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MURDER MACHINES IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

METROPOLIS*

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ABSTRACT This article traces the changes and continuities in fictional stories of serial murder in London from the late-seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. In particular, it shows how changes in the primary audience for metropolitan popular culture necessitated dramatic shifts in the tale of serial killing and narratives of violence. Thus, by the nineteenth century, as the lower classes had become the main supporters of both traditional and new genres of entertainment in popular culture, their experience of and fears and anxieties about urban change became intertwined with myths about serial killing and reflected in a new character of the public nightmare, Sweeney Todd, the barber of Fleet Street, who set out to effectively depopulate the capital with his ghastly murder machine.

KEYWORDS: popular culture, nineteenth century, London, violence, Sweeney Todd

During the mid 1840s, a popular serial described in great detail the strange and abominable odour that filled old St Dunstan's Church in Fleet Street and had begun to disturb the pious frequenters of that sacred edifice. While the organ blower and organ player were 'both nearly stifled as the odour seemed to ascend to the upper part of the

church,... those in the pit by no means escaped it, ...the stench preventing congregations from sleeping through the sermon.¹ Indeed, 'so bad was it,' the author continued,

that some were forced to leave, and have been seen to slink into Bell-yard, where Lovett's pie shop was situated, and then and there solace themselves with a pork or veal pie in order that their mouths and noses should be full of a delightful and agreeable flavour instead of one most peculiarly and decidedly the reverse.²

Terrific anguish and loud debate erupted in the parish over the cause of the dreadful smell, officials and laymen eventually agreeing that its source must be located in the deep, subterranean passages that ran underneath the church, connecting a row of shops in Fleet Street with another in Bell-yard. However, no one was prepared for the truly appalling discoveries which would subsequently be uncovered in those vaults and implicated two seemingly respectable citizens in the most horrendous, blood-thirsty and unimaginable crime: serial murder.

The recent focus on narratives of violence in English society has been instructive, particularly their use as a window into popular beliefs and preoccupations on a range of social issues.³ Serial killing, such a specialized form of violence, has not been ignored in this trend, despite or even perhaps because of its relative rarity. For example, in *Murder in Shakespeare's England* (2004), Vanessa McMahon demonstrated how tales of serial killing that circulated in the early-modern period confirmed popular notions of criminality about the potential depravity of everyman. In essence, serial killers were perceived as no different from ordinary murderers, in

fact this category of crime did not even exist, a system of belief that continued until the Ripper murders of autumn 1888 when more attention began to focus on the psychological motivations of multiple murders.⁴

McMahon is, in many respects, correct. The terms serial killing/killer or murder/murderer are modern inventions and were not popularly used even in the late-nineteenth century. However, despite the lack of a sophisticated language to discuss these crimes, and the absence of any attention on the psyche of the murderer, stories about serial killing still held an important place in popular consciousness from the late-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Their extremity compared with more standard tales of murder meant that they stood out and were imbued with a unique quality that attracted the attention of large audiences. And this is particularly evident in the case of two fictional serial murderers who achieved celebrity status in pre-industrial and early Victorian popular culture respectively: Sawney Beane and Sweeney Todd.

These disturbing and violent figures have attracted little serious attention from scholars, instead being the subject of detailed antiquarian histories which tend to characterize them as rather quaint.⁵ This they certainly were not. Sally Powell's work forms an exception to this trend. She has linked the tale of Sweeney Todd, as told in the 1850 penny blood, to other stories about trade in corpses, finding in them common concerns about the corporeal actuality of sights and smells in the Victorian urban experience and an articulation of the threat posed by city commercialism to the sanctity and survival of the working-class individual. In particular, she identifies in the narrative of Sweeney Todd a reflection of fears about the vulnerability of urban foodstuffs, corporeal contamination and the detrimental effects of the production line.⁶ The tale of Sweeney Todd was undoubtedly about life in the mid nineteenth-

century city, but it is not enough simply to recognize the features of the urban environment which the story reflects or on which it provides a commentary. Attention to its evolution, for example, its roots in tales from the early-modern period, and its manifestation in a range of genres, including serial fiction and popular theatre, makes clear its actual function in metropolitan society and culture.

As this article will show, fictional narratives of serial killing that circulated in metropolitan popular culture from the late-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century offered ordinary people a way of seeing, describing and understanding the environment in which they lived by playing upon particular sets of anxieties about everyday life. The lead character of the serial murderer was archetypal. His uniqueness and extremity gave him an appeal with audiences that was timeless and in the right circumstances could cut across categories of class, gender and age. Yet the setting in which he was placed was very much time-bound and audience-specific, and thus changed in significant ways at the turn of the nineteenth century. As the primary paying audience for these tales shifted downwards, the threat posed by the serial killer shifted from the isolated rural setting to the crowded metropolitan street. By drawing upon a range of themes in working-class life including changing work patterns, food adulteration, neighbourhood dislocation and urban mortality, the story of Sweeney Todd does provide a useful window onto the fears of the urban masses, something that the current urban historiography has largely failed to illuminate. However, the method of presentation used to tell this story, namely melodrama, meant that the overriding tone was highly conservative. Like other genres in the culture from which it emerged, its interest was not in promoting social reform but in protecting and asserting the position of popular culture in the face of competition from a potentially hegemonic respectable culture.

SAWNEY BEANE

In *Murder in Shakespeare's England*, Vanessa McMahon based her conclusions on a detailed study of a five page pamphlet distributed by a London printer in 1675.⁷ *The Bloody Innkeeper, or Sad and Barbarous News from Gloucestershire* presented to metropolitan audiences the tale of a couple who kept an inn near the village of Putley, on the well-used road between Gloucester and Bristol. While this couple did manage to attract some commercial travellers who were passing through the area, for the most part their trade was 'otherwise very small and inconsiderable'.⁸ In spite of this, and 'contrary to all expectations, they began to thrive amain, furnishing their house rarely well with all sorts of Household goods and convenient Utensils', and, within several years, they had become wealthy enough to move to a larger inn near the city of Gloucester.⁹ The source of their fortunes, however, was soon discovered. A blacksmith moved into their former house and, while digging up part of the garden to extend his shop, found the bodies of seven men and women. It soon became clear that the wealth of the innkeeping couple 'was swel'd [sic] with blood, and [their] Gains raked together with the Barbarous hands of Robbery and Murther [sic].'¹⁰ McMahon's analysis of this pamphlet focuses solely on its reflection of popular ideas about criminal motivation and the potential guilt of everyman. In fact, especially for those Londoners who purchased it, this tale performed a much wider social function.

The tale of the bloody inn-keeping couple conformed to a specific narrative pattern repeated in tales of other serial killers in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth century. Travellers, usually in the absence of alternative choices, find shelter at a country inn. Despite taking various precautions, such as locking doors and sleeping with their valuables under their pillows, these unfortunate men (and sometimes

women) are invariably murdered, the large purses they have with them to conduct their business stolen. The typically isolated setting of the murderers' inns ensures that the families and friends of the victims are unable to trace their loved ones and identify those responsible.¹¹ Various forms of this narrative appeared in both fiction and crime reporting genres, but its most famous and lasting expression was in the fictional character of Sawney Beane, a serial murderer who began to appear in pamphlet literature and voluminous biographies of notorious criminals from c1700 onwards.

Sawney Beane, we are told by various authors, lived during the second half of the sixteenth century, when James I only ruled in Scotland (as James VI). Raised by hedging and ditching parents east of the city of Edinburgh, Beane soon demonstrated that he was prone to idleness and did not care for honest employment. When opportunity presented itself, he ran away, taking with him a woman 'as viciously inclined as himself'.¹² They settled in a cave by the seaside, located on the coast of Galloway, and lived there for twenty-five years, during which time Beane and his 'wife' spawned a large number of children and grandchildren, all of whom were brought up with the same evil tendencies as their parents. The Beane family never went into any city, town or village. Instead they supported themselves by robbing and murdering travellers who passed by their cave. Furthermore, 'as soon as they had robbed or murdered any man, woman or child, they used to carry off the carcase to their den, where cutting it into quarters, they would pickle the mangled limbs, and afterwards eat it; this being their only sustenance'.¹³ The dreadful practices of the Beane family were eventually exposed when one of their victims managed to escape from their vicious attack. The authorities were notified, the horrendous habitation of Sawney Beane was uncovered, and the family was taken to Leith for execution.¹⁴

From his first appearance at the turn of the eighteenth century, Sawney Beane rapidly rose to the status of celebrity serial killer and featured as a central character in early-modern metropolitan popular culture. The tale of his life closely followed the narrative pattern of serial murder described above, and so Beane came to reflect the deeper anxieties of his audience. The literary genres in which Beane appeared were part of a larger cultural phenomenon, the popular literature of crime. During the closing decades of the seventeenth century, this formerly marginal literature experienced tremendous proliferation and, by the mid-eighteenth century, both its genres and audiences were diverse. Most profitable and noteworthy among these genres were the lively pamphlets and multi-volume biographies that aimed to attract more literate and affluent readers. These detailed accounts of the lives of criminals, from common thieves and pickpockets to notorious highwaymen and murderers, including serial killers, entertained middling sorts of people, not only by presenting outrageous and scandalous tales, but by drawing on the deep-seated fears of this audience.¹⁵

In particular, the professionals, merchants, and other reasonably well-to-do Londoners who purchased the tale of Sawney Beane saw their concerns and uneasiness about travel reflected in its pages. Passages made specific references to the dangers faced by travellers who were forced, through their business, to pass by the cave of the Beane family. As one author wrote, ‘all the people in the adjacent parts were at last alarmed at such a common loss of neighbours and acquaintance; for there was no travelling in safety near the den of these wretches.’¹⁶ Moreover, conscious references to innkeepers drew the tale into a direct relationship with other contemporary narratives about serial killers. For example, it was recorded that:

Several innocent innkeepers were executed for no other reason than that persons who had been thus last, were known to have lain at their houses, which occasioned suspicion of their being murdered by them, and their bodies privately buried in obscure places to prevent a discovery.¹⁷

These passages would have invoked a sense of terror in the breasts of metropolitan readers. Although residing within the city, middling professionals and merchants had the financial potential and the commercial reason to travel outside London. Therefore, unlike those socially beneath them, they had various imaginative reference points outside the metropolis. Furthermore, the physical character of eighteenth-century London was notably different from that of the nineteenth century. Despite unprecedented expansion, its geographical size was still substantially smaller. Although the area between the City and Westminster had been filled in, the ring of suburbs surrounding these districts thickened, and the ribbon of development on the south-side of the Thames lengthened, large uninhabited fields which surrounded the commercial and residential boundaries were still easily accessible and relatively close to the city centre.¹⁸ Travel around the edge of the city, especially at night, could be just as perilous as longer journeys, as highwaymen lay in wait for potential victims along these dark roads. Thus, the extra-urban narrative represented by the character of Sawney Beane struck a particular resonance with these city dwellers. The danger of travel was a common theme in the popular literature of crime. Tales of highwaymen abounded in the eighteenth century, their popularity with audiences in large part derived from their very real presence in everyday life. Moreover, as Hal Gladfelder has recently shown, the increasing romanticisation and idealisation of these criminals in popular literature over the course of the eighteenth century resulted from authors'

recognition that potential victims wanted to think of them as less threatening than they actually were.¹⁹

During the second half of the eighteenth century, the more affluent and middling sectors of society began to substantially limit their participation in popular culture. Strongly influenced by several crucial intellectual shifts, such as evangelicalism, humanitarianism, politeness, sensibility and respectability, this new middle class was anxious to achieve social status and distance themselves from those below. Despite efforts of publishers to keep abreast of these changes, the more sophisticated genres of the popular literature of crime ultimately experienced a substantial decline.²⁰ At the same time, however, as a result of the increasing participation of the lower classes, cruder genres, such as broadsides, both persisted and expanded.²¹ During the opening decades of the nineteenth century, falling prices in paper manufacture and substantial advances in printing technology meant that literature could be produced on a large scale and sold at low prices to an unprecedented readership. While traditional printers were quick to exploit these critical developments, entrepreneurs in this industry recognized new, highly profitable opportunities. By the middle decades of the century, publishing maestros such as Edward Lloyd and G.W.M. Reynolds had established a new, successful form of metropolitan entertainment: cheap serial fiction, or as more popularly known, penny bloods.

The character of Sawney Beane was not swept away with the decline of specific genres in the popular literature of crime. Tales of his wicked deeds continued to be told in serial publications such as the *Newgate Calendar* and the *Terrific Register*, the comparatively high price of these periodicals indicating a continuing, though small, middle- or perhaps even upper-class audience.²² Of greater note,

however, was the way in which the traditional narrative pattern of the serial killer, in which the murderer preys upon solitary, naïve travellers, began to appear in short stories published by Edward Lloyd and G.W.M. Reynolds in their cheap miscellanies of entertaining fiction. For instance, one author transported readers of *Lloyd's Penny Atlas* back in time to a late-eighteenth century cottage situated on a large heath in Devonshire, a building that had 'since been destroyed, owing to the discovery that it was inhabited by a couple of desperate and abandoned characters, simply for the purpose of entrapping the innocent and unsuspecting travellers that perchance happened to take refuge there from a variety of accidental circumstances.'²³ These tales were well received by subscribers to Lloyd's and Reynolds's periodicals. In particular, they fitted very neatly into a popular culture in which the theme of violence was prominent.

However, at the same time, the new, primary audience for this literature had concerns and anxieties which were very different from the predominant audience of the popular literature of crime during the early-modern period. Readers were mostly of the lower orders. While the prohibitive cost of three-decker novels, even when purchased second-hand, would have meant that some artisans or skilled workers probably ranked among them, most of the available evidence points largely towards a mass of unskilled urban labourers. The oft-cited passage from Thomas Frost's autobiography explains how Edward Lloyd would place unpublished manuscripts in the 'hands of an illiterate person – a servant, or a machine boy, for instance. If they pronounce favourably upon it, we think it will do.'²⁴ Slivers of evidence relating to actual reading experience show that penny bloods were eagerly devoured by the costermongers and their families in the New Cut, Lambeth, the casual inmates of the low-lodging houses and workhouses of the East End, city crossing-sweeps, and the

rough boys of Spitalfields.²⁵ Their daily lives presented a substantial contrast to those of the professionals, merchants and traders of the eighteenth century. In particular, these readers had neither the money nor the need to travel outside of the city, and as London sprawled in all directions, large uninhabited fields became fewer in number and acquired a very different character. Thus, the rural setting of the narrative of serial murder had become antiquated. Moreover, the popular melodramas and much of the cheap fiction seen and consumed by these readers had re-characterized the country as a place of innocence and purity, while the town, and in particular London, had become a den of iniquity. In order to maintain its place within the public nightmare, the tale of serial killing needed revision. And at least one significant turning point can be found in a penny novelette presented to subscribers in 1846.

Attributed to the authorship of Thomas Peckett Prest, *Retribution; or the Murder at the Old Dyke* (1846) describes the plight of the noble Sir Anthony Wyvill and his wife, Emily, victims of the plotting of his cruel half-sister, Margaret Wyvill. Newly married, Sir Anthony and Emily settle at Wyvill Hall, but their wedded bliss is soon interrupted as Sir Anthony is called to rejoin his regiment in France. Margaret sees the separation as her opportunity to ruin Sir Anthony's marriage and secure the wealth of the Wyvill estate for herself. To achieve this, Margaret enlists the services of the Foster family, local inn-keepers who run an establishment situated by the old Dyke on the road from London.

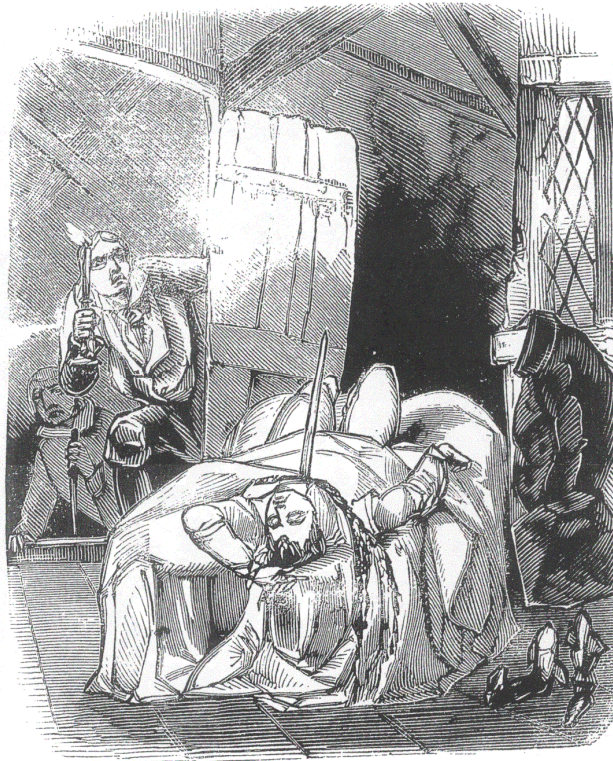
Caught in a storm on the return to his estate with his young daughter, Sir Anthony seeks shelter at the Fosters' inn. Like his half sister, he has been acquainted with the family for many years, but he entertains no suspicions about them. In his room, Sir Anthony puts the sleeping child in bed. His own sleep, however, is much disturbed. Walking about the room, he finds a note that provides a dire warning: it

states that he has taken shelter in the house of murderers. Anthony searches for evidence and, under his bed, finds numerous articles of rich clothing which he drags out. Immediately he is struck by their horrible smell and, on further examination, discovers that the different articles are caked together with blood. In panic, his eyes wander, fast resting upon the crimson hue colouring the floor and bed sheets. Anthony rushes to lift his child from the bed, and:

Scarcely had he done so, when a strange, cracking noise came upon his ear, as if marching of some sort was suddenly set into action, and, to his astonishment, there shot up, right through the bed from beneath, a sanguinary looking blade, of a double-edged sword, but much thicker, which had he or the child been lying on the spot, must have pierced them through.²⁶

With its dastardly innkeeper and descriptions of unfortunate traveller victims, *Retribution* undeniably follows the traditional serial-killer narrative. However, the tale also features a new, innovative twist that signalled some sort of recognition by authors and publishers that this traditional narrative had become anachronistic. And this was encapsulated in the Fosters' ghastly murder machine. With their homemade apparatus, the Fosters frequently murder guests who seek shelter from the regular storms that plague the valley. Travellers are placed in a room that contains a bed, slacked so that the sleeper would be sure to lie in its centre. On hearing the snores of their victim, Mr Foster and his burly sons would retire to a room below where they would turn the handles of a wooden box, sending a brutal-looking sword between the floorboards of the guestroom and into the body of their victim (see fig. 1). Their motive is, of course, to acquire the heavy purses of solitary travellers.²⁷ *Retribution* was something of an

experiment. In hindsight, we can see that Thomas Peckett Prest was trialling some new ideas in this serial, considering how he might be able to create a truly popular and profitable story. He had updated the tools of the serial murderer; the next step was to change the location of his crimes, to shift the serial killer into the very heart of the metropolis. But, as *Retribution* also shows, despite crucial changes in stories about serial murder, there was a significant degree of cultural overlap in the early-nineteenth century. *Retribution* encapsulates a crucial process, in which older stories continued to be told alongside, and exert a great deal of influence over, new ones. Sweeney Todd's replacement of Sawney Beane was gradual and never absolute.



**Figure 1: The murder machine in [Prest?] *Retribution; or, the Murder at the Old Dyke* (1846)
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SWEENEY TODD

As *Retribution* drew to a close, a new serial began in the pages of Edward Lloyd's *People's Periodical and Family Library*, under the slightly obscure title, 'The String of Pearls. A Romance'. From the content of the journal it is clear that Lloyd intended it as reading material for all, men, women and children, and perhaps ideally for it to be read by the working man to his family. In addition to romantic fiction, such as 'Rose Somerville' and 'Emily Hastings; or, the Vicissitudes of Love', he regularly included short advisory articles on marriage and family matters. However, 'The String of Pearls' was a far cry from what we would today regard as suitable family entertainment, especially in its introduction of a new, fictional but frightening celebrity to metropolitan popular culture: the bloodthirsty barber, Sweeney Todd.

'The String of Pearls' opens with a description of Mr Thornhill's efforts to find the house of Johanna Oakley in order to break the news of the death of her lover, his friend Mark Ingestrie. Spying a small barber's shop near St Dunstan's Church in Fleet Street, Thornhill decides to delay his awkward task and steps inside for a shave. He is promptly seated in the chair by the enthusiastic, if slightly strange barber, Sweeney Todd. During the course of their conversation, Thornhill reveals he has a valuable string of pearls in his possession which he intends to give to Johanna. Todd becomes excited at this news and makes some inconsequential excuse to leave the room. Thornhill then mysteriously disappears.²⁸ With the aid of a specially constructed machine, Sweeney Todd routinely murders his customers. After placing the gentlemen in the barber's chair, Todd pulls a lever which causes the chair to spin, casting the unsuspecting victims into the stone vaults below. At a convenient moment, Todd enters the vaults, robs the customer of his valuables, and then slices the body into bite-size chunks.

Todd's diabolical deeds do not end there. Because of its high value, the string of pearls proves troublesome to sell. Thus, throughout the serial, the true extent of Todd's murder machine is slowly revealed as the barber begins to panic and arouse suspicion. Within weeks of Thornhill's disappearance, Mr Wrankley, the local tobacconist, drops into Todd's shop for a shave. He is eager to tell the barber about a valuable string of pearls sold to his cousin who, anxious to discover its origin, has enlisted Wrankley's assistance. The dangerous information convinces the barber to 'polish him off'. Later that day, Todd pays a visit to his friend, Mrs Lovett, the famous pie-shop owner in Bell-yard. As he leaves, Mrs Wrankley enters the shop to ask a favour of Mrs Lovett. She explains that her husband has been missing since that morning and wishes to place a poster in the pie-shop window to draw attention to him. In her distress, poor Mrs Wrankley claims that she has not eaten since last seeing her husband:

'Then buy a pie, madam', said Todd, as he held one out close to her. 'Look up Mrs Wrankley, lift off the top crust, madam, and you may take my word for it you will see *something* of Mr Wrankley.'

The hideous face that Todd made during the utterance of those words quite alarmed the disconsolate widow, but she did partake of the pie for all that. It was certainly very tempting – a veal one, full of coagulated gravy – who could resist? Not she, certainly, and besides, did not Todd say she should see something of Wrankley? There was hope in his words, at all events, if nothing else.²⁹

Mrs Lovett, then, is not only Todd's friend, but his business partner. The chunks of meat from Todd's victims are passed through the vaults under Fleet Street, from his cellar to her bakehouse, which services her famous pie shop.

Sweeney Todd was not necessarily a new character in popular literature. In 1826 the *Terrific Register* published a short story entitled, 'Horrible Affair in the Rue de la Harpe at Paris', in which a stranger to the city is murdered by an evil barber, his fate, and that of many other victims, only uncovered through the persistence of his faithful dog, who refuses to leave the door of the shop. When the authorities search the barber's home, they discover that it is connected with that of the Pastry-cook's next door: the barber's victims are used as tasty fillings for the treats crafted by the Pastry-cook.³⁰ Similarly, the front page of a number of *Lloyd's Penny Atlas* in 1844 featured the tale of 'Joddrel, the Barber; or, Mystery Uncovered'. Suspicious of the increasing fortunes of Joddrel and his wife, and the seemingly odd practices conducted at his shop, the inhabitants of Bishopsgate Street decide to set a trap. They send a friend to the barber to be shaved, and when the gentleman does not appear again for several hours, they fetch the police. A search confirms their worst fears: the unfortunate gentleman has been murdered by Joddrel.³¹

However, this tale does not mention a partner in crime, and does not include the crucial feature of a specially constructed murder machine. And, neither the Parisian tale nor 'Joddrel the Barber' attracted the level of attention that Thomas Peckett Prest's serial, 'The String of Pearls', did in 1846. It is perhaps necessary to mention at this stage that some doubt exists about whether Prest was indeed the author of 'The String of Pearls'. The anonymity of penny blood authors has encouraged debate among antiquarians anxious to attribute popular works to specific individuals, and many have argued that James Malcolm Rymer was in fact the author of both

Retribution and 'The String of Pearls'. Yet the fact of who actually put pen to paper really matters very little, the debate instead highlighting the degree of uniformity within the genre.

What does matter is that Prest (and we shall persist with Prest because he is fairly representative and both serials were first attributed to him) chose the perfect moment to launch his story and the correct genre of popular literature. In addition, the tale of Sweeney Todd achieved such great popularity through Prest's expert handling of the narrative: he successfully manipulated elements of the traditional narrative of the serial killer, inserted vital new ingredients, and skilfully interwove aspects of the everyday with the imaginative. The combination proved explosive. Due to popular demand, in 1850, Prest's tale was republished by Edward Lloyd as a penny novelette with the addition of several hundred pages.³²

Furthermore, theatrical hacks and managers of London's popular playhouses were eager to acquire a slice of the enormous profits. The Britannia Theatre in Hoxton advertised and produced George Dibdin Pitt's stage adaptation, 'The String of Pearls; or, the Fiend of Fleet Street' in early 1847, even before the conclusion of Prest's serial.³³ Plagiarisms rapidly began to appear in other theatres throughout the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s.³⁴ Although serial fiction and theatre were two separate genres, the influence of theatrical melodrama on penny bloods meant that an intimate and promiscuous relationship developed between the two. Although it is important to recognize that penny bloods were not melodramas, they did draw upon the same literary traditions as theatrical melodrama and, entering popular culture at a slightly later date, were strongly influenced by the melodramatic mode. Moreover, authors of penny bloods, including Thomas Prest, also wrote for the popular stage, and vice versa, not to mention the constant theft of tales by writers or maestros of either genre.

Thus, while the published story was modified to fit within the physical and temporal limits of the stage, particular narrative features remained common and important to both. The presentation of the narrative of serial killing within this new melodramatic framework cannot be ignored – it is vital for understanding the precise features of urban life drawn upon in the tale and its underlying function. In addition, when compared with other genres that comprised popular culture, it also helps us to appreciate both change and continuity in the narrative, to recognize the degree of cultural overlap that persisted in the early nineteenth century.

But first, what exactly were those new fears about urban life which found expression in new fictional tales about serial killing? In other words, how did Sweeney Todd with his shop in Fleet Street differ from Sawney Beane with his isolated cave on the Scottish coast? Sally Powell has already explored in some depth the social context of “The String of Pearls”, particularly in relation to other penny bloods containing plots about cadavers. For Powell, this story gave voice to profound social anxiety about aggressive commercial forces generated by the industrial city.³⁵ This theme became embodied in Sweeney Todd’s murder machine, at the beginning of a sophisticated production line, which transformed unsuspecting customers into a highly marketable product: meat pies.

Although in the content of the pies – human flesh – there seems to be a direct parallel with the Beane family’s cannibalistic activities, Powell is right to focus our attention on specific contemporary issues. Unlike the Beane family, Todd and Lovett do not have a voracious appetite for consuming their victims. Instead, they sell the bodies, though in disguised form, thus highlighting the commoditisation of the corpse in urban society, a theme regularly used in other penny bloods that featured another figure who occupied the public nightmare, the bodysnatcher, whose vile trade had

expanded during the early-nineteenth century with the growing demand for corpses at the anatomy schools.³⁶ Furthermore, Powell argues that Mrs Lovett's pies drew on concerns about the use of diseased meat in products for human consumption, and even more particularly, fears about the vulnerability of urban foodstuffs to corporeal contamination as a result of badly maintained sewage systems and overcrowded burial grounds.³⁷ In an environment in which the labouring classes had become isolated from the original source of their food and, due to a lack of adequate cooking facilities, were forced to rely on ready-made meals, it was easy to fan fears about the content of popular foods such as pies, especially as the working classes were far from ignorant.³⁸ It is worth pointing out that tales of food adulteration circulated in other genres of nineteenth-century popular culture, from Jemmy Catnach's best-selling broadside about a Drury Lane butcher who made sausages from human meat, to 'factual' articles in the popular Sunday press, including the mundane (the dyeing and selling of used tea leaves) and the extraordinary (the use of horse meat in pies).³⁹

Powell, usefully, goes further still. Through the characters of Lovett's bakers, who are sequentially imprisoned in the pie manufactory, she explores the exploitation of the urban industrial worker. Not only is the baker's entire existence subsumed by his employment, but his place on the production line, involving him only in the assembly of the pies, alienates him from the product. Moreover, his employers, Todd and Lovett, relieve themselves of responsibility for his welfare.⁴⁰ Again, we could extend this discussion, strengthening Powell's arguments about the context of the tale. For example, the choice of a bakery and the production of pies might have been quite deliberate. While many skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labourers in London had direct experience of the production line through the disintegration of the traditional trades, the baking trade had become especially notorious. The long hours, low pay and

unsavoury working conditions had prompted a government inquiry around the same time as the publication of the serial, in which attention focused on the reduced life expectancy of the large number of apprentices and journeymen who were forced to work and sleep in dark, suffocating cellars.⁴¹ Those who became too ill for work were replaced with young recruits coming to London for the purpose, a situation replicated in 'The String of Pearls'. Skinner (also known as Jean Parmine), driven insane by his work and eventual knowledge of the contents of Lovett's pies, is replaced by Williams, always introduced to audiences as a new arrival in the metropolis and even characterized in Dibdin's play as a country bumpkin.⁴²

Although important, we should not dwell for too long upon the theme of industrial capitalism in 'The String of Pearls'. After all, it was nothing new. Melodramas often gave voice to the 'fear and disorientation brought about by the rise of a market economy that disregarded traditional morality, in which the poor were allowed to suffer.'⁴³ We must not let this theme distract our attention from the basic plot which made this tale stand out: the creation of a sophisticated machine for the murder of urban dwellers and its concealment. As we shall see, the extreme violence at the centre of this tale is vital for understanding its appeal and its place within a very violent early Victorian popular culture. Both print and stage adaptations focused on providing a detailed and bloody description of the machine in operation and the ease of its concealment. As Prest writes:

There was a piece of flooring turning upon a centre and the weight of the chair when a bolt was withdrawn, by means of a simple leverage from the inner room, weighed down one end of the top, which, by a little apparatus, was to swing completely round, there being another chair on the under surface, which

thus became the upper chair, exactly resembling the one in which the unhappy customer was supposed to be ‘polished off’.⁴⁴

The provision of such intricate details matches that in *Retribution* described above. In both serials, Prest and Lloyd were also sensitive to the desire of their barely literate audiences to see the murder machines in action, satisfying them with very graphic illustrations. While one image could tell the whole story in *Retribution*, in *The String of Pearls* readers were presented with a sequence of woodcuts representing different parts of the machine and production line, one of which was, of course, Todd’s lethal barber’s chair (see figs. 1 & 2).

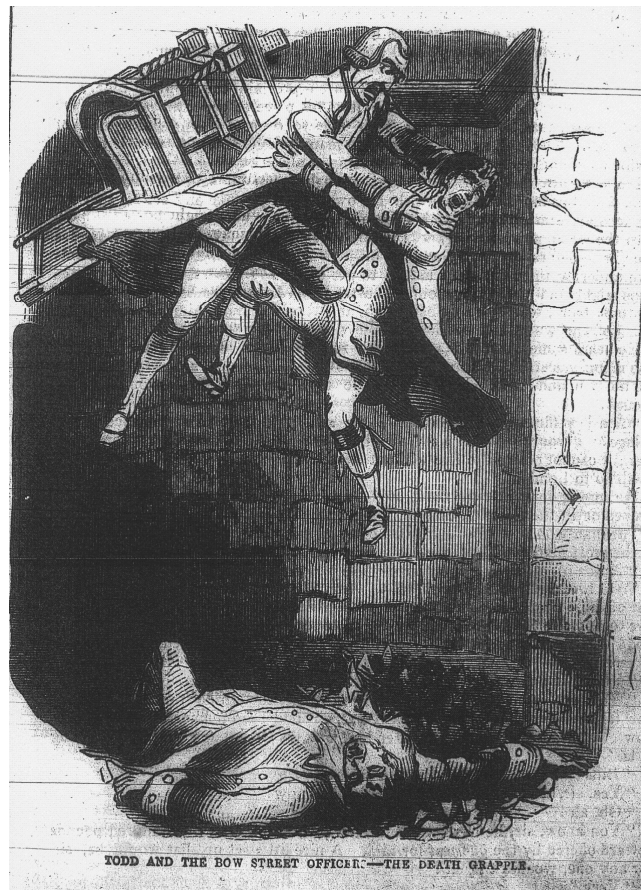


Figure 2: Sweeney Todd’s murder machine in action. [Prest], *The String of Pearls* (1850).
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In popular theatres, vampire traps easily facilitated the realistic operation of Todd's machine for curious theatre patrons. Special lighting effects were used to make the production line and bakehouse in the vaults into a version of hell on earth. The prompt copy for Mrs H. Young's 'The String of Pearls; or, the Life and Death of Sweeney Todd', describes a large oven placed centre stage, various dark secret passages leading away from the scene, a machine operated by a crane to send pies to the shop above, shelves furnished with dishes of raw meat and freshly baked pies, and several pools of blood, the whole scene being lit by sets of red lights placed in the furnace firing the oven.⁴⁵

The tale of Sweeney Todd, therefore, demonstrated the potential for gross, unrestrained violence, actual, visual, and metaphorical, under the cloak of an expanding and unregulated metropolis. Revisionist histories of urbanisation in nineteenth-century London have alternatively argued that the most intensive and socially disruptive period of urbanisation in the metropolis occurred during the eighteenth century, or that during the nineteenth century the newly urbanising centres were actually quite a distance from London.⁴⁶ Moreover, historians' investigations into the social life of the urban working class have revealed the existence and importance of established communities, focusing attention on the close-knit ties of interdependence within working-class neighbourhoods.⁴⁷ F.M.L. Thompson has claimed that these community structures ensured cohesion and orderliness, and were the primary reason why 'the anomie, anarchy and collapse of social order, so much feared by early Victorian observers, never materialized.'⁴⁸

Historians such as Thompson are right to remind us that rapid urbanisation and population growth in London did not lead to social breakdown, manifested in rising levels of crime and even riots. But the sense of 'anomie' and 'urban alienation' can

still exist in other locations and hold as much importance as imagined, rather than real, dragons.⁴⁹ Until recently, much of the analysis of the impact of urbanisation has been largely functional, highlighting eighteenth-century continuities, the persistence of actual networks, and the existence of tangible artefacts. However, tactile neighbourly networks can co-exist alongside contradictory perceptions that emphasize the fragility of communities and exaggerate the dark consequences of urban life in the popular imagination. And the manifestation of these perceptions in the various genres of popular culture can tell us a very different story about the experience of life in the nineteenth-century city.

Fears associated with anonymity and community fragility caused by the rapid growth of the city and the constant movement of its population did have some basis in fact. As Roy Porter has explained, during the nineteenth century 'London's districts were ever in flux, turbulent eddies of change, as citizens frequently moved on, to avoid going down in the world.'⁵⁰ Even F.M.L. Thompson has to acknowledge the frequency with which working people changed their addresses: no more than one fifth of families stayed at the same house from one census to the next.⁵¹ Moreover, how much London really changed in a physical sense in the transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries actually mattered very little. Melodramatic plays and penny bloods were dominated by a sense of nostalgia and promulgated myths of a past golden age. This theme was central to the inherently conservative outlook of early Victorian popular culture as the simplicities of past or village life were 'preferred to the city where order was overturned and custom replaced by lawlessness'.⁵²

Therefore, accounts of criminal activity in cheap fiction typically emphasized the ease of concealment in the dense, anonymous metropolis. G.W.M. Reynolds's

Mysteries of London (1844-56), published at the same time as 'The String of Pearls', presented to readers gloomy labyrinths of dark, frightening streets and alleys. As Reynolds's writes of one infamous district, the Mint, 'the houses ... give one the idea of those dens in which murder may be committed without the least chance of detection ... yet that district swarms with population.'⁵³ The theme is replicated in 'factual' accounts of violent crime presented to the very same audience in broadsides and the new Sunday press. Reports of horrendous murders routinely opened with a declaration of the terrible nature of the crime and the shock experienced in the local neighbourhood on its discovery. These statements were followed by accounts of witnesses who either revealed that the murder might have been prevented if members of the community had not turned a blind eye, or highlighted significant gaps in local knowledge that allowed such a horrid crime to occur.

In 'The String of Pearls', the social evil of anonymity is successfully encapsulated in the character of the villain, Sweeney Todd, who, under the dark cloak of the metropolis, and by taking advantage of the fragility of modern urban communities, could continue to operate his murder machine for years without raising the suspicions of his neighbours. Although some thought the barber was 'a little cracked', the people in the local community genuinely respected this seemingly well-to-do businessman.⁵⁴ His portrait on the first number of the 1850 novelette further emphasizes his external normality. The illustration suggests that Todd is obviously the villain of the tale, but readers accustomed to stock characters would have understood that others in the story were easily deceived (see fig. 3).



Figure 3: Portrait of Sweeney Todd on the cover of the first number of the 1850 penny novelette. [Prest], *The String of Pearls* (1850). (c) British Library Board. All Rights Reserved. C.140.d.6

Anonymity and community instability again arise in the selection of the serial killer's victims. On the one hand, Sweeney Todd and Mrs Lovett prey upon strangers, new arrivals to the metropolis, without family or friends to track their movements. Todd pulls the frightful lever to dispose of Captain Thornhill, a gentleman recently returned from sea, and Mrs Lovett imprisons a new baker in the ghastly vaults, the self-proclaimed orphaned and friendless Jarvis Williams.⁵⁵ On the other hand, opportunity dictates that Todd and Lovett must sometimes select their victims from within the community. While Mrs Lovett uses her charm to encourage the local law

students who dine at her shop to visit her friend, the barber, for a shave, local men with family and even substantial connections who visit Todd's shop also vanish without trace, their loved ones appearing at various points in the narrative to question their mysterious disappearance.⁵⁶

As an increasing number of Londoners, from the 'born and bred' to the recently arrived, fall victim to Todd's murder machine, we can see how it acts as a particularly potent metaphor for the early-nineteenth century metropolis, touching upon a range of fears about death in the city. Urban mortality remained a critical problem in the nineteenth century and which had been intensified by the accelerated growth of the city. London's population remained incapable of reproducing itself let alone furnishing any natural increase during the first half of the century. The rising population was, in large part, sustained by the influx of immigrants from the countryside of south-east England.⁵⁷ The 1830s and 1840s, when penny bloods flourished and the tale of Sweeney Todd was conceived, were also two especially bad decades for life expectancy. Poor nutrition and squalid living conditions encouraged the spread of disease and increased mortality rates.⁵⁸ Thus, like the mid-nineteenth century metropolis, Todd's machine both sucked in newcomers, shattering their hopes and expectations, while also voraciously devouring the local population. The large number of victims, their anonymity and the mechanical nature of their deaths formed a frightening parallel with the condition of the faceless, poor, urban mass.

Hence the specific setting of the tale of Sweeney Todd in Fleet Street, the very heart of old London, and its popularity and resonance with its intended audience, as well as the persistent confusion and significance of the year in which the story is placed (sometimes c1785, sometimes a year early in the nineteenth century). The narrative invoked their particular fears about urban change as it directly reflected

contemporary debates about modern urban governance and regulation, or more accurately, the lack of it. Programmes of metropolitan improvement and beautification centred mainly on the fashionable West End, and when these plans did encroach on the old City, street widening and slum clearance tended to exacerbate problems in neighbouring slums as no provisions were made for the newly homeless poor. Certainly little effort was made by the authorities to upgrade old infrastructure to support the growing population. Such problems were replicated in the expanding districts to the south and especially to the east of the City, where the combination of jerry-building, high rents and overcrowding created new slums. Without serious government intervention and regulation, old London hung like a yoke around the necks of nineteenth-century lower-class Londoners, restrictive and strangling.

The situation came to a head during the 1840s. As discussion of the issues associated with urbanisation raged in all sections of London, the government launched a series of inquiries into sanitation and the interment of the dead, both touched upon in the tale of Sweeney Todd. Slum-dwellers were not blind to the sights or immune to the smells in their living-quarters, but also appeared before the Select Committee in 1840 to give an account of the maladies and hardships they suffered.⁵⁹ For example, witnesses gave vent to the problem of animal slaughter houses located in densely populated neighbourhoods in the very centre of town, another issue which regularly featured in the establishment and popular press throughout the decade. Old slaughterhouses in Smithfield as well as new ones opened by enterprising butchers in surrounding districts in the cellars beneath their shops, rather like Sweeney Todd's, familiarized local residents with disturbing sights, as there were no adequate drains or waste systems to remove the blood and discarded animal matter. James Pennethorne, a building surveyor, told the Committee that Rose Lane, 'which is, perhaps, one of the

best streets about that part of Spitalfields, I have seen...completely flooded with blood from the slaughterhouse.⁶⁰ But of much more concern was the smell of the putrid animal matter filling the surrounding streets, which many believed led to outbreaks of disease and fatalities.⁶¹

Population growth combined with high urban mortality had led to overcrowding in both old, confined inner-city churchyards and new burial grounds in the East End and south London, locations that the labouring poor were forced to use and reside next to through lack of money. Outrageous sights often confronted those attending funerals and those whose windows overlooked churchyards. To make room for new interments, gravediggers were often forced to unearth relatively fresh graves and chop-up bodies for alternative disposal.⁶² And those who did not witness these scenes read about them in the popular press.⁶³ Mutilations of corpses by gravediggers and by Sweeney Todd clashed unambiguously with popular ideas and beliefs about death and the body. As a strong tie was perceived to exist between the body and the soul for an undefined period of time after death, the preservation and totality of the corpse was of paramount importance in preparing the dead for their journey into, and life in, the next world.⁶⁴ However, where the gravediggers inadequately disposed of the body parts they chopped up, Sweeney Todd turned his victims into a valuable commodity. Todd's murder machine could, therefore, be regarded as macabre solution to the mounting dead in the city.

Furthermore, although the resurrection man continued to occupy a central place in the public nightmare, the Anatomy Act of 1832 had transformed these traditional, inherited fears into very modern ones. Through this legislation, the government effectively legalized a branch of the trade in bodies by bequeathing the unclaimed workhouse dead to the anatomy schools, thus placing this horrid and

offensive fate within the realm of possibility for all of limited or unstable incomes.⁶⁵ The factory-like construction and discipline of the Victorian workhouse could only have made matters worse, and perhaps served as an inspiration for Thomas Prest as he wrote 'The String of Pearls'. Here was a murder machine designed to deal with the urban masses and ensure that their remains would be put to good use. Popular fears even generated rumours that 'children in workhouses were killed to make pies with', and that the bodies of aged paupers 'were employed to manure the guardians' fields to save the expense of coffins'.⁶⁶

While as many bodies as possible continued to be crammed beneath the soil of the churchyards, other more enterprising sextons and private individuals tried other methods to cope with the large numbers of urban dead, including the use of vaults or cellars directly beneath places of human use and habitation.⁶⁷ What horrified the public most about these interments was that the bodies, within such close proximity to the living and without adequate protection, posed a real danger to human life. The belief that decaying bodies emitted noxious gases which often made people sick and, with enough exposure, could kill, had become fairly widespread in London society.⁶⁸ Stories about new and old vaults being opened and workmen suffering disease and death from the dreadful odours which poured into the air circulated in society and fed into urban myths that pervaded popular culture, such as that of Sweeney Todd. Congregations throughout nineteenth-century London, it would seem, were frequently disturbed by the stench of the dead who lay beneath the floor or in the yard outside.⁶⁹

St Dunstan's Church in Fleet Street, under which Todd stored the bodies of his victims until they could be put into pies, had been the centre of a controversy just a decade earlier when the vaults of the church were opened as part of the renovations. Because of the danger, the labourers employed for the job were supplied with brandy

and were only able to complete the removal of bodies ‘under the influence of a half-drunken excitement’. Within a just a few hours, one labourer, William Mutton, ‘complained of a nauseous taste in the mouth and throat, severe pain in the chest, accompanied with a cough’. His skin soon turned yellow, and when removing his last body he ‘was rendered unconscious for a considerable period’. Mutton’s death soon after this was attributed to the effect of the effluvium.⁷⁰ This tale may well have been part of the inspiration for the story of Sweeney Todd and perhaps the memory of bodies being removed from vaults underneath that church lent some credibility to ‘The String of Pearls’, which, after all, was often advertised to have been ‘founded on fact’.⁷¹

Having raised concerns about the consequences of the emergence of industrial capitalism and played upon the anxieties of the labouring classes in relation to specific aspects of urban life, how was such discomfort and fear assuaged to the point at which the story of Sweeney Todd could become pleasurable and entertaining? The answer is to be found in its fashioning into a melodramatic framework in both the printed and theatrical versions. Melodramas, for the most part, featured either happy endings or moral resolutions in which virtue triumphed conclusively over the evil forces that had dominated at narratives’ openings. In one sense, these endings were cathartic. While repetitive, extreme violence built layer upon layer of tension and expectation in audiences, the brutal punishment of the offender[s] at the conclusion generated cathartic pleasure.⁷²

Yet, in another sense, happy or moral endings point to the underlying function of violent plays and serials as a method for coping with urban growth. The critique of the modern city contained in ‘The String of Pearls’ did not offer any solutions, nor contain any calls for change, nor vocalize any protest. Instead, the story, like other

violent fictional tales in these genres, acted as an important safety valve, providing a mechanism through which audiences could give vent to social frustrations. The specific functions of popular cultural genres are something historians are only just beginning to devote more attention to, for the very important detail they provide on the popular mentality and experience. For example, Karl Bell has recently shown how supernatural folktales were used by the lower-class inhabitants of nineteenth-century Norwich and Manchester as one way of ‘mentally mapping the ever-changing urban landscape’. Although magic tales had roots in pre-industrial society, in the nineteenth-century environment they offered individuals and communities an alternative imaginative interpretation of social change, helping them to adapt to urbanisation.⁷³

As Rohan McWilliam has written, melodrama was a form that encouraged comfort and certainty through the operation of narrative closure.⁷⁴ Melodramas assisted in the process of assimilation in a time of social upheaval and disruption, by demonstrating ‘how difficult circumstances could be endured and even turned to victory.’⁷⁵ Although ‘The String of Pearls’ evoked fear, audiences’ feelings of terror were transformed into pleasure. They were offered palatable reassurances about everyday life in the variety of endings different writers chose to conclude the story. Thomas Prest’s original tale in the *People’s Periodical and Family Library* closed with the reunion of the lovers, Johanna Oakley and Mark Ingestrie, as the cook masquerading as Jarvis Williams was discovered to be the long-lost sailor on his liberation from Mrs Lovett’s bakehouse.⁷⁶ Even in versions where the lovers are not reunited, the tale of Sweeney Todd always concludes with the detection of Todd and Lovett’s enterprise and their eradication. In stage adaptations, this scene was often especially dramatic. In George Dibdin Pitt’s ‘Fiend of Fleet Street’ at the Britannia Theatre, an angry mob and troop of soldiers flood the stage to hunt Todd down and

exact justice. Lovett's pie-shop is burnt to the ground by the infuriated locals. As the soldiers attempt to arrest the barber, the mob breaks into the building and Todd is murdered by them as the curtain falls.⁷⁷

Moreover, any sense of protest against social conditions was further muted, and overall pleasure increased by the inclusion of comic interludes in both the serials and stage adaptations. While comic characters in scenes or sub-plots largely unrelated to the predominant story line diverted attention and provided a sense of relief, audiences were also invited to laugh at the most disturbing aspect of the tale, the transformation of Todd's victims into pies. On stage, Mrs Lovett's new baker, Jarvis Williams, receives a shock when he discovers, in a carefully arranged sequence, extra ingredients in the delicious pies he has been invited to consume, from a thumbnail to a portion of a gentleman's breeches. These discoveries lead to a thorough inspection of the bakehouse, and the stranger takes some 'delight' in comparing the size of the bones of a victim to his own.⁷⁸ Similarly, who could not shiver and laugh with disbelief at the same time at that chilling passage included above, in which Todd offers Mrs Wrangle a pie that potentially contained the remains of her unfortunate husband.⁷⁹

It is through this extreme theme of cannibalism that we can trace a crucial line of continuity from the narrative of Sawney Beane in the eighteenth century to Sweeney Todd in the nineteenth century. The concept of devouring human flesh was always meant to be, in one sense, horrendous and terrifying for audiences. Cannibalism draws upon the very darkest part of the human psyche. But by doing this, the narratives provide an outlet for taboo fantasies while managing these through the outrageous presentation of the methods of production and consumption of human foodstuffs. Audiences were never meant to take these stories too seriously. Both

Sawney Beane and Sweeney Todd were held responsible for significant depopulations of their localities. In Todd's lodgings above the barber shop whole rooms are filled with articles he has stolen from his victims:

in one corner, an enormous number of walking sticks ... in another corner a great number of umbrellas – in fact, at least one hundred of them; boots and shoes lying on the floor partially covered; thirty or forty swords of different styles and patterns; in another cupboard, a great number of watches, gold chains, silver and gold snuff boxes, a large assortment of rings, shoe buckles and broaches.⁸⁰

Similarly, the Beane family were said to have murdered at least one thousand men, women and children.⁸¹ Not even they had the appetite to consume all these people, and so 'in the night time they frequently threw arms and legs of the unhappy [victims] into the Sea...The limbs were often cast up by the tide in several parts of the country, to the astonishment and terror of all the beholders, and others who had heard of it.'⁸² Such vast quantities, the murder and consumption of people on such a terrific scale, detached and desensitized audiences. Thus the excess, black humour and mocking tone of early modern popular culture continued to shape popular culture during the first half of the nineteenth century.

But the presence of continuities in these narratives points to an even deeper function of the tale of Sweeney Todd which makes it very different from the Sawney Beane story and explains its place within early Victorian popular culture. As a penny blood and theatrical melodrama, 'The String of Pearls' shared at least one crucial characteristic with other serialized stories, other melodramas, forms of itinerant street

entertainment, broadsides and the emerging Sunday press: the gross presentation of extreme interpersonal violence. The theme of violence was a hangover from the pre-industrial popular culture, as evident in the Sawney Beane story, the popular literature of crime more generally, and in the range of violent sports on offer. However, in the experience of social upheaval during the early nineteenth century, some of which has been described above, in the crackdown on violent sports, and in the emergence of new technologies, particularly in printing, the representation of violence was intensified – it became more prevalent in popular culture and was much more visually extreme. And in this sense, it did become a form of protest by the labouring classes, or those who continued to form the audience for these various genres. Extreme violence was a useful way in which to assert the place of popular culture within the mainstream, flying in the face of an increasingly prominent or even hegemonic culture supported by the new middle class and characterized by restraint and respectability.

THE DEMON BARBER

During the 1870s, the character of Sweeney Todd became dislocated from his original setting. From the middle decades of the nineteenth century onwards, the process of commercialisation and the emergence of mass culture had gathered significant pace, marginalising or transforming the various genres that comprised early Victorian popular culture. In this context, again we glimpse the archetypal potential of the serial killer, the ability of this figure to appeal across class, gender and age. In 1878, Sweeney Todd again appeared in print, although in the form of the part-issue penny dreadful intended for a new market: adolescent boys.⁸³ At the same time, the tradition of popular theatre began to recede and the middle classes formed new audiences for

melodrama. Traditional themes gave way to more silver-fork content and audience behaviour became much more orderly.⁸⁴ Early melodramas that survived began to be regarded by mass audiences as rather quaint, as objects of nostalgia. George Dibdin Pitt's 'The String of Pearls' continued to entertain these patrons, but the 1883 published version of the play gives us a sense of just how much the narrative had changed. The violence of the play was retained, most likely to satisfy the taste for spine-chilling 'old-style' melodramatic 'knee-tremblers'. But other crucial elements were removed. Most notably, the lovers Johanna Oakley and Mark Ingestrie failed to be reunited in the conclusion, and as the play ends with Sweeney Todd fainting at the sight of a revived Ingestrie whilst before the court, retributive justice is not realized.⁸⁵

These transformations gave the story a fresh appeal and were, on the one hand, time-bound. During the late Victorian period, as attention focused on the notion of the 'criminal other', popular science, in particular phrenology, was used to buttress the theory that criminals were a distinct, hereditary race, degenerates marked by peculiar physical and mental traits. The focus was now placed on the physical characteristics of Sweeney Todd that set him apart from normal people. In Charles Fox's 1878 penny dreadful, Todd, in illustration, represents the stereotype of the criminal other, with his retarded growth, uncivilized ape-like structure, and disproportionately-sized head (see fig. 4).

On the other hand, transformations also constituted an attempt to make the story of Sweeney Todd timeless. He is turned into a character of horror, rather than terror, a type of bogeyman located in the world of nightmares instead of the everyday. The addition of a new word to the title of his story in print was no accident: Todd became the *Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. But most telling was the new attention given to the abnormalities and even supernatural occurrences surrounding his birth

and childhood. We are told that even Todd did not know his own age, as the church he was christened at was burnt down the day after, his mother and father were dead, the nurse who cared for him was hanged and the doctor had cut his own throat.⁸⁶ Finally, at the very moment that Sweeney Todd was hanged, ‘the ruins of his shop in Fleet Street fell with a thundering crash, and ... the dust and ashes hovering in the air took the form of a huge gibbet, with the figure of a man suspended upon it.’⁸⁷

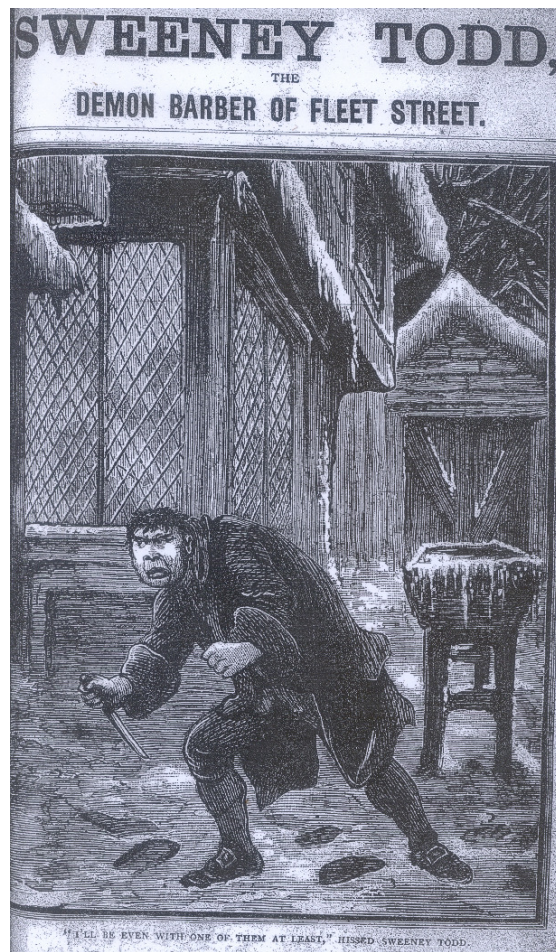


Figure 4: The new depiction of Sweeney Todd used for the cover of issue 38 of the 1878 reprint. [Charlton Lea?] *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1878). (c) British Library Board. All Rights Reserved. C.140.d.7

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¹ [T.P. Prest?] 'The String of Pearls', *People's Periodical and Family Library*, 1 (1846), p. 219.

² Ibid.

³ For example, Martin J. Wiener, 'Alice Arden to Bill Sikes: Changing Nightmares of Intimate Violence in England, 1558-1869', *Journal of British Studies*, 40 (2001), pp. 184-212, Judith R. Walkowitz, 'Jack the Ripper and the Myth of Male Violence', *Feminist Studies*, 8 (1982), pp. 542-74, especially pp. 544 and 563. For the use of such narratives in early-modern and modern America, see Karen Hulttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

⁴ Vanessa McMahon, *Murder in Shakespeare's England* (London, 2004), pp. 223-32. See also Bernard Capp, 'Serial Killers in Seventeenth-Century England', *History Today* (March 1996), pp. 21-6. And for the recent interest in Victorian serial poisoners, see Ian Burney, *Poison, Detection and the Victorian Imagination* (Manchester, 2006), Katherine Watson, *Poisoned Lives: English Poisoners and Their Victims* (London, 2004) and Angus McLaren, *A Prescription for Murder: The Victorian Serial Killings of Dr Thomas Neill Cream* (Chicago, 1995).

⁵ For example, Peter Haining, *Sweeney Todd, the Real Story of the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (London, 1993), Michael Anglo, *Penny Dreadfuls and other Victorian Horrors* (London, 1977), E.S. Turner, *Boys will be Boys: The Story of Sweeney Todd, Deadwood Dick, Sexton Blake, Billy Bunter, Dick Barton, et al* (London, 1973), Ronald Holmes, *The Legend of Sawney Bean* (London, 1975).

⁶ Sally Powell, 'Black Markets and Cadaverous Pies: The Corpse, Urban Trade and Industrial Consumption in the Penny Blood', in Andrew Maunder and Grace Moore (eds), *Victorian Crime, Madness and Sensation* (Aldershot, 2004), pp. 45-58.

⁷ McMahon, *Murder in Shakespeare's England*, pp. 223-32.

⁸ *The Bloody Innkeeper; or Sad and Barbarous News from Gloucester-shire: Being A True Relation how the Bodies of Seven Men and Women were found Murthered in a Garden belonging to a House in Putley, near Glocester. With the strange and miraculous manner how the same was discovered by a Smith that lately took the House, digging to set up his Anvil, and finding a Knife in one of the Bodies* (London, 1675), p. 3.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

¹¹ See, for example, *A Warning Piece Against the Crime of Murder; or An Account of Many Extraordinary and Most Providential Discoveries of Secret Murders* (London, 1752), the tale of Jonathan Bradford in *The Cries of Blood, or the Juryman's Monitor. Being an Authentic and Faithful Narrative of the Lives and Deaths of Several Unhappy Persons* (London, 1767), pp. 41-7, Mathew G. Lewis, *The Monk* (London, 1796), also contains a version of this narrative (Chapter III: The history of Don Raymond).

¹² Captain Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Lives and Adventures of the Most Famous Highwaymen, Murderers, Street Robbers, etc* (London, 1734), pp. 132.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 133. Other metropolitan publications of Sawney Beane include: *The History of Sawney Beane and His Family, Robbers and Murderers* (London, n.d., probably c1700), Scotland, National Library (NLS), Lauriston Castle Collection, LC.2737 no.7., Captain Alexander Smith, *Memoirs of the Life and Times of the Famous Jonathan Wild, Together with the History and Lives of Modern Rogues* (London, 1726), pp. 138-44, Captain Mackdonald, *A General History of the Lives and Adventures of the Most Famous Highwaymen, Murderers, Robbers and Thief-Takers* (London, 1758), pp. 155-61, *The History of Sawney Beane and His Family, Robbers and Murderers* (London, 1800?), *The Life of Richard Turpin, A Notorious Highwayman...To which is added, The Life of Sawney Beane, The Man-Eater* (London, 1800), pp. 43-8.

¹⁵ Lincoln B. Faller, *Turned to Account: The Forms and Functions of Criminal Biography in Late-Seventeenth and Early-Eighteenth Century England* (Cambridge, 1987), Faller, 'Criminal Opportunities in the Eighteenth Century: The "Ready-Made" Contexts of the Popular Literature of Crime', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 24 (1987), p. 121, Philip Rawlings, *Drunks, Whores and Idle Apprentices: Criminal Biographies of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1992), Andrea McKenzie, *Tyburn's Martyrs: Executions in England, 1675-1775* (London, 2007), chs. 2, 3, 4 & 5.

¹⁶ Johnson, *A General History*, pp. 132-3.

¹⁷ Ibid., Mackdonald, *A General History*, p. 157, Smith, *Memoirs of the Life and Times*, p. 140.

¹⁸ L.D. Schwarz, *London in the Age of Industrialisation: Entrepreneurs, Labour Force and Living Conditions, 1700-1850* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 3-4, 7-11, Schwarz, 'London, 1700-1840', in Peter Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain* (3 vols., Cambridge, 2000), II, pp. 644-54,

Robert Shoemaker, *The London Mob: Violence and Disorder in Eighteenth-Century London* (London, 2004). See also comparisons made by Henry Mayhew between the nature of crime in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London: Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (4 vols., London, 1861), IV, pp. 326-30.

¹⁹ Hal Gladfelder, *Criminality and Narrative in Eighteenth-Century England: Beyond the Law* (Baltimore, 2001). See also Gillian Spraggs, *Outlaws and Highwaymen: The Cult of the Robber in England from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (London, 2001).

²⁰ McKenzie, *Tyburn's Martyrs*, V.A.C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770-1868* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 114-7.

²¹ Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, pp. 156-61, David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 201, Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, I, pp. 220 & 284, Charles Hindley, *The History of the Catnach Press* (London, 1886), p. 92.

²² For example, 'The Monster of Scotland', *Terrific Register*, 1 (1825), pp. 161-3. In his study of the myth of Sawney Beane, Ronald Holmes refers to a penny blood version of the tale written by Thomas Peckett Prest and published by Edward Lloyd during the 1840s, entitled, *Sawney Bean; the Man Eater of Mid-Lothian*. However, I can find no trace of this version. See Holmes, *The Legend of Sawney Bean* (London, 1975), p. 22.

²³ R. Pratt, 'The Murderers', *Lloyd's Penny Atlas*, 1 (1843), pp. 738-40. See also John Kane, 'The Guilty Father; or the Murderer of the Hovel', *Lloyd's Penny Atlas*, 1 (1843), pp. 241-2, anon, 'The Murderers of Penruddock', *Lloyd's Penny Miscellany*, 2 (1844), pp. 1-3, James Turner, 'The Murder at the Inn', *Lloyd's Penny Miscellany*, 2 (1844), pp. 689-95.

²⁴ Thomas Frost, *Forty Years' Recollections, Literary and Political* (London, 1880), pp. 89-90.

²⁵ Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, I, pp. 25-6, 416, III, pp. 388-9, II, pp. 474, 495, Thomas Okey, *A Basketful of Memories: An Autobiographical Sketch* (London, 1930), p. 20.

²⁶ [T.P. Prest?] *Retribution; or the Murder at the Old Dyke* (London, 1846), pp. 1-20, especially p. 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 183-9.

²⁸ Prest, 'The String of Pearls' (1846-7), pp. 98-9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 361-3 & 368.

³⁰ 'Horrible Affair in the Rue de la Harpe at Paris', *Terrific Register*, 2 (1826), pp. 310-12.

³¹ 'Joddrel the Barber; or, Mystery Uncovered', *Lloyd's Penny Atlas*, 2 (1844), pp. 705-6.

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- ³² [Thomas Peckett Prest?] *The String of Pearls; or, the Barber of Fleet Street. A Domestic Romance* (London, 1850).
- ³³ Playbill from the Britannia Theatre, Monday 1 March 1847, London, British Library (BL), BL.376, George Dibdin Pitt, 'The String of Pearls; or, the Fiend of Fleet Street', February 1847, London, British Library (BL), Additional Manuscripts (Add Mss) 43000, pp. 753-815.
- ³⁴ For example, these scripts were submitted to the Lord Chamberlain for licensing: Anon, 'The String of Pearls', February to March 1861, BL, Add Mss 53001, fo. f., Mrs H. Young, 'The String of Pearls; or, the Life and Death of Sweeney Todd', May to July 1862, BL, Add Mss, 53014, fo. bb. Frederick Hazleton, *Sweeney Todd, The Barber Fiend of Fleet Street; or, the String of Pearls* (London, 18??), but performed in 1862 at the Bower Saloon in Stangate.
- ³⁵ Powell, 'Black Markets', p. 46.
- ³⁶ Powell, 'Black Markets', pp. 46-8, Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London, 1988), pp. 51-60.
- ³⁷ Powell, 'Black Markets', pp. 49-50.
- ³⁸ Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (London, 1983), p. 48, John Burnett, *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Food in England from 1815 to the Present Day* (3rd edn., London, 1989), pp. 86-98.
- ³⁹ Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Literature* (London, 1974), p. 15, *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, 10 September 1843, p. 2, 7 January 1855, p. 3, 7 January 1855, p. 11, 6 April 1856, p. 7, 24 August 1856, p. 5, 16 November 1856, p. 5, 12 February 1860, p. 10.
- ⁴⁰ Powell, 'Black Markets', pp. 51-3.
- ⁴¹ *Evidence by Dr Guy Before the Sanitary Commission in Reference to Persons Employed in the Baking Trade* (Parliamentary Papers [hereafter PP], 1847-48, LI), pp. 1-3.
- ⁴² Pitt, 'The String of Pearls; or the Fiend of Fleet Street', Act 2 Scene 3.
- ⁴³ Rohan McWilliam, *The Tichborne Claimant: A Victorian Sensation* (London, 2007), p. 256.
- ⁴⁴ Prest, 'The String of Pearls' (1846-7), pp. 380-3.
- ⁴⁵ Young, 'The String of Pearls; or, the Life and Death of Sweeney Todd', Act 1, Scene 5, and see also anon, 'The String of Pearls'.

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- ⁴⁶ Shoemaker, *The London Mob*, John Langton, 'Urban Growth and Economic change: From the Late-Seventeenth Century to 1841', in Clark, *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, II, p. 487, David Eastwood, 'The Age of Uncertainty: Britain in the Early-Nineteenth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 8 (1998), pp. 91-115, John Stevenson, 'Social Aspects of the Industrial Revolution', in Patrick O'Brien and Roland Quinault (eds), *The Industrial Revolution and British Society* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 235.
- ⁴⁷ Schwarz, 'London, 1700-1840', in Clark, *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, III, pp. 647, 654, Pamela Sharpe, 'Population and Society, 1700-1840', in Clark, *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, III, pp. 513-27, Ellen Ross, 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War One', *History Workshop Journal*, 15 (1983), pp. 4-27.
- ⁴⁸ F.M.L. Thompson, 'Town and City', in F.M.L. Thompson, *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1990), I, p. 57.
- ⁴⁹ Similar sentiments expressed by these historians: Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain, 1851-1875* (London, 1971), p. 9 and P.I. Garside, 'London and the Home Counties', in Thompson, *Cambridge Social History of Britain*, I, p. 489.
- ⁵⁰ Porter, *London*, p. 252.
- ⁵¹ Thompson, 'Town and City', p. 56.
- ⁵² Rohan McWilliam, 'Melodrama and the Historians', *Radical History Review*, 78 (2000), p. 59.
- ⁵³ G.W.M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* (2nd Series, 4 vols., London, 1844-48), II, pp. 187-8.
- ⁵⁴ Prest, 'The String of Pearls' (1846-7), p. 98, [Prest] *The String of Pearls; or, the Barber of Fleet Street* (1850), p. 2.
- ⁵⁵ Prest, 'The String of Pearls' (1846-7), pp. 98-9, 162-5, [Prest] *The String of Pearls; or, the Barber of Fleet Street* (1850), pp. 4-7, 56-9.
- ⁵⁶ Prest, 'The String of Pearls' (1846-7), pp. 115, 313-5, 367-8, [Prest] *The String of Pearls; or, the Barber of Fleet Street* (1850), pp. 17-20.
- ⁵⁷ Schwarz, *London in the Age of Industrialisation*, p. 128.
- ⁵⁸ Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People: England, 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 574-6, Simon Szreter and Anne Hardy, 'Urban Fertility and Mortality Patterns', in Martin Daunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain* (3 vols., Cambridge, 2000), III, p. 671, Simon Szreter and Graham Mooney, 'Urbanisation, Mortality and the Standard of Living Debate: New Estimates of the

Expectation of Life at Birth in Nineteenth-Century British Cities', *Economic History Review*, 51

(1998), pp. 84-112, Thompson, 'Town and City', p. 49.

⁵⁹ *Select Committee on the Health of Towns* (PP, 1840, XI) [Hereafter SC (1840)].

⁶⁰ SC (1840), p. 167.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, evidence of Dr Neil Arnott, p. 37, evidence of George Samuel Jenks, p. 165.

⁶² *Select Committee on the Improvement of the Health of Towns: Report on the Effect of Interment of*

Bodies in Towns (PP, 1842, X) [Hereafter SC (1842)], evidence of William Chamberlain, p. 130,

Thomas Munns, p. 28, George Whittaker, p. 20.

⁶³ For example, in *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 23 March 1845, p. 3, 24 August 1845, p. 5, 9 September 1849, p. 5, 16 September 1849, p. 5, 30 September 1849, p. 5, 21 October 1849, p. 5, 2 June 1850, p. 1, 18 December 1853, p. 7.

⁶⁴ Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, p. 7.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-60.

⁶⁶ M.A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System, 1834-1929: The History of an English Social Institution* (London, 1981), p. 31.

⁶⁷ SC (1842), evidence of Rev. John Channing Abdy, pp. 81-2.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, evidence of John Irwin, pp. 5-8, evidence of Moses Solomons, p. 12, evidence of George Whittaker, p. 20, James Michael Lane, p. 32, William Miller, p. 85.

⁶⁹ SC (1840), evidence of George Alfred Walker, pp. 188, 211-3, 217, SC (1842), evidence of Samuel Pitts, pp. 8-11, evidence of William Burn, pp. 14-16, Rev Henry John Knapp, p. 46, G.F. Collier, p. 114.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, evidence of Alfred George Walker, p. 214, SC (1842), appendix, letter from G.A. Walker to W.A. McKinnon M.P., 3 May 1842, p. 211.

⁷¹ [Prest] *The String of Pearls; or, the Barber of Fleet Street* (1850), Playbill from the Britannia Theatre, Monday 1 March 1847, BL.376.

⁷² Beth Kalikoff, *Murder and Moral Decay in Victorian Popular Literature* (Michigan, 1986), p. 28. See also James B. Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 16-27.

⁷³ Karl Bell, 'The Magical Imagination and Modern Urbanisation' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of East Anglia, 2007), chapter four, *passim*.

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- ⁷⁵ Martha Vicinus, 'Helpless and Unfriended: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama', *New Literary History*, 13 (1981), p. 131.
- ⁷⁶ Prest, 'The String of Pearls' (1846-7), p. 352.
- ⁷⁷ Pitt, 'The String of Pearls; or, the Fiend of Fleet Street', Act 2 Scene 5.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., Act 2 Scene 3, Thomas Erle, *Letters from a Theatrical Scene Painter* (London, 1880), p. 65.
- ⁷⁹ Prest, 'The String of Pearls' (1846-7), pp. 361-3 & 368.
- ⁸⁰ Prest, 'The String of Pearls' (1846-7), p. 219, [Prest], *The String of Pearls* (1850), p. 40.
- ⁸¹ Johnson, *A General History*, pp. 132-3, *The Life of Richard Turpin*, p. 44, Mackdonald, *A General History*, p. 156, Smith, *Memoirs of the Life and Times*, p. 141.
- ⁸² *The Life of Richard Turpin*, p. 44, Mackdonald, *A General History*, p. 156, Smith, *Memoirs of the Life and Times*, p. 139.
- ⁸³ [Charlton Lea?] *Sweeney Todd; the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (London, c1878).
- ⁸⁴ Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London, 1965), p. 202, Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840-1880* (Hatfield, 2001), pp. 38-9, 225, Gavin Weightman, *Bright Lights, Big City: London Entertained, 1830-1850* (London, 1992), pp. 110-13, 130-4.
- ⁸⁵ George Dibdin Pitt, 'The String of Pearls; or, the Fiend of Fleet Street' (1883), reprinted in Michael Kilgariff (ed.), *The Golden Age of Melodrama: Twelve Nineteenth-Century Melodramas* (London, 1974), pp. 246-62.
- ⁸⁶ *Sweeney Todd; the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, p. 390.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 576.