appear the humble and respectful dependant — yes, even in the presence of your husband. But when alone with you, I shall prove a very demon, whose weapons are galling reproaches, ignominies, insults, and indignities." (*London* II.237)

Exploiting the power that knowledge of Adeline's secret affords her, Lydia makes good on her word. Over the next several months, she torments Adeline daily with the memory of her shame; comparing her pregnant employer's past conduct with her attitude towards the legitimate child she now bears 'in her bosom'.

"Your maternal feelings have improved in quality of late," said Lydia, with a scornful curl of the lip. "For—as you must well remember—your *first babe* was consigned to me to be concealed in a pond, or thrust into some hole—you cared not how nor where, so long as it was hidden from every eye." (*London* II.254)

Lydia's insistence on retelling the baby's story is readily comprehensible, given the obvious analogy between her own position and that of the discarded infant on whose behalf she speaks. Denying responsibility for the child, Adeline attempts to conceal it at all costs: caring 'not how nor where, so long as it was hidden from every eye'. Her conduct regarding Lydia is precisely similar. Rejecting the notion that she might be in some way to blame for Lydia's misfortune, Adeline abandons her erstwhile friend in the expectation that she will sink into convenient obscurity.

Construing Lydia as a rejected child helps to make clear the association between this story and the resurfacing bodies of my previous chapter: the concealed corpses of the exploited working class. Just as the surgeons campaigning for the Anatomy Act displaced their own criminal responsibility onto the working-class resurrection men who supplied them — and then sought to dissociate themselves from that connection — Adeline invests Lydia with the guilt of her own sexual transgression, before proceeding to deny her acquaintance. Equally, Lydia's response can be read, like Melmoth's, as a monstrous resurrection. Like

Frankenstein, the parent whose inadequate care makes a fiend of the creature that he declines to acknowledge, Adeline's rejection makes Lydia 'a very demon'.<sup>2</sup>

The parallels between Lydia and Melmoth do not end there. Sharing a formative history of social rejection, they also share a cause: the desire to force the wealthy to confront outright the true miseries endured by the working class. Lydia explicitly frames her motivation in these terms:

[Y]ou, lady, are so highly exalted above myself, that it is almost impossible for you to shape the least — the faintest — the most remote idea of the depth of misery into which I have been plunged. And yet I pant — I long — I feel a burning desire to make you comprehend all I have suffered. (*London* II.232-233)

The strategy Lydia adopts in service of this goal is startlingly direct. When she is alone with her mistress, she demands that Adeline act as her servant: brushing her hair, lighting the fire and pouring her wine. Reynolds recounts this behaviour in detail in a chapter entitled 'The Tortures of Lady Ravensworth'.

[W]ith scalding tears trickling down her cheeks, [Adeline] proceeded—yes, she—the high-born peeress!—to arrange the wood in the grate—to heap up the coals—and to light the fire.

And while she was kneeling in the performance of that menial task,—while her delicate white hands were coming in contact with the black grate... there, within a few feet of her, sate the menial—the servant—comfortably placed in an arm-chair, and calmly surveying the degrading occupation of her mistress. (*London* II.253)

Like the chapter title itself, the exaggerated vocabulary in which Reynolds describes the scene is a signal of its satirical intent. The 'tortures' by which Lady Ravensworth is made so miserable are only the tasks that a domestic servant would be daily expected to perform. This role reversal might be read as another instance of the serial's displaced body motif.

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<sup>2</sup> This is precisely the same vocabulary used to describe Shelley's creature: Frankenstein more than once refers to his creation as 'the demon' (Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* [London: Penguin Classics, 2003], pp. 24, 86, 175.)

Transposing the aristocrat and her working-class servant, Reynolds disputes the right by which one of the women would usually expect to occupy the other's position: there is no true difference between them, after all.

Lydia and Adeline's story, already striking, is made still more so by the fact that Reynolds does not leave its interpretation to the reader. He closes his account of the women's unfriendly reunion with a passage of political polemic that establishes Lydia as a metonym for the working class, figuring her response to Adeline's exploitative behaviour as a metaphor for revolution. This, Reynolds claims, is what the wealthy can expect if they continue to perpetuate the oppression of the poor.

The aristocracy conceives that it may insult the democracy with impunity. The high-born and the wealthy never stop to consider, when they put an affront upon the lowly and the poor, whether a day of retribution may not sooner or later come. The peer cannot see the necessity of conciliating the peasant: the daughter of the nobility knows not the use of making a friend of the daughter of the people.

But the meanest thing that crawls upon the earth may some day be in a position to avenge the injuries it has received from a powerful oppressor; and the mightiest lord or the noblest lady may be placed in that situation when even the friendship of the humblest son or the most obscure daughter of industry would be welcome as the drop of water to the lost wanderer of the desert.

Yes! Most solemnly do I proclaim to you, O suffering millions of these islands, that ye shall not always languish beneath the yoke of your oppressors! Individually ye shall each see the day when your tyrant shall crouch at your feet; and as a mass ye shall triumph over that proud oligarchy which now grinds you to the dust! (II.237-238)

As befits Reynolds's melodramatic aesthetic, there is little room for subtlety or misinterpretation here.

The open clarity of Reynolds's comparison between Lydia's situation and the political reality of his time makes this plotline particularly inviting as a subject for analysis in this, my final chapter. Drawing repeatedly on the motif of the displaced body, Lydia's story also



engages with the concerns I have sought to establish throughout this thesis as central to Reynolds's work. *The Mysteries of London* is concerned with reading, and specifically with the ways in which the literary mass market might be able to empower those presently marginalised or exploited by Victorian society. Challenging a prevailing political attitude that sought to silence or dismiss the voice of the poor, Reynolds depicts a working class that speaks out and up for itself. Blackmailing her mistress into terrified complicity, Lydia models the way in which a confident working class might be able to manipulate its own privileged knowledge; challenging and ultimately overturning existing hierarchies of social authority.

This model of working-class empowerment is not, I think, undermined even by the gory sequel to these initial events. Finally driven to distraction by Lydia's torments, Adeline decides to hire the Resurrection Man (Anthony Tidkins) to despatch her troublesome maid; bringing him to Ravensworth Hall under cover of night, and blindfolding him in an attempt to conceal her identity. Strangling Lydia, Tidkins drops her body into the lake. The action harks back to Lydia's tormenting image of that stillborn baby, 'concealed in a pond' (II.354); and like that unwanted child, Lydia's corpse is again resurrected in a grisly resurfacing of its own. Some months after Lydia's death, Tidkins returns to Adeline's home. This time he is in the employ of her vicious brother-in-law, hired to attempt the life of her newborn child (the heir to her dead husband's wealth). Recognising the mansion as the scene of his previous crime, the enterprising Resurrection Man takes himself back to the lake, retrieving Lydia's body and displaying it before Adeline in the hope of extorting payment for his silence. He is disappointed. Adeline's horror at being confronted with the evidence of her guilt is enough to destroy her: 'uttering a terrific scream', she bursts a blood vessel, falls prone on the carpet, and dies (II.390).

This sequel seems to me not to contradict, but to corroborate Reynolds's narrative threats about the inevitable retribution of the working class. Attempting finally to suppress

Lydia's inconvenient presence in her home, Adeline succeeds only in chaining herself to the whims of another, more dangerous, servant: the Resurrection Man. Less readily controlled than even Lydia has been, his unwanted re-appearance in her home (in the person of her brother-in-law's valet) echoes Lydia's unexpected arrival as ladies' maid. And just as Lydia insists on metaphorically exhuming the corpse of the child Adeline had hoped to see vanish so long ago, so the Resurrection Man literally retrieves the 'putrid corpse' of the woman whom Adeline has so repeatedly wronged (II.390): confronting her so baldly with the evidence of her sin that her body is physically unable to withstand the sight. The effect is to transform the working-class monster from a 'demon' into a Hydra. Cutting off a single head, Adeline finds herself only confronted with another, more vicious. The retributive power of the working class is absolute.

Bringing the violent conduct of the streets into Adeline's suburban home, the Resurrection Man's journey anticipates the trajectory that penny sensational fiction would soon undergo. By the 1860s, the penny serial's stories of secrets, sex and crime were transposed into the three-decker sensation novels that proved the literary sensation of that decade. Writers like Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood enjoyed success with stories whose plots often seem to echo the narratives of Reynolds's radical work: but they marketed them to an audience of the respectable middle class. It is not immediately clear how that transposition might affect the meanings of those structural devices: which, as I have argued throughout this thesis, are the primary vehicles through which Reynolds conveys his political views. In this chapter, therefore, I seek to consider that point.

My first three chapters examined *The Mysteries of London* in the context of three different popular genres: melodrama, pornography and the Gothic. All three demonstrably influenced Reynolds's work and its reception. In this fourth, and last, I consider the *Mysteries*' position within another generic tradition: the literature of crime. Attitudes to, laws

governing and strategies for the containment of crime all underwent significant change over the course of the nineteenth century. It is not surprising, therefore, that the fiction tackling the topic should have developed as well. By the time that Reynolds concluded his serial in 1856, the Newgate literature with which the century began had been supplanted by the burgeoning genres of detective and sensation fiction. The *Mysteries* can therefore be considered as exemplifying a moment of transition between these significantly different approaches. Comparing Reynolds's serial both to the works that preceded, and those that succeeded it can provide a useful prism through which to examine the ways in which crime literature expresses and shapes contemporary morality; and help also to understand the ways in which the penny fiction of the early Victorian period helped to influence the middle-class literature of the decades that followed.

Situating Reynolds's novel within this particular generic landscape, I have chosen to pay particular attention to one element of Lydia and Adeline's story: the figure of the blackmailing servant. Anthea Trodd comments on 'the strong association of servants with crime plots',<sup>3</sup> an association which might be ascribed to the fact that domestic servants provided a focal point for the same anxieties that I have elsewhere described as informing the development of melodrama as a literary genre. Elaine Hadley writes that:

After 1834, the poor were, in law, wholly supported and constituted by their wage labour... by definition, creatures of subsistence – without legacies, without lineal connections to their superiors, without histories, without homes.<sup>4</sup>

Hadley understands melodrama as the working-class response to this anxiety: framing a solution (as Chapter 1 of this thesis explores in more detail) in a nostalgic vision of a rural society where the wealthy cared paternalistically for the poor under their care. Although this

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<sup>3</sup> Anthea Trodd, *Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800-1885* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 102.

vision can seem regressive (many critics of melodrama lament the genre's lack of forward political momentum), it is at least understandable in the context of a harsh new world that reduced the working classes to cogs in a profit-making machine.

But the same conditions that prompted the working class to fear for the insecurity of their own situation also prompted concerns amongst those who employed them, which found expression in a similar nostalgia for the safety of a feudalistic past. These anxieties and arguments can both be found in mid-century advice literature about the employment of domestic servants: an arena in which old-fashioned value systems were brought up sharp against the changing economic conditions. Jean Fernandez observes that Victorian 'ideologies of service extended far back in time to a pre-industrial age';<sup>5</sup> but, as Brian Cuskey notes, by the mid-nineteenth century 'the conditions of labour had shifted', bringing 'two different notions of service into conflict.'<sup>6</sup> Specifically, John Jordan contrasts 'a declining paternalistic model (with its notions of reciprocal obligation on the part of both master and servant)' with 'the emerging free market attitude towards domestic service, in which it was merely a matter of the cash nexus, of a labour contract.'<sup>7</sup> An 1860 article in the *Saturday Review* articulates these two conflicting standards for the middle-class reader.

The ideal of the relations of master and servant is always drawn from the examples of country houses. In other days, servants belonged to a certain district from which they rarely moved, and they were very glad to get into the big house. The state of society now is so different, that this can only be realised in a very few families... every day the relation between master and servant becomes more one of contract.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jean Fernandez, *Victorian Servants, Class, and the Politics of Literacy* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Cuskey, 'The Kitchen Police: Servant Surveillance and Middle-Class Transgression', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 28 (2000), 359-75 (p. 371).

<sup>7</sup> John O. Jordan, 'Domestic Servants and the Victorian Home', in *Homes and Homelessness in the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Murray Baumgarten and H.M. Daleski (New York, NY: AMS Press, 1998), pp. 79-90 (p. 84).

<sup>8</sup> 'Servants', *Saturday Review*, 9 (1860), 205-06 (p. 205).

Similarly, the *Sunday at Home* printed an article in 1863 opining that the ‘tie between masters and servants’ had become ‘not a tie of affection, scarcely a tie of principle; but a bond of mere interest and convenience.’<sup>9</sup> In both cases, the anxiety is the same as that by which so much of the period’s popular literature is shaped; and which informed not only melodrama’s nostalgic vision of an idealised rural past, but also (as I have argued in Chapter 3) the recurring image of the resurrected corpse, that ultimate symbol of the commodified working class.

Of course, although both rich and poor were demonstrably made uneasy by these shifting social conditions, the degree of jeopardy was not the same on both sides. Where the ultimate consequences for a working class valued purely for its economic productivity might well include starvation and a painful death, the primary concern for their uneasy employers was the possibility that their personal secrets might be betrayed. The servant’s intimate position within the household necessarily entailed the acquisition of a great deal of personal information about the family by whom they were employed. Cuskey describes how ‘household manuals written for servants exhort valets and chambermaids to hold the secrets of the family sacred’; noting incidentally that the manuals, which often specify the types of behaviours that might be concealed – ‘alcoholism, illness, adultery, domestic violence’- therefore also serve the ironic function of ‘shin[ing] a light into the dark closets of the Victorian middle-class home’.<sup>10</sup> The safeguarding of this information was a central part of the servant’s role. But with the relationship between master and servant increasingly reduced to ‘a bond of mere interest and convenience’, there was always the uncomfortable possibility that

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Masters and Servants’, *The Sunday At Home* (1859), 300-03 (p. 300).

<sup>10</sup> Cuskey, ‘The Kitchen Police: Servant Surveillance and Middle-Class Transgression’, p. 360.

the employee might decide to ‘exchange “the family’s” secrets[,] for [a] profit’ more attractive than their wages could provide.<sup>11</sup>

This concern about the management of personal information links both the role of the servant, and Reynolds’s examination of that role in Lydia’s story, to a wider set of discussions about individual privacy which were current when Reynolds began writing his serial. The changing social conditions which made it implausible for servants to be drawn from families with which their employers were already familiar also made it increasingly possible for the Victorian individual to conceal those elements of their personal history that they would prefer to remain unknown. Lawrence M. Friedman, in an article of 1991, describes how similar social developments in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America encouraged a rise in those crimes, like bigamy and fraud, which ‘turned on false pretences... on lies about one’s past.’<sup>12</sup> These are the same white-collar crimes with which the sensation literature of the 1860s was primarily concerned.

The bulk of this chapter goes on to juxtapose *The Mysteries of London* with three important crime novels of the (long) nineteenth century: William Godwin’s three-volume *Caleb Williams* (1794); Charles Dickens’s shilling serial *Bleak House* (1852-53); and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s 1862 sensation novel, *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Published respectively before, during and after the *Mysteries*’ serialisation, each of these now-canonical works responds, like Reynolds’s text, to the social changes which contributed to make up modernity. More specifically, all three texts also include as central elements of their narrative both servants (used as a prism for examining class relations) and secrets (characters who seek to hide a guilty past). These narrative similarities permit for a productive comparison with

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<sup>11</sup> Ann Gaylin, *Eavesdropping in the Novel from Austen to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence M. Friedman, 'Crimes of Mobility', *Stanford Law Review*, 43 (1991), 637-58 (p. 638).

Reynolds's work; in which, as I have argued throughout this thesis, plot is the primary conduit of meaning.

All three novels additionally feature variations on the detective: a figure who, for many commentators, fundamentally defines the development of crime fiction over the Victorian period. The detective unit of the Metropolitan Police was formed in 1842, with the force itself dating only from 1829. As critical histories of the genre record, a number of the period's most influential writers became fascinated by the significance of this small group of expert interpreters, incorporating them with increasing regularity into their work.<sup>13</sup>

Conventionally, accounts point to Edgar Allan Poe's Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin as inaugurating the detective story tradition, in the early 1840s;<sup>14</sup> with a gap of some years before first *Bleak House* and then Collins's *The Moonstone* (1858) brought British fictional detectives to life. Detective fiction went on to develop as a kind of cousin of the sensation novel (there is a substantial overlap between the two) before the genre reached what is described with unusual consistency as its apotheosis, in the 1880s and 90s, with Arthur Conan Doyle and the creation of Sherlock Holmes.

The fascination of the detective for literary scholars seems to derive (as it did, I think, for Dickens and his contemporaries) from the fact that detective fiction foregrounds the process of interpretation. Dipping into my notes on the topic, I find the detective variously described as 'a reader',<sup>15</sup> 'an expert reader'<sup>16</sup> or even 'a sort of super-reader'.<sup>17</sup> It is this reading ability that lends the detective his authoritative power. As Rita Felski suggests, the

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<sup>13</sup> Dickens in particular displayed an early fascination with the detectives, famously reporting on a night spent alongside one of the Metropolitan Police detectives in an article for *Household Words* in an article of 1851. (Charles Dickens, 'On Duty with Inspector Field', *Household Words*, 3 [1851], 265-70.)

<sup>14</sup> Dupin appears in three stories by Poe: 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841), 'The Mystery of Marie Roget' (1842), and 'The Purloined Letter' (1844).

<sup>15</sup> Britta Martens, 'Dramatic Monologue, Detective Fiction, and the Search for Meaning', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 66 (2011), 195-218 (p. 204).

<sup>16</sup> Rita Felski, 'Suspicious Minds', *Poetics Today*, 32 (2011), 215-34 (p. 221).

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth Century British Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 146.

detective police can be situated alongside the other Victorian professions of medicine and law in a pantheon which derived its importance from its privileged interpretative skill. ‘During the nineteenth century,’ she writes:

medical and legal professionals collaborated in developing a science of criminology based on interpretation, classification and forensic evidence, resulting in a culture of experts able to discern secrets invisible to the ordinary human eye.<sup>18</sup>

This depiction of the detective’s role is suggestive in the context of the claims that I have made elsewhere in this thesis about Reynolds’s cultural understanding and the value that the *Mysteries* places on openness and accessibility. The presence of any kind of expert reader implicitly creates a sub-class of less qualified or more naïve readers; exactly the kind of process that can be observed in the response of the ruling classes to the development of the popular marketplace (as described in Chapters 1 and 2). The detective therefore can at least notionally be read as reinforcing a hierarchical model of cultural understanding which enforces a political worldview quite at odds with Reynolds’s own.

This point of view is supported by the commonly articulated critical view that crime literature can often act as a tool for enforcing socially conservative ideology. Writing on the period 1841-1939, John Scaggs opines that

the crime genre during this period was a particularly powerful ideological tool that consolidated and disseminated patriarchal power, and its voice was the rational, coolly logical voice of the male detective or his male narrator.<sup>19</sup>

Reynolds’s serial, with its emotional tone, its dynamic female characters and its determination to challenge existing structures and mechanisms of power, clearly provides an exception to this rule. It seems reasonable therefore to hope that the *Mysteries* might act as a useful parallel to more conventional or better-known crime literature purely by virtue of its differing intent.

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<sup>18</sup> Felski, 'Suspicious Minds', p. 221.

<sup>19</sup> John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 20.



If Reynolds is writing crime fiction with a radical purpose, thinking about what the *Mysteries* does differently to other more canonical, more familiar and perhaps more conservative texts might help us to understand the ways in which those texts are working; or indeed to cast doubt on some of the assertions made by critics like Scaggs.

My first section discusses *Caleb Williams*, which seems to me to be an important source text for Reynolds's work. There are several similarities between the events of Godwin's novel and the story of Lydia Hutchinson and Adeline Ravensworth described above. *Caleb Williams*, too, tells the story of a servant whose knowledge of a scandalous secret prompts his master to reject him. But Godwin's story develops quite differently. A comparison between the two throws into sharp relief Reynolds's more optimistic attitude towards the prospect of a mass reading public, and his sense of the potential of the popular text. My second section considers some possible reasons for these contrasting perspectives, briefly examining the radical literature that appeared in the fifty intervening years between the publication of Godwin's and Reynolds's works, and introducing the notion of the blackmailer as a kind of counterpoint to the more conservative detective.

The chapter's third section moves on to discuss my next canonical crime novel: *Bleak House*. Here too, as contemporary reviewers of Dickens's novel observed, there are marked similarities with *The Mysteries of London*. Engaging with the same questions about social responsibility and working-class literacy that preoccupy Reynolds throughout his text, *Bleak House* can be (and has been) seen as Dickens's variant on the urban mysteries genre.<sup>20</sup> However, whilst the novel employs many of the same narrative devices as Reynolds's work, they act to what is ultimately quite a different effect. In particular, I argue that Dickens's novel neutralises much of the radicalism that characterises Reynolds's serial. To borrow a

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<sup>20</sup> Anne Humpherys seems to have been the first twentieth-century critic to make the comparison, in an article of 1991. (Anne Humpherys, 'Generic Strands and Urban Twists: The Victorian Mysteries Novel', *Victorian Studies*, 34 [1991], 455-72.)

phrase from Stephen Knight, *Bleak House* is the *Mysteries* 'with enhanced middle-class values'.<sup>21</sup>

My final section examines Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, which might be read as another middle-class variation on the *Mysteries*. For critics of the time, sensation literature's dependence on the tropes and concerns of penny fiction made the genre unpalatable. Braddon, who also wrote for the penny press, was famously berated in an 1864 review for 'making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room'.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Twentieth and twenty-first century critics have endorsed the association. However, I have not found a great deal of in-depth critical work on what that transposition might actually mean in terms of this original penny fiction's political or ideological goals. As I argued in my introduction, there has been relatively little critical attention paid to Reynolds's work. For that reason, work on this topic has tended to emanate from scholars of sensation literature, rather than those concentrated on the penny press; focusing on sensation fiction's adaptation of the motifs of popular fiction without necessarily offering much consideration to the meanings of these motifs in the original work.<sup>24</sup> In this last section I begin therefore to attempt to redress this balance, asking what it might mean when the plot motifs of Reynolds's serial (which, as I have argued, are the primary vehicles of its meaning) are translated into a

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen Knight, *The Mysteries of the Cities: Urban Crime Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2012), p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> W.F. Rae, 'Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon', *North British Review*, 43 (1865), 180-204 (p. 204).

<sup>23</sup> In an article of 1863, H.L. Manse describes the relationship between the period's sensation fiction and the penny literature that preceded it in terms that chime suggestively with the imagery of Reynolds's work. He writes, '[T]he cheap publications which supply sensation for the million in penny and halfpenny numbers... belong to our subject, as the anatomy of the skeleton frame belongs to the surgical treatment of the human body... They are the original form, the primitive monad, to which all the varieties of sensational literature may be referred... by a law of generation at least as worthy of the attention of the scientific student as that by which Mr Darwin's bear may be expected to have developed into a whale... In them we have sensation pure and undisguised, stripped of the rich dress which conceals it while it adorns the figure of the more ambitious varieties of the species.' (H.L. Manse, 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review*, 113 [1863], 482-514 [p. 505-06].)

<sup>24</sup> Andrew King's 2011 chapter on 'the literature of the kitchen' is an honourable exception, seeking to contextualise sensation literature alongside the 'cheap serial fiction' of the 1840s and 50s. However, as the final part of this chapter will discuss in more detail, King's focus on Reynolds's successor J.F. Smith prompts him to conclusions that differ from my own. (Andrew King, "'Literature of the Kitchen': Cheap Serial Fiction of the 1840s and 1850s', in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. by Pamela K. Gilbert [Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011], pp. 38-53.)

different form and marketed to the middle class. Understanding the significance of that shift, we might begin to gain a sense of the legacy of Reynolds's serial; that is, of its sustained impact on the literature of the years that followed it.

#### 4.1 The subjected servant: *Caleb Williams*

A mistress who revenges herself on the servant who knows her secret, but who is herself driven mad by her consciousness of culpability; a working-class detective who exposes aristocratic guilt; and a chest whose contents threaten exposure and the loss of reputation. These central elements of Lydia and Adeline's story all evoke William Godwin's 1794 novel *Caleb Williams*. Like Reynolds, Godwin set out in his work to comment on what he saw as the egregious condition of the British legal system. Like Reynolds, he contended that the law was dangerously biased in favour of the rich. And, like Reynolds, he developed his point about class relations in the context of a story about the self-destructive relationship between a servant and his employer. However, the two narratives unfold very differently. I argue in this section of my chapter that this difference can be understood not only as a consequence of the two authors' contrasting political beliefs, but as a reflection of Godwin and Reynolds's disparate historical positions: one writing before, and one after, the birth of the literary mass market.

Godwin's novel shares with Reynolds's serial the intention of (and a strategy for) political engagement. *Caleb Williams* is often described as a fictional counterpart to *Political Justice*, a political-philosophical text that Godwin had published only the year before.<sup>25</sup> The suggestion seems to be corroborated by the original preface to *Caleb Williams*, which was withdrawn by its publishers on the novel's first publication as being too controversial safely to include. In it, Godwin writes:

What is now presented to the public is no abstract speculation... It is but of late that the inestimable importance of political principles has been adequately apprehended. It is now known to philosophers that the spirit and character of the government intrudes itself into every rank of society. But this is a truth highly

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<sup>25</sup> See for instance Kenneth W. Graham, 'Narrative and Ideology in Godwin's *Caleb Williams*', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 2 (1990), 215-28.

worthy to be communicated to persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach.<sup>26</sup>

There is a clear parallel here with Reynolds's own position, that literature is the most important tool in developing political autonomy for the working class. Like Reynolds, Godwin understands fiction as an essential tool for effecting the education of those 'persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach'. The implications are far-reaching: if literature can alert the working class to the extent to which their lives are shaped by the 'spirit and character of the government', then their further political engagement must surely follow.

That the governing classes agreed with Godwin's assessment is amply attested by the response both *Caleb Williams* and *The Mysteries of London* attracted. In an article of 2012, Casie Legette gives an account of the nineteenth-century reception history of Godwin's work. She suggests that for many critics of that period, 'author and novel alike came to stand in for the radical politics of the 1790s';<sup>27</sup> and that an anxiety about this radical novel's likely effect on the readers of the subsequent decades prompted deliberate efforts to counteract it. In another suggestive parallel with Reynolds's work, this opposition took the form, not of active engagement with the issues presented by the text, but of an attempt to dismiss it out of hand. The second chapter of this thesis described a critical tendency to characterise Reynolds's serial as worthless, semi-pornographic trash. Similarly, Legette describes how *Blackwood's* magazine carefully worked to portray *Caleb Williams* as forgotten and irrelevant, 'waste paper... flung into oblivion'.<sup>28</sup> Depicting the novel as already out of date, the *Blackwood's* editors discouraged others from taking it up. Although the terms in which the two works were dismissed are slightly different, the tactic is obviously the same.

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<sup>26</sup> William Godwin, *Caleb Williams* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2009), p. 312. Further references will be to this edition and will be given in the text.

<sup>27</sup> Casie Legette, 'Remaking *Caleb Williams* in the Nineteenth Century', *Romanticism*, 18 (2012), 143-54 (p. 144).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

Just as Reynolds's work is in fact much more than the intellectually bereft erotica its critics described, so Godwin's novel was far from forgotten by the 1830s and 40s. In fact, as Legette observes, the novel was republished several times for the mass market: as part of Bentley's Standard Novels in 1831, again in a shilling edition in 1839 and a third time as a penny serial in 1841. These cheap editions made Godwin's work available to the same extended readership for which Reynolds was writing in the 1840s. More pertinently still, in 1840-41, *Caleb Williams* was appropriated by the Chartist press: William Thomson serialised extracts from Godwin's novel in the 'Thoughts for the Thoughtful' section of his *Chartist Circular*.<sup>29</sup> Although Legette points out that some careful editing was necessary to find sympathetic political sentiments in Godwin's work, this contemporary context does suggest why Reynolds, closely involved in the Chartist movement, might look to Godwin's example in the composition of his work.

The reason Legette deems *Caleb Williams* inappropriate for the uses to which Thomson put it is because Godwin himself was highly suspicious of political mass movements. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, Godwin advocated instead the kind of considered, intellectual engagement with political thought which he held to be 'incompatible with the mob mentality of a mass movement'.<sup>30</sup> There is clearly a contrast here with Reynolds, unabashedly instigating his readers to perform whatever acts might be necessary to attain their political ends; but if their method of choice is different, there is still some clear overlap in the pair's political concerns. Godwin describes his novel as 'a general review of the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism, by which man becomes the destroyer of man' (312). This emphasis on tyranny chimes closely with Reynolds's melodramatic denouncement of the aristocratic abuse of power. We might

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Keen, *Revolutions in Romantic Literature: An Anthology of Print Culture, 1780-1832* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2004), p. 3.

remember Peter Brooks's description of the melodramatic villain: 'those who have power and use it to hurt'.<sup>31</sup>

More specifically, both Reynolds and Godwin depict the English legal system as an instrument of the unjust government their works condemn. In Caleb's narrating words, 'Wealth and despotism easily know how to engage those laws, which were perhaps at first intended... for the safeguards of the poor, as the coadjutors of their oppression' (42). This is a point on which Reynolds consistently dwells, lamenting (for instance) in the fourth series of his work that 'while the fiction of the so-called British Constitution declares that all persons are equal in the eyes of the law, the administrators, functionaries, and officials of the law take very good care that such shall not be the case' (*Court* III.211).

Given that both works are concerned to address wide-ranging problems with the British legal system, it is striking that Godwin, like Reynolds, chooses to make his point through the story of a mistreated servant. As in Lydia and Adeline's tale, the relationship between domestic employer and employee lends itself to the representation in miniature of the tyrannies of the larger social order: something that Godwin would address more explicitly elsewhere.<sup>32</sup> But Godwin's use of master-servant relations as a figure for a broken society is still more significant given that Caleb's history with Falkland might be a model for the feudal servitude to which Victorian employers would so nostalgically look back. Growing up, the child of 'humble parents', 'within the manor of Ferdinando Falkland', Caleb attracts the notice of Collins (Falkland's steward) 'at an early age' (3). Orphaned at the age of eighteen, he is grateful for Falkland's subsequent offer of employment; and soon comes to regard his new master as something of a surrogate parent. This is precisely the type of relationship to

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<sup>31</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 44.

<sup>32</sup> The essay 'Of Servants', published in the *Enquirer* in 1797, decries the various ways in which servants are belittled and dehumanised by their employers, describing the situation as 'monstrous'. (William Godwin, *The Enquirer: Reflections on Manners, Education and Literature* [London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1797], p. 207.)

which the *Sunday at Home* would advert in the 1860s: ‘In other days, servants belonged to a certain district from which they rarely moved, and they were very glad to get into the big house.’<sup>33</sup>

However, as Gerald Barker observes, it is precisely Caleb’s ‘long-enduring loyalty’ to Falkland that makes him vulnerable to the machinations of his employer; ‘depriv[ing] him of the one weapon that would permit him to act against his foe.’<sup>34</sup> When Caleb discovers that Falkland has been responsible for murdering Tyrell, a neighbouring squire, some years before, he does not go to the police with his accusation. Instead he seeks only to escape an employment that has been soured by a corrupting knowledge of his master. This refusal to hold Falkland to account for his criminal behaviour exposes Caleb to his master’s schemes. When Caleb attempts to slip away to London, it is easy for Falkland to step in with an accusation of his own, hiding valuables amongst Caleb’s goods and accusing him of having stolen them before running away. Responding, too late, with the true motive of his actions, Caleb suffers the consequence of a society which venerates the sanctity of the master-servant bond. He is vilified by both friends and strangers as ‘a monster of depravity’ (168), ‘the spawn of a cockatrice’ (170). The situation provokes irresistible comparisons with Lydia, whose initial, willing sacrifice of her own reputation later makes it easy for Adeline to deny her further aid. “‘Who would believe your story were you to proclaim it?’” Adeline asks (*London* II.127).

But Lydia at least is able at last to exact revenge on the woman who has wronged to, although she must wait several years for her retribution. By contrast, Caleb’s deeply-held beliefs about servitude and loyalty deprive him even of this belated satisfaction. Finally able to confront Falkland with the truth of his crime, the encounter affords him none of the

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<sup>33</sup> ‘Masters and Servants’, p. 300.

<sup>34</sup> Gerard A. Barker, ‘Justice to Caleb Williams’, *Studies in the Novel*, 6 (1974), 377-88 (p. 378).



triumph that Lydia enjoys. Exonerated of the accusations that have dogged him, Caleb finally decides to revenge himself for the miseries to which his master has subjected him: striding into a magistrate's office and demanding that Falkland be charged with Tyrrell's murder. Accordingly, finally, Falkland is brought before the court: and under the onslaught of Caleb's expounded miseries, he breaks down and confesses his crime: 'I am the most execrable of all villains,' he tells the assembled crowd (302). This moment is equivalent to that at which Lydia is able to confront Adeline with her own immoral actions. But where Reynolds's servant triumphs in her ascendancy over her mistress, Godwin's is immediately wracked by guilt. As soon as Falkland appears in court, 'haggard, ghost-like and wild' with anxiety (296), Caleb begins to regret his boldness in accusing the man whose love he has prized for such a great portion of his life. 'Shall I trample on a man thus dreadfully reduced?' Caleb asks himself – but it is too late to turn back (297). He has to speak, and speaking, to tell the truth: ultimately precipitating not only his master's confession, but his death. Falkland 'survive[s] but three days this dreadful scene;' leaving Caleb, suddenly heavy with responsibility, to 'endure the penalty of [his] crime' (302).

It seems difficult to believe that Godwin expects the reader to endorse Caleb's feelings of violent regret. The 'crime' for which Caleb is resigning himself to suffer is curiously insubstantial in comparison to Falkland's act; by consequence of which, we remember, not only the unpleasant Tyrrell but two innocent working-class men have died, hanged for the crime in Falkland's stead. This conflict between Caleb's own feelings and the moral tendency of Godwin's work is supported by the novel's alternative ending, rejected by the author but preserved amongst his manuscripts. In this version, Caleb does not achieve even the dubious resolution that Falkland's trial affords him. Instead, his story is never believed, driving him mad with frustration and despair. The novel closes with Caleb's ravings as he lies confined in an asylum. '[A]ll day long I do nothing', he writes to Collins: '—am a

stone—a GRAVE STONE!—an obelisk to tell you—here lies WHAT WAS ONCE A MAN!’ (311).

It seems to me that the more overt injustice of this rejected ending can help to clarify the sense of Godwin’s text. The last-minute switch in sympathy which the published ending appears to demand would, I think, be too much to expect of a reader who has followed Caleb’s sufferings for so long. Rather, I would agree with Gary Handwerk in reading the novel as imaging in Caleb ‘the working of ideology in an individual mind’.<sup>35</sup> Caleb is a social subject so thoroughly disciplined that even his own conscience conspires to make him feel guilty for challenging Falkland’s moral and social authority. As Martin Priestman writes,

At the exact moment when Caleb seems to circumvent historically conditioned differences of status and power, they rewrite themselves within the personalized ethical narrative that he is constructing, leaving behind as narrative surplus an excessive feeling of guilt.<sup>36</sup>

Caleb’s guilt at Falkland’s fate is *intended* to jar with the reader, prompting an examination of the unswerving fealty that traditional, feudal models of servitude demanded of the working class. Caleb has been so well indoctrinated with the belief that social status and moral superiority go hand-in-hand that he cannot countenance the fact that he, Falkland’s social inferior, might in fact possess the moral high ground. Instead, he can only conclude that his triumph is the manifestation of an evil will – echoing those earlier sentiments with which other characters respond to his initial accusations against his master, and making him into his own unrelenting judge.

In *Caleb Williams*, then, Godwin deliberately challenges the status quo of master-servant relations. His story acts as a salient reminder that the kind of traditional village society so often idealised in the nineteenth century (in comparison to the supposed

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<sup>35</sup> Gary Handwerk, 'Of Caleb's Guilt and Godwin's Truth: Ideology and Ethics in *Caleb Williams*', *ELH*, 60 (1993), 939-60 (p. 940).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 945.

estrangement and isolation of urban life) was predicated on an absolutely rigid imbalance of power. Even with Falkland squarely in the wrong (not only for his initial act of violence, but for his determined persecution of the innocent Caleb), the pervasive effects of this social ideology are such that Caleb cannot conceive his own innocence. Instead, he rebukes himself both for his initial invasion of Falkland's privacy (the gaze, in this model, should travel in only one direction) and for his later insistence on his master's guilt. By contrast, Lydia's greater self-confidence seems to put Reynolds's serial in the decidedly unmelodramatic position of defending certain aspects of the new model for class relations. If a more purely economic contract between master and servant threatens to dehumanise the poor in the eyes of the rich, it has at least the advantage of offering them the possibility for greater individual freedom and self-respect, *if* they can mobilise themselves to best advantage.

This sense, that Reynolds's serial presents a world in which changing social conditions offer the possibility of greater independence for the working class, is reinforced by an examination of Caleb's role as reader. Caleb's investigation into Falkland's past has seen him positioned by some critics of Godwin's novel as a pseudo- or proto-detective,<sup>37</sup> suggesting a parallel with the working-class readers that Reynolds presents in his serial. The practice of detection is also a practice of interpretation: and Godwin emphasises that link by associating the curiosity that prompts Caleb's obsessive concern with his master's past with the interest that makes him an enthusiastic consumer of Falkland's library. Learning from an avuncular friend, Mr Collins, the 'narrative' of Falkland's acquaintance with Tyrrell (the man he killed), Caleb subjects the tale to his full interpretative attention:

[T]he story I had heard was forever in my thoughts, and I was peculiarly interested to comprehend its full import. I turned it a thousand ways, and examined it in every point of view. In the original communication it appeared

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<sup>37</sup> See for instance Martin Priestman, *The Figure on the Carpet: Detective Fiction and Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 11-13.

sufficiently distinct and satisfactory; but as I brooded over it, it gradually became mysterious. (103-104)

Like the well-trained reader he is, Caleb is struck by the moral inconsistencies of this real-life drama. The Hawkinses, the father-son duo who have been convicted of and hanged for Falkland's crime, do not present themselves as likely perpetrators. Conversely, Falkland's conspicuously guilty behaviour suggests that he may be hiding some terrible truth. So far, therefore, it seems plausible to align Godwin's work with Reynolds's in that both seem to figure the possible consequences of an increasingly literate working class. Caleb's literacy is of a piece with his perceptiveness: educating the working classes has the potential to deprive the aristocracy of their ability to operate outside conventional bounds of morality unscathed. Rather than blithely free, the wealthy may find themselves under an uncomfortable observation.

However, Caleb's crippling unwillingness to capitalise on his knowledge makes him vulnerable to justice's surveying gaze. In *Caleb Williams*, Falkland is able to exert control over Caleb in part through his manipulation of the media. When Caleb flees to London – which he describes, in recognisably Reynoldsian terms, as 'an inexhaustible reservoir of concealment to the majority of mankind' (246) – he finds himself pursued by the spectre of his own story, distorted into the material of popular print culture.

I was walking out one evening for an hour's exercise and air... when my ear was struck with two or three casual sounds from the mouth of a hawker who was bawling his wares... to my utter astonishment and surprise I heard him deliver himself nearly in these words. 'Here you have the Most Wonderful and Surprising History, and Miraculous Adventures of Caleb Williams!' (258)

The hawker's story not only relies on Falkland's word (describing how Caleb 'robbed, and then brought false accusations against his master'), but also exaggerates and sensationalises his activities. This account proves to be particularly damaging as it pursues

Caleb into his attempted Welsh retreat, disrupting the tentative relationships he has formed and forcing him back into an itinerant existence. Persecuting Caleb through printed texts, Falkland demonstrates that for Godwin, at least, the media is still primarily the preserve of the rich.<sup>38</sup>

By contrast, *The Mysteries of London* presents Lydia as more media savvy than her mistress: it is through a newspaper employment advertisement that she is able to secure the position which brings her back into Adeline's orbit. But Lydia is also a more confident 'reader' than Adeline in the sense that she is a more efficient policeman, manifesting this skill in a way which recalls the competing models of readership presented by Reynolds in the forgery stories that this thesis's first chapter discussed. Where Caleb spends most of his story resisting the urge to subject Falkland to the law, Lydia is direct in declaring that she will not hesitate to expose Adeline's actions to a professional investigation.

“[W]hen you summon your domestics to drag me to gaol on a charge of extortion,” replied Lydia, contemptuously, “that moment do I proclaim the history of the past! Then will medical experience speedily prove whether Lady Ravensworth now bears *her first child* in her bosom!” (*London* II.234)

Lydia's confidence in invoking the law comes from her knowledge of the material evidence of Adeline's guilt. She knows that she can rely on the physicality of Adeline's body to corroborate her tale. This suggestion provides a further link between Lydia and the other working-class readers of Reynolds's serial; specifically, the cobbler described in Chapter 1, whose professional experience allows him to 'read' the truth of a fraudulent mummy where an Egyptologist cannot. Again, Reynolds seems to be endorsing a particular kind of knowledge as characteristic of the working class – associating them with a concrete

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<sup>38</sup> There is, perhaps, a further analogy to be made here with the written characters on which nineteenth-century servants depended in seeking alternative employment, and through which their masters could similarly shape their stories.

understanding of the world that can trump the less tangible understanding of the upper classes.

Godwin's Caleb appears in contrast as a reader insufficiently grounded in the real. 'Though I was not a stranger to books, I had no practical acquaintance with men' (4); 'I had had no intercourse with the world and its passions' (103). This cerebral, theoretical understanding is what leaves Caleb vulnerable to Falkland's machinations. Specifically, Caleb is undone by the planted evidence that Falkland invokes against him: 'a watch and several jewels' belonging to his master, discovered hidden amongst Caleb's bags (162). Although this material evidence is effectively forged (its provenance, or narrative, does not fit with the role it performs), the success with which Falkland deploys it in Caleb's undoing contrasts to the ineffectual, insubstantial evidence on which Caleb relies in his investigation of Falkland's crime: a mysterious chest which (despite repeated efforts) Caleb never actually sees inside. Rudolf Storch opines that 'it is difficult to conceive of the kind of evidence that could be hidden in the trunk'<sup>39</sup> and, although I am not sure that I completely agree, I would suggest that the *point* of this unopenable casket is its inaccessibility. To revert to the model of surface reading which I established in Chapter 1, Falkland's incriminating chest might be located in a similar symbolic position as the opaque painting purchased by Sir Brinksby Bull. It is a red herring, a distraction in which Caleb's too-ready investment leaves him vulnerable to exploitation by Falkland's more practical mind.

Godwin's declared intention in writing *Caleb Williams* is to demonstrate the association between political theory and lived reality. Perhaps Caleb, too deeply invested in the world of the ideal, suffers because of his inability to reconcile the two: a trait which is evinced both in his vulnerability to Falkland's more canny exploitation and in his ready

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<sup>39</sup> Rudolf F. Storch, 'Metaphors of Private Guilt and Social Rebellion in Godwin's *Caleb Williams*', *ELH*, 34 (1967), 188-207 (p. 197).

capitulation to the social ideals that would prevent him from challenging his master's authority. But the consequence is that although *Caleb Williams* roundly condemns the social system it describes, it also concludes in a decidedly defeatist manner. Even if Caleb had adopted a more pragmatic approach to his discovery of Falkland's guilt, it is not clear that this would have permitted him really to mitigate his misfortunes. Falkland's social control is too absolute. This seems surprising given that the very existence of the novel is predicated on the assumption that there is some good to be hoped for in educating the working class.

In contrast, Reynolds's model of self-confident servants who are able to seek a decisive redress against their wrongs seems to present a much more hopeful picture. Where Godwin laments the status quo, Reynolds offers a suggestion as to how it might be changed. As the next section of this chapter will illustrate, it seems to me that this difference in perspective might be ascribed to the different historical moments at which Godwin's and Reynolds's work appeared. That is, there is a clear relationship between Godwin's scepticism, Reynolds's greater confidence, and the advent of the literary mass market.

## 4.2 Blackmail and the early nineteenth-century radical press

Although Adeline threatens to take Lydia to court for ‘extortion’, ‘blackmail’ is the word that we would be more likely to use to describe her activities today. The term is anachronistic, in that it only emerged into popular use at the end of the nineteenth century;<sup>40</sup> but it more precisely conveys the sense of what I wish to discuss. Where the extortionist might rely on his physical strength for financial advantage, the blackmailer depends only on her privileged *knowledge* to grant her power. As such, the dynamics of the blackmail relationship suggest a commentary on what I have suggested throughout this thesis is a central theme of Reynolds’s work: the ways in which a socially side-lined working class might draw on the communicative and educational power of popular print culture in order to attain a measure of social authority.

As this section will show, that is exactly what the radical pressmen of the 1810s and 20s seemed to believe. Over this period, the popular press adopted blackmail as a political strategy that granted its audience moral, if not social, authority over a corrupted ruling class. This movement reached its apex with the 1820 Queen Caroline Affair: which permitted the popular press to congratulate itself on having frustrated the King’s desire for a divorce. The *Mysteries*’s evident stylistic debt to this blackmail literature is only more clearly attested by Reynolds’s incorporation of the Affair as a central plotline of the serial’s fourth series. Situating the *Mysteries* in this tradition of radical blackmail, it is possible to understand why Reynolds’s mid-nineteenth century serial might be more hopeful about the probability of true social change than is William Godwin’s late eighteenth-century novel.

Alexander Welsh, whose *George Eliot and Blackmail* (1985) is still one of the most important literary-critical texts to tackle this topic, describes blackmail’s emergence as a

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<sup>40</sup> Alexander Welsh, *George Eliot and Blackmail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 5.



narrative trope during ‘the second half of the nineteenth century’. ‘One can almost date the theme precisely by reference to the publication in 1860 of Antony Trollope’s *Castle Richmond*, in which Sir Thomas Fitzgerald is painfully paying off his wife’s first husband, and Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*, in which Walter Hartright employs blackmail to checkmate Sir Percival [Glyde] and Count Fosco’.<sup>41</sup> Angus McLaren, in *Sexual Blackmail* (2002), concurs in identifying blackmail as a concern of the late nineteenth century. Tracing the emergence of sexual blackmail in the developing homophobia of the eighteenth century, McLaren discerns an important shift in the nature of the crime during the mid-Victorian period. ‘Only in the mid-nineteenth century,’ he writes, ‘do we begin to find evidence of individuals being convicted of threatening to reveal *heterosexual* improprieties’ (emphasis mine).<sup>42</sup>

However, the most cursory examination of Reynolds’s text reveals that the *Mysteries* is ahead of its time in being absolutely riddled with blackmail plots. Richard Maxwell describes the London of the *Mysteries* as ‘a gigantic web of secrets’,<sup>43</sup> a phrase which is particularly apt in conjuring the complex relationships of power that these confidences enabled. Characters rely so heavily for their authority on their knowledge of one another’s hidden crimes, sexual misdemeanours, and fraudulent pasts that situations frequently arise in which two parties are both blackmailing one another, brandishing ever more damning secrets in a kind of mutually assured destruction. George Saintsbury, writing on the urban mysteries novel, captures the dynamic of the situation precisely: ‘When you have got an ivory casket supposed to be full of all sorts of compromising documents, somebody produces another,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Angus McLaren, *Sexual Blackmail: A Modern History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 32.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1992), p. 161.

exactly like it, but containing documents more compromising still.<sup>44</sup> Saintsbury's tone is mocking but in the context of the *Mysteries* and its extended exploration of the possibilities of mass market fiction, the blackmail trope manifests itself as another example of Reynolds's faith in the relationship between knowledge and power. The *Mysteries*'s blackmail plots suggest that the best way to get ahead in the new urban capitalist society of the nineteenth century is to know more than anybody else, about everybody else.

Blackmail's emergence as a literary device in the nineteenth century reflects its dependence on the increased social and spatial mobility by which Victorian society was characterised. The blackmailer depends on secrecy for success: in Alexander Welsh's words, he 'shares his victim's interest in concealment, without which he would gain nothing'.<sup>45</sup> That is, for the blackmailer to operate successfully, his victim must already have succeeded in concealing an unsavoury fact about their past. Lawrence Friedman's observation about social mobility seems pertinent here:

Identity is not a problem – or not much of a problem – in societies where people stay put. The great virtue of a traditional community is that no one ever has to ask, who am I?... The more mobile the society, the more one is forced to choose who one is, to discover and to create an identity.<sup>46</sup>

Friedman's notion of the created identity ties the question of blackmail into an increasingly noisy contemporary discourse about personal privacy, which can also be seen to leave its traces across Reynolds's work. The first series is demonstrably influenced by the Post Office Scandal of 1844: which responded to the discovery that the British government had been intercepting and reading the correspondence of Joseph Mazzini, an Italian revolutionary exiled from his country and living in London. David Vincent, writing on British governmental secrecy, describes these events as 'the major political scandal of the

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<sup>44</sup> George Saintsbury, *A History of the French Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1917), pp. II.299-300.

<sup>45</sup> Welsh, *George Eliot and Blackmail*, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> Friedman, 'Crimes of Mobility'.

year’;<sup>47</sup> so that it is not surprising to find that they made an impression on Reynolds, whose admiration for Mazzini was such that he actually gave the Italian’s name to one of his sons.<sup>48</sup> The first series of the *Mysteries* (which, we remember, began in September of that same year) sets several chapters in the ‘black chamber’ of the Post Office, where mysterious and sinister officials paw through the personal letters of the powerful and influential. Reynolds makes his sentiments on the proceedings typically clear.

And here we may observe, that if the system of opening letters at the General Post Office were merely adopted for the purpose of discovering criminals and preventing crime, we should still deprecate the proceeding, although our objections would lose much of their point in consideration of the motive; but when we find - and know it to be a fact - that the secrets of correspondence are flagrantly violated for political and other purposes, we raise our voice to denounce so atrocious a system, and to excite the indignation of the country against the men who can countenance or avail themselves of it! (*London* I.77)

This disgusted response aligns Reynolds with the broader popular reaction to Mazzini’s experience. Just as commentators in 2013 were outraged by Edward Snowden’s revelations about the activities of the NSA, so Vincent describes Mazzini’s ‘revelations’ as ‘provok[ing] a paroxysm of national anger’.<sup>49</sup> Specifically, the public were furious that the government’s quest for political secrets would inevitably entail their acquisition of private, personal information. ‘As one speaker in the Mazzini debate asserted, “it is a grave thing that the correspondence of the country should be tampered with; that the private family secrets should be known”’.<sup>50</sup> The response was so strong that it not only prompted the abolition of the

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<sup>47</sup> David Vincent, *The Culture of Secrecy: Britain, 1832-1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> The (unfortunate) child’s full name was Kossuth Mazzini Reynolds (Anne Humpherys and Louis James, ‘Introduction’, in *G.W.M. Reynolds: Nineteenth Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*, ed. by Anne Humpherys and Louis James [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008], pp. 1-15 [p. 3].)

<sup>49</sup> Vincent, *The Culture of Secrecy: Britain, 1832-1998*, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Secret Department of the Post Office, but effectively put paid to any kind of domestic espionage for the next ‘quarter of a century’.<sup>51</sup>

The Post Office Scandal is not the only piece of evidence for the mid-Victorian concern with personal privacy. In 1843, the year before the first instalment of Reynolds’s serial appeared, Parliament passed a Libel Act. This had been prompted primarily by the demands of the newspaper industry: proprietors wanted greater clarity about what they could and could not print about individuals’ private lives. But the Select Committee report that informed the Act is also interesting for the larger questions it addresses: about the right to a private life, or a private history; about how, whether and when it is possible to move on from the past.

In general, as seems to fit with the events of the following year, the report places a high value on personal privacy; to the extent of establishing a definition of ‘libel’ that has more to do with public interest (is it justifiable to publish this information?) than with truth. Participants in the hearings argue repeatedly that people ought to be given the chance to move on and away from their mistakes; making their point through a series of vignettes which can read like sensation novels in miniature. For example, this from Lord Abinger:

Put the case of a Father of a family, whose Daughter in early Life may have been guilty of some Indiscretion; afterwards she is married, and has a Family, and is respected in the World, when some ill-natured Fellow, who takes offence at something that she or her Husband has done, thinks it fit to rake up an Event that happened Thirty or Forty Years ago, and bring it before the Public... to gratify his own Malice.<sup>52</sup>

Or this, from Lord Lyndhurst:

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> House of Lords, *Report of the Select Committee of the House of Lords Appointed to Consider the Law of Defamation and Libel*, (London: UK Parliament, 1843), p. 9.

I will suppose the case of a Woman who, in early Life, when a Girl of 16 or 17, in Cornwall, had a Bastard Child; she is then reclaimed, and becomes a respectable Person; moves to another part of the Country, and when she is the Mother of a Family, to make the Case stronger, some Man with whom she has refused to lie shall say, "If you do not, I will publish your Shame, by letting that be known which happened in Cornwall;" and then he publishes in Northumberland that she once had a bastard Child."<sup>53</sup>

In both cases, the peers who postulate these scenarios suggest not only that the woman should be able to keep her secret, but that she should further be able to seek redress against the man who seeks to expose it. Such a point of view is striking because it contradicts so starkly the familiar literary narrative of the fallen woman. In those novels which concern a heroine guilty of this kind of sexual indiscretion, the pattern tends with a weary inevitability towards the eventual exposure of their sin.<sup>54</sup> That the Committee should defend the right of such women to move on from their youthful mistakes seems to demonstrate an unexpected liberality: which would appear by consequence to reveal these novels as more morally condemnatory than the political climate in which they appeared.

However, Angus McLaren suggests a hidden purpose to these sympathetic stories. Writing in *Sexual Blackmail*, he also remarks on the 'curious' nature of the Libel Act Report. But he suggests that this curiosity extends beyond the generosity it seems to show: not only is it unusual to find these 'elite men' so 'overly anxious about the wellbeing of poor, provincial, women', but the scenarios that the Committee describes do not reflect the reality of blackmail at this period. In fact, 'almost every reported blackmail case involved a *male* victim'. The conclusion is inescapable: '[t]hese politicians were not so much responding to the plight of their female constituents' as they were preparing a defence for the concealment of their own

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853), Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) provide three obvious examples of this trend; but there are innumerable others that might also be named.

misdemeanours.<sup>55</sup> If the Act was crafted on the fictitious ideal of protecting vulnerable women from what amounted to rape, it acted in fact to protect the wealthy against the exposure of their guilt. This is a familiar tale. Parliament justified the Anatomy Act as beneficial to the poor and portrayed the Obscene Publications Act as a necessary defence of a vulnerable working-class readership. In both cases, as Chapters 3 and 2 of this thesis have argued, the legislation actually helped to enforce existing social inequalities.

In fact, McLaren suggests that blackmail was more commonly practised *on* rather than *by* those in positions of social power. ‘Blackmail accounts raised the spectre of the young, the female and the poor deviously plundering older, wealthy males’.<sup>56</sup> This makes a great deal of sense, given that blackmail is effectively the conversion of information into financial, political or personal advantage. But McLaren’s construction also suggests how blackmail might be something of which Reynolds would approve, if we consider it as a strategy by which the working class individual might regain a degree of control over her own situation. This suggestion is carried through in the story with which this chapter began. The fact that Lydia gains ascendancy over her mistress by blackmailing her with the knowledge of her past points to Reynolds’s perception of this crime as a potentially radical act, aligning blackmail with the *Mysteries*’ overall narrative argument that literacy (and by extension, cultural knowledge) was the most important tool by which the working-class could hope to ameliorate their own situation.

Reynolds’s invocation of blackmail as a justifiable strategy in the battle for social justice places his serial in a radical tradition which gained considerable momentum during the early part of the nineteenth century. Over the Georgian and Regency periods, the practice of

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<sup>55</sup> McLaren, *Sexual Blackmail: A Modern History*, p. 36.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

blackmail became ‘a tacitly accepted and widely practised political mode’.<sup>57</sup> Iain McCalman and Rohan McWilliam, both historians of early nineteenth century popular politics, concur in emphasising the extent to which the period’s radical pressmen relied on blackmail as a political strategy. ‘Populist literature thrived on the exposure of scandal amongst the upper classes’;<sup>58</sup> ‘[w]here politics was still conducted on an intimate personal scale, scandal gave the powerless... a purchase with which to “coerce” their enemies and enrich themselves’.<sup>59</sup> Printers like George Cannon and Francis Place would publish the scandalous memoirs of women who had been mistresses at court; or, on occasion, would withhold those memoirs in exchange for a considerable sum.

In and of itself, this is clearly a politically levelling act. Paying radical publishers to keep their embarrassing secrets, the Georgian aristocracy transferred wealth from those who had a great deal of it to those in financial need (and who would, at least in theory, use this money to finance more direct political action). However, the significance of this practice of radical blackmail extended beyond its use as a fundraising technique. As Anna Clark observes, ‘during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, scandals about a monarch’s personal life were neither anachronistic nor trivial; rather, they turned on the relation of virtue to power.’<sup>60</sup> The importance of blackmail as a strategy by which ‘the powerless’ could exercise coercion over the rich points to the wider political implications of what was on one level a straightforward enjoyment of salacious gossip. As McWilliam argues, scandal memoirs laced with aristocratic corruption ‘served to emphasise the basic goodness of the people’<sup>61</sup> and therefore to challenge the moral authority of the ruling class.

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<sup>57</sup> Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 41.

<sup>58</sup> Rohan McWilliam, *Popular Politics in Nineteenth Century England* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 57.

<sup>59</sup> McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840*, p. 41.

<sup>60</sup> Anna Clark, ‘Queen Caroline and the Sexual Politics of Popular Culture in London, 1820’, *Representations*, 31 (1990), 47-68 (p. 47).

<sup>61</sup> McWilliam, *Popular Politics in Nineteenth Century England*, p. 57.

McWilliam associates this contested aristocratic authority with a belief in the ancient commonwealth, which attributed the injustice of contemporary social hierarchies to the historic theft of common land supposedly enacted by William the Conqueror.<sup>62</sup> Blackmail stories which focused on the improprieties of the rich acted as a reminder that the aristocracy was working on borrowed authority, disputing the right by which they held their social position. Why should the virtuous be governed by the bad?

Given Reynolds's emphasis throughout his serial on the absolute corruption of the English aristocracy, it seems eminently reasonable to situate *The Mysteries of London* within this radical literary tradition. Indeed, McWilliam himself makes this connection, describing Reynolds's narrative practice as that of 'a literary blackmailer exposing the private vices of the aristocracy to public view'.<sup>63</sup> The deviant practices in which the fictional aristocrats of Reynolds's serial engage act in the same way as the real-life scandal memoir, contributing to an image of the aristocracy as fundamentally corrupt. This critique on Reynolds's part is amplified by his willingness to invoke historical examples in his work. For example, the first series of the *Mysteries* is enlivened by the repulsive, lascivious figure of the Marquis of Holmesford: a rapacious and elderly aristocrat whose pornographically decorated apartments are home to his personal harem of women from around the world (*London* II.96-100). Holmesford is a (very) thinly veiled depiction of the real-life Marquis of Hertford, who had died in 1842;<sup>64</sup> so that Reynolds's depiction of his corruption gains additional force, not just a type but a specific example of the corruptions of the upper class.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>63</sup> Rohan McWilliam, 'The Mysteries of G.W.M. Reynolds: Radicalism and Melodrama in Victorian Britain', in *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J.F.C. Harrison*, ed. by Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), pp. 182-98 (p. 183).

<sup>64</sup> Mentioning Hertford by name in the *Mysteries*' second series, Reynolds adds a footnote to the following effect: 'Represented as the Marquis of Holmesford in the First Series of "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON"' (*London* III.220).



The political commentary enacted in Reynolds's depiction of Holmesford is made still more explicit in the third and fourth series of the *Mysteries*, which place the Prince Regent (by the fourth series, King George IV) in a central role. The Prince exemplifies the worst tendencies of the *Mysteries*' corrupt aristocracy. Amongst other transgressions, he attempts to seduce a wife while under her husband's roof (and then later tries to rape her after she resists his advances) (*Court* I.139-41, II.271-74); determinedly pursues Rose Foster, an extremely reluctant and vulnerable young orphan, and has her adoptive father deported when he attempts to intervene (*Court* I.390-94); frequents brothels; drools over dancing girls at a show in his private rooms (*Court* I.328-29); and disports with a different married woman while his manservant watches them through a crack in the door (*Court* I.56-59).

This behaviour is only thinly fictionalised. The 'personal scandals, extravagances, vices and duplicities' of George IV and his Court played an important role in the development both of the early nineteenth-century blackmail industry, and in the political critique that it enabled.<sup>65</sup> Governed by a ruler who barely attempted to restrain his behaviour within conventionally acceptable bounds, it was easy for the period's popular press to criticise the aristocracy as irredeemably corrupt. Invoking the Prince in his serial, Reynolds deliberately situates his work in this tradition and implicitly associates it with the radical faith in the capacity of literature to effect political change.

This belief is further supported by the *Mysteries*' invocation of one particular historical scandal concerning the Prince, into which the popular press had made a decisive intervention: the 1820 Queen Caroline Affair. In articles of 1982 and 1990, Thomas Laqueur and Anna Clark describe how the apparently personal matter of a Royal divorce became the

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<sup>65</sup> McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840*, p. 39.

political sensation of the day.<sup>66</sup> In brief: before becoming Regent, in 1795, George IV had been persuaded by Parliament to marry the German Princess Caroline of Brunswick in exchange for their agreement to pay off his debts. When Caroline arrived in the country, she was met with a hostile reception by her husband's many mistresses at court; and by the Prince himself, who immediately rejected his new bride as irretrievably coarse. Their wedding night was an unmitigated disaster and – after Caroline had given birth to a daughter, their only child – the pair soon separated.<sup>67</sup> The Prince remained in England and Caroline removed with a small household to the Continent. However, when the mad King died and George ascended the throne, Caroline declared her intention to return. Unwilling to re-engage in a marriage he disliked, George sought a divorce – on the grounds of his wife's adultery.

It was this last element of the scandal that seems to have underpinned the response of the popular press to George's bid for marital freedom. Everybody knew that the King had multiple mistresses (one of whom it was even rumoured that he had married in secret before ever meeting Caroline).<sup>68</sup> As such, George's attempt to place responsibility for the separation on the Queen – whom he accused of having an affair with her household steward – was perceived as an egregious personal slight; a manifestation in miniature of the grand tyranny of the aristocracy. Lauding Caroline as (an unlikely) melodramatic heroine, condemned by a tyrant to hide his own moral corruption, radical pressmen drew on the symbolic vocabulary of popular culture to make a wider political point. As Clark, Laqueur and McWilliam all recount, there was an enormous public response to Caroline's plight, a flood of leaflets and pamphlets defending her cause, and huge pressure placed on Parliament not to grant the

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<sup>66</sup> Clark, 'Queen Caroline and the Sexual Politics of Popular Culture in London, 1820'; Thomas W. Laqueur, 'The Queen Caroline Affair: Politics as Art in the Reign of George IV', *The Journal of Modern History*, 54 (1982), 417-66.

<sup>67</sup> Reynolds includes a graphic account of the marriage night in series 3 of the *Mysteries*, depicting the Prince passing out drunk in the arms of his concerned new wife. When he eventually revives he finds himself alone in bed, covered in his own vomit (*Court* II.226-29).

<sup>68</sup> Much of the plot of the *Mysteries'* third series is centred around this rumour.

divorce. Under immense political duress, the Prince was forced to abandon his petition: a victory for 'the whole nation against the corrupt elite'.<sup>69</sup>

Reynolds refers to the Queen Caroline affair in the third series of the *Mysteries*, when he introduces the Princess as she arrives to marry her betrothed. As befits Caroline's subsequent status as a radical heroine, Reynolds is uniformly sympathetic in his portrayal; emphasising her innocence and her natural antipathy to the formal artificiality of the Court. "I am expected to throw off my natural skin and assume an artificial one altogether?" she asks (*Court* II.215) Lamenting the aristocracy's hostility toward the new Queen, Reynolds's narrator reminds his reader that:

the millions adopted a far different line of conduct when the period arrived for pronouncing an opinion between the Prince and the Princess;—and on *that* occasion, as on *all others*, did the honest, intelligent, and generous hearted working classes of these islands adopt the cause of the weak against the strong—of the oppressed against the oppressor—of right against wrong—and of justice against tyranny! (*Court* II.225)

These oppositions echo precisely the terms in which the scandal had been voiced by contemporary radical propaganda. Like the propagandists, Reynolds establishes Caroline as a figurehead for the oppressed, the exploited, or the working class. The fourth series foregrounds her story more clearly still, recounting the events leading up to the Queen Caroline Affair; as a buxom group of sisters, trained in espionage by the Prince and their wicked mother, infiltrate Caroline's household in order to plot against her reputation. Again, the portrayal of Caroline is extremely sympathetic throughout.

Reynolds's invocation of the Queen Caroline Affair in *The Mysteries of London* can be seen as a deliberate allusion to the radical tradition in which he is situating his work. In so

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<sup>69</sup> McWilliam, *Popular Politics in Nineteenth Century England*, p. 9. This triumph was ultimately less complete than such a description perhaps suggests. Caroline was never reinstated as Queen and she died of a stomach complaint the following year. Nevertheless, the perception of the Affair as a victory for the popular press, and its use as an example of the scale of the influence that this popular press might hope to exert on society, still held weight.

doing, he also presents the possibility of a political justification for the blackmailers whose manipulations drive the serial's plots. This does not mean that the *Mysteries*' blackmailers are uniformly sympathetic. Blackmail is so prevalent as a narrative device within the *Mysteries* that the motivations of those practising it are almost necessarily mixed: nearly everybody, heroes and villains alike, has recourse to strategies on the blackmail spectrum at some point in their story. But I would argue that in the *Mysteries*, blackmail is at least presented as a moral grey area. As the next two sections of this chapter will go on to explore, this pragmatic attitude on Reynolds's part not only offers him a solution which Godwin, in *Caleb Williams*, struggles to find; but also distinguishes *The Mysteries of London* from much of the more canonical crime literature of the period. Rather than endorsing blackmail as a radical strategy, detective and sensation literature more frequently condemned it as a method of sexual exploitation: condemning it on the same lines as the Libel Act Committee had done.

### 4.3 Sexual blackmail and substituted servants: *Bleak House*

Reviewing *Bleak House* in 1853, George Brimley expressed a strident sense of disappointment in Dickens's work. He suggested that Dickens's popular success had inured him to the wisdom of more discerning critics, fatally encouraging him to pander to the lowest common denominator. He supported his argument with the claim that that this most recent effort, *Bleak House*, was the feeblest that had so far fallen from the novelist's pen. In particular, Brimley lamented the novel's 'absolute want of construction', a structural flaw which prompted him (in what was evidently intended as the most damning criticism of all) to describe Dickens's work as 'disagreeably reminiscent of that vilest of modern books, Reynolds's *Mysteries of London*'.<sup>70</sup>

Although I would dispute Brimley's characterisation of Reynolds's work, I would certainly agree with him in finding considerable similarities between Dickens's 1852-53 novel and Reynolds's 1844-56 penny serial. Beyond the obvious coincidence of dates, the two works share significant thematic concerns. Like Reynolds's serial, Dickens's novel is preoccupied with the relationship between the wealthy and the working class; and, like the *Mysteries*, *Bleak House* seems to suggest a fundamental failure of duty on the part of the rich. The novel's numerous stories of neglectful parents (perhaps most notably Mrs Jellyby, whose numerous children must tumble through life haphazardly without the hope of a guiding hand) can be readily construed as providing an analogy for the wider social carelessness that the novel indicts.

Like the *Mysteries*, also, *Bleak House* is centrally concerned with literacy. Many of the novel's characters are depicted as being unable to, or as learning to read. Esther teaches Charlie her letters; the illiterate Krook studies carefully in order to be able to spell the name

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<sup>70</sup> George Brimley, 'Dickens's *Bleak House*', *The Spectator* 26 (1853), 923-24 (p. 923).

‘Jarndyce’; and even Jo, who cannot read, recognises the importance of the written word in his dying demand that Mr Snagsby inscribe his apologia in letters ‘uncommon precious large’.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce, the Chancery case whose contaminating fog envelops almost every character in the novel, turns on the interpretation of a legal document; and in the character of Inspector Bucket Dickens provides one of the English novel’s earliest police-detectives.

But if Dickens’s work shares thematic concerns with Reynolds, I would argue that their political perspectives are importantly distinct. Where Reynolds can be placed in a tradition of radical blackmail that sought to expose the corruptions of the aristocracy as a justification for disputing their rule, Dickens’s point of view seems to me to be more closely aligned with that of Eugene Sue’s *Mystères de Paris* (1842-43). Where Reynolds seeks both to educate and to inspire his working-class readers, Dickens like Sue is more urgently concerned to enlighten the wealthy about the plight of the poor. Unlike *The Mysteries of London*, *Bleak House* is targeted rather at the middle than the working class.

This difference makes itself felt in the relative passivity of *Bleak House*’s working class characters. In one memorable scene, the illiterate crossing-sweeper Jo stares uncomprehendingly up at the dome of St Paul’s:

Jo moves on, through the long vacation, down to Blackfriars Bridge, where he finds a baking stony corner wherein to settle to his repast.

And there he sits, munching and gnawing, and looking up at the great cross on the summit of St. Paul's Cathedral, glittering above a red-and-violet-tinted cloud of smoke. From the boy's face one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great, confused city — so golden, so high up, so far out of his reach. There he sits, the sun going down, the river running fast, the crowd flowing by him in two streams — everything

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<sup>71</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 675. Further references will be to this edition and will be given in the text. Jo’s emphasis on the *size* of the letters recalls the print-shop keepers I discuss in Chapter 1, assiduously assuring an amused Wilkie Collins that their penny journals will provide him with ‘a lot of print for the money’.

moving on to some purpose and to one end — until he is stirred up and told to "move on" too. (290)

It is a poignant moment, but a problematic one: Jo's ignorance is so total that he almost loses his humanity. In Rachel Teukolsky's words, 'Jo... is pure object'.<sup>72</sup> This helplessness (Jo is just a body to be 'moved along') contrasts markedly with the *Mysteries*' (often) more wicked but (also) more dynamic, self-actualising working class. Dickens decries the overbearing charity of Mrs Pardiggle, which operates with no regard for the humanity of those unfortunates on whom she imposes her aid; and he *talks* about the importance of 'what the poor are to the poor' (137); but ultimately the novel's hopes for broader social justice seem to depend on the actions of the middle or upper classes: the 'lords and gentlemen... Reverends and Wrong Reverends... men and women' whom the narrator apostrophises at the moment of Jo's death. (677)

This inertia on the part of those classes conventionally classified as vulnerable (the same social groups who made up the bulk of the *Mysteries*' readership) extends to the blackmail story at the heart of *Bleak House*'s plot. Lady Dedlock, who like Adeline hopes to conceal the birth and death of her illegitimate child, is preyed upon by the sinister Mr Tulkinghorn, a blackmailer whose unalloyed maleficence aligns him not with the radical extortioners of Reynolds's serial but with the sexually exploitative villains of the Libel Act's vignettes.

In theory, Tulkinghorn's social position might seem to position him as a possible agent of social subversion. Confronting Lady Dedlock at her home in Chesney Wold, he repeatedly reiterates that his 'sole consideration' is 'Sir Leicester's feelings and honour, and the family reputation' (609-10). This carefully stated deference acts as a reminder that

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<sup>72</sup> Rachel Teukolsky, 'Pictures in Bleak Houses: Slavery and the Aesthetics of Transatlantic Reform', *English Literary History*, 76 (2009), 491-522 (p. 503).

Tulkinghorn, at least nominally, is the Dedlocks' employee. In exerting his power over his master's wife, therefore, it might be possible to see Tulkinghorn as acting in concert with the radical blackmailers of the 1820s; or their representative, Lydia Hutchinson. But Dickens undermines the suggestion: effectively disputing the claim that the blackmailing scandal stories of the popular press were primarily designed for political impact. Instead, he implies that the behaviour figured by Reynolds as a legitimate strategy to re-establish the moral authority of the working class might be more accurately construed as a prurient sexual interest in aristocratic private lives.

In *Supposing Bleak House* (2011), John Jordan suggests that Tulkinghorn's blackmail is primarily motivated by his own perverted desire:

He does not really want to expose Lady Dedlock's secret... What he wants is to possess Lady Dedlock, to add her to his store of sweet, blushing secrets and bring her up periodically to sip and torture with vampirish delight... Tulkinghorn is a sadist who takes erotic pleasure in manipulating women and keeping them under his control.<sup>73</sup>

This portrait is convincing. In the passage to which Jordan alludes, Dickens describes Tulkinghorn sitting in his rooms, drinking old port and 'mellow[ing] as it were in secrecy' as he silently contemplates 'all the mysteries he knows' (323). When Tulkinghorn's confrontation with Lady Dedlock is immediately followed by another chapter in which he returns to his wine, the juxtaposition does indeed seem to establish a relationship between this silent, sensuous indulgence and the exercise of power. Skewering Lady Dedlock like a butterfly on the end of his pin, Tulkinghorn relishes the opportunity to watch her squirm. It is an unpleasant picture which challenges the more exuberant depiction of blackmail in Reynolds's work, disputing its suitability as a strategy by which the working class might hope to reappropriate cultural power.

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<sup>73</sup> John Jordan, *Supposing Bleak House* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 59.



Tulkinghorn finds a suggestive (and, I think, politically enlightening) parallel in another fictional blackmailer: Charles Augustus Milverton. Milverton is the eponymous villain of a Sherlock Holmes short story of 1904, described by Holmes as ‘the worst man in London’ and compared by him to the snakes in the reptile house at London Zoo: ‘slithery, gliding, venomous creatures, with their deadly eyes and wicked, flattened faces’.<sup>74</sup> Like Tulkinghorn, Milverton preys on aristocratic women: Watson encounters him when Holmes is commissioned by an anonymous, wealthy client to negotiate for the return of certain ‘imprudent letters’.<sup>75</sup> Like Tulkinghorn, too, it is possible to ascribe to Milverton an uncomfortable, pseudo-sexual pleasure from the power he enjoys over the women whose secrets he possesses.<sup>76</sup> Conan Doyle is unrestrained in his criticism of this blackmailer’s practice. Holmes’ repugnance for Milverton is such that when he and Watson bear witness to the man’s murder – he is shot by another of his victims – he refuses to aid the police in her arrest. ‘My sympathies are with the criminals rather than with the victim, and I will not handle this case’, he tells Lestrade.<sup>77</sup>

As blackmailers, both Milverton and Tulkinghorn bear a close resemblance to the fictitious extortioners dramatized in the vignettes of the Libel Act Committee report, (as opposed to the real-life examples McLaren reports). I would argue that in both cases this characterisation of the blackmailer is intended – like the Libel Act – to protect those in positions of power through impugning the blackmailer’s motives. By indicting blackmail as a prurient behaviour founded in sexual deviance, Dickens and Conan Doyle disable its potential as a political weapon by indicting its practitioners before they begin. Instead of

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<sup>74</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton’, in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, ed. by Kyle Freeman (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003), pp. 113-25 (p. 113).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>76</sup> Stephen Moffat and Mark Gatiss highlighted this aspect of Milverton’s personality in writing Charles Augustus Magnussen, a variant on the character who appeared in the 2014 series of *Sherlock*. In a pre-credits scene, Magnussen, just as reptilian as his fictional forebear, *licks* the face of Lindsay Duncan’s horrified Lady Elizabeth Smallwood.

<sup>77</sup> Conan Doyle, ‘The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton’, p. 125.

crusaders for social justice, the radical blackmailers of the early nineteenth century are instead characterised as lascivious voyeurs, deriving a nasty pleasure from the consciousness of their own power.

This alternative perspective on the socially crusading blackmailer makes sense because it harmonises with the likely concerns of the middle-class readers that Dickens shared with Conan Doyle. Rather than seeking to expose aristocratic corruption, as the radicals of the early nineteenth century had done, the middle-class readers of the later nineteenth century were expected to be more concerned about the possibility of their own exposure to the monitory lower-class gaze. Reynolds's blackmailers are figures for his readers; Dickens's and Conan Doyle's are images of their likely critics, made monstrous with the dual effect of disputing their moral authority (from what position do they judge?) and urging the reader into proper moral submission (any 'bad' behaviour threatens to put the middle-class citizen in the hands of these unscrupulous rogues).

That said, Reynolds does include in his work a character whose conduct bears some relation to Tulkinghorn's. Reginald Tracy, who can be encountered in Chapter 2 of this thesis being bamboozled by Cecilia Harborough's seductive performances, seems to acquire a taste for sordid secrecy as a result of this illicit liaison. Specifically, he prefigures Tulkinghorn's behaviour in the eagerness with which he grasps at the sexual secrets of Ellen Monroe, a young woman of his acquaintance who (like both Adeline and Lady Dedlock) is concealing the existence of an illegitimate child. Discovering Ellen's situation by chance as he visits her home (an unlucky nursemaid brings the child to see its mother, thinking the room is empty when Tracy is in fact still there), Tracy develops an erotic obsession whose foundation is his possession of this secret knowledge. "I have discovered her secret!" said the rector triumphantly to himself, as he rose and paced the apartment, mad passions raging in his breast; "and that discovery shall make her mine" (*London* II.24). Significantly, Tracy enjoys

the idea of the contrast between Ellen's innocent exterior and the fact of her sin: relishing the fact that she is 'so coy, so difficult to win... in spite of that one fault which accident betrayed to me' (II.26).

Tracy's fixation on Ellen's secret shame, and his pleasure at the thought of his own position of privileged knowledge, implicates him in the same erotics of interpretation by which Reynolds characterises wealthy readers throughout his text. Like the forgers' customers, Mr Fossilton (with his well-wrapped mummy) and Sir Brinksby Bull (with his painting that nobody can see), we might see Tracy as a hermeneutic reader: taking pleasure in his access to an item of knowledge that is not in common circulation. Although he is prepared to threaten Ellen with exposure in the hope of manipulating her into bed, he would not really want to make her child's existence generally known. To do so would be to do away with the intimacy he believes to be imparted by the secret the two of them share. In this, there is an important contrast between his behaviour and that by which Lydia exerts her authority over Adeline in her quest for revenge. Lydia 'enjoys' her possession of Adeline's secret only insofar as it helps her to gain her end: she does not take any particular pleasure in a memory which is, of course, also intimately bound up with the history of her own disgrace. This association is important. Where Tracy effectively appropriates knowledge with which he properly ought to have nothing to do, the secret Lydia wields is partly her own.

What I would suggest, then, is that Reynolds's inclusion in his work of men like Tracy as a *contrast* to the more justifiable behaviour of the blackmailing working class effectively serves to anticipate the criticism Dickens would level in his portrayal of Tulkinghorn. Reynolds differentiates between two kinds of blackmailer: one whose action is retaliatory, and socially justified; and another who is motivated by more purely selfish concerns. Inevitably, this second group is comprised exclusively of those already in positions

of power, who do not need to aggravate their authority through the exploitation of others' shame. Blackmail is properly a strategy for social levelling, not for personal gratification.

The consequences of Reynolds's more open-minded approach can be seen in the markedly different responses of the two heroines, Ellen Monroe and Lady Dedlock, to the sexualised blackmail that Tracy and Tulkinghorn subject them. Ellen employs retaliatory blackmail to regain the control she has lost. Embarrassed and disgusted by Tracy's sexual attentions, she ultimately succeeds in luring the lascivious rector to a rendezvous at a costumed ball: not a very suitable venue for a vicar who has vowed to be chaste. Seizing her opportunity, she threatens the horrified Tracy with exposure; thus creating one of the blackmail stalemates Saintsbury describes, albeit one in which Ellen has clear control.

“For heaven's sake, do not expose me, Miss Monroe!” murmured Reginald, now writhing in agony at the turn which the matter had taken. “Let me depart—and forget that I ever dared to address you rudely.”

“Yes—go,” said Ellen: “you are punished sufficiently. You possess the secret of my frailty—I possess the secret of your hypocrisy: beware the use you make of your knowledge of me, lest I retaliate by exposing you.” (*London* II.36)

Costuming herself in order to take back control of her image, Ellen takes her place amongst the ranks of the dynamic, performing women I described in more detail in Chapter 2. Her reappropriation of her own public image situates her as one of the confident cultural readers that Reynolds's serial hopes to create.

This ability to redress the balance of power, regaining some measure of control over her public image by taking Tracy's own reputation into her hands, positions Ellen in stark contrast to Dickens's blackmail victim, Lady Dedlock. Lady Dedlock's emotional strength is evident, and admirable, throughout the novel in which she appears. But she proves ultimately helpless in the face of Tulkinghorn's implacable cruelty. Finally driven from her home in fear, she embarks on a flight that leaves her dead at the burial place of the man who fathered

her child. Decidedly sympathetic, she nonetheless serves to corroborate Susan Yates's disparaging assessment of the nineteenth-century heroine:

In the nineteenth-century novel... strong, dynamic female protagonists... are almost unthinkable. Far from taking her life into her own hands, the nineteenth-century female protagonist meekly endures her fate.<sup>78</sup>

In the case of Lady Dedlock, this ineptitude seems to me to be a manifestation of (in James Buzard's words) 'the vulnerability that goes with possession of a socially recognised identity.'<sup>79</sup> Writing on the society of *Bleak House*, Buzard suggests that the benefits afforded by full cultural participation come at some cost. 'Construed as the ability to read a system of signs, membership of a culture also means *being* a readable sign within that system... [there is a] reciprocal fit between cultural literacy and legibility.'<sup>80</sup> The privilege that keeps Lady Dedlock in isolated grandeur at Chesney Wold also makes her an object for others' cultural consumption: something that is figured in her bathetic appearance amongst the 'Galaxy of British Beauties' with which Mr Weevle (Tony Jobling) adorns his walls (470). Separated from her person, Lady Dedlock's circulating image exposes her to curious and sometimes unfriendly eyes.

There is a further parallel here with the victims of Milverton's blackmail. After Holmes and Watson witness Milverton's death at the hands of his fair assassin, Holmes takes Watson to a Regent Street 'shop window[,] filled with photographs of the celebrities and beauties of the day',<sup>81</sup> and points to the culprit's image behind the glass. They do not use their knowledge to her disadvantage; but the moment does contribute to a sense that where Reynolds's women are able to manipulate the symbolic vocabulary of their own

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<sup>78</sup> Susan Yates, *Maid and Mistress: Feminine Solidarity and Class Difference in Five Nineteenth-Century French Texts* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), p. 169.

<sup>79</sup> James Buzard, 'Anywhere's Nowhere: Bleak House as Metropolitan Autoethnography', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 12 (1999), 7-39 (p. 33).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton', p. 125.

representation to their best advantage, both Conan Doyle's and Dickens's heroines are made vulnerable by their status as cultural signs. Where Reynolds's serial presents a strategy by which social inequalities might be redressed, Dickens's work therefore acts more conservatively in reinforcing (while it, perhaps, laments) existing hierarchies of gender and class.

This same tendency can be observed in the detective story that provides another important element of *Bleak House*'s plot, developing after Tulkinghorn is found murdered in his rooms. On the surface, Dickens's detective Inspector Bucket presents himself as a possible working-class reader. In the early Victorian period, as Heather Worthington observes, 'from the public's perspective, the police were recruited from the lower classes in order to police their peers'.<sup>82</sup> Bucket, moving confidently through Tom-all-Alone's, is in both his professional and his proper milieu – evoking the policeman Morris Benstead, encountered in the opening chapter of this thesis introducing Richard Markham to the performing beggars of the Covent Garden slums. Like Bucket, Benstead becomes embroiled during the course of Reynolds's serial in a criminal case which involves those above him in the social scale. But there is an important difference in the crimes that they solve. In a dramatic trial scene, Benstead appears at the last moment in court to exonerate the working-class Katherine Wilmot from a charge of having murdered the housekeeper for whom she works. Producing a decisive piece of evidence just in time, Benstead is able to indict in Katherine's stead her employer Reginald Tracy, he of the lascivious secrets discussed above (*London* II.54-58). Policing those above him in the social scale, Benstead therefore demonstrates the potential of the police detective to operate as a socially subversive figure.

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<sup>82</sup> Heather Worthington, *The Rise of the Detective in Early Nineteenth Century Popular Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 20.

In contrast, Bucket's case concludes with the indictment of a member of the working class, as Lady Dedlock's French maid Hortense is revealed as the person responsible for Tulkinghorn's death. Hortense's story provides a provocative parallel to Lydia Hutchinson's. Like Lydia, she is a servant rejected by her mistress; in this case, not because of any particular guilty association, but merely because she has been supplanted by Rosa, a more appealing face. As is the case with Adeline's rejection of Lydia, Lady Dedlock's ready discarding of Hortense seems to dismiss her servant as something less than human. Hortense's personal feelings are not considered; as a member of the working class, she is reduced to her object value. It is not surprising, then, that like Lydia, Hortense should seek revenge. But the inflection of Dickens's story is quite different from Reynolds's. Hortense's bid to incriminate her mistress does not succeed, and she ends up murdering Tulkinghorn largely out of frustration when he too insists on dismissing her with no consideration for her difficulties.<sup>83</sup>

Whilst Tulkinghorn is an abhorrent character, Dickens's decision to make Hortense responsible for his murder is ideologically troubling. Aesthetically, it has the effect of creating considerable suspense: the reader is led to believe that Lady Dedlock herself has killed the man who persecuted her. The eventual revelation of Hortense as the culprit creates a neat moment of surprise. But in making the servant responsible for what might easily be the mistress's crime, it is possible to see *Bleak House* as enacting on a narrative level the same shift in responsibility for which Reynolds indicts Victorian society at large. That is, choosing Hortense as his murderess, Dickens displaces aristocratic guilt on to the working class – and then disposes of Hortense out of the serial, reducing her to a convenient plot device. Her presence in the novel allows Dickens to flirt with the sensational possibility that Lady Dedlock may be a killer, without having to follow through.

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<sup>83</sup> Chapter 42 of Dickens's work recounts this confrontation between Tulkinghorn and Hortense.

There are indisputable similarities between Dickens's novel, *Bleak House*, and its contemporary, *The Mysteries of London*. But ultimately, it seems to me that Dickens's work is significantly less bold than Reynolds's disreputable serial. Where Reynolds repeatedly models for his readers the ways in which the socially marginalised might hope to amend their position, Dickens rather laments the state of existing affairs whilst implying that any real hope for change must lie in the hands of the rich.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, his reluctance to indict his heroine Lady Dedlock, and his substitution of a conveniently guilty servant in her stead, makes him complicit in the same social practices which Reynolds's serial so vehemently condemns.

The final section of this chapter explores another canonical work of crime fiction from the nineteenth century, published only a decade after *Bleak House*. As with Dickens's novel, *Lady Audley's Secret* can be seen to deploy many of the same tropes and to tackle similar topics to Reynolds's serial; but, also like Dickens's work, Braddon's novel proves stubbornly unable (or unwilling) to fully accept the radical possibilities with which it toys.

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<sup>84</sup> As Simon Joyce opines, 'If the challenge that Dickens and other novelists of the period picked up... was to describe the problem of poverty, then *Bleak House* was a success. Solutions, however, were beyond the limits of fiction.' (Simon Joyce, *Capital Offenses: Geographies of Class and Crime in Victorian London* [Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2003], p. 144.)



#### 4.4 Amateur agents of justice: *Lady Audley's Secret*

It is easy to see that the sensation literature of the 1860s and 70s owes a debt to the penny fiction of the previous decades. Like penny fiction, sensation literature engages with the social changes that marked the nineteenth century: particularly, the increased personal anonymity brought about by urbanisation and greater geographical mobility. But the two genres have more in common than merely a thematic concern. Sensation literature also echoes its penny predecessor in many of its central structural and plot devices. As in the mass-market fiction of the 1840s, the secrets revealed in this literature often take physical form: although (as recognised by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, who wrote both penny serials and three-decker sensation fiction) **this form is much less likely to be that of a corpse.**<sup>85</sup> Family romance plots make for frequent appearances from long-lost siblings, parents or heirs; or alternatively the documents that often came to stand in for, or at minimum contributed to the formation of, identity in an industrial society turn up unexpectedly long after they are thought destroyed. That said, Braddon's own *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) provides its reader with a very Reynoldsian series of resurrected bodies: not only George Talboys (who surprises his wife by returning from Australia, and then surprises everybody by getting out of that well) but Lucy Audley herself (who is, of course, a kind of resurrection of the 'dead' Helen Talboys) and even Robert Audley, who terrifies Lucy with his unlooked-for return after she has thought him dead in a fire at the inn.

However, existing critical commentary on the relationship between penny fiction and sensation literature has devoted relatively little attention to what penny literature actually meant or did. Andrew King's 2011 chapter on 'the literature of the kitchen' is an exception,

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<sup>85</sup> Edmund Yates records a conversation with Braddon in which she gives the following description of penny literature: 'The Balzac-morbid-anatomy school is my especial delight; but it seems you want the right-down sensational; floppings at the end of chapters, and bits of paper hidden in secret drawers, bank-notes and title-deeds under the carpet, and a part of the body putrefying in the coal-scuttle...' (Edmund Hodgson Yates, *Edmund Yates: His Recollections and Experiences* [London: R. Bentley & Son, 1884], p. II.173.)

seeking to contextualise sensation literature alongside the ‘cheap serial fiction’ of the 1840s and 50s. However, King’s focus on Reynolds’s successor J.F. Smith prompts him to conclusions that differ from my own. King describes Smith’s work as being focused primarily around narratives of ‘family romance’: ‘The mystery at the heart of the novels is always... what is the protagonist’s parentage?’<sup>86</sup> Ultimately, inevitably, the protagonists’ fortunes reflect their moral standing: good characters turn out to be of noble stock. For King, this speaks to the ‘nostalgic’ desire for a world where identity is stable; where appearances match reality.

Although this recognisably melodramatic imperative links Smith’s more conservative stories with Reynolds’s work, and although the *Mysteries* does feature its fair share of family romance plots, I would argue that both the central preoccupation and the political slant of Reynolds’s text are quite different. The *Mysteries*, as I have sought to show, tried to model for its working-class readers a possible route through which they could take control of their own condition. The idea of sitting hopefully back and waiting for a fortune or an aristocratic background to materialise is quite inimical to these beliefs.<sup>87</sup>

What Reynolds’s serial and the sensation fiction genre certainly do have in common is a belief in the inevitability of the secret exposed. Sensation novels frequently remind their readers that ‘there are some things which... cannot be hidden’.<sup>88</sup> Wilkie Collins, writing in *No Name* (1862), makes the same point in a metaphor which vividly recalls Lydia and Adeline’s story (emphasis mine):

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<sup>86</sup> King, ‘“Literature of the Kitchen”: Cheap Serial Fiction of the 1840s and 1850s’, p. 49.

<sup>87</sup> Reynolds deals rather summarily with characters who seek an easy route to wealth or acclaim. In the second series of his work, he tells the story of the young Charles Hatfield, who hopes to aggrandise his own position by revealing that his father is in fact an Earl (deposing his uncle, presently acknowledged as the heir). But in seeking to make this revelation, against his parents’ wishes, Charles discovers that he is himself illegitimate and therefore not in the line of succession after all (*London IV*. 48-53, 116-120, 170-176).

<sup>88</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (Oxford, 1987), p. 175. Further references will be to this edition and will be given in the text.

Nothing in this world is hidden forever. The gold which has lain for centuries unsuspected in the ground, reveals itself one day on the surface. Sand turns traitor, and betrays the footstep that has passed over it; **water gives back to the tell-tale surface the body that has been drowned**... Look where we will, the inevitable law of revelation is one of the laws of nature: the lasting preservation of a secret is a miracle which the world has never yet seen.<sup>89</sup>

There is a clear parallel here with the melodramatic moral imperative towards total moral openness; in both cases, this drive is evidently founded in anxieties about the increasing facility by which the truth (about one's identity, one's past) might be concealed within an increasingly mobile, alienated society.

Beyond the simple fact that sensation literature, like the *Mysteries*, puts the discovery of secrets at its heart, the nature of those secrets suggests a comparison with the message of Reynolds's work. As Ronald Thomas writes:

the plots of sensation novels... [typically] centre around some menacing secret that threatens to expose the family's identity as a humiliating lie and to destroy its financial and psychological security. That secret normally originates with an elaborate fraud that has taken place in the past, a secret plot in which class boundaries have been ruthlessly transgressed for profit... These plots offered up the disturbing possibility that the secret terms in which personal identities and intimate relations had been established within the culture and within the family were themselves fictions, acts of commerce, forms of trade, commodities to be bought and sold... The secret they ultimately exposed was the essential commercialisation of the family and of the individual subjects involved in its most intimate transactions.<sup>90</sup>

There seems to be a clear parallel between this exposure of uncomfortable financial truths and the *Mysteries of London*'s narrative of a surface social stability underpinned by the labouring bodies of the poor. Just as sensation fiction reveals the 'essential commercialisation of the family', so Reynolds's serial is concerned to expose the harsh economic reality by which the wealthier elements of nineteenth century society were supported.

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<sup>89</sup> Wilkie Collins, *No Name* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), p. 35.

<sup>90</sup> Ronald R. Thomas, 'Wilkie Collins and Sensation Fiction', in *The Columbia History of the British Novel*, ed. by John J. Richetti (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 479-507 (p. 480).

But despite this similarity, I would argue that sensation literature tends to occupy an ideological position closer to that of *Bleak House* than of *The Mysteries of London*. That is, the persistent exposure of secrets it recounts serves the function rather of policing the middle classes (and eliminating undesirable individuals and behaviour) than of challenging aristocratic authority. *The Mysteries of London* recounts scandalous secrets about a fictitious (or historical) aristocracy to an audience primarily composed of the working class. By contrast, *Lady Audley's Secret* and its ilk describe crimes committed by those of a similar social class to the novel's readers: 'Proximity,' wrote H.L. Manse, 'is one great element of sensation'.<sup>91</sup>

This is in part what made the sensation genre so successful. Where Reynolds and other practitioners of the urban gothic had potently translated the terrors of the European medieval castle into the more threatening landscape of the contemporary urban sprawl, sensation novelists went further still, carrying crime into the suburban home. But the consequence of this overlap between readers and protagonists is – I would argue – to defuse the political power of Reynolds's work. Where the *Mysteries* exposed the conditions which the poor daily experienced in order to shame the rich by whom they were exploited, sensation novels offer their readers the frisson of excitement derived from a fear that those around you might not really be what they claim, before ultimately concluding with the comforting reassurance that these impostors will inevitably be exposed. This is the same message conveyed by Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, that 'guardian of middle-class values and security'.<sup>92</sup>

As in Holmes's case, one way in which these middle-class values are both perpetuated and protected is through the administration of a justice which operates outside of the public

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<sup>91</sup> Manse, 'Sensation Novels', p. 488.

<sup>92</sup> Andrew Maunder, *Companion to the British Short Story* (London: Infobase, 2007), p. 123.

legal system. In particular (and as already seen in Holmes's refusal to co-operate with the police in 'The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton'), the amateur detectives whose presence characterises sensation literature generally seek ultimately to conceal from public view the truths which the narrative has laid bare. As Tamara Wagner writes:

In sensation narratives of detection, competing forms of exposure regularly lay open the intimacies of the Victorian family, including the seemingly inviolable spaces of the Great House. And yet, they become encapsulated once more, framed by narratives that seek to contain the family secrets.<sup>93</sup>

This tension between concealment and exposure runs contradictory to the impulse of Reynolds's text, which is nothing if not consistent in its enthusiastic drive towards openness. As such, the exposure with which sensation novels threaten both protagonists and readers is significantly less radical than the project of revelation on which Reynolds's serial so determinedly embarks.

This tendency is clearly evident in *Lady Audley's Secret*. In Braddon's novel, it is the idle young lawyer Robert Audley who takes on the detective's role, finding himself inadvertently drawn into the investigation of his friend George Talboys' disappearance. Discovering the uncomfortable truth about his beloved uncle's new young wife – not only is she a bigamist, married to George at the time of her wedding, she is also apparently a murderer who has dispatched her inconvenient first husband into the well at Audley Park – Robert's concern for his relative, Sir Michael Audley, extends to a determination to hush things up. As such, and as emphasised by Braddon's narrator, he becomes an entire legal system unto himself: 'The young barrister had constituted himself the denouncer of this wretched woman. He had been her judge; and he was now her gaoler' (382). This arrangement might be very efficient, but it is also somewhat disturbing. Lucy Audley, taken

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<sup>93</sup> Tamara S. Wagner, 'Detecting Business Fraud at Home: White-Collar Crime and the Sensational Clergyman in Victorian Domestic Fiction', in *Victorian Secrets: Economies of Knowledge and Concealment*, ed. by Albert D. Pionke and Denise Tischler Millstein (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 115-33 (p. 123).

by Robert to the Belgian asylum where she will end her days, positions herself as a corpse, buried alive: “you have brought me to my grave,” she repeats (391). The image appears in direct contradiction of the *Mysteries*’ value system, with its repeated motif of resurrection; just as Robert’s desire to conceal the truth contradicts the impulse that drives Reynolds’s serial, to expose the iniquities and corruption of the ruling class.

The differences between Braddon’s and Reynolds’s approach are perhaps best illustrated in one storyline from the final series of Reynolds’s work; which more than any other of the six bears a resemblance to the sensation fiction that followed it. This series’ central storyline concerns the 1828 murder of the Duke of Marchmont, apparently by his nephew Bertram. The series of events leading up to Marchmont’s murder display some similarity with the plotline of Braddon’s novel. Where Lucy Audley has been previously married to George Talboys, who disappears to the Australian gold fields, Bertram Vivian is initially engaged to Eliza Lacey; but when her father demands a long engagement, Bertram travels overseas and is believed dead, killed in a boating accident in the United States (*Court* VII.6). The distraught Eliza is eventually persuaded to marry the elderly Duke: discovering only after the union has taken place that he is a close blood relative of her erstwhile fiancé. Inevitably, just like George Talboys, Bertram returns alive: horrifying Eliza, who feels that she has betrayed him. With the prior relationship between the two publicly exposed by Bertram’s villainous brother, Hugh, it is natural to lay the Duke’s subsequent murder at Bertram’s hands; particularly as he immediately afterwards disappears without a trace.

The situation presented by Reynolds’s serial is not, of course, precisely similar to that in Braddon’s novel; but there is a clear flavour of the sensation story to the situation that Reynolds describes. Most of the series takes place two decades later, when Hugh (who is, of course, the true villain of the piece) is enjoying the fruits of his machinations, having inherited his uncle’s title and estates. But what is particularly interesting is the party who

ultimately investigates and exposes Hugh's crimes: not Bertram or any of his male acquaintance, but the Hindu Princess Indora, who has fallen in love with Bertram during his extended stay under the custody of her father at his Indian palace. Indora arrives in London in Chapter 15 of the series (*Court* VII.72-76) and proceeds to work diligently towards the clearing of her beloved's name. She acquires a number of back issues of the *Times*, which she combs for evidence (VII.238); interviews witnesses (VII.286); and visits the scene of the crime (VII.243). By the close of the serial's two volumes, her investigations have furnished her with evidence sufficient to hold a tribunal, at which Hugh is confronted with the revealed reality of his crimes.

Held at the Duke's ancestral home, this tribunal is extremely theatrical in its realisation. Reynolds describes a room 'hung all around with black drapery', with Indora seated in 'a flowing head-dress' on 'a large arm-chair, looking like a throne' (VIII.304). The Princess is accompanied by several veiled witnesses; whom she calls in succession to testify against Hugh's crimes. These include a servant named Amy Sutton, whom Hugh has impregnated and then discarded: her situation providing echoes not only of Lydia's but also of Caroline Walters, the prostitute whose discovery of a skeleton in the closet opened my previous chapter. Amy's presence attests Hugh's status as an exploiter of working-class bodies, a tendency also exemplified in his employment of the working-class criminal Barney the Burker as his agent in various murderous projects.

Indora's mock-trial ends with a scene that is highly reminiscent of the conclusion of Lydia and Adeline's tale. Concluding the initial part of her proceedings, Indora summons Hugh into a smaller chamber; where the Duke is confronted by the body of Sagoonah, Indora's maid, a servant for whose murder his money has paid.

Upon a couch the corpse of Sagoonah was laid out... Four wax candles, as tall as those tapers which are seen on Catholic altars, shed their light upon the

corpse... solemnly grand was the effect thereof... It brought out the form of Sagoonah into the strongest relief... and it played upon her features as if they themselves were moving with the presence of existence. (*Court* VIII.312)

Just as Adeline crumples when the Resurrection Man provokes her with the spectacle of Lydia's resurrected corpse (and so, indeed, as Falkland's face-to-face encounter with the servant he has so cruelly wronged proves the final, fatal straw in his burden of guilt), so Sagoonah's carefully displayed body has a terminal effect on the man who has murdered her. Led from Indora away from this disturbing scene, Hugh succumbs to the accumulated weight of what he has seen, passing away within hours of the event (VIII.316).

This is hardly the conclusion that Hugh has expected to the evening's proceedings. Confronted with Indora's secret tribunal, his initial hope is that this alternative to conventional legal redress demonstrates a propensity to mercy on the part of his accusers:

he fancied that there might be an inclination... to spare him as much as possible, and that his own brother was chivalrous enough to make that most fearful self-sacrifice that man could possibly make [that is, his own reputation] for the purpose of avoiding a terrific exposure that should startle the whole world. For if it were not so... why should all these proceedings be arrayed in mystery and darkness against him? why should not everything have been left to the regular course of human justice and to the development of legitimate process in the public tribunals?' (*Court* VIII.308)

Were Hugh correct, then Indora's actions would seem to evince the same moral compromise evident in Robert Audley's concealment of the truth. In fact, Reynolds makes it absolutely clear that the Princess's motivation is quite distinct. Rather than sparing Hugh the full weight of English justice, she intends to deliver a redress which the country's biased legal system cannot deliver. As Hugh goes on to observe, his own status as a peer of the realm renders him 'exempt from the jurisdiction of the ordinary tribunals of [his country]' – he 'can be tried only by [his] peers' (VIII.311).



As such, Indora's intervention can be seen to derive less from her concern about publicity than from her contempt for the weaknesses of the English legal system. The same motivation is evident in her treatment of the *Burker*, who, albeit under Hugh's instruction, has been responsible for Sagoonah's death. Telling Barney that "it were an outrage against society to leave [him] without chastisement", Indora further comments that:

"If you were handed over to the grasp of your country's law, your life would be forfeited, and you would expiate on the scaffold the numerous iniquities of which you have been guilty. In my estimation, however, the punishment of death is odious... It is my purpose [therefore] to transport you with the least possible delay to my own native country; and there you will be confined in a fortress for the remainder of your life. In pronouncing this punishment, I must remind you that you have to congratulate yourself on escaping that doom which would be yours if you were to be subjected to the ordeal of British justice." (*Court* VIII.315)

In Reynolds's case, then, we see the amateur detective delivering a form of justice that can be seen both to advocate for the conventionally dispossessed (Indora might be a Princess, but she is also a woman of colour, dispensing justice against a white male member of the British aristocracy) and to criticise several aspects of the existing legal system: not only the death penalty, but the practice of trying the aristocracy only before their peers. In contrast, what Mary Elizabeth Braddon presents us with in *Lady Audley* is a white male member of the aristocracy casting judgment on (what is in fact) a lower-class woman. It is possible to argue that Lucy's articulate voicing of this injustice ("I do not thank you for your mercy, Robert Audley, for I know exactly what it is worth" [394]) at least creates the prospect of a more subversive reading of Braddon's novel; but the contrast with Reynolds's deliberately strident protest is nonetheless marked. Sensation fiction's possible radicalism remains mired in an ambiguity that the *Mysteries* resolutely rejects.

There is one further instance in *Lady Audley's Secret* where the possibility of a more subversive and socially challenging reading arises, only to be brushed aside. This is the point

at which Robert is confronted with the possibility that George Talboys's body may have to be left unburied, hidden in the unconsecrated depths of the well to which his wife has consigned him.

“My God!” Robert exclaimed, as the full horror of his position became evident to him, “is my friend to rest in his unhallowed burial-place because I have condoned the offences of the woman who murdered him?” (396)

The starkness of this decision effectively calls into question the imperative towards family secrecy which characterises the sensation novel. In the context of Reynolds's work, George's body, disrespected in its unhallowed grave, evokes the bodies of the dissected working class, repeatedly desecrated and dispersed in the name of progress; the truth of their ending often concealed from the families who had followed a stranger to the grave. This is a real moment of tension, then, and one which (like Lucy Audley's condemnation of Robert's behaviour) calls into question the anxious impulse towards concealment. But this tension is ultimately diffused, as Braddon lets her protagonist off the hook by having George unexpectedly return alive, having escaped from the confines of his watery grave with the aid of that unlikely hero, Luke Marks.

Braddon's capitulation helps emphasise the difference between the four works that this chapter has discussed. Reynolds is concerned to oppose secrecy and justice: that is, throughout the *Mysteries*, justice is generally seen to be best served when the truth is openly exposed. The exception, Hugh's private trial, acts primarily as a commentary on a broken legal system. *Caleb Williams*, too, argues for the importance of revelation and truth (although it regrets the social circumstances that can make even this an insufficient resolution). But *Bleak House*, like *Lady Audley*, deflects the issue, sideswiping responsibility onto a convenient third party just as Robert Audley is able to evade the hard decision that threatens to confront him with his morally suspect actions.

Ultimately, then, comparing Reynolds's work to these other examples of crime literature helps to emphasise the message which this thesis has sought to convey. *The Mysteries of London* is made unique because of its deliberate, persistent and consistent struggle towards the moral openness that characterises melodramatic representation. In the context of a literature which critics have frequently described as operating at various levels of repression, it is no wonder that Reynolds's radically open text should have been scandalous to the readers of its day. What is, or ought to be, scandalous to readers now is the extent to which the judgments passed on Reynolds's serial by its peers have continued to elide its importance.

In this, there is a clear parallel between *The Mysteries of London* and the working-class bodies with which Reynolds's work is concerned, suppressed into the darkest corners of the nineteenth-century city, too shameful to be openly acknowledged. Just as an understanding of nineteenth-century social or scientific progress would be incomplete and inaccurate without the awareness that this progress often depended on the sufferings of a disempowered working class, so too an understanding of the period's literary development must recognise the influence of this particular serial text. *The Mysteries of London* was not only written for, but is fundamentally concerned with, its own new reading audience. Reynolds's willingness to disregard established moral and political convention, his evangelical faith in the power of literacy, and his deliberate attempt to create a new and more open literature for the masses, all make his serial a unique and suggestive counterpart to the more familiar canonical works of the period. It is therefore imperative that the new generation of Reynolds scholars should follow in the footsteps of Reynolds himself: working to expose this skeleton in the Victorian literary closet to a wider public view.

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