

**Demons into Dandies:
Comic Villains and Urban Economics in Victorian Literature**

by

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Abstract

This dissertation traces the evolution of comic villains through their antagonistic rapport with the most serious of Victorian enterprises: the economy. In particular, the development of villains is situated as a metaphoric shift from working-class “demons” into affluent, genteel “dandies” with purchasing power and minimal liability. Culturally, the development charts a transition from the laboring criminal to the idle investor.

The first chapter examines Fagin from Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) as a villain whose construction joins Victorian anxieties about counterfeiting and economic deceptiveness with Jewish stereotypes. Dickens situates Fagin’s identity between cultural fears about secondary markets and an increased distance between purchaser and seller in an expanding credit economy. Throughout the novel, Fagin is associated with the imitative, fictional, and Jewish. In contrast, honesty and truth are aligned with the middle-class, normative characters. This establishes a moral structure marked by comic incidence wherein marginalized figures are fodder for humor and irony, while the conventional heroes are sincere.

Chapter 2 investigates the anonymously published *The String of Pearls* (1846-7), which marks the first appearance of Sweeney Todd. It is a study in the economic anxieties provoked by a commercial figure who embodies conflicting class identities. Again, lines of demarcation are drawn between genuine and deceitful characters through a comic mechanism: in this instance, laughter. The construction of Sweeney Todd, I argue, grapples with a Victorian instinct to

eliminate the notion of physical presence from the economy's formal processes despite a traditional reliance upon physical class indicators.

The third chapter takes up the figure of the late-Victorian dandy through Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Conventional utilitarian economic thinking would hold that work and leisure, pleasure and pain, private and public, are distinct realms, but they often overlap and even replace each other. Wilde's dandies employ comic wit as a tool to disorient notions about the nature of truth. They function as economic villains in the sense that they are anti-productive (in several senses), but also because they disrupt the orderly binaries of private/public, good/bad, truth/lies through seemingly irrational substitutions.

The final chapter considers a comic opera by W.S Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan titled *Utopia, Limited* (1893). The general premise is that the difficulty of navigating a course for truth becomes nearly impossible after the enactment of limited-liability statutes. The new villain is the corporation, and its members are able to shield themselves as a group, leaving individuals to flounder. In a pointed critique, Gilbert conflates performed, corporate identity with genuine, private selves until life and language begin to reflect the same fragmented (and absurd) doctrine as property.

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Demons into Dandies: Comic Villains and Urban Economics in Victorian Literature

Introduction

“Crime becomes an absurdity when it is shown incongruously, out of proportion. Under the proper circumstances, murder can be comical. Von Clausewitz said that war is the logical extension of diplomacy; M. Verdoux feels that murder is the logical extension of business.”

--Charlie Chaplin defending his film, *Monsieur Verdoux: A Comedy of Murders* (1947)

This dissertation examines a group of Victorian literary villains through their relationships to the economic and capitalist cultural factors that inform their constructions. In particular, I will examine comic villains as a collective and describe their literary functions through the extension of pre-existing cultural theories. The framework I have selected for beginning to understand their function in literary history derives from the most serious of Victorian enterprises: the economy. How comedy and humor cooperate with the developing philosophies of Victorian industrial and financial capitalism through these villains changes over the course of the period, but the villains provide an uncanny set of paradoxes that come across most vividly through their antagonistic rapport with the economies in which they reside.

Due to a number of factors such as the availability of financial documents, the Industrial Revolution, the formation of an official stock exchange, the birth of private corporations, and the creation of modern credit instruments, the Victorian era provides an extensive set of primary sources. Cultural studies is the subfield that shapes the project's general contours. I explore the

parallels, as transmitted through literature, of the ideological dialogue between economic theory and literary representations. The aim is to enhance an appreciation of economics and its principles as being part of a lived, cultural phenomenon. In order to accomplish this style of critique, the specific approach of this dissertation seizes upon the principles of historicism, which allow me to exploit the many non-literary documents associated with financial discourse.

I have attempted to select a set of characters that serve as fair representations of the larger issues at stake and also function as turning points in the maturity of economic villainy through the period. The project is divided into five sections, comprised of an introduction and four chapters proper. The development of villains is situated as a metaphoric shift from working-class “demons” into affluent, genteel “dandies” with purchasing power and minimal liability. Theoretically, the move signifies a change from the laboring criminal to the idle capitalist. The villains in this study, even those convicted of illicit acts, prompt their greatest terror as villains in relation to the *system* of economy as designated through contemporary political economy.

For instance, Fagin in *Oliver Twist* may be a kidnapper, thief, and fencer, but his greatest “crime” is the manipulation of secondary markets and forging of identities: breaches of trust and representation. Placed into the context of the economic climate of the 1830s where concerns over Jewish financial wizardry and an equally, albeit opposite, mysterious criminal underworld converge in a figure such as Fagin we are left with a styling of Victorian myth. The larger mythology of a capitalist society of economic freedom and profit must have its monsters and a Fagin provides that counterpoint with the assistance of a set of Victorian prejudices and anxieties. Acts of villainy like this strike much deeper on the cultural register than officially illegal ones, and their amorphous quality offers an excellent set of case studies for examining the nuances of what Victorian writers and audiences approved of and disapproved of within their

world, along with the changing methods of regulating perceived transgressions. The primary cultural sources that best contextualize these villains are derived from attempts by Victorian social and economic commentators to make sense of the very issues of financial morality that appear in the literature. Their writings include responses and position pieces about trade restrictions, writing from political economists, forgery, banking and legal measures related to incorporation, and official testimonies before Parliament.

By the end of the century, the identity of the economic villain has become nearer in his presentation with that of the non-villain. I believe this softening of villains' appearances, along with their presence within the general flock is a result of complicated changes in the Victorian understanding of social networks, personal identity, and the creation of wealth. Over the course of several decades, beginning formally perhaps with the revocation of the Navigation Acts in 1849 and continuing with a series of limited-liability legal measures, a strong classical liberal sentiment takes root by the 1880s, particularly amongst the upper and middle-classes. The lack of trade restrictions, colonization, and blossoming corporate culture contributed to the extension of a new ruling class' influence that thrived off of a lack of governmental intrusion. The economic behaviors driven by sheer self-interest and the manipulation of various credit instruments, such as contracts, can no longer be seen as villainous—they are par for the course in a more fully privatized society. Urban expansion and subsequent economic progress has blurred the former distinctions that had once existed between dichotomies like inherited and earned, and friendship and deception. The “dandies” of Gilbert and Sullivan and Wilde comment upon and satirize this latest morality but are also informed by it on a deeper level. Incorporation and rabid consumption permanently fragmented identity and transferred responsibility and trust into things to be bought and measured through purchasing power. The freedoms desired by a business elite

privileged an attitude of individuality but, ironically, ended up producing strict new codes of conformity and “types” of characters (including villains).

This “Introduction” describes the relevant socioeconomic conditions that contributed to this change in Victorian villains and describe comedy’s role in that conversion.

I will briefly outline a history of relevant scholarship, establish definitions of pertinent economic terms, describe a cultural history of intersections between villainy and urban life, and offer an interpretative framework for reading the selected comic literature.

Scholarly Context

Within Victorian scholarship there has been some recent movement in the fields related to comedy and comic incidence. Most notably for the purposes of this current project, Matthew Kaiser’s *The World in Play: Portraits of a Victorian Concept* (Stanford, 2012) illustrates a new perspective on the important implications of “play” and leisure for both Victorians and their descendants. It is worth noting that Kaiser’s book also pays a significant amount of attention to the development of capitalist psychology and imagination in respect to play, seemingly recognizing the strange contradictory link between the grave potentials of the financial landscape and the deeply ironic aspect to the modern lives it creates. Similarly building off of those connections, there has been an outburst of nineteenth-century cultural work that engages the financial capitalism of Victorian England and the resultant transmission of literary art.¹

¹ *Personal Business: Character and Commerce in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Virginia, 2014) by Aeron Hunt; *Economic Woman: Demand, Gender, and Narrative Closure in Eliot and Hardy* (Toronto, 2012) by Deanna Kriesel; *Romances of Free Trade: British Literature, Laissez-Faire, and the Global Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2011) by Ayse Celikkol; Tanya Agathocleous’s *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2011); Eleanor Courtemanche’s *The ‘Invisible Hand’ and British Fiction, 1818-1860: Adam Smith, Political Economy, and the Genre of Realism* (Palgrave, 2011); Tamara Wagner’s *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction: Plotting Money and the Novel Genre* (Ohio State, 2010); Audrey Jaffe’s *The Affective Life of the Average Man: The Victorian Novel and the Stock Market Graph* (Ohio State, 2010); Sara Malton’s *Forgery in Nineteenth Century Literature and Culture: Fictions of Finance from Dickens to Wilde* (Palgrave, 2009); *Victorian Investments: New Perspectives on Finance and Culture* (2009) edited by Nancy Henry and Cannon Schmitt; Sara Thornton’s *Advertising, Subjectivity and the Nineteenth Century Novel: Dickens, Balzac,*

Due to a number of factors such as the availability of financial documents, the Industrial Revolution, the formation of an official stock exchange, the birth of private corporations, and the creation of modern credit instruments, the Victorian era has become the source of incredibly popular material for economic criticism. As the catalog of recent works listed in the footnote illustrates, the nineteenth century's economic critiques may be additionally inspired by concerns from the twenty first century's two major financial crises, both of which have pushed the financial system's credibility to the forefront of communal consciousness and carry high stakes for professional academics. It is of note that Woodmansee and Osteen identify the "political economy of the 1980s" as a motivating force for the emergence of the original attention to the topic in the 1990s (4).

Nancy Henry and Cannon Schmitt recognize two camps of approaches toward economic-driven scholarship that pervade Victorian studies and highlight the "inextricability" of financial and business concerns with nineteenth-century life. The first involves those works that function as pure cultural histories of related topics such as Timothy Alborn's *Conceiving Companies: Joint-Stock Politics in Victorian England* (1998) or *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914* (2008) by Margot Finn (2-3). The other involves the linking of specifically literary texts with either broad philosophical topics of contemporary political economy like Courtemanche's *The 'Invisible Hand' and British Fiction, 1818-1860* and *Romances of Free Trade* by Celikkol; or finding a way in which to read economic phenomenon through literature such as Wagner's *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction: Plotting Money*

and the Language of the Walls (Palgrave, 2009); and Kathleen Blake's *The Pleasures of Benthamism: Victorian Literature, Utility, Political Economy* (Oxford 2009) are all book-length works published within the past three years and explicitly address the role of either the philosophy of capitalism or transitions of cultural and literary values caused by changing circumstances related to urban economics.

and the Novel Genre and Jaffe's *The Affective Life of the Average Man: The Victorian Novel and the Stock Market Graph*. The manner and degree to which these latter works utilize economic developments varies and is difficult to classify beyond small groupings. Specifically, my goal is to scrutinize the ethical justifications of both "good" and "bad" economic behavior.

The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics was published in 1999 and presents itself as the first unified attempt at gathering the sources and variants of what the editors, Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen, saw happening in the humanities and labeled "economic criticism" (a term drawn from a 1994 conference). This long anthology collects twenty-two essays from across periods and breaks them into seven distinct sections coupled with a fifty-page introduction, all of which betray the early (and continued) difficulty of organizing this topic into a cohesive volume. Nevertheless, the writing maintains a focus upon theoretical implications of financial subjects like deficit spending, commodities, and panic in order to better understand associated literature and cultural products from throughout Western modernity. While some essays date up to twenty years prior to the collection's publication, the goal seems to be to signal an era of cultural critique that has not consciously been recognized before the late 1980s or early 1990s. The premise relies on an interdisciplinary area of cultural studies that promotes an improved understanding of art and culture through a historicizing of those components within an economic frame. Marc Shell is the earliest critic to explicitly describe literature as a series of "small tropic exchanges or metaphors" that can be understood either through the "signified economic content" (when present) or more commonly through the "form" of exchange (*The Economy of Literature*, 1978). This is still a starting point for discussions but also invokes a few of the difficulties inherent to the method. In the closing section of *The New Economic Criticism*, Jack Amariglio and David F. Ruccio offer a critique of

the fundamental dilemma facing this style of criticism, which is the long tradition of Marxist influence within English studies and associated disciplines. The trouble involved is twofold. First, as they point out, nearly anything can be protected beneath a metaphoric umbrella of concepts like “economy” or “exchange.” However, this alone may not justify calling a piece of scholarship “economic” in nature. I will implicitly address this question below through an explanation of my particular methodology and how it can be understood as differing from other studies on similar topics. But the second aspect requires further clarification.

While “economic criticism” may be a fairly recent development, Marx’s influence entails that literary critics have been practicing a form of economic critique for several generations. Beyond overt discussions of class and exploitation, Marxist theory often sets the groundwork for investigations of all marginalized subjects, social conflict, and myriad oppressions. However, “economic criticism” in this sense attempts a style of interpretation that involves economics but is not Marxist, and this is a difficult premise given the history of literary criticism. Jonathan Rose floated the term “capitalist criticism” at one point, but was met with less than enthusiastic response from fellow critics (Henry and Schmitt 2). Kathleen Blake addresses the implications of a similar tradition in *Pleasures of Benthamism*. She explains that literary studies exhibits an ideology “largely oppositional to Utilitarianism, capitalist, liberal, bourgeois values” (26). And while she does not necessarily disagree with those sentiments finds that they are often simplified into a paradigm lacking the appropriate balance and perspective given the ubiquity of political economy.

For instance, she recounts a number of well-known critics’ views on Dickens’ relationship to Utilitarianism, all of which identify his thought as part of a “counter-revolution” against industrialism with some minor acknowledgements of the inescapability of the system in

which he is writing. However, Blake's larger point, and I tend to concur, seems to be that literary and cultural critiques within the humanities can sometimes reach a point of diminishing returns when economics are in play because of the far reach of Marx's principles (as promoted through a century or more of historicist theory and criticism). This is not to say that those ideas are not worthwhile (and find expression in my own dissertation, especially chapters 2 and 4) but simply that they can lead to similar conclusions, when taken as an aggregate. The more fertile, and less tilled fields, may reside upon the horizon of formal economic models and the consequent functioning business practices; namely, how and why they developed as such and the ethical implications of that growth. In *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* Cather Gallagher describes a trend of criticism "more curious and tolerant about economic logic" and this regard for the methods of capitalism may be a good description of how I envision this style of analysis (192). The reason inherent within the choices made by political economists and businesses of the nineteenth century betray a certain logic (albeit not always sanctioned by contemporary scholars), which seeps into other cultural arenas such as daily life and the arts. I hope to expose and organize a small piece of that logic in this dissertation.

Although the full scope of a discussion about Marxism's role in respect to economic premises of literary studies extends well beyond the purposes of my dissertation, there remains one topic I wish to highlight because it proves fundamental to the organizing of significant themes for this project. I would like briefly to address the function of the Labor Theory of Value (LTV) as a grounding principle for nineteenth century economics and the subsequent marginal revolution that occurs around the 1870s (midpoint of the Victorian era) as two competing versions of measuring a commodity's worth but also as the primary division between "demons"

and “dandies.” As will be demonstrated, the LTV standards of economic value lend a greater emphasis to conceptions of crime as a phenomenon related to work, while the latter century (post-1870) builds anxiety through villains that exploit a relation to the Marginal Theory of Value.

Rationality and Risk

In 1833 Edward Bulwer Lytton described the strange relationship between crime and labor in England as such: “In other countries poverty is a misfortune—with us it is a crime.”² The ways crime becomes linked to poverty in the Victorian imagination are myriad and have filled countless volumes of nineteenth century newspapers and contemporary scholarly texts alike. How criminals and the poor were labeled and treated is demonstrated throughout the literature of the period and provides strong examples of what lifestyles and behaviors were deemed acceptable and which were not. For the purposes of this study, the question of labor brings together those topics of crime and poverty in a manner that underlines a crucial paradox within Victorian culture, which only grew more obvious and difficult to reconcile. Henry Mayhew and John Binny’s exhaustive 1862 study of prison life and the classes of people who made up the various populations of them, helps us to piece together how much Victorians saw individuals as responsible for contributing to the new economy’s needs and how those who did not fulfill expectations were handled. Phrases describing the “habitual indisposition,” assorted “dishonourable motives,” and definitions of the “dangerous classes” pepper the work and others like it, all the while pointing to the desire to find reason for the production of criminals. Why do some members of society have this disposition? Can they be “cured”?

² Bulwer-Lytton, Edward. *England and the English, Volume 1*. New York: J.J. Harper, 1833: 30. Google Books. Web. 2 March 2013.

Victorian criminologists revised their answers to these questions generation after generation but the difficulties never ceased. Although approaches to rehabilitation became more common in the second half of the century and hard labor came to be seen as either ineffective or cruel, the changes were gradual, to say the least. And labor is a theme that consistently lurks just below the surface of the rhetoric surrounding crime. The history of labor and its importance to the industrial movement is well-documented; however, a brief framing of the understanding of labor as a flexible economic concept in the nineteenth century will help to lend clarity to the changes that take place in the definitions of terms like “nobility” and what it means to be a “gentleman” in the financial and social senses of the label, and to understand what factors adjust constructions of villainy, as well.

Karl Marx was the last prominent economist to rely on LTV, a progeny of classical economics, and maintained a strong dedication to it until his death. The labor theory holds that the value of a good is relative to the amount of labor employed in its production. The more labor necessary for something to be made and come to market, then the more it should be worth, but the theory’s explanation is not the pertinent aspect of this digression. Belief in LTV shapes thought about labor itself and subsequent related topics like crime and productivity in a certain way. It privileges and, really demands, “physical dexterity” over “mental.” Labor is a measurable, almost tangible, reality. Imagine running on a treadmill that calculates how many calories you burn in such a time and at such a speed. That is analogous to how LTV declares value should be established. It maintains that labor can be gauged in a *real* and profound way.

The goal here is not to determine whether the labor theory of value is an effective judge of value, or how valid a labor theory of value is to very abstract pricing mechanisms that occur on a stock exchange. Rather, the social implications of this shift in the understanding of the

worth of labor and its relation to wealth are where I hope to situate the discussion. Who is perceived as a “hard worker” draws a sense of respectability and self from that perception while gaining as much cultural capital from his efforts as financial (Freedgood 9). As organizing tenets for this issue I have chosen the themes of rationality, risk, and the associative topic of trust (or credit) to mediate the cultural bridge between economics and ethics, in particular the urban setting’s manipulation of that association.

While LTV continued to serve a purpose into the twentieth century, the final several decades of the nineteenth (starting around 1870) mark the transition from the end of a labor theory of value as the privileged economic model about the value of commodities and the beginning of the present-day understanding of marginal utility value that is governed almost solely by supply and demand (and, notably, a declared feature of the “free” markets). Regenia Gagnier devotes the most attention of any literary critic to the topic of “Economic Man,” or *homo economicus*. The basis for economic man resides with the theoretical creation of an ideal participant in the economy. Fundamental to this construction is rationality. I intend *rationality* to be taken in the economic sense with some acknowledgements of the philosophical tradition from which it rises. To be “economically rational” means to strive for maximized profits and gain in all situations. This basic understanding is the one I plan to exploit in my readings of Victorian literature. Because of changing intellectual, manufacturing, and technological movements, the social construction of economic man evolves as any other fictional figure might and therefore serves as a an illustrative touchstone for the systemic changes in the Victorian economy. While the term itself begins to appear in the mid-1830s through debates between John Stuart Mill and other political economists, the idea begins in the eighteenth century with the privileging of rationality and self-interest as the driving forces for economic (and moral)

decisions (Mill 38, 48; Hollis and Nell 51). Much of Gagnier's work revolves around Oscar Wilde, who serves as a prototype for the interaction between modern consumer desires (latter economic man) and the forthcoming Modernist aesthetic practices (*Idylls of the Marketplace* 10). But she also specifically addresses the purpose and development of such a figure in nineteenth century ideology.

According to generally accepted history and Gagnier's analysis, the figure undergoes a major revision during the last thirty years of the century. She describes the progress of the conception of economic man as one based upon becoming an ideal "producer or reproducer" in the first part of the century to one founded upon consumer choice and discernment around the 1870s ("On the Insatiability of Human Wants" 125). Essentially, the model participant in the Victorian market morphs from maker into buyer, and the resultant implications for value mark the change from labor-based into value purchasing-based. This distinction serves as an important turning point in my dissertation as the "demons" of the earlier part of the period commit economic crimes of the sort related to "laboring body" of political economy as opposed to the "demons" who function within and respond to the "desiring body" of the later neoclassical school of formal economics (Gagnier and Dupre 401). Demons are identifiably working class and poor, while manipulating the bonds of trust and credit through physical misrepresentations and legwork, essentially in the trenches of the economy and brought to justice through the state. The dandies, however, violate codes of a different sort. They are affluent and hold purchasing power, avoid labor and partake in the economy through selecting and buying. Theirs is an intellectual pursuit founded on a faith in status and as opposed to the aspiration for a reduced workload with cash gains. They tend to be less individualized while circulating in groups with similar figures, and are never brought to justice through formal measures. The identity of the

dandy is nebulous, changing with fads and settings, while the demon remains identifiable and visible.³

Throughout the period, and since, the potential for the spread of disease (literal and metaphoric) has led to great attention being given to capitalism's nemesis—*risk*. Risk serves as a counterweight to the idealized rationality of economic man. Where the rational promises control, risk threatens stability. It is the definitive feature of a capitalist dystopia. Represented through the unsafe and chaotic, the result of chance rather than calculation, risk can neither be eradicated nor forgotten, and villains tend to find refuge through manipulation of it, by stacking the odds in their favor. A pair of Victorian anxieties converge under the heading of "risk," each a style of contagion. As many critics have acknowledged and Victorians well knew, filth and disease do not recognize social boundaries and draw attention (not always wanted) to the network of connections joining all the inhabitants of a place like London. In a certain respect, the Victorians mixed their metaphors when it came to imagining the city, or at least expanded them to encompass more and more aspects of society. The metaphor of disease is clearly linked to the sewers and filth of the streets and imagined to exist even more greatly in unseen corners and unfashionable areas. But the metaphor soon changes into one with economic concerns when the producers of the filth, or at best those who happen to live amongst it, are poor. Poverty takes on a disease-like quality, one that becomes naturally tied to those people nearest to it. These people soon become metonymical to the idea of poverty, a more abstract and socially-driven infection than the original "disease" as derived from filth and the unclean. But the metaphor has one further step to take. As disease and poverty were joined through association of culturally

³ The "dandy" undergoes a number of incarnations throughout the nineteenth century. The dandies of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, both fictional and historical, often ended their lives of aristocratic imitation either in debtor's prisons or cast out of their privileged social circles in disgrace. The later version becomes less of an imitation of aristocratic lifestyles than ironic homage to them.

stigmatized peoples, so does crime get pressed into the original alarm. Thievery, assault, murder begin to be rhetorically situated as styles of infection and urban contagion spurred by the culture's villains. Crime becomes the literal embodiment of fears about the networking possible within a city.

Criminal behaviors become more akin to an epidemic than acts performed by individuals. In turn, the approaches to regulation reflect aspirations of containment. However, the inability to do so quickly becomes evident. This collection of social ills signifies a "pattern of uncontainability" for filth, disease, poverty, and crime only possible within an urban economic environment of financial and social networks, and acknowledgment of "uncontainability" leads to questions of rehabilitation and the government's role in providing for those who seem to figure in the epidemic greatest. In people's psyches, the fear of an unsafe encounter or transmission of foreignness contributes to a conception of the urban as a locale dangerous to both body and morality through associative infection. This urban development coincides with the formalized progression of industrial capitalism and the subsequent financial instruments of the stock exchange. It also sets the stage for the questions that this dissertation hopes to address in respect to economic villainy and the Victorian city: How did urbanism help to redefine a rationale for understandings of value? And how was the representation of criminal (and, in turn, villainous) identity influenced by these justifications?

While filth and crime inspire anxiety over a fear of physical contact leading to infection of one sort or another, the financial sector feared its own contagion through a series of investment crises. Following economic and banking crises in 1825, 1837, 1847, 1857, and 1866, then a prolonged depression beginning in 1873 until 1896 (with a number of crises intermingled during that time), the Victorian press and public were no strangers to the signs of downturn and

resultant panic. In *Victorian Writing about Risk*, Elaine Freedgood situates risk as a pervasive theme of English life in the nineteenth century, which finds expression in the rhetoric of capitalism but also in less obvious endeavors such as ballooning and mountain climbing. As she explicitly notes, the *laissez-faire* economic principles advanced by David Ricardo's writing that hope to justify and assuage fears about a lack of financial stability coincide with the techniques found in official reports by sanitation committees and city inspectors reporting on pollution (7-8). Risk for Freedgood challenges the "Victorian practice of paradise" as endorsed by industry's faith in progress and calls that all things deemed inhibitive to improvement be contained or limited. However, risk also serves an important moral function, in respect to capitalism. The ability to justify profits and empire according to the overcome difficulties and dangers makes that fortune a "legitimate" one and a "moral excuse" for excessive earnings as has been observed by Max Weber, Theodor Adorno and others (Freedgood 9; Gerth 192). The Victorians discover and implement the essential formula of financial logic: risk versus reward. The ebb and flow of this model forms the blueprint for a series of confrontations between rationality and risk that reappear throughout modernity and come to define both what is acceptable and distasteful. The recipe of contamination and financial risk within the larger setting of a nation trying to naturalize rational economic behavior generates a breeding ground for the emergence of new outcasts. In particular, the urban setting attracts a medley of pariahs whose histories may not be as new as one might imagine.

Economic Villainy and the City

Originally a label for a particular group of serfs within the feudal system of economy, the term *villain* carries an etymology that betrays a history interwoven with ideas about morality, wealth, and social position. The antiquated spelling of *villein* is today used in discourse

surrounding feudalism in order to denote this original sense of a class of serfs—those with some legal rights and closer to poor tenants on a lord’s land than to outright slaves. They were a style of bondsman severely constrained within a larger system of social order, if not necessarily by the literal repression of an owner, *per se*. But the transition from an understanding of a *villein* as an “unfree tenant holding land in villeinage or doing villein service” to the more recognizable *villain* as an “unprincipled or depraved scoundrel; a man naturally disposed to base or criminal actions, or deeply involved in the commission of disgraceful crimes” tells only two-thirds of the term’s story (*Oxford English Dictionary*). A third sense, the link between the two prior meanings, serves as an important step in the process of fully appreciating the relevant chronicle and position of villains by the turn of the nineteenth century. Envisioned as “a man of ignoble ideas or instincts” the transition of villain from designator of an official economic status to one of a general descriptor for unacceptable, often criminal, behavior includes the social perspective of being somehow apart from or in contrast to culturally-accepted standard, polite behavior. Two points of note come out of this look at etymology. First, villains have always been tied to their economic position and social class. This, of course, varies in explicitness over time but the essence never completely goes away, it merely restyles itself. Second, villainy as a concept, like many others, is a socially fluid term that may exist over many centuries in roughly the same linguistic form, but carries a series of associations and concerns particular to a given time and place. Those most intriguing for my purposes are the connections to their economic and public perceptions. Therefore, villains serve as a strong indicator of what a culture deems acceptable, by illustrating for us what traits and behaviors it does not want to exist or what it attempts to punish. If heroes and cultural norms are the shapes that define a culture’s portrait, the villains are the negative space that helps to lend those shapes specific detail through their contrast.

To describe someone as a villain either in reference to a literary character or actual person is to broadly speak of a figure with generally “bad qualities.” But what exactly bad qualities are, or how they might be quantified becomes extremely problematic and variable. It is never a good thing to be known as a villain, but which codes of conduct are being broken by villains during any given era are worth considering closely. While contemporary usage and general historical perception would lead us to the conclusion that the term’s social connotations fell into obscurity by the modern age, this is far from the case. While it is true that the typical sense of an opprobrious character seems to have become the norm by the Early Modern period, within the specific cultural genres of writing that document property histories and laws, the older sense remained very much alive in England through the eighteenth century and until the latter years of the nineteenth. These histories of property and noble families wherein the former sense of *vilain* appears, although fairly popular amongst the growing upper-middle class in hopes of verifying their “nobility,” could not be called commonplace, and rather speak more to a specialized genre for a specific audience and purpose. They represent, for villainy, a type of undercurrent within the culture that probably seeps into the popular imagination through an osmosis but does not sit at the forefront of Victorian consciousness, a forgotten remnant of an economy gone by.

However, it is precisely this “forgotten-ness” or ancestral quality of the term that I believe reappears with a vengeance and shapes many of the villains of the period in a subtle yet profound manner. The evolution of villains in their linguistic form follows a metaphoric parallel to their cultural construction in the Victorian period as evidenced through the literature and discourse on several cultural topics. Of course, many factors contribute to the development of a culture’s villains but a few stand out as particularly important in respect to Victorian conceptions of malevolence: urban expansion and the subsequent evolution of industrial and financial

capitalism; revaluations and difficulties with the ideas of labor and value; and lastly, standards of respectability that must be modernized as new class markers within a society where great wealth can be gained without the former distinction of family and title inheritance. In different ways and to varying degrees, the villains of this study will confront these culturally fluctuating areas and reveal how the transgressions committed may be described as universal “evil” but upon closer examination demonstrate a break with the norms of economic relations that the Victorians were attempting to implement and uphold.

At stake in the literature is identity, both for the villains and the non-villains. As mentioned above, villains highlight their counterparts through contrast and are themselves formed by comparison. In turn, this provides a view of what a society fears and disapproves of, while also illustrating what it hopes to protect. How their values clash with those of a growing middle-class is the starting point I take and will use to explore the tensions, contradictions, and assimilations that appear throughout a sampling of texts that cover about fifty years of the period. But before introducing the literary works and particular characters, I’d like to describe a few of the relevant aspects of the cultural situation taking place in urban society that help inform the construction of literary villains and ultimately allow us to see the literature as enacting a process of coping with and explaining the presence of elements in society that have been deemed threatening. Generally, I will attempt to rediscover the sense of “villainy” related to the villain’s economic self that appears to have been lost to time but in actuality has only buried its explicitness. Specifically, my approach detects what I call “economic otherness” amongst the chosen villains and treats them as a marginalized group in respect to formal practices of the Victorian marketplace, which evolves in a manner that privileges progressively more abstract measurements.

Interestingly, although they began as farm laborers and associated with rural properties, *villeins* became *villains* through a migration to the city. Left with freedom but not much else, many *villeins* headed for the nearest metropolis in hopes of finding gainful employment and a fresh beginning. However, they were not met with the warmest of welcomes and were soon directed into menial jobs, illicit activity, and generally difficult lives. It is not hard to see from this set of circumstances how the idea of a villain would quickly become one adapted to fit disfavored individuals of a certain class (literally the “villain class”) and help to contribute to the already present groups of the poor and criminal. Over the course of literary villains’ representations, we can take note of a process to identify and quarantine villains through various cultural stigmas, but upon closer examination the stigmas are merely the cloak concealing the breaks within mainstream ideals that are concurrent with their appearances. The conflicts that Victorian villains encounter tend to strike upon a profound chord for a financial world just hitting its stride as an expanding, complex credit-based system wherein the human, personal interactions of a market economy are stretched to new, evermore distant limits. The distinct trends of new urban life and economics converge upon the identity of this new group.

London’s population registered a bit under one million in 1801—the year the London Stock Exchange was officially founded—but about seventy-five percent of England’s population still lived in what would be considered fairly small towns or rural areas. This demographic was soon to change. The 1820s saw a twenty percent rise in the number of London residents, already the most populous city in Europe, and the formerly small cities/larger towns saw incredible growth during this decade (Lees 287). Places like Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, and Leeds experienced double that London rate of expansion (upwards of forty percent). While London certainly grew bigger and more composite, these formerly quaint towns underwent

complete metamorphoses. By the 1860s and 70s and the beginning of the economic depression that would last until the twentieth century, less than half of the total population would be living in small towns and farm-based communities, but more importantly, nearly twenty cities had developed, which recorded populations of over 100,000 residents. In a phrase befitting concerns about risk and the city, H. Llewellyn Smith would coin the phrase “the contagion of numbers” as a descriptor for the urban rush that had come to drain the romance from former conceptions of English life as pastoral or farm-based and replace them with a bright, fast, crowded lifestyle (Porter 204). At the turn of the nineteenth century a distinction between being English and being from London could be drawn. The latter might have been plainly urban but the former only potentially so as the vast majority of citizens could not claim an experience remotely similar to that of Londoners. However, the emigration from the country to large metropolises brought about a literal change in lifestyle along with a number of continental shifts in respect to what it meant to be English (205-7).

The rapid expansion of urban centers, both in number and scale, of course led to a series of new and difficult problems with which society now had to cope and form responses. The first Reform Act in 1832, the Factory Act of 1833, and the Poor Laws of 1834 are notable examples of attempts to regulate the literal conditions of the world that Victoria would soon inherit, but also demonstrate the urge to re-evaluate the standards of acceptability relevant to the nation while simultaneously changing the very *types* of questions that were being asked about society. Like anything cultural, the borders of time and effectiveness are shady. How many years were the Victorian poor laws in development? Hundreds. And their effects? Immediate and continuing; predictable and unforeseen. Actual legislation oftentimes serves as a symbolic manifestation of undercurrents that have been evolving on their own, and quite frequently occur

outside the bounds of official language and state action, as will be seen later in the comedic works I will be discussing. As Michel Beaud succinctly puts it in his thorough examination of the development of capitalism, it was from the earliest stages, “national *and* global, competitive *and* monopolistic, liberal *and* state-connected” (emphasis in original). The point being that the push and pull of varying interests and philosophies of commerce have always existed within the debates about economic development with a certain tacit understanding that any discussion is a portion of a much larger continuum. The twentieth-century economist Schumpeter stated that a century is a “‘short run’ in capitalism.” This is a useful point to remember.

That having been said, there remains an effect of urban development in the nineteenth century that changed both the understanding of what it means to live within a community and a reshaping of the individual’s perspective of himself. The enhanced connectivity of urban living develops alongside anxieties about changes in spatial relations between classes and the associative commercial links that would come to redefine privilege and poverty. Michel Foucault famously described the modern city as a zone of surveillance wherein the individual is conditioned to monitor himself through an internalization of rules and a fear of observation. The city produces a “new reality,” the contradiction of close quarters coupled with an anonymity and distance of social interactions that refigures the standards of trust and dependence. A frequently appearing metaphor of Victorian urban space is the city as body. In order to begin focusing responses to these questions, I will take the body as locus point for city identity and work around the shifting presentations of that figure while highlighting the changes and differences of subsequent representations. Like the etymology and social history of “villains,” the urban body travelled through a series of conceptions before the Victorian period and continued to morph during those sixty-odd years. Especially relevant to these cultural formations are concerns about

crime, labor, and the associated moral questions. The urban body is inherently complicated and inherently economic, as are the topics that circulate its orbit. While the discussion of each villain will focus upon his relationship to Victorian anxieties about changing economic contexts, those associated worries about criminality and acceptable labor are always simmering below the surface.

Comic Margins & Methodology

In order to examine comic aspects of the selected literature, I have chosen two complementary approaches. The first is theoretical and the other interpretive. The interpretive will be addressed within a discussion of the methodology and the theoretical will be outlined through a sampling of useful arguments from the prior century of discussions about humor, comedy, and the comic. The most well-known examples of all-encompassing theories of comic incidence come from Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud. For my purposes, Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic* (1900) provides a starting point for the theoretical dimensions of comic portrayals in Victorian art. His argument covers a range of topics but the definition of the comic as "something mechanical encrusted on the living" carries implications for an examination of comic villains (24). Often related to figures such as Charlie Chaplin and the literally "automatic," I would stretch the standard use of the term to include what Bergson also calls "movement without life." (88). Mary Ann Gillies describes Bergson's definition of the mechanical as a "notion of inelasticity" (171). And Bergson himself tells us the phenomenon is "SOME RIGIDITY OR OTHER applied to the mobility of life" (emphasis in original). Repetition and automation certainly have strong ties to the industrial era, as Michael North discusses in *Machine-Age Comedy* (2009) the modernist period supplies a critique but also an embrace of the body as machine through early film. However, nineteenth century literature

encounters the mechanical during an era with different concerns about humanity and social mores. Bergson's theory exposes the comic as an oftentimes antagonistic partner to the normative aesthetics and values of a culture. Through the villains in this dissertation, I hope to extend that understanding to include a relationship to the tenets of rationality within capitalist philosophy.

Like the cultural markers of class or race, the "markers" of the comic, so to speak, indicate a villain's marginalization. The comic comes to serve as a "lens" through which to read economic dissidence. However, what that marginalization entails pushes beyond simply being a "funny" or strange character. That incongruity with life's movement (both physical and emotional), transplants the character into a theoretical space founded upon an alternative, often irrational logic. Andrew Scott traces the relationship between nonhuman objects and consciousness in postmodern thought through writers like Paul de Man, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, and Kirby Olson (7-8, 13-14). They take comedy's "indefiniteness" and resistance to "rational thought" as starting points for discussions that privilege the relative nature and repeated confrontations between "orthodoxy and heresy" that the comic body can provoke (Olson 5-6). While the comic may be a paradigmatic motif for postmodernism, founded upon paradox and fragmentation, those roots can be traced through the century prior with comparable, if less obvious, prevalence. It supplies an engagement with subversive experience, a counterintuitive alternative to standard life. In Victorian respects, Ruskin's understanding of the Gothic as a purely individualized expression of art's craft demonstrates a disdain for automated, machine-driven construction. It also serves as a benchmark for identity in modernity, wherein

life becomes more machinated and the distance between subjects more easily exploitable by the comic.⁴

The identification of irrationality within the comic tradition is an important discovery and one that links comic villainy to economic identity. In a style befitting the defiant *vilain* of centuries past, the comic villain inverts the standard modus operandi of rational economic man. While incongruity and censorship are related to questions of comprehension, the irrational holds a specific place in Western history as an essential characteristic of post-Enlightenment life. Likewise, capitalism's advancement corresponds with the need for knowable and unsurprising outcomes within economic and societal associations. The comic is antithesis to the serious, other to the normative, rebel to the capitalist, and villain to the rational. In particular, all of the villains in this dissertation exploit the tools of deception, be they disguise, lies, double meanings, or misrepresentations of others. The duplicity of comic techniques complements the moral breaches of a credit economy and accentuates economic villains as representatives of a subversive element, culturally and generically. The use of tricks and guile strike the core of inter-subjective trust and creates a recurrent distance between the villain and his normative counterparts, which creates a space to examine the breakdown of dominant ideologies. Economic man, either in his earlier incarnation as productive pursuer of gain or, after the 1870s, rational chooser among scarcity, must maintain his faculties of reason in order to function effectively and the ability to interpret his fellow participants is crucial. Comedy and villainy disrupt the aptitude to achieve those ends with assurance.

In Kaiser's *The World in Play*, he broaches the subject of ludic features that operate within a supposedly "serious" Victorian culture. His reading of the "play" of capitalism

⁴ Ruskin, John. "On the Nature of Gothic Architecture." London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1854. *Google Books*. Web. 5 March 2013.

describes the constant flux of the nineteenth century and highlights the many paradoxes produced between a society concerned with public order and the appearance of control and the (seemingly) repressed chaos of a growing economy (15). The clash between the “divergent logics” of capitalism and a playful character shape the Victorian experience and force writers to steer the differing courses of modern life with one foot in both camps (18). While not explicitly “irrational” or anti-rational, play seems to engage similar threads as comedy and can be considered a cultural cousin. In particular, the role of competition within the economic system relates directly to the validity of fair practices and the moral concerns of risk and justified wealth (39). Play comes to be understood as an intellectual “Other” of English sensibility that arises in unexpected places. The ways in which play becomes situated into a marginalized position despite its importance to the larger Victorian landscape is comparable to what I hope to demonstrate in this genealogy of villains.

Staying with the assertion of economic villains as marginalized figures, comic action and circumstance lend themselves to an amplification of that marginalization, within literary texts. As will be seen through the subsequent chapters, the lines of morality and acceptance within the economy are drawn with respect to evolving senses of morality as transmitted through comic criteria. The format of this dissertation is four chapters split into two larger sections. “Part I: The Demons” includes Chapters 1 and 2 with each chapter dedicated to an individual villain. In these cases, the villains are Fagin from *Oliver Twist* and Sweeney Todd from *The String of Pearls*. “Part II: The Dandies” consists of villains defined either as groups (as opposed to individuals), or specific types of late-Victorian cultural figures, predominantly the dandy and bourgeois financier. Chapters 3 and 4 make up this section and each engages two important works of the stage: Chapter 3 engages Oscar Wilde's figure of the dandy, especially as

represented through *The Importance of Being Ernest* and, tangentially, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Chapter 4 discusses Gilbert and Sullivan's *Utopia, Limited* as an exercise in satire through parody of incorporation, which situates the effects of limited-liability commerce as a new type of villainy. The economic/moral lines differ between the demons and the dandies but function in a telling way when coupled together.⁵

While representations of villainy, of course, span the entire century there are a number of reasons for this categorization. The first goal is to duly acknowledge the prominence of the Victorian novel throughout the period and the re-emergence of the Victorian stage during the last few decades of the century, while demonstrating a connection between the two. The secondary goal is to emphasize the shift that occurs in the representation of villains from “demons” or social outcasts into “dandies” or generally accepted, gentlemanly sorts who are criticized through a satiric perspective from the writers’ and audience’s self-awareness more than controlled or regulated in any way by the fictional moral forces within the narrative.

The standard narrative of Victorian literature’s evolution describes the era as one that becomes more somber and pessimistic in its art. For instance, the evolution of Dickens from a writer generally understood as an overtly comic, resolute defender of the English middle-class into an author grown jaded by increased bureaucracy and questions about the function of progress. His novels are seen as the consequence of the difficulty that becomes inherent to finding answers or reaching conclusions about the complex world of financial and political entanglements that surrounds him. While this trajectory may be generally accurate in respect to

⁵ In his study of comic identity, *Playboys and Killjoys: An Essay on the Practice of Comedy*, Harry Levin classifies two types of comic protagonists: the “playboy,” with whom an audience laughs and the “killjoy, the object of ridicule and social correction. The evolution of Victorian demons into dandies that my dissertation follows can be understood as a similar transition from killjoys into playboys, an outcast individual into an accepted (albeit eccentric) pleasure-seeker. However, I am attempting to include considerations of official social practices within the marginalization discussion of my villains, namely economic and criminal activities.

novels, a look at the Victorian comic, particularly through the villains, offers an alternative understanding of the development of Victorian culture and the literary reactions to those developments. Comic representations offer an unconventional perspective on literary figures when compared to those typically associated with the novel and non-comic writing. The period's earlier comic villains build off of melodramatic models founded upon unambiguous lines of good and evil, but the latter become *less* evil and treacherous, and some even unabashedly fun and likable.

The reasons for this development can be tied to changing economic legislation and urbanization that affects the rights of businesses, consumers, corporations, and government. The explosion of a credit economy through nationalized banking and formation of stock exchanges, the full transition into industrial capitalism out of a mercantile version, along with ever-increasing freedoms granted to large businesses and corporations set in motion a series of legislative measures and fundamental challenges to the traditional views of respectability and responsibility. The economic revolution affected several other areas of life and forced a confrontation with questions about criminal activities such as fraud and gambling, productive versus unproductive labor in respect to a growing bourgeois class, and the effects of rapid and vast incorporation upon the understanding of individual autonomy. As will become evident over the reading of the forthcoming chapters, at the center of all these concerns rests the growing pains of a shifting morality that is inextricably bound to the economic questions of the day and likewise comedy transforms to fit with and comment upon those changes. Taking into account comedic modes like comic opera and the stage, we begin to see a simplification of literary representation, an erosion of psychological complexity, eventually a loss of moral distinction between comic villains and urban consumers and corporations. I believe taking an approach to

literature that does not wholly rely upon standard distinctions about form like novel, poetry, drama helps to evaluate potent and ubiquitous cultural trends that mature throughout the period and can be tracked with benefits for future understandings that may or may not be genre-based.

Chapter 1
Fagin's Coin of Truth:
Economic Belief and Comic Representation in *Oliver Twist*

Dictum Meum Pactum.
(My Word is My Bond.)

--Motto of the London Stock Exchange, founded 1801

Writing in the preface to the 1841 edition of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens famously derides prior authors' approaches to crime writing because they enhance their stories with "false glitter" and prevent the "Truth" from shining through on its own (459). Dickens involves himself with a debate that distinguishes between the values of different styles of fictional representation, and calls attention to his conscious worry, even obsession, with genuine accounts of the seediness of criminal life and the need to transmit poverty in as authentic a means as possible. His preface addresses concerns about artistic representation and its moral dangers, condemning the untrue as a wrong of the highest order and the text itself takes up a similar argument through its economic ethos. In the following pages, my goal is to explore this topic as a thematic presence within *Oliver Twist*, one that partakes in the larger cultural concerns about authenticity and simulation that plague Dickens as a writer and as a Victorian. The urban system from which the novel emerges proves to be a potent source for the exploitation of such tensions, wherein the narrative must explicitly reconcile challenges to the authority of legitimate originals from copied by-products. I propose that Dickens constructs Fagin in a manner that preys upon anxieties related to the shifting economic paradigms of industrial and financial capitalism, which includes doubts

about the dependability of economic networks. Associated fear provoked by the difficulty inherent to judging value expresses itself through Fagin's talents as a counterfeiter of both individuals and narratives. Supplementing these concerns are his ethnic markers, which build upon a number of stereotypes about Jewish participants in the marketplace and find precedent in non-literary Victorian writing about counterfeiting and economic crime. As will be demonstrated, the anti-Semitic undertones often manifest themselves through comic traits and serve as indicators for distinguishing between those who are trustworthy and the duplicitous. Dickens consistently aligns normative, English characters and their attendant values with believability and authentic, original appearances (a "Truth") that portray lives led in earnest, while the marginalised figures remain such through the conflation of imitative and comical tropes. Taken together, *Oliver Twist* can be understood as an early example of the attempts to rationalise anxieties about a credit system that would come to define economic discourse during the Victorian period.

The concealment of the methods that produce great wealth (where the money came from and why some people seem to be grasping onto much more of it than others) creates a vagueness that must be resolved through extra-economic social measures. Much of the financial writing of the period attempts to make abstract financial practices seemingly tangible through physical metaphors. Mary Poovey explains that one of the fundamental transitions that industrial capitalism spurred was the transference of wealth from landowners with real estate and gold to capitalists with symbolic paper money, and far less culturally visible means of verifying their prosperity and refinement. Insurance, stocks, bonds, and corporations require no less assistance in the effort to literalise their cultural presence. While publications specifically dedicated to financial matters multiplied over the course of the nineteenth century, less formal, popular

publications also partook in the discourse and helped carry the torch for the proliferation of economic issues into everyday Victorian life. Here is an example from one such magazine:

It fell victim at last to a person belonging to the lower orders, who seized it, one fine morning [...] and conveyed it to a Jew [...] Here it was included by ‘the boy’ among his numerous “perquisites,” and, by an easy transition, soon found its way to the Hebrew gentleman above mentioned. (Blanchard 60)

A quick glance at the passage above might call to mind *Oliver Twist* and the memory of Fagin as an ironic “gentleman” with whom the parish boy is soon acquainted upon his arrival in London.

But the source of this quotation is not *Oliver Twist*, rather a literary relation of Dickens.

Household Words 2 from January 1851 (edited by Dickens) ran a piece by Sidney Laman

Blanchard titled “A Biography of a Bad Shilling,” and the passage I quote comes from that story.

There are a number of notable points to draw from this example. The overlap between artistic, literary writing such as novels that envision the London Underworld’s economic system through fictionalised, yet journalistically informed, renderings is striking. “Bad Shilling” gives the first-person account of a counterfeit shilling that has been melted and formed in a Fagin-like Jew’s den and crafted into an object that can circulate through the general population with a false value based upon imitation. The shilling, strangely, is an unwilling participant in his career and feels guilt for his crimes of misrepresentation. His character is not unlike Oliver’s in its virtue and highlights a significant aspect of the anxiety provoked by counterfeits and false value. The power of such inventions does not derive from the object itself but its marketplace application and use by clandestine subjects.

One might assume that the mystery of the counterfeiter’s work rests in the alchemy of his morphing a “zinc door-plate” and “pewter flagon” into a passable coin through some

unexplained method (Blanchard 60). However, as the story unfolds we are told very explicitly of the details and methods of the counterfeiters. There is, conveniently, a young “green,” whose obliviousness to the process allows for a Sykes-like character by the name of Mr Blinks to guide him through the practices of the Hebrew gentleman in order that he will be able to distinguish the “turtle from the mock” in regards to money (62). The boy’s inexperience allows for the reader to hear the intricacies and science behind the melting and casting, a series of techniques verified by the descriptions of counterfeiting as found in Henry Mayhew’s chapter “Coining” in his journalistic *London’s Underworld*. Galvanised batteries and plaster of Paris moulds populate both descriptions and provide a sense of legitimacy and authenticity of the kind Dickens would (and did) approve. But the emphasis on technical procedures contrasts with the mysterious, covert part of the operation: “From the Jew, my parents were transferred – mysteriously and by night – to an obscure individual in an obscure quarter of the metropolis, when, in secrecy and silence, I was *cast*, to use an appropriate metaphor, upon the world” (61, emphasis in original). The transference of stolen goods (his “parents”) to an “obscure individual in an obscure” locale of the city wraps the entire enterprise in a cloak of unseen, unknown menace.

When compared to the tangible, realistic quality of the account of the counterfeiting practices, this lack of specificity stands out with even stronger divergence. The “trick” is not making the coins, which seemingly anyone could do with a few basic tools. Knowing who to go to and how to inject such a product into the market; how to manipulate the urban network to your will, therein lies the skill and ostensible “magic,” understanding the “secrecy” of the city. Mayhew’s study contributes to this vagueness in subtle ways, as well. At the opening to his well-researched chapter on “Receivers of Stolen Property,” he refers to the “opulent Jews of Houndsditch and its vicinity, whose coffers *are said* to be overflowing with gold” (Mayhew 274,

emphasis added). Mayhew relies on hearsay and legend to portray the Jewish contingent within a book that professes to be offering an empirical view of London's destitute lives. Again, the unrevealed leads to a representation that emphasises the aspect of the economic structure best deemed threatening and illogical, where profit can be acquired outside the bounds of desired order. The shilling shows us that greater fears derive from the general "unknowing" attached to these practices and the anxiety about the deceptiveness of forged representations. The urban Jew is not the contaminant; the product is the contaminant. However, they become conflated and their subjugations feed off of each other within the urban system.

As a receiver of stolen goods and hoarder of valuable merchandise, Fagin often leads to discussions of "Jewish" greed and contamination. Deborah Epstein Nord joins Fagin's ethnicity with his economic moment and labels him a participant in "pariah" capitalism, wherein the stereotypes of "avariciousness and the contaminating urban Jew" create an economic villainy dependent upon the association of Jews with marginalised (typically secondary) marketplaces (28–31). These are certainly valid and relevant claims; however, Fagin's composition also builds upon the impressions of what might be categorised as unseen aspects of urban economic life that necessitate a reappraisal of the genuine versus imitative dynamic of products within the Victorian economy. I believe this angle is implicit in Epstein Nord's argument, but I would like to further the implications through the inclusion of a discussion of his comic traits. The alliance of greed, self-interest, and filth with Jewish figures significantly predates the Victorian period. As Epstein Nord points out, Jewish stereotypes come to include relationships to the stock exchange and brokerage houses in the later part of the century, although an apparent distinction is made in economic writing of the earlier nineteenth century that draws a clear distinction between the street-level depiction of filth and the wealthy, deceptively reputable, puppeteer of international

trade as figured in touchstones like the Rothschild family. Fagin induces abhorrence based upon both of these versions of prejudice and could even be said to unite them: he is a street-level operator who wields the influence of a scheming financier. The modern world, especially when examined through economic terms, travels a path that evolves into progressively more emblematic forms of interaction, wherein the genuine becomes increasingly difficult to discern from the imitative. Sara Malton explains how “the stability of the capitalist system” relies heavily on a need for “legitimacy and authentication” through legible visual markers (56; 3). Her study examines the forgery of documents in Gaskell’s *Ruth*, but considers the same “inextricable interrelation between morality and money” seen in the “minting” of fallen women and illegitimate children, each of whom are marked with social value in an ironic, figurative version of the coining process (Malton 56-57; 58). Fagin’s reshaping of orphans into thieves follows a similar trajectory wherein the unmarked young boys become counterfeits of identity. Fagin and his Hebraic literary descendant can be confined. They are strange, unattractive, and physically unimposing, their descriptions almost feminine in nature. But their inventions can go places where they cannot, exploit the trusting world of appearances, and wreak havoc from within the fragile shell of a credit economy.

In a short story where a phony shilling can speak and muse upon its own existence along with the many “counterfeits of humanity” with which it claims to share so much common ground, the workings of the city’s streets still cannot be imagined (Blanchard 61). When the naïve “young Youthful,” impressed by the quality of fake coins in the Jew’s possession, and particularly taken by the exceptional appearance of our narrator, comments that they could not be told from “those made by government,” Mr Blinks sagely remarks that as in “all human affairs, everything is as good as it looks” [sic] (Blanchard 62). For the Oliver-esque, good-hearted,

misused shilling, the ability to “pass” makes it real. Each time it pays for an item or circulates through a till, its social truth is reaffirmed. Value originates in belief, and the belief must be inspired by the appearance. In discussing the contentiousness surrounding American paper currency in the nineteenth century, Marc Shell’s essay “The Issue of Representation” brings many similar topics into focus. He examines a selection of political cartoons wherein humour and the resultant economic anxiety from placing one’s faith in a purely symbolic currency are joined and critiqued through a series of bizarre iconographical signs. Obviously, the United States currency debate was overt and unique from the concerns of a credit economy in Britain; however, the larger anxiety about a confusion of “the relation between symbols and things” and “intellectual currency” versus “material currency” that paper money was seen to “play upon” provides a nice literalised illustration of the representation problem I see taking place with counterfeited materials and fluctuating, ironic identities in *Oliver Twist* (“The Issue of Representation,” 45). The fears of “ghostliness” embedded in the rhetoric that surrounded the economic discourse of U.S. economists and “their understanding of how an artistic appearance is taken for the real thing by a *devilish* suspension of disbelief” (emphasis added) correspond to English connotations of credit with the uncanny and unexplainable, and echoes some of Marx’s spectral metaphors about communism (57). If we take these principles of economic belief, value, and representation as outlined thus far and apply them to Dickens’s text, we begin to trace a comic structure that augments urban economic life through the irony and incongruity that only comedy can supply.

Much of the criticism that responds to the comic aspects of *Oliver Twist* either probes what one critic calls characters who embody the “exciting if harrowing energy of the city” with its “phenomenal overflow” and rambunctious “comic vision”(Henkle 93), or provides readings

that explain a Bakhtinian, carnivalesque celebration wherein the norms of a society governed with too much bureaucracy and unjust Poor Laws are mocked by its victims (that is, Mr Bumble the Beadle, Mr Fang, or the Dodger's famous courtroom tirade). While these traits certainly appear throughout Dickens's oeuvre, minimal attention is paid to what might be called the darker side of the comedy a reader encounters. Typically referring to loveable characters like the Artful Dodger or uncanny villains like Quilp, who comfortably fit into the Bakhtinian model, there are others, like Fagin, that are comic in a very different way. In her essay on anti-Semitism in the novel, Susan Meyer cites Joseph Gold's argument where he classifies Fagin as a "satiric counterpoint" to the Christian foundation of Oliver and the dominant English society of the period (Meyer 245). His similarities to depictions of Satan and various prior literary and cultural symbols are also acknowledged. However, it has proven a difficult task for scholars to engage with Fagin's humour and inherently comic disposition. Modern readers understand the humour associated with Fagin as a style of oppression and poor taste (laughing *at* him because of his race), because laughing at otherness has come to be seen as a tool for discrimination. However, I would like to take a closer look at what is humorous about Fagin and his accomplices and attempt to form an understanding of how Dickens uses comic effect to enhance the villainy of a character that plays upon the fear of misrepresentation and falsification discussed above. Aviva Briefel uses the phrase "unhealthy mimicry" in her chapter on Jewish art dealers in *The Deceivers* (117), a study of nineteenth century art forgery, and this is a well-suited expression for Dickens's version of comic mimesis in the criminal Underworld. Within the scenes that depict Oliver's arrival in London and some of Fagin's ironic business dealings, we can locate a system of comedy that attempts to order and distinguish the world of genuineness from the one of imitation, through humour and ludic irony.

Upon arriving in London, Oliver encounters many extraordinary sights and sensations, the most unusual being a “strange young gentleman” with the “airs and manners of a man,” who speaks in street slang and with a brash accent (Dickens, *Oliver Twist* 60). The gentleman is, of course, Jack Dawkins, The Artful Dodger. His appearance, speech, and metropolitan attitude all contrast starkly with Oliver’s country, boyish naiveté. This introduction sets the stage for Oliver’s (and Dickens’s) understanding of London and its relation to (mis)representation. Charley (Master) Bates’ outbursts of laughter provide another use of a typically positive expression that becomes cloaked in inappropriateness and cognitive dissonance within this setting. The opening salvo of Oliver’s introduction to Fagin’s den offers a clear view of the “world in play,” as Matthew Kaiser terms it (1). The boys can be said to be “playing” at being men, but that playing is their reality. They are misrepresentations of boys, counterfeit men. Their depictions are uncanny and work to level the class distinctions of society. However, these are not temporary reversals of standards as might be observed in a carnival setting. Fagin and the boys live as these “strange gentlemen” and this may be the greatest crime they commit. Their lives are a farce worthy of mockery, which Dickens supplies in comparison to the solemnity of the suburbs and Oliver’s disposition. As much as Fagin’s characterisation comes from the eccentric mix of comedy with the terror of manipulated lost children, Oliver’s persona is just as unfunny and earnest. Dickens describes the boys with a humour that works to create an aesthetic distance between them and the ostensibly normal middle-class agents of the novel.

After being corralled by the Dodger, Oliver meets more boys around his age who smoke pipes and drink spirits with the “air of middle-aged men,” as well (64). Their overseer, Fagin, “the merry old gentleman,” works at the stove and rack of stolen handkerchiefs simultaneously, while wearing a “greasy flannel gown” when Oliver first lays eyes upon him (64). Fagin, too, is

in a state of uncertainty: he is clearly male-sexed, but his domestic activities and dress-like gown, hunched over body, constant casting of his eyes towards the floor in a style of submission, and being surrounded by children reveal a motif of femininity. Fagin is as much mother as father, and this adds to the confusion of the place. The boys are orphans, but do not seem to have found a surrogate father or mother in Fagin. They are boys who have been raised into faux men by the world. Oliver's good-hearted nature blinds him to these initial cues. He fully accepts what he sees and what people tell him with unwavering trust. It won't be long before he learns the truth about Fagin and the other boys and tries to remove himself from their company, but for the first nights in the den he believes what he is told and succumbs to the value of appearances. For Dickens to label Fagin and his associates as "respectable characters" is satirical because they are not (by any measure), but also disturbing because sincerely respectable gentlemen are a missing component of the boys' lives (317). It is entertaining to watch boys play dress-up as men and old Jews convert their measly abodes into orphanages as long as they do not revert back to being boys under his care. Then, the tone morphs into one of alarm and the comic becomes joined to the corrupt in a manner that constructs a series of binaries between the comic/serious, counterfeit/sincere, and original/imitation.

As the boys offer a disturbing version of urban play, Fagin participates in his own version of play when interpreted against the backdrop of Victorian capitalism. Fagin produces things from nothing. Hand signals, winks, vanishing watches and money boxes, and a spy on every corner, build an aura around his ability to conceal and camouflage the inner workings of the city. A comparison of Fagin's economic behaviour with the broader Victorian sentiments involving Jewish relations with the marketplace reveals that a significant aspect of his villainy stems from timely economic fears. The irony is that this alternate market parallels the standard capitalist one

of the time. Fagin's actions are (valid) techniques of an expanding credit economy, wherein the collection of self-interested participants must equate with a larger society of progress and improvement. Fagin's network employs analogous techniques to the conventional capitalist system. However, those techniques alone do not provide an ethos, or when they do it is a morality of cynicism and brutality. All of these conditions require a stability of representation in order to remain valid. The face value needs to be believable and beyond reproach in order to prevent the larger structure from falling in on itself. Fagin's mastery of criminality comes from the ability to manipulate appearances and circumstances through the abstract potentials of social capital and information. The economy of *London's Underworld* becomes an ironic simulation of London's official one, and the simulation proves more compelling than the original.

Nowhere is this more evident than when Oliver sees the portrait of his (then unknown) mother at the Brownlows' home. He instantly recognises something genuine and admirable in the woman's features, just as other people do in his. People like Oliver and his mother are incapable of being fakes, forgers, or counterfeits – their values always align with the beliefs they prompt. Only a few pages later, upon supposing he has caught Oliver in a lie, Mr Brownlow immediately corrects his opinion and thinks to himself: 'It was impossible to *doubt* him; there was *truth* in every one of [his face's] lineaments'" (93, emphasis added). Oliver cannot be forged or moulded into an orphan vulnerable to corruption because Dickens writes him as the most sincere, most original, and, therefore, most true. He hides nothing and his worth matches his appearance to the penny. In turn, he doesn't tell any jokes because he cannot understand incongruity, and does not even seem to laugh for the same reasons as the other boys. Rather, he laughs because they are laughing and his cordial nature lures him into the activities of the group (in a fully trusting manner) like a moth to a flame. Again, his sincerity makes his value obvious

to everyone but also vulnerable to dishonesty. The Dodger, Fagin, Mr Brownlow, the Maylies, all immediately interpret Oliver as genuine based upon his physical features. He preserves the concept of a “faith-based” economy, which allows exchanges to take place without fear of fraud because the reputation of each participant is known to the others. While Oliver may not do very much in terms of traditional heroics, he does inspire belief in an early Victorian industrial world that makes him a supreme idol.

Fagin’s subversive business enterprise complements his den and the boys’ lives. He controls stronger, more dangerous figures like Bill Sykes, earns money through endearing prostitutes such as Nancy, and garners news from his informants like the Dodger and his associates. These are the results of his influence, and how he comes to command such a network of operatives is much less blatant. However, one particular scene concerning Fagin’s first meeting with Noah Claypole illustrates both the “magic” and the practical concerns of Fagin’s “way of business,” which are presented through a mixture of comic antics and misunderstood suggestions (355). As Noah and Charlotte head into *London’s Underworld* in chapter five of the final book, they stumble into a bar called The Three Cripples where a “young Jew” (not Fagin) eyes them with interest and a barkeep named Barney serves as informer to Fagin (351). The inexperience of Noah and Charlotte in this setting comes across clearly through their squabbling over a prior attempt at theft gone awry, but of importance here is how they are directed to Fagin. Barney goes into the backroom and tells Fagin of Noah and Charlotte, “Frob the cuttry, but subthig in your way, or I”b bistaked” (353). Fagin appears “to receive this communication with great interest” (353). He then spies on Noah and Charlotte and recognises that he likes “this fellow’s looks” and is impressed that he has already been able to “train the girl” (353). Within a few moments, he has drawn conclusions and mapped a plan for their use. Fagin, despite his

manipulation of value and appearances, also never misses in his summations of those he encounters. He may be the only comic figure in *Oliver Twist*, or character at all, who fully understands the belief/value connection. Barney, Fagin, and the unnamed younger Jew in the bar fill in for the “obscure individuals” that help cast and circulate our narrator in “A Biography of a Bad Shilling” and Mayhew’s unseen conduits of black market trade. Here, they are named yet no less mysterious and troubling.

We see the inner workings of Fagin’s opportunist tactics in this scene, but it also permits a view of his subtlety and cunningness when luring new victims into his web. With Oliver, the approach was the promise of protection and love. With Noah, the older and crueller character, the selling point is easy money and a life of criminal success. As Fagin sits with Noah, he remarks how “one need be sharp in this town [...] and that’s the *truth*” while stroking the side of his nose in a gesture that Noah tries to imitate “though not with complete success” (354, emphasis added). Fagin leads Noah with his winks and friendly suggestions in an effort to make him feel important and feed his ego, which maintains a far greater estimation of him than reality would assess. Fagin’s stereotypical scheming and preying upon the dim-witted Noah for labour is not unlike the Jewish dolly shop owners (here, replaced with a pub) or merchants of used clothing, who pick up the scraps of society and reform them into something usable and gainful. In Oliver’s case, the anxiety of counterfeiting informed Fagin’s manipulation, but here it is the fear that an ineffective bumbler such as Noah, whom England has minimised and marginalised, can be transformed into a person of danger and profit. Had Oliver become a criminal it would have been a tragedy, but Noah is already depraved and discarded. Fagin identifies the chance to employ him, to turn him into a valuable product – in essence, to pull a rabbit out of his hat. The friendly gestures and jokes allow Fagin to sculpt Noah in ways that he never could with Oliver.

Again, the logic appears to be that the comic characters equate to shifting identities and resultant threats to the desired moral standards of the capitalist system.

Noah's misreading of signals, inability to copy them precisely, and lack of complete understanding when Fagin gives hints about Charlotte's future profession, each take comic turns and lead to strange identity issues. Noah has planned to use the alias of "Mr Morris Bolter" while circulating amongst the likes of Fagin, and this pseudonym lasts for about three lines until Charlotte openly calls to him, "Yes, Noah, dear." Noah's attempt at mending this slip is as impressive as one might expect (359): "She calls to me as Noah, as a sort of fond way of talking," said Mr Morris Bolter, late Claypole, turning to the Jew. "You understand?" (359). The mistake is humorous and telling in respect to the uncertainty of identity in the playful Underworld. Both of Noah's confused identities are juxtaposed with Fagin's dominant one (as "the Jew") and demonstrate the explicit trouble of keeping values and distinctiveness stable. Fagin's response that he understands Noah "perfectly" again puns off of the comic situation and inserts a disquieting aspect to the narrator's continuation of that comment (359). We are told that Fagin was "telling the truth for once" (359). Lying, misrepresentations, and jokes are put together in these few lines by both Fagin and the narrator. Combined, they serve as a break with the privileged mores of the novel's middle-class world and show how misrepresentation rests at the heart of Fagin's villainy and Victorian criminality.

Noah agrees to meet Fagin's friend the following day only to realise that it is Fagin himself with whom he has entered into a compact. Noah's comprehension upon seeing Fagin waiting for him at his den provokes a question: "And so it was you that was your own friend, was it?" To which Fagin responds: "Every man's his own friend" (360). The philosophy presented here is one that clearly challenges and satirises the thorny philosophical aspects of a

self-interested economy, which continues during the pair's famous exchange about who is "number one" (360). However, the premise relies on the conviction that one person can only ever know and judge himself, and perhaps should not even try to value others because it is too risky and difficult. The approach polarises with that of the middle-class characters, which have no trouble knowing who is good/safe and who is bad/dangerous. Within the bizarre criminal network of capitalism, where everyone, as Fagin notes, is so "mixed up together," the dilemma of determining who to trust becomes futile and success relies on sheer cynicism and friendship either with one's self or, at best, a "little community like ours" made up of individuals feeding off of one another to keep the cash flowing and the system of connections growing (360). This underside of liberal doctrine is summed up by the narrator at the conclusion of the exchange when he explains that Fagin is a master of "blending truth and fiction together as best served his purpose" (361). Within the Underworld's set of rules wherein truth and value have been capsized, Fagin can make up his own conventions as he goes along. The result displays an alarming belief in both the individual's self-interest and his own abilities to create narratives to fulfil those interests, something of which Dickens seems to be wary.

The narrator's distinction between truth and fiction recalls Dickens's 1841 preface wherein he is very specific as to the role of the novelist. The fiction-maker should not manipulate the boundaries between reality and story to form a narrative that strays from "actual life" (Dickens, "Author's Introduction" 460). Writing in *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Martha Nussbaum identifies Thomas Gradgrind's divergences from "relevant facts" and flirtations with an artistic consciousness as marks of his growing humanity (22). The ability to intellectually expand upon the literal world and "see one thing in another" demonstrates the capacity to break out of mechanical thinking and into a more fully human

realisation (36). As she argues, *Hard Times* (1854) presents the “fiction-making imagination” as a thoroughly humane and dignified faculty (36). However, *Oliver Twist* confronts the sinister side of imaginative ideas. Fagin embodies what could be called, somewhat redundantly, a “false” fiction-maker. Not unlike the novelists who weave tales filled with “seductive fellows (amiable for the most part), faultless in dress, plump in pocket,” Fagin is a narrative charlatan (Dickens, “Author’s Introduction” 457). He spins promises of easy money and adventurous lives to unsuspecting rubes, and his depiction exemplifies both sides of the argument about Victorian crime writing. The vulgar, offensive manners portend to the realism and “moral precept” Dickens craves, while Fagin performs a similar artistry as those misleading writers that precede Dickens (Dickens 458). With this combination, Dickens illustrates his aesthetic argument about literature and social responsibility through the “vilest evil” he could concoct (456). Furthermore, anxiety about the connection between misrepresentations of the economic, counterfeiting sort and the untrustworthy, authorial variety joins capitalism with fiction on a deep cultural level.

As the novel concludes, Fagin is literally brought out of the Underworld, his sorcerer’s wand taken away not through personal choice, as with a Prospero or Doctor Faustus, but by the state he once corrupted. He sits vermin-like and scared in a jail cell, the light beaming down upon him with a condemning glow, in Cruikshank's famous illustration. In keeping with traditional comedic conventions and the picaresque genre, the villain is brought to justice and the old world order of birth and respectability are maintained. Dickens lets everything be known by the final page. His attempts at the uncloaking of Fagin’s mystery are obvious and at least superficially successful. But despite Dickens’s efforts, we are left with the sense that those old melodramatic tropes of good and evil are worn at best and unbelievable at worst. Sikes is dead, Nancy is dead, Monks is forced to reveal his secrets, the Dodger is in jail – the Underworld

requires quite a bit of cleaning up and in summary sounds as much like a tragedy as a comedy. The form seems to be bending under the enormous weight of a world in flux. Dickens draws back the curtain in an attempt at grandiose justice and hopes to expose the monster while putting the reader's fears to rest. Ironically, he reveals Fagin at his most fragile and human, the banality of evil. If anything, Dickens gives a backstage view of the magician's tricks, where the mirrors and tools of illusion are shown to be all too practical and plain.

As our "bad shilling" finishes its narration, the task is also one of exposure and reevaluation. Upon finally being "passed" to an honest shopkeeper who takes him out of circulation once and for all, he is "nailed to the counter as an example to others" (Blanchard 70). Crucifixion exposes the bad shilling for its true value and, as in the case of Fagin, strips its ability to originate unwanted belief through the economic network. The "shilling" has become an ordinary piece of forged metal, displayed as a symbol of warning in naked futility, while Fagin's end arrives with an equal whimper through which the underlord is revealed to be just another old Jew. The game is over. The bad shilling is stripped of its monetary value, unable to inspire assurance, but that lost value is replaced with a new one, also founded on belief: a forewarning to future counterfeiters. As with Fagin, the display of the coin's "body" serves to enhance belief in the larger system and the suggestion that contaminants such as this one have and will continue to be expelled. More important than hanging Fagin is turning the ludic serious and the laughter into resolve. Dickens exploits a variety of tropes and subsequent anxieties about capitalism by creating a Jewish villain informed by his connection to the unobserved levels of economic activity, who can manipulate his private network of thieves and value in a manner befitting a Mephistopheles of modernity. He is sentenced through a middle-class light that makes his shadowy criminal work literally and philosophically unconcealed. Likewise,

Blanchard's narration insists upon the overt, public castigation of the shilling, which serves a base desire for visible punishment.

The world of *Oliver Twist* punishes the false and rewards the sincere. This relationship to modern credit functions as a type of subversive play wherein Fagin's comic aspects can be understood in conjunction with his figurative counterfeiting and some of the more nuanced expressions of Victorian anti-Semitism. Against the backdrop of *London's Underworld*, Fagin reminds us of perhaps the most frightening aspect of urban economics. That is, how easily any of us can be tricked.

Chapter 2
The Barber's Dilemma:
Laughter and Economic Otherness in *The String of Pearls*

“...Where we are,
There's daggers in men's smiles. The near in blood,
The nearer bloody.”

--William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (1606)

Introduction

If Kafka illustrates the enigmatic pressures of capitalist values better than any other writer of the twentieth century, Honore de Balzac perhaps best captures the peculiar sentiment of Europe's cultural reaction to capitalism in the nineteenth. While fictions like *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and *The Trial* (1925) force readers to confront the pettiness of their own modern habits and the magnitude of the forces opposed to the individual, *The Human Comedy* (1815-48) is filled with characters facing the challenges of the new social system that governs their lives and would prove to be the embryo of that which Kafka would later critique. In particular Balzac's *Melmoth Reconciled* (1835) offers a view of the strange literary effects upon identity and perception so fundamental to the nineteenth century's economic developments. A suddenness of action and existential confusion merge to fill the pages of this short novel. As a narrative, it offers a continuation of the Irish Gothic *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and situates the central character, Castanier, in the unfortunate position of having to convince another person

to trade his soul for the riches that Melmoth can supply in this world. The passing of the obligation to another is the only path to freedom.

Castanier, a simple cashier, becomes sucked into the cycle of debt and desperation when Melmoth inexplicably appears before his desk while considering an act of forgery upon his master, M. de Nucingen. Balzac takes care to identify the stranger with supernatural powers as a “wealthy Englishman” in a “half-Puritanical costume” and “the lips that seemed made to suck the blood of corpses.” The conflation of Englishness with predatory, vampire-like imagery inside the context of a story driven by capitalist instinct is striking in its own right, but more pertinent is the disruption Melmoth can cause and the profound effects of that disturbance on Castanier. After imparting his ultimatum upon Castanier, Melmoth simply “disappears” and leaves him with a sensation of having swallowed a “poison” of some sort. This sense of a poisoned mind continues for Castanier as he grows more frantic to relieve himself of the contract he will soon be blackmailed into signing and reaches a fever pitch while attending the theater. At the start of the performance, Castanier realizes that Melmoth has changed the play into a performance that mirrors his own case of forgery (entitled *The Cashier*). Balzac describes Castanier’s feeling as “like that of a nightmare” because he must watch the horror but cannot react or change anything about it. Melmoth forces him to observe the stage and take on a strange third-person view of his own life, actions, and even thoughts. This disconnected sensation peaks when Castanier realizes everyone in the theater is roaring with laughter. A woman asks him, “Why don’t you laugh?” His life and panic-ridden situation have been configured into a comedy. His terror is only amplified when he turns to Melmoth and sees him “burst out laughing.” Castanier’s brain is “tortured” at the sound and his sense of self becomes so confused and troubled that he loses all distinction between what he has lived and what he has imagined.

Castanier then agrees to sign the document and exchanges eternal damnation for safety from the earthly authorities who would prosecute him as a financial forger. Beyond demonstrating the severity of financial trauma upon the human psyche and the interrelations between economics and conscience, Balzac twists the boundaries of reality and understanding when he infuses a vulgar, horrifying laughter into the center of Castanier and Melmoth's relationship.

I begin with this exposition because Balzac's fable-like pact with the devil provides a concise allegory for the difficulty involved with two important aspects of capitalist philosophy that are relevant to the nineteenth century and beyond. The first is the constant pressure to change, or transform, from one state of being into another, with the question of value always hanging in the balance. Melmoth, Castanier, and the rest of those pulled into the cycle of transference face the difficulty of adaptation and pinning a price upon their own lives (and afterlives). Balzac offers a concentrated view of this dilemma, with stakes raised to the level of myth. When applied to a commodity, Marx calls this predicament capital's "crisis of realization": when the accumulation of capital reaches a point where it becomes useless due to a supply that outruns demand. The capital cannot "realize" its value in the marketplace and, hence, this dilemma leads to crisis. As will be discussed, Sweeney Todd encounters this very dilemma with his stolen goods. However, it is also a fitting metaphor to illustrate his existential state wherein, like Melmoth and Castanier, his inability to attain a desired social position generates a crisis of realization and subsequent panic in respect to his identity.

This panic leads to the second feature of capitalist culture contained in these representations and involves the aforementioned laughter that Melmoth releases. It arises from the perpetual stress upon the individual's psyche and existential condition born of living within financial panic. Inside the context of the novel, it tells us plainly that something is *wrong* with

Melmoth. Laughter in the face of stress, danger, and the terror of another person, is disturbing. I will argue that this style of laughter stands apart from the standard Gothic howling of a maniacal madman or murderer, who enjoys his work too much. While those tropes are certainly derived from the Gothic traditions of the eighteenth century and Romantic periods, figures like Melmoth distinguish themselves as urbanites and of a type not accepted by the conventions of the time. The laughter runs counter to standard conceptions about what should be laughed at, and mixes upsetting reactions with the ludic. As distinct from Bertha's "goblin laughter" in *Jane Eyre* and similar intonations of the genre, the urban form of laughter described above comes to indicate a disturbing *physicality* that erupts from specifically economic frustration (Bronte 134). While the general tendency of capitalist philosophy during the century is to *suppress* labor and physical measurements of value, these crises and accompanying laughs present stark reminders of the inability to purge raw, bodily actions from economic considerations despite a strong desire to turn their presence into an anomaly.

My goal in this chapter is to discuss a comparable tradition of Balzac's Melmoth in English, figures whose villainy derives from economic existential displacement and manifests itself through a deformation of the comic. It is difficult to pinpoint an exact Anglo equivalent to Balzac, Hugo, Dostoevsky, or later, Kafka. Dickens offers many villains with economic underpinnings, such as Fagin, Mr. Merdle, and Quilp. William Thackeray's Barry Lyndon and Becky Sharp prey upon the vulnerable cash exposed by human foibles. Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* may come close to a similar bizarreness. However, one figure stands out within the serializations of the 1840s as offering the appropriate mix of terror with absurdity. Sweeney Todd's initial appearance in *The String of Pearls: A Romance* (1846-47) offers a good, comparative example of the phenomena described by Balzac to the characters from the Continent

and Russia. Edward Lloyd's *The People's Periodical and Family Library* provided the backdrop for what would become one of the most popular and enduring villains of Victorian England and, more significantly, supplies a missing link, drawn from the English tradition, to the nexus of texts that depict this particular type of capitalist angst as filtered through the coupling of money and the urban Gothic. The serialization amounts to a novel-length, pulpy, penny dreadful that portrays Sweeney in a manner similar to, but with substantial distinctions from, the more recognizable Stephen Sondheim musical production, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. In the original, Sweeney is a barber but also a criminal: a thief and murderer to be exact. The revenge aspect, so vital to the Sondheim version, is nonexistent in *The String of Pearls*. He murders for profit and is a villain of the highest order, one who delights in his enterprise.

In "The Psychology of Crises" (1900) Edward David Jones describes the scholarship about capitalist panic as a "literature of crises," and this term may be a good one to adapt for the present case.⁶ The nineteenth century develops a subset of literature in response to the personal implications of financial crisis and Sweeney Todd upholds that convention. Clive Bloom traces the shift of the Gothic onto the urban landscape to Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) and considers Sweeney Todd to be a descendant of that development. This setting emphasizes the modern aspects of the story such as crime and newspapers, along with the vulnerabilities to marketplace conflict, such as the famous "meat-pie shop" and the emphasis on Sweeney's identity as barbershop proprietor. Gail Turley Houston also ties the urban Gothic to issues of economic panic and uses them as a basis for her study of Victorian literature's relationship with "economic discourse often figured in terms of the Gothic" (13). Words like "terror," "haunted,"

⁶ Jones, Edward David. "The Psychology of Crises." *Economic Crises*. London: MacMillan, 1900. *Google Books*. 10 March 2013. Web. While crisis was nothing new to political economists by 1900, Jones is one of the earliest to write about crisis as a specific function of human psychology.

“insane,” and “secret,” pepper Victorian economic rhetoric and echo those found in Gothic writing with the eerie resemblance of a doppelganger.

Writing in *The Affective Life of the Average Man: The Victorian Novel and the Stock Market Graph* (2010) Audrey Jaffe theorizes the implications of financial capitalism upon the psyche and emotional state of a supposed “ideal” individual. She describes the market’s fluctuations as a way to determine the “collective feeling” of society, not as an irrelevant abstraction but rather as a measurement directly tied to quality of life. An emphasis upon statistics attempts to calculate this “affective life” in a manner that approaches unimpeachable “truth” or “fact.”⁷ However, the pressure to find a supposed objective medium with which to gauge market and financial deviance betrays the reality of its incessant shifting and gyrating. Jaffe’s argument becomes one about the temperament of fictional characters and how we should read their developing normality, or lack thereof, in conjunction with changes in economic mood. She sums up the situation: “...the Victorian novel often construes individual character and emotion as a *degree of similarity to or difference from a norm*, just as statisticians create the possibility of viewing reality as a system of perturbations from an average” (emphasis added, 7). In other words, the development of individual psyche is perceived as a function similar to and influenced by the very statistical processes of the growing, overarching system of market derivatives. The market goes up—we must be happy, and vice versa. Houston also picks up on this tendency when explaining that part of the necessity of Economic Man, or *homo economicus*, “was to exist in conditions in which economic crisis was a norm” (14).⁸ The Darwinist-like need

⁷ Jaffe, Audrey. *The Affective Life of the Average Man: The Victorian Novel and the Stock-Market Graph*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2010. Print. Jaffe is not interested in *homo economicus* specifically, but describes a de facto construction of an emotionally controlled figure who fits into the economic system as smoothly as possible.

⁸ Houston, Gail Turley. *From Dickens to Dracula: Gothic, Economics, and Victorian Fiction*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005.

to adapt to extreme panic may have been as potent in the 1840s as any other decade of the century. The Bank Charter Act of 1844 and subsequent bust of the railway bubble in 1847 combined to move financial crises to the forefront of Victorian consciousness and unsettle an already precarious relationship between capitalism and public confidence. Lord Overstone's famous description of trade cycles as a "state of quiescence" followed by improvement, confidence, prosperity, excitement, overtrading, convulsion, pressure, stagnation, distress, and again into quiescence was considerably tested.⁹ The 1840s seem to have spent an extended period of time in the latter stages of convulsion, pressure, and distress and the figure of Sweeney Todd demonstrates the dysfunction of such constant panic through what I will describe as an inability to transform, to convert, to move past the crisis and realize prosperity.

His troubles parallel the novel's central metaphor (and one which has yet to receive any critical attention): the pearls. In *The String of Pearls* we find a working-class man (a barber) attempting to transform himself into a retired gentleman through the unloading of a set of stolen pearls. The failure to exchange the pearls and other tangible goods for appropriate value creates an extended and heightened sense of panic, which reveals itself through grotesque mirth. Neither he nor the pearls can reach a settled conclusion as the forces of Victorian social institutions such as the police and formal markets of London push against his attempts, ultimately leading him and the pearls into stases not unlike the predicament Balzac envisions. Throughout these events, his existence is uncertain and anguished as his ideological construction depends upon a number of economic and social binaries from Victorian society that do not allow for combination, such as laborer/capitalist, poor/wealthy, comic/earnest, and sane/mad.

⁹ Overstone, Lord [until 1850, Samuel Jones Loyd] (1837a), *Reflections suggested by a perusal of Mr J. Horsley Palmer's Pamphlet on the Causes and Consequences of the Pressure on the Money Market*. London. Reprinted in Tracts, pp. 1–40.

As I will explain, Sweeney suffers a fate similar to that of Melmoth and the effects are just as laughable (to him). Early on, readers are informed of the off-putting hideousness of Sweeney's laugh. It is "hyena-like," alarming, sadistic and puts other characters on edge, disrupts their notions of normality. Descriptions of his laugh appear frequently in the opening chapters and continue to interrupt the text throughout the course of the story. His accomplice, Mrs. Lovett, has a smile that does not invite endearing reactions. In fact, it conveys a certain spirit of the "self-interested" that makes others tense at its expression. The semiotics of joy, pleasure, and playfulness obviously include our laughing and smiling, yet something is not right with these two. The disturbing natures of Sweeney's laugh and Mrs. Lovett's smile portray the comic in a manner contrary to typical associations. For nineteenth-century creations caught in the paradox Melmoth and Sweeney find themselves in, laughter—typically a symbol of happiness and community—betrays their alienation and marginalized economic status. They stand apart from the mainstream characters and values of the novel and that distance is measured in dissonant cackles and foreboding grins. They do not express amusement "properly." Because of the stalled economic evolution and endless sense of panic in which they live, Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett regularly display their marginalization through how they sound as much as how they look. Misplaced laughter becomes a warped reflex for an existence defined by the ironic desire of unattainable change. Sweeney counters the middle-class characters that uphold the gentlemanly virtues of the "romance," a genre stressed through the subtitle, while supplying working-class subversion for the original young readers of the serial. Over the course of this chapter, Sweeney Todd's construction will come to be understood as a manifestation of simultaneous economic and comic dissent. In conclusion, I will hypothesize as to why the iconic

figure of “the demon barber” has developed as he has, and survived for so long inside the capitalist imagination.

Embodied Crises

In his well-known essay “The Dialectic of Fear,” Franco Moretti identifies Frankenstein’s creature and Dracula as the two poles of economic metaphor in the nineteenth century: “the worker and capital.” As compared to feudal representations, these characters are “totalizing” in the sense that they encompass the potential for all of society to be affected by them, not merely a rogue figure hoping to fulfill his limited personal desires.¹⁰ In *Frankenstein* the creature threatens to spawn a proletariat “race of devils,” as Shelley describes it, that are impervious to mankind’s physical limitations, while Bram Stoker depicts an eternal aristocrat who builds an empire through business ventures and the exploitation of others’ bodies, sucking their lifeblood to feed his own power. Using these two icons of Anglo villainy as a theoretical framework, Sweeney Todd can be understood as an important touchstone between them: a figure who exemplifies features from both while preying upon a new category of mid-Victorian financial anxiety about identity and wealth. His arrival in 1846-47 some thirty years after *Frankenstein* (1818) and forty prior to *Dracula* (1897) offers historical and aesthetic complements to both novels.

Counterparts to one another, we see the earlier, over-sized monster with superhuman physical abilities that *could* dominate the world with brute force but chooses to live in obscurity versus the regal seducer at the end of the century, one who begins a plot to conquer civilization. Their appearances oppose one other, but also work in conjunction to display the trouble with determining value in an era defined by deepening division between labor and capital. The

¹⁰ Moretti’s analysis is central to this reading of Sweeney Todd because he explains the threats of Frankenstein’s creature and Dracula as part of a symbolic economic continuum of which I believe Sweeney is a part.

creature is informed by the fear of a revolting poor and working class, literally pieced together with the parts of thrown away, nameless bodies. Dracula flaunts his familial heritage and name, imposing his will through lawyers and financial transactions; he is a rendering of imperial investment and the anxiety of unseen processes of capitalist expansion shrouded in the charismatic glow of nobility. The monsters embody separate but related types of Victorian fear: street-level crime and murder as imagined through the figure of the physically dexterous outlaw and the fiscal cannibalism of banks and institutions as it evolves through the Gothic tradition. In respect to Sweeney Todd, we find him embodying both of these cultural crises in equal and alternating degrees.

Within the first few pages of *The String of Pearls*, Sweeney Todd is described in literal, imposing terms:

“...long, low-jointed, ill-put-together sort of fellow, with an immense mouth, and such huge hands and feet, that he was, in his way, quite a natural curiosity [...] there never was such a head of hair as Sweeney Todd’s. We know not what to compare it to[...] it was a most terrific head of hair; and as Sweeney Todd kept all combs in it—some said his scissors likewise—[...] he might have been mistaken for some Indian warrior with a very remarkable head-dress.” (4)

His stature is remarkable, unfamiliar. Later, two characters refer to him as a “tall, ugly-looking fellow” and “as ugly as the very devil” (131). The emphasis upon his hair is fitting given his profession, but also links him to misused objects. Throughout the novel, Sweeney is associated with physical products that are out of place and ineffectual. The motif of commodities that cannot find an appropriate outlet will be revisited shortly, but his physical portrayal betrays a large, patched together combination of signs that create a “natural curiosity” and even displace

him geographically with the invocation of a North American “Indian warrior.” Embedded in this appearance is the comic absurdity of an unsettled persona, one that does not have a definite cultural position and must piece one together through random mimicry. However, his unusual description does have precedent in *Frankenstein*. As Dr. Frankenstein first lays eyes upon his creation he reacts with disgust at the sight:

“Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness [...] his shriveled complexion, and straight black lips.” (34)

Sweeney Todd offers a more human and domesticated version of Frankenstein’s creature although the similarities are apparent. Both are hulking curiosities noted for their hair, and while Sweeney enjoys the benefit of thirty years of evolution, he still stands as a figure apart from the normative in the narrator’s judgment. Both are also regularly likened to “devils” and “daemons.” In both books, we see the anomalies in action and again the similarities are noticeable. As Sweeney Todd finds himself trapped in a thieves’ den with the stolen pearls, he must fight his way out. He body slams his adversaries one after another before fending the rest off with a mop in a battle that “continued for more than two or three hours” until he is able to leap from a window and get away (65).

His escapes are not unlike those popularized by the stories about the likes of Jack Sheppard and Eugene Aram from the “Newgate” novels of the 1830s and 40s. Another scene displays Sweeney’s incredible speed as he flees from a corrupt jeweler and is “hunted” through the streets by passers-by who take up the cause in a scene reminiscent of *Oliver Twist* being chased from the bookstall (56). Sweeney Todd overcomes more and more pursuers by traveling at “a tremendous speed,” breaking free of tacklers, and landing “terrific blow[s]” before grabbing

a particularly tenacious Good Samaritan and with an “amount of strength that was perfectly prodigious [...] flung him through the shop-window, smashing glass, frame-work, and everything in his progress” (57). As his physical description is reminiscent of *Frankenstein*, so are his brutish movements. Towards the end of the novel, as Frankenstein chases his creation across the globe, we are told the monster “fled with more than mortal speed” and into climes unfit for humans, leaving a wake of destruction in his path (Shelley 143). Both the creature and Sweeney dramatize the physicality of the laboring class in a manner that constructs an otherness in relation to middle-class bodies. This strange corporeality is where I would also like to situate the economic subtext of *Sweeney Todd* and *Pearls* as being indicative of a nineteenth-century cultural collision between the genteel “respectability” of capitalism and the bodily necessities of its effects.

Matthew Buckley thoroughly describes the role of modern urban life in the public reception of *Jack Sheppard* (1839) with his essay “Sensations of Celebrity: *Jack Sheppard* and the Mass Audience.” Figures like the escapist criminal built upon a panic surrounding the “daily activity of the metropolis, rather than political revolution” (425). Crime and criminals feed this new “perceptual modernity” because they may lurk around any corner and come forth from the most unsuspecting persons (Buckley cites the case of B.F Courvoisier, a valet who murdered his lord in 1840 and created a lurid media reaction), while also supplying representations of physical difference between the urban poor and middle-class standards of appearance. The “ingenuity” and “gymnastic capability” that characterize Sheppard’s escapes can easily be recognized in Sweeney’s actions. However, we should remember that *Sweeney Todd* appears nearly a decade after *Jack Sheppard* and *Oliver Twist*. The panic about citizens “imitating” those less seemly

aspects of popular fiction has grown familiar, although mimicry is still a concern that will be addressed through Sweeney's misrepresentations of himself to others.

From an economic standpoint, as mentioned above, the "railway mania" of the 1840s along with the Bank Charter Act of 1844 pushed explicitly economic concerns to the forefront of English consciousness. Sweeney combines these aspects of cultural anxiety with the prior ones about criminal unpredictability to form a hybrid crisis. The fear of money "disappearing," or being locked irretrievably into investments and institutions, starts to pop up in literature like *Pearls*. Despite all of the theoretical discourse related to bank-runs, economic panic, and the suchlike, they are incredibly *physical* events; boundaries wherein the seemingly abstract aspects of urban economics face immediate material exposure [See *Figures 1* and *2*]. A person, a body, has to get to the location at a certain time, before his neighbor, and push through the crowd. The entire process is antithetical to the mantras of capitalism wherein the "money works" for the investor. *Pearls* and other texts that build upon economic stress through Gothic tropes highlight the physical nature of these scenarios because they allow for the display of concealed cultural practices through fantastic identities and uncommon metaphors. I would argue that what makes a bank run so traumatic is the commotion and clamor, the intense physiological reactions, more so than the actual money at stake. They are lived sensationalism. While images of crowds in the nineteenth century may immediately call to mind fears over class revolution, these particular groups are not driven by the desire for social change but rather the conservative impulse to maintain the current organizations of wealth. Similar in iconography, they are derived from a very different cultural stimulus. The large gatherings of people do not function as a single force but as a collection of individuals aiming to help their personal interests through the power of a group. The liberalist mob may be the ultimate example of Buckley's description of modernity's

urban centers shifting from a locale for revolutionary change to the “practice of everyday life” (424).¹¹

While *Pearls* does not provide examples of any explicit bank runs, there is substantial economic panic on the level of commodities as seen through Mrs. Lovett’s pie-shop. The first description of her establishment parallels the imagery of bank runs with startling resemblance.

“Is it a fire? is it a fight? or anything else sufficiently alarming and extraordinary...? No, it is none of these, nor is there a fat cause to be *run* for, which, in the hands of some clever practitioner, might become quite a *vested interest*. No, the enjoyment is purely one of a *physical* character, and all the pacing and racing—all this turmoil and trouble—all this pushing, jostling, laughing, and shouting, is to see who will get first to Lovett’s pie-shop” (emphasis added, 29).

I have highlighted the key economic terms in this passage and those that speak to the sheer “physical character” of the rush to buy meat pies. The language could easily portray a bank run of the period, except in this case people are trying to add money into the shop instead of take it out. We see the same transition of revolution into personal endeavor as with the larger cultural movement to privatized interests over communal ones. However, the patrons are not purchasing typically delicious pies for lunch and dinner.

As readers are soon made aware, the pies are made of human flesh and they (characters and readers alike) have all been unknowingly brought into the network of cannibalism built by

¹¹ The images of bank-runs represent a specific type of “mob” that is superficially recalls revolution but has actually been appropriated for conservative purposes. They draw attention to the varying social constructions of “rationality” in modernity. A crowd of looters or revolutionaries might be described as criminal, while the gentlemen storming a bank are safe from such accusations. The physical exuberance is always uncomfortable for capitalism, but the gentlemen are judged to be socially safe because they are fighting on behalf of private property.

Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett. The stakes for discussions about cannibalism are always high and typically involve a prominent theoretical perspective. Postcolonial readings related to cannibalism and racial otherness have been explicated for some time, in particular the dichotomy between “civilized” and “savage” peoples. Kristen Guest, in her edited collection about cannibalism and cultural identity, cites Maggie Kilgour’s description of cannibalism as the blurring of self and other, the loss of “an absolute division between inside and outside” that the process entails. Cannibalism often challenges standard notions of what identity is and prompts questions about the “permeability, or instability, of such boundaries” (2). The strain this gruesome act puts upon an understanding of urban identity and the way in which *Pearls* exploits the economic anxieties tied to that identity finds precedent in the physical stresses of panic. As our narrator tells us after the description of the “run” on the meat-pie shop, “high and low, rich and poor” rushed into line and the “fame had spread great distances” to even the “suburbs of the city” (29). Little do the patrons know just how thoroughly the typical lines of class division have been subverted by Mrs. Lovett. The shop, a symbol of entrepreneurial commercialism, becomes a satirical craze of bourgeois consumers, who are literally chasing and buying themselves as product, their neighbors feeding the supply chain which then feeds their hungry demand.

In *Man, Play, and Games* Roger Caillois observes that the carnivalesque and masquerade never cross the border of believability. Deception is not the purpose: “the masquerader does not try to make one believe he is really a marquis, toreador...” (21). There is certainly a reading of the Bakhtinian carnival in the pie shop. However, a close cousin to this style of play and perhaps more fitting to the villainous ends of this particular case is mimicry—the less socially-acceptable version of overt masks. The façade of the meat-pie shop crosses this line in a very disturbing way for Victorians. Exploiting unpleasant nineteenth-century cultural experiences such as the

stench from the sewer system and daily engagements with dead bodies at overflowing graveyards into an ironic nightmare, *Pearls* turns consumerist identity into its own rival.¹² The demarcation between consumer and consumed, living and dead, evaporates. Likewise, mimicry is an illusion that transcends costume and becomes disguise.

As with the economic inversions and trickery of the pie shop, Sweeney derives pleasure from “being or passing for another” individual, changing identities with only the self as knowing audience and finding profitable ends in that deceit. When discussing *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Julia M. Wright explains how the Gothic tradition builds upon fears related to the metaphoric cannibalism of the aristocratic class as perpetrated through political discourse of the eighteenth century and Romantic period. What she terms a “crisis over property” emerges wherein the old guard that represents wealth through bloodlines must be symbolically “devoured” by the “consumption-based logic” of capitalism (80-81). She identifies the original Melmoth as a Gothic figure trapped between these two economies. He is at once bound to family and contract and physically appears when the “two economies are in conflict” (93). As he wanders in search of an equal exchange value for his soul’s freedom, a series of financial concerns about failing businesses and lost estates come into view. The constant presence of money underlines the economic features of Gothic stories while enhancing the panic of Melmoth’s condition. As the pie-shop’s satire thrives on pressuring the tension between self/other, producer/purchaser, so does Melmoth face a fragmenting of his own identity based upon the cultural divide between two economic spaces. But Sweeney Todd himself also undergoes a fragmentation of self throughout his economic activities. As with the meat-pie shop, his identity comes to function in a permanent

¹² The stench from the dead bodies in the subterranean passages that link the barbershop and the pie-shop is regularly referenced by middle-class characters and investigators who cannot place its source.

state of economic mimicry. When attempting to dispose of the unsalable pearls, his disguises range from the peculiar to the aristocratic.

Not unlike the Underworld scenarios that play themselves out in *Oliver Twist*, *Pearls* offers similar confusion about what is genuine and what is fraudulent. Upon his first attempt to unload the pearls, Sweeney barter with a lapidary about their worth. Beyond a standard exercise in deal making, the conversation turns towards the bizarre when both men proclaim the pearls to be forgeries (knowing full well they are not). During an after-hours meeting to sell the pearls, the lapidary exclaims: “Real, real, by Heaven! All real!” before taking a “long stare at Sweeney Todd” and changing his response to “Oh, I see they are counterfeits,” in an effort to swindle the pearls from him for the price of a “well done” “curiosity,” 50 pounds (54). But not to be outdone, Sweeney (who knows they are authentic) declares: “I am fond of curiosities...as long as they are not real, I’ll keep them; they will do for a present to some child or other” (54). This sends the lapidary into a whirl, at which point he doubles his offer to 100 pounds. The charade ends after Sweeney releases his disturbing laughter and they shift into a thorough debate about the exchange value versus the market worth of the pearls. As the lapidary explains, pearls such as these (worth upwards of 12,000 pounds) are “like a house, an estate...the vendor of them must give every satisfaction as to how he came by them...and prove a good right and title to them” (55). Sweeney quickly recognizes the lapidary’s play to buy the pearls for a “thief’s price” but assures him that his plot for a bargain will not work. As he tells the dealer, no one “will question you, who are well known to be in the trade,” and have the cultural capital to circulate with such things. The deal does not reach an agreement and as Sweeney tries to leave the lapidary sounds an alarm of “Stop thief!” (56). The ensuing chase pushes Sweeney into the street scene described above and the subsequent thieves’ den m el e.

Before escaping the den, he again must declare the pearls a forgery in order to keep the other criminals from stealing them from him. This creates an inversion of standard rhetoric wherein deception and lies seem to be the only form of discourse available to members of the group. While Fagin's schemes offered definite alternatives to the earnest middle-class depictions of English life through humor, winks, and nods only interpretable by the initiated, *Pearls* presents a world bordering upon complete subversion. As the central romantic figure, Jarvis Williams, thinks to himself upon meeting Mrs. Lovett, "There seems to be some singular and hidden meaning in every word she utters" (98). One can never be sure what lurks beneath the city or the words of its occupants. The pearls themselves mirror this conundrum. Outside of their original ownership, the pearls prove to be not only difficult to exchange but impossible to even claim. Whereas the typical scheme would be to pass counterfeits for genuine jewels, the pattern within *Pearls* inverts that trajectory. The criminals are in possession of bona fide gems but disown that validity in favor of forwarding profitable ends through eccentric schemes. While notions of trickery and manipulation are still prevalent within the London Underworld of crime, they have been twisted from the standard melodrama and caricature of Dickens into a storyline that challenges the most basic structure of truthfulness. This tension marks the continuation of a trend which will be followed in the coming chapters of this dissertation. Who to believe and what is sincere are still defined within the conventions of genre and middle-class standards in *Pearls*, and generally easily understandable. However, the beginnings of a move towards indeterminacy between the culture of villains and the values of the normative takes shape through the reversing (and subverting) of standard discussions of value.

In order to free himself of the pearls, Sweeney Todd must take on an identity with the cultural ethos worthy of the expensive asset. It offers the one potential escape from a panic-

driven existence of capitalist angst. Even the investigators shadowing him acknowledge that the set of pearls would allow him “to retire from business with an independence,” a conclusion considered foreign to his status (89). When a tailor delivers a set of clothes “in such a style that they were to do for any nobleman,” he is very surprised at Sweeney’s trade, proclaiming he had never seen “such a coat for a barber” (131). We soon learn that the man, who is “ugly as the very devil,” according to the tailor, plans to put the clothes to “some villainy” (131, 133). As the carriage arrives, Sweeney leaves “attired in the very height of fashion” for “playing so grand a part” in his velvet coat and “positively gorgeous” waistcoat, “fingers...loaded with costly rings” and “sword with jeweled hilt” (134). Sweeney’s plan is revealed to be one equal to his extravagance and economic insurrection. He has sought out a Dutchman, who makes his income from lending large sums of money to financially-strained nobility at “enormous rates of interest” (135). His requisite for such a transaction is oftentimes a security deposit in the form of jewels or family heirlooms with high value but short on liquidity.

The narrator sums up his profession as being “nothing more than a pawn-broker on a very extensive scale” (135). Sweeney is sure to allow the lender to see his “costly” equipage and take in his exquisite dress before proceeding into the transaction’s details. Sweeney promises that he comes on behalf of a “very illustrious lady,” and the lender wonders if he might be a duke. When the pearls are unveiled, the lender quickly exclaims that there exists ““but one string like this in the kingdom... belong[ing] to the Queen” (138). The far-fetched nature of the claim that Sweeney’s faux nobleman is somehow tied to the queen of England only enhances the bizarre nature of the exchange and the idea that nothing is out of bounds when the entire city is “in play.” Although his plan ultimately works and he is able to leave the premises with a check for 7,500 pounds, there are a number of lessons to be learned.

The lengths he must go to in order to reach a resolution in the saga of the stolen pearls reaffirms the cultural and economic distance between a barber and a gentleman and the distrust that meets value when placed into improper hands. Not unlike the bank-run's physicality, Sweeney must operate on a visceral level within the theoretical framework of economic activity. It is only Sweeney's convincing "great alterations in his appearance" and the ability to physically disguise himself with false facial hair, makeup, and the spinning of an elaborate narrative that allow him to convince the dealer of his cultural capital and, in turn, the surety that the pearls are a safe investment (140). It is not until he can persuade someone of his occupancy of a social position beyond that of a barber that he can transform the pearls into a useful good. His own transformation results in the transformation of the pearls into a saleable commodity. He finally breaks the chains of futility and achieves the realization of the pearls' worth that springs his existence from the shackles of continuous crisis. Upon attaining a check for the pearls, his thoughts instantly turn into fantasies about a "new career" as a retired gentleman drawing an income from his accumulated capital (141-142). In these examples, we see the grave fluctuations and instability of Sweeney's economic identity: mock-aristocrat, half-worker, semi-capitalist, playful forger, and impostor entrepreneur.

Continuing the theoretical blending of identity begun with the pie shop and cannibalism, Sweeney brings that instability of self to his manipulations of material items as well, although he has far less success. What we find in his barber shop's cabinets and closets are consumer goods in all of their naked banality. When Tobias, Sweeney's exploited, Oliver Twist-like apprentice, decides to sneak into the barber's locked backroom, he makes quite a discovery. "A volley of hats...they formed quite a museum of that article of attire" come tumbling out of one of the cupboards (145). He continues farther into the room and downstairs only to break open another

locked closet wherein he finds “a great quantity of miscellaneous property of all kinds and descriptions” (145). There is great detail in this scene, which has minor foreshadowing at prior points in the novel, and the narrator portrays the class markers of such items in a manner that emphasizes the futility of their present circumstances.

“In one corner was an enormous quantity of walking-sticks, some of which were of a very costly and expensive character, with gold and silver chased tops to them, and in another corner was a great number of umbrellas—in fact at least a hundred of them” (146).

The description goes on to include, “boots and shoes,” “a great quantity of apparel,” “jewelry and trinkets,” and even more esoteric things like swords and scabbards (146). Of course, this is the point wherein Sweeney’s plot is fully revealed. He has collected all of these personal items from the victims he “polished off” and sent through the floor to their deaths and eventual consumption. However, the sterility of these items is striking. They have been stripped of all social and economic value. Even Tobias remarks that they “must have been of great value,” the perfect tense implying that they currently are not. As Sweeney’s plight with exchanging the pearls proved, collecting goods without a clear path to an exchange value is troublesome. When the goods are taken out of the capitalist system, what remains is *stuff*—strange, almost unintelligible products that occupy space without purpose. In a fashion similar to Sweeney’s own atypical appearance, the stolen goods create what I would call a grotesque literalness, wherein symbolic value (exchange value in the economic sense) cannot be readily identified or trusted. Sweeney’s physical form is untranslatable into mainstream terms and the goods he collects from his victims suffer the same fate. A hundred umbrellas are just that—a hundred umbrellas, nothing more or less. If Sweeney’s barbershop were a retailer, he would be

said to have a surplus of inventory; large supply with no demand. Instead, within the strange conditions of his perverse barbershop, he ends up with a virtual warehouse of futility. Within the hands of the gentlemen travelers, the items have both use and exchange value, but in the hands of a barber, “a working man” as he describes himself, they become hollow of those values.

The situation illustrates an important aspect about the circulation of value within a marketplace. Despite the expansive network of relations within an advanced credit-based economy like Victorian London’s, the “real” value of something is tied so closely to its symbolic worth that they prove to be inseparable. Almost like a medieval myth, wherein the powers of a certain sword or ring can only be activated by the “true” possessor, so does the private property of capitalism protect itself against misuse by criminals and non-capitalists. Within this literature, a moral economy trumps the financial system.

As Moretti notes, part of the fear induced by the creature and Dracula comes from their separate abilities to “destroy worlds,” to dominate in a complete fashion. Moretti refers to the literal destruction that fills both novels, but I would add to this by stating that the domination inherent in these figures is not only physical but economic as well. They are totalizing not simply because they are physically dominant or seemingly unstoppable, but because they are economic in nature. In a fairly stable political and social environment, the greatest lingering threat is economic crisis. Only financial disaster can sink the entire system, and figures like Frankenstein’s creature, Dracula, Sweeney Todd and other urban legends build upon this anxiety. The creature’s tact is to overwhelm with incredible athleticism and force. Dracula’s is to employ others for his bidding through his manipulation of unseen socioeconomic forces. Sweeney Todd is corporeally gifted, a prole with supernatural agility. However, he also anticipates a figure like Dracula. Towards the end of the century, we find the aged aristocrat

shaking Harker's hand with "a strength which made [him] wince, an effect which was not lessened by the fact that it seemed cold as ice, more like the hand of a dead than a living man." Despite the grayed hair and smaller stature of the Count, his "peculiarly sharp white teeth...protruded over the lips, whose remarkable ruddiness showed astonishing vitality" and signal an evolution of villainy from Frankenstein's creation. Dracula retains the preternatural might of his more athletic predecessors, but has been fully cultivated into a product of the capitalist sect, wrapped in a literal black cloak of aristocratic title.

Situating Sweeney between these two villains, we find that his construction and behavior move towards those of Dracula as he attempts to transfer his stolen pearls for an acceptable exchange value. However, because he is neither fully proletariat nor capable of becoming a capitalist, his journey transitions into an alternative form: the comic. While the Underworld bent to Fagin's will and manipulation, Sweeney functions farther above ground, so to speak, and the problems he faces involve a difficulty of finding space within the formal marketplace. Comic actions appear within Fagin's travels and amongst marginalized figures while the melodramatically noble characters remain solemn. A similar segregation presents itself in *Pearls*, wherein Sweeney must modify the representation of his identity in order to travel within the social circles that will permit the manifestation of a fair exchange value for his stolen goods. Sweeney, like Frankenstein, is built not born, constructed not conceived, although not by the hands of science. He is fabricated in and by the city of London, a product of crime, poverty, and the panicked imagination.

Whatever one may say about the treachery of either Dracula or the monster, they are both fully recognizable. Although outsiders, they are not wanting completion in respect to their

villainy. Sweeney Todd lacks a finalized state. Citing Claude Levi-Strauss, Andrew Stott identifies the “trickster” figure often found in comic art as “an ambiguous and equivocal character, one with the “mobility” to shift forms and take on any necessary appearance in order to bridge two seemingly irreconcilable fields of reality (55). As a missing link of sorts for Victorian capitalist representation, Sweeney fits this description with definite certitude and spreads the values of the trickster trope to unsuspecting Londoners.

What we find with Sweeney is a much greater prevalence of incompleteness and, in turn, a higher rate of comic action. His inability to convert the pearls into a functional exchange value coincides with his inability to translate himself out of his original working-class stature as an object of capital and into an owner of capital. He moves from place to place and scheme to scheme searching for a way out of an untransformed condition, like the stolen pearls themselves. In a direct parallel to the trouble his accumulated commodities undergo, Sweeney experiences economic crisis in an incredibly literal way. The pearls and gentlemanly items lack use value for him because of his class position and in a cruel twist avoid exchange value due to larger economic conditions as informed by the cultural trends of financial panic during the 1840s. Besides his own slipping in and out of social circles, he forces English citizens into a process wherein they will “satirize themselves” as a trickster traditionally does (Hynes and Steele 160). The only times Sweeney is successful in attaining any value are when he either alters his appearance through comic mimicry (disguise) or ironically subverts industrial culture (the meat-pie shop).



Figure 1. Illustration of bank run on Seaman's Bank (New York) in 1857. The jostling of gentlemen in top hats; some will succeed in retrieving their funds while others will not.



Figure 2. From *Supplement to Frank Leslie's Illustrated News*, October 1873. The bank run captures many of the anxieties about urban economic life and urban life in general. The crowds, the pursuit of money, and anonymity of consumerist identity all converge in images like these.



Figure 3.

“Daring Robbery of an Old Gentleman Named ‘Bull’” from *Punch* (1851, Volume XX). Caricatures of Robert Peel and Lord John Russell mugging the personification of English gentlemanliness, John Bull. A chloroform-dipped rag labeled “Repeal of the Window Tax” is smothering Bull. The image demonstrates the conflation of anxieties about street-level criminals with perceived injustices of the more abstract governmental and financial system as filtered through the comic devices of cartoons and caricatures. Sweeney Todd embodies this mix of cultural fears. An associated satirical article about the “robbery” explains that the two villains situated themselves near Bull by “pretending to be his friends.”

Laughter & the Economic Other

In his sonnet “To Laughter” (1816), Percy Bysshe Shelley describes laughing as a voice “dearest” to those who “mock at Truth and Innocency.” As Michael O’Neill notes, Shelley’s relationship with humor is complex, although generally he seemed to critique the “derisive” and resultant “amoral laughter” into which he saw Byron and some Restoration comedies slipping (O’Neill 126). However, Shelley’s biographer, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, recounts Shelley as once telling him, “I am convinced there can be no entire regeneration of mankind until laughter is put down” (Gribble 193). Anecdotal, yet interesting nonetheless, Percy and Mary Shelley’s

appreciations (or lack thereof) towards humor are debatable, but they present a remarkable sentiment from the nineteenth century and one not far removed from *Frankenstein*. Appearing in a more formal medium some years later, George Vasey's *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling* (1875) continues the critique that Shelley asserts.¹³ In a chapter titled "On the degrading and vicious consequences of the habit of laughing," Vasey claims those who succumb to the "meaningless habit of laughing" have sunk the "moral scale" in English society via the "follies, frivolities, mischiefs, and lewd conversations" that promote laughter (79). He goes on to explain that the predominance of "fools" to be found within England could be greatly reduced if only the laughers would stop laughing at absurd clowns and pranksters, then jokes and laughing could "cease to be practiced" (80). The irony of Vasey's hyperbole may be lost on him; the preface describes his project as one containing "all the seriousness and gravity becoming a scientific or philosophical inquiry" (vii).

However, his larger attitude and the desire to quantify and reposition laughter along with other human activities within a belief in seemingly objective judgments parallels a common post-Enlightenment tendency and one that came to exist within economic theory as well. For Shelley and Vasey, laughter is anti-beauty, anti-intellect, and therefore, irrational in a profound way. This is the aspect I would like to highlight in respect to Sweeney Todd. The figure of *Homo economicus*, as invented through the work of political economists like David Ricardo and Jeremy Bentham, attempts to reconfigure the model participant in the economy as a representation of pure rational order and conscious maximizer of effort (labor). Like they worked to embed statistics and mathematical formulas into a new style of political economy, so did the figure of

¹³ Vasey, George. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling*. Charleston, SC: BiblioLife, 2009. Print.

rational participants need to be imagined in order to enact these circumstances. But the economic Gothic, as traced from *Frankenstein* to *Dracula*, pushes back against this simple envisioning of human behavior. While they may be monstrous, the villainy of these figures is not necessarily irrational, although the need to associate them with such terminology becomes imperative.

Claudia C. Klaver traces the formal development of economics into a standardized method and accepted intellectual history as it builds up a cultural cache in the early part of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Building off of Ricardo's shift towards a scientific approach to political economy, people like J.S. Mill and Thomas Malthus "systematized and modeled on the natural sciences" the way that we would all come to think about economics and its rules (2). As is not uncommon, when a phenomenon falls outside the bounds of preferred understanding it is painted with a broad brush of immorality. The trend can be seen to continue with figures like Fagin and members of London's Underworld who promote their own self-interests through economically rational behavior but are still marginalized on separate grounds. Sweeney's laughter and smiles betray something sinister and, more significantly, irrational about his psychology. Laughter generates a specific enigma for reason-driven, post-Enlightenment thought. Not to claim that economics hopes to banish "laughers" from its purview. Rather, texts like *The String of Pearls* dramatize the clash between the rational and irrational by using laughter as a signal for the latter. What we find, especially in the Gothic tradition, involves a trope of misplaced and disturbing

¹⁴ Klaver, Claudia. *A/Moral Economics: Classical Political Economy and Cultural Authority in Nineteenth-Century England*. Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2003. Print.

smiles and laughing associated with psychological deviance but that also builds associations with the other large metaphor of the genre: the economic.

Sweeney's laugh, the strangeness of Mrs. Lovett's smile, the work's satiric tone that borders upon (and crosses into) the comic, and the manner in which the barbershop/meat-pie establishments exploit the underpinnings of an urban economy all expose a cultural tension when one is asked to identify what is ostensibly "good," "trustworthy," and "serious" within the story. Coupled with the marketplace setting, the unusual details convey the sense of a strained system, or a world in which morality is very much in flux. Not unlike *Oliver Twist*, value is in play (in several senses of both "value" and "play"). We find an established melodramatic pattern of the middle-class characters as safe and believable, while the villains are identified through their manipulation of appearances and credibility. Additionally, the concept of "play" and subsequent laughter from the villains can be seen as an attempt to challenge or disorder the apparent norms of London and push against the organization of the city's economic values. Sweeney Todd and his cohorts might be said to *misuse* play from a Victorian perspective.

The romance genre entails a number of requisites, not the least of which is a love story, but by 1846 that and other standards have been subverted in favor of the villains and horror of the scandals. Looking at particular instances of the appearance of laughter demonstrates how the comic is used as a touchstone for difference and economic fear within the novel and continues the tradition already explicated wherein the ludic becomes linked to irrational and dangerous aspects of city life. As Mr. Thornhill, the original holder of the "string of pearls," has his face lathered for a shave he exclaims, "What the devil noise was that?" To which Sweeney Todd replies, "It was only me [...] I laughed" (7). The sound, Sweeney's laugh, becomes a point of distraction for Mr. Thornhill, who concludes that if Sweeney laughs again, then he "will get up

and go” (8). Several instances like this one occur throughout the novel, and even some of the more hard-boiled figures of the London Underworld are disturbed by Sweeney’s grotesque chuckle. This traditional, often universal, sign of happiness and joy becomes, in the mouth of Sweeney Todd, something startling to his fellow Londoners and a representation of uncertainty to his audience of readers. His laugh and Mrs. Lovett’s disconcerting smile serve as warnings to their victims. Granted, the warnings are never recognized in time to save the targets, but it points to the conflation of panic with play and the comic. Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett *enjoy* their exploits, and to the Victorians, this is as bad, if not worse, than their actions. The reactions of Thornhill and other normative characters of the romance genre demonstrate the anxiety towards play sans goodness and the cultural need to offset the purely ludic with moral temperance.

Schiller may have seen the play-drive as joining the individual’s identity into a cohesive whole, declaring that “man is only fully a human being when he plays.” But the implicit moral value of his model is positive and world-affirming. To a Victorian bourgeois, Sweeney’s play-drive does not function properly, his desire for material gain is too strong and changes its proper function. His laughing betrays the sinister and turns the tables on the standard, beneficial use of play and the symbols associated with it. Sweeney Todd is playful—to an extreme. His style turns him into someone incapable of customary interactions with others or society. Too much play, or too strong a play-drive, pushes him outside the bounds of tolerability and turns him into a beast.

If we return to *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* briefly, a pattern not unlike that found with Sweeney begins to form around this fear of aggressive, taunting laughter. Immediately after the inception of life in *Frankenstein*, Frankenstein tells us that a “grin wrinkled” the cheeks of his creation (35). The monster cannot yet speak, but his most base, instinctual and non-rational

expression is a smile. This is a pattern that continues throughout the novel. In several cases wherein the creature behaves violently towards a member of the normative class, laughter or smiling appears as an alarming enhancement for that action. For instance, if we move towards the end of the narrative, to the description of the aftermath of Elizabeth's death, we see a similar appearance of a "grin" that "seemed to jeer" Frankenstein and mock his very serious "agony of despair" (136). The creature, at his most displaced moments, reacts with the only articulation available to him within the value system of Shelley's morality: laughter. At the most disturbing moments of the creature's reign of terror in Frankenstein's life, he displays a smile. The measure of grotesquery and non-human traits in his creation appear through the countenance of this particular look. Similarly, Sweeney's reaction to an early confrontation over the missing Mr. Thornhill shows him displaying "a grim sort of smile" to the accusers (28). All the while knowing that he has killed off a "rather good-looking" respectable gentleman of "bright-blue eye, and rather fair hair" (as Sweeney himself will describe him), Sweeney's response and description of Thornhill acknowledge the distance between his own appearance and social position versus the conventional, heroic characters' (28).

The major turning point in Frankenstein's character occurs shortly after the creature becomes alive. In Frankenstein's bedroom the following morning, Clerval witnesses "a wildness in [his] eyes" and a "loud, unrestrained, heartless laughter" that "frightened and astonished him [Clerval]." Clerval commands Frankenstein, "Do not laugh in that manner. How ill you are!" (37). The reaction is nearly identical to those of the normative characters in *Pearls* upon hearing Sweeney Todd's laugh and flirts with irrationality through the same linguistic confusion as was seen between Fagin and his "children." All of these cases strike at a deep chord of English anxiety about appropriate behavior and also employ laughter as an indicator for the irrational.

Laughter marks a clear line of demarcation in Frankenstein's development and signals the break from his former, aristocratic-based life. When questioned about the man Sweeney has recently robbed and killed, he replies to the investigators, "'Oh! to be sure, he came here, and I shaved him and *polished him off*'" (emphasis added, 24). The response is enough to trigger a strange sense of foreboding in the listeners who ask, "What do you mean by polishing him off?" As becomes the pattern, Sweeney gives a "straight" answer to cover the tracks of his monstrous humor, although readers soon become aware of his duplicity. Overtly villainous characters partake in the double meanings that humor and irony allow, while their laughter often serves as a warning sign of a tendency towards the irrational, grotesque, and chaotic. Perhaps no place else does the economic subtext of *Frankenstein* come across with such fright for initial readers as through the image of a supernatural prole literally laughing at his handiwork of destroying stable English families and tearing down social conventions. Readers are meant to infer that he enjoys the look of panic on the normative characters' faces as they experience the trauma of displacement that he has lived since his manufacture. Sweeney Todd continues this particular tradition while revising the representations into urban ones.

Although *Dracula* offers a different version of embodied crisis (as discussed above), the role laughter plays in respect to indicating such crisis remains consistent. As Mackenzie Bartlett notes, laughter in nineteenth-century fiction is very deliberately "*not held in check*. Like a contagion, it is released indiscriminately upon the world, threatening to contaminate the hearers" and explains the vampire sisters in *Dracula* as exemplifying this trend (1).¹⁵ While her reading

¹⁵ Bartlett, Mackenzie. "'The pleasure of fiends': Degenerate Laughter in Stoker's *Dracula*." *Forum: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts*. Special Issue 1: evolutions, Summer 2006. Web. 10 November 2012.

focuses upon their laughter as a function of “degenerate femininity,” I would add that the marginalized status of female vampires as women who are eternally bound to Dracula’s rule continue the tradition of “irrational” laughter in the face of unchangeable social position (3). Like Melmoth and Frankenstein before, Sweeney Todd provides a link in the connection of representations up to the *fin de siècle*. All share the sense of a self trapped within the confines of a permanent panic due to a stagnated position within the capitalist system and express that dislocation through a laughter that transcends the linguistic order. Bartlett also mentions Griffin's “disembodied laughter” in *The Invisible Man* (1897) as another prime example of villainous laughing in the horror/Gothic tradition. On the economic level, *The Invisible Man*’s dilemma may offer a perfect conclusion to the embodiment of crisis set in motion with *Frankenstein*. Wherein most of the century revolves around the control of bodies seen as emblematic of working-class crime and revolution, Griffin’s is completely subsumed into the commodities of his surroundings, literally keeping his anguish out of sight from the economy’s gatekeepers but also replacing his body with actual goods. His existence is condemned to a condition of sheer *unembodied* consumption, the expression of which finds literary transmission through a laugh.

Ironically, although instigated by the panic of an economy dealing with constant crises, the laughter of these villains inspires a similar panic in the normative characters, pushing them into an indirect confrontation with the unstable elements of the financial system in which they are the sheltered guardians and beneficiaries. I believe the lesson here is one of interconnectivity. Literature like *The String of Pearls* and *Dracula* provides villains who remind us that no one can hide from modernity. While Fagin lived in an ostensibly quarantined “underworld” and meets official justice through the courts, Sweeney Todd pushes the form of

melodrama a bit further from where it hopes to stay. The barber and meat shops function with normal business hours in the middle of Fleet Street. The costumers come and go between these businesses and their homes, tracking whatever contamination (physical or moral) they absorb with them. Compare this to Fagin's one appearance outside of the city: Oliver thinks he sees Fagin at the window of the Brownlows' home in a half-dream, half-conscious state. Dickens in the late 30s cannot allow a criminal to infiltrate the border of the suburbs and gentility. Ten years later, the frontier has shifted and the ghost all but given up in respect to strict geographical lines pertaining to criminals/innocents, villains/heroes. Laughter and the way in which Sweeney plays with his victims extends a new form of laughter that begins with earlier Gothic and blends with developing features of Victorian fiction. In particular, the laughter is a response to the pervasive fears of inconstant value and the strange liminal location of those participants caught between a faith in the economy (and each other) and the pressing worry that it is all a game without definite rules.

Sweeney's catchphrase: "I polish 'em off!" echoes through the serialized edition as a teasing, albeit cruel, inside joke—an ironic pun, the repercussions of which only the audience and Sweeney fully comprehend. The slogan combines his actual occupation of polishing a man's face with shaving cream and the gruesome act of "finishing" one's life. More than once Sweeney's strange expression draws attention from patrons and investigators alike, at which time he must offer a clumsy evasion. He toys with fate and his pursuers through a subversive comedy routine. I feel this self-conscious mockery and mimicry-run-amok strikes a deep cultural chord for Victorians. Sweeney victimizes visitors to London, people who are not known or tied into the city's social network. He exposes the threat of being a stranger and the necessary faith placed in commerce. These are not principles to be fooled with: a barbershop has to be a

legitimate barbershop just like a bank has to be a legitimate bank. If this is lost (which it is with Sweeney Todd), then the only possible outcome is chaos—unbound play—and no one wants that. Like the “strange odour” that begins to rise from Old St. Dunstan’s Church from the rotting corpses collected there, the stench of unsafe markets also penetrates the lives of Londoners. Sweeney Todd amasses a graveyard for stolen goods with no immediate value, and the accumulation of dead bodies eventually betrays itself as something at once horrid and sardonic for Victorians (the degree of either sensation depending upon one’s social position) because these murdered citizens serve as a reminder of the potential viciousness present within the achievement of thriving profits.

Sweeney Todd is the fusion of two distinct yet related literary poles. Set historically between *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, his construction is one or two steps up the evolutionary ladder from Frankenstein’s lab and halfway to Dracula’s castle. He is a monster who circulates through London’s formal economies in the open but meets with the inability to transform into the covert, late-century nobleman he craves to become. Instead he stalls around 1850 as an aspirant to a settled life. The central metaphor of the stolen set of pearls and other collected merchandise travels a corresponding path to Sweeney’s difficulty with quartering off an identity for himself. As the pearls and gentlemanly goods that sit in his shop suspend their progress at the level of accumulation, never able to complete a capital cycle by attaining an exchange value, so does Sweeney Todd’s transformation stop short. At the semiotic level he is confused sign, a raw collection of symbols signifying an impermanent pastiche more than a culturally-acceptable embodiment of either “working class” or “gentleman.” As opposed to Fagin, who despite his strange parodies of “father” and “gentleman,” is always identifiable as an underworld Jew, Sweeney Todd is never clearly decipherable, he lives as an irrational symbol. And this may be

why his laughter is so disturbing and offensive to others. Smiles and laughter depend heavily upon recognition of the source and the instigation in order to be appreciated. Sweeney Todd's existential position, due to his economic abstraction, turns him into a specific type of an "economic other," as contrasted with the Victorian model of Economic Man. He is economically rational yet personally absurd, employed yet unsettled, motivated and ruthless in ways that press the moral fabric of self-interest and economic desperation into timely but bothersome dilemmas for Victorians. An existential state influenced primarily by financial crisis and subsequent panic creates a nineteenth-century villain with one foot in the margin and the other in the text proper. Not unlike Melmoth and several other notable figures from the era, this capitalist anxiety results in a new, monstrous laughter derived from the pressures concurrent with an inability to economically transform and achieve a stable condition.

Conclusion

In addition to the revenge upon the system of commerce within which he partakes, the pattern of failed capital transformation captures larger Victorian interest. Nineteenth-century behaviors once deemed villainous and identified with grotesque comedy become not only acceptable but even repositioned as heroic and tragic as audiences are asked to empathize with the financial troubles of these figures and laugh with them as they exploit the arbitrariness of prosperity and façade of stable markets. Today, we see the obvious trickery, manipulation, and ironic "circulation" and "consumption" of commodities through Sweeney's barbershop and Mrs. Lovett's meat pie business from a much different outlook than the original readers of the serial would have, but the desire to attain a perfected economic status has stayed with us. This is why it may be fitting that *The String of Pearls* was published anonymously, under the guise of a true

story. Sweeney Todd is a figure of mass consciousness, authored by economic history. Whether he is villain or hero depends merely on cultural fluctuations.

Sherlock Holmes makes detective disguises famous and his performances as myriad characters help him solve crimes and undo the disruption criminals provoke. *Pearls* offers a much earlier case study in the blurry line that exists in the Victorian period (and today) between governing and disrupting the social order. The tools and techniques of the good guys and the bad guys are comparable although their cultural intent varies greatly. Sweeney Todd is a master of performance, but Joanna and the police begin to employ comparable methods for professional ends—namely, capturing Sweeney. *Pearls* brings the ludic to justice, but also exposes the modern city as a playground in the midst of its own transformation. Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett demonstrate aspects of sinister fun in their exploits and violate certain rules that the narrative must reconcile—free play isn't free.

Society exacts a price and it comes in the form of strange laughs and smiles, the inability to find peace, comfort, or fraternity with other citizens, and ultimately arrest and death. Sweeney lives in a permanent state of panic/play and this warps his identity. The novel's ethos corresponds with the conception of art as a type of moral register, in the tradition of John Ruskin. The earlier *Pearls* reverts to a conventional process of detection and containment of the rogue villains and one of the hallmarks of their villainy remains the inability to play nicely with others. However, later versions of the Sweeney Todd story will present the absurdity of the "meat pie" endeavor and cold-blooded murder in a different way. The story provides an excellent case study in the "crisis of representation" I argue influences a significant amount of Victorian anxiety in respect to the economy. It denotes an important, early benchmark related to the

trouble of discerning symbolic quality in the behavior of heroes as opposed to villains, which extends with ever-greater intensity through the twentieth century.

The String of Pearls critiques the structure of a capitalist marketplace through a wildly successful, profit-driven enterprise that will even provide Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett with retirement plans. What villains such as these unintentionally expose is that capitalism *is* a type of game, a metaphorical locale of play, a “playground,” if you will. It *is* all these things but Victorians do not want to be reminded of it, especially the urban capitalists themselves. To their mind, economics should move away from resemblances to play. Investors are professionals, speculators are gamblers; statistical data is persuasive, emotions are wishy-washy, etc. Representations like Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett demonstrate the tools of play being used against the grain of this cultural trend and they must be either brought into the fold or expelled. The typically amicable and safe features of play become deformed into the disjointed and dangerous characteristics of outcasts wallowing in the incongruities of wealth accumulation. In short, the novel could be interpreted as anti-play, or a regulatory statement on the consequences of mixing *Homo ludens* with that most serious of self-interested, non-laughing creatures, *Homo economicus*.

Chapter 3:
The Liar's Dream:
Marginal Utility and Wit in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

“The theater began to fill; opera glasses came out of cases; and subscribers exchanged greetings, as they glimpsed one another across the house. The arts, for them, were a relaxation from the worries of buying and selling; that was why they had come; but it was quite impossible for them to forget business even here, and their conversation was about cotton, spirits and indigo.”

--Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1857)

Introduction

Conventional Victorian thinking would hold that work and leisure, pleasure and pain, private and public, are distinct realms of life and should be kept apart, but the tension within that model can be intense. In the following chapter, I hope to demonstrate the central contradiction of this desire within late-Victorian culture through a case study of Oscar Wilde's literary dandies. Using *The Importance of Being Earnest* as illustration, I will begin to unravel Wilde's economic ethos, which proves fairly complex. As an effect of the particular situation that concludes the period, the dandy's attitude reflects the aspiration to find diversion from modernity's systems while still partaking in the aesthetic potentials of consumerism. However, the (in)ability to understand within which aspect of life one is partaking becomes harder to discern. As in the quotation from Flaubert's narrator, the situation described captures the inescapability of the modern economy, wherein the best efforts to evade production and rationality remain futile. Ironically, “the arts” are meant to suspend these principles, but a gathering at a theater only reinforces the certain anxiety of business pressures. The intriguing

feature of this dilemma, for my purposes, is not the inability of theatergoers to dismiss economic concerns, but rather the instinct to do so. A belief in a time and a place for financial matters, and likewise for art, prompts questions about the perceived appropriateness of their juncture. But the tail-end of the century works against that distinction in new ways. While the division might remain, it is much blurred, and that distortion emerges through the era's cultural products.

Specifically, Wilde's version of the dandy toys with the urge to separate "art" from "business" and, in the process, forces revaluations of both concepts. Situating the comic plotting of *Earnest* in conjunction with some examples of the play's celebrated wit, allows the explication of a system of controlled, subversive rhetoric that employs contradictory values in order to confuse the processes of the capitalist agenda. It also draws attention to the strangely self-replicating methods of this new economic paradigm, which he exposes with an equally peculiar use of language. This replication appears not only on the linguistic level, through witty substitutions, but also on that of narrative. The characters duplicate and mimic each other's mannerisms and values to a point where it can become difficult to discern between them. In particular, I will examine this mimicry in respect to the characters' influences upon one another. Wilde creates a loop wherein characters regenerate an identity founded upon dandyism's defiance of capitalist tents through their unusual variety of substitutive wordplay.

After an overview of the significant theoretical economic changes during the final decades of the century, I will examine these patterns of substitution in combination with complementary issues regarding the natures of veracity and deception, which also play an important role in discerning Wilde's relationship to the economics of the 1880s and 90s. Within *Earnest*, navigating a course for truth becomes inherently difficult because of the ambiguities of lies and urban identity. The detection of villains and social outcasts is challenging for readers

because of constant inversions of truth values through ironic humor and a lack of regulatory social retribution. The play itself, *Earnest*, is filled with representations of dandies, but its aesthetics also enact a style of theater that a dandy's sensibilities would create. On this level, Wilde establishes a deep connection between the artistic and commercial aspects of the nineteenth century's theater experience and forms an economically self-aware genre of theater.

Dandy Economics

A common interpretation of Wilde's capitalist resistance relies upon the idea that the dandy is anti-utility and anti-reproduction. He lives to devour sensual experience and intentionally gives nothing back that can be processed other than fleeting language and wit. In an era defined by gentlemanly work ethic and a race for revenue, the dandy stands very much opposed, both in practice and construction. He takes his cues from the marginal understanding of value. Whereas Fagin and Sweeney Todd drown in their own surpluses of stolen goods lacking translation into usable capital, the dandy wallows in the profligate character of owning too much. Under this model, accumulation becomes a self-satisfying, tautological practice unto itself. It needs neither use nor defenses of inherent value. In her study tracing the evolution of the figure of Economic Man, Regina Gagnier explains how Victorian economic practices and perceptions changed during the 1870s. She identifies the shift with the remodeling of the ideal participant in the marketplace from a producer or reproducer, someone who makes things in the vein of England as the "workshop of the world," into aesthetically-minded consumers who must learn to discern value based upon improved taste so as to know how best to spend their money (125).

The larger economic change is known as the Marginal Revolution, after which the value of a commodity is no longer determined by its labor or production costs, but rather its worth as

compared to other items or services, a system governed greatly by each individual's subjective perception. The distinction is typically categorized as the transition from "classical" into "neoclassical" economic theory. Gagnier explains that the general focus becomes one that shuns the macroeconomic concerns of "political economy" in favor of the formal "science" of economics that privileges the microeconomic goals of private firms and businesses. It is this standpoint and subsequent behavior I wish to highlight in this chapter because it denotes the dandy's connection to the economy as an outcast and self-marginalized figure. While not villainous in the same literal sense as Fagin or Sweeney Todd, the dandy functions as an economic rebel and disrupter of desired commercial outcomes from within normative and accepted marketplaces. The street-level criminal functions as an outcast from consumer society and must locate hidden, secondary markets in order to resist and re-sell stolen wares. The dandy operates within mainstream society (shops, theaters, fashionable living spaces), but counteracts standard consumer authority through a re-appropriation of linguistic power.

The Marginal Revolution refocuses prior emphases upon originality and production onto commodity substitution and inspires a cultural revision of which Wilde is a part. Formerly a producer, Economic Man becomes a chooser, and the resultant implications for the economy involve a redirection of emphases from wealth accumulation to exchange. In other words, "intersubjective comparisons" become (theoretically) unworkable because each individual is granted the consumer agency to fulfill its seemingly unique tastes (137). Additionally, the very concepts of "utility" and "rationality" are revised into their current understandings, and these are the touchstones I will exploit to focus a discussion about such a dramatic transition. While exchange under the classical model (that of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill) involved a comparison of "relative production costs of the goods," the neo-classical model (of

William Stanley Jevons, Leon Walras, Carl Menger, and Alfred Marshall) requires only “an opportunity cost in terms of utility forgone” (Hollis and Nell 258). Questions about personal satisfaction and choice replace the older concerns about equilibriums derived from cost and labor. In other words, what today we generally call *consumerism* took center stage. Despite the utilitarian roots of political economy, what Bentham famously labeled a “hedonic calculus,” economists could no longer “compare the amount of feeling in one mind with that in another”¹⁶ (*Theory* 20). The original Economic Man had been controlled by scarcity, but the new incarnation lived in a world of abundance and his psyche came to reflect the need for rational, marginal choices in commercial and social life.¹⁷ This modification in the assessment of value had far-reaching implications for the Victorian economy, but also complements seemingly unrelated areas of the culture.

My argument builds upon hers in respect to the Marginal Revolution and adds what became known as the “Long Depression” as an important manifestation of this change from an economy that determines value through production-based measurement into one dictated by marginal utility. The discord amongst politicians and economists about how to catalog the state of the economy signals the situation’s novelty. The former economic culture of agriculture and intense labor might be portrayed as passing the torch to a bigger, wealthier population with a lot of purchasing power, or maturing into what Gagnier calls Modern Man. The low cost of goods and surplus quantities provided by a long deflationary period revise the mindset for a consumer who has more expendable income and must spend it to keep the system moving. Individuals can

¹⁶ Stanley Jevons, writing in *The Theory of Political Economy* (1871), takes explicit care to explain that consumer desires have become totally subjective.

¹⁷ A big contributor towards the evolution of Economic Man as a “chooser” as opposed to producer is the availability of goods, especially within urban centers. When scarcity is replaced with abundance, the psyche of consumers must change.

free themselves of prior practical constraints and open the door to unlimited desires. If we turn to Wilde's dandies, we find characters partaking in this form of economic motivation. Although economic historians commonly address the Marginal Revolution, its use as a tool for studying the literary arts and the subsequent cultural implications are rarely advanced.

The dandy's perspective filters itself through the principles of the Marginal Revolution in such a manner that makes identity and language begin to reflect the same doctrine as property. As Algernon corrects Jack upon hearing of his plan to propose to Gwendolen: "I thought you had come up for pleasure?...I call that business" (Wilde 254). Seemingly all aspects of life have come under the heading of "business" and the subsequent linguistic disorder, down to the unusual punctuation, displays the resultant effects of that transfer. In *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Thorstein Veblen identifies the "ceremonial character" of consumption as forming a basis for a new economic honor code (51). The "utility of conspicuous consumption" derives from the modification of purchasing power into a type of respected, honorable labor (64). Wilde's dandies consume, but seemingly without purpose, or at least without purpose of this variety. Veblen's analysis reflects an aspiration to locate practical motives for generally unnecessary purchases. This conventional wisdom is not lost on Wilde, and he positions his characters in such a way as to ironize the reasoning associated with this brand of consumption. Whereas the cultural impulse has tended towards a commoditization of art (the inescapable joining of pleasure and art with business discourse), Wilde turns commodities into artistic performance. Consumption becomes a show in its own right, but, within *Earnest*, Wilde makes efforts to deny it the practicality of a standard class marker.

The dandies are anti-work, but also help to embody the tenets of the new Economic Man, who is derived from the basic assumptions that it is better to receive than to give, spend than to

create. The results of this upheaval of thought and value sponsored by the Marginal Revolution find explicit reference in unlikely sources. When its timing is coordinated with developments in moral philosophy, art, psychology, and literature a more expansive impression takes shape: a changed attitude about exchange and replacement. The twin levels of replacement, both in literal and linguistic exchanges, signify a major schism in the perception of value and lead to a breakdown in symbolic meaning. Both Nietzsche and Freud employ rhetorics of substitution in their analyses of metaphor, wit, dreams, and the subsequent effects upon identity and the self within the modern world. What begins to take appear is a deep confusion about normative assertions and believability, fueled by an increasing recognition of exchange and deception as legitimate aesthetics.

Inheriting Confusion

Alfred Marshall, the Victorian economist, had this to say, in 1887, when questioned as to whether he agrees with the “general opinion” that the nation had been suffering through a depression since 1873: “Yes, of severe depression of profits [...] a severe depression of profits and of prices” (*Final Report* 21). Having read the Trade and Industry Commission report he concludes that “a depression of prices, a depression of interest, and a depression of profits” are all occurring but he “cannot see any reason for believing that there is any considerable depression in any other respect” (21). One might wonder how many other respects would be necessary to convince him, but what Marshall’s answer implies is that the production levels were still high (and rising) and, although unemployment was becoming a greater problem, it is counterintuitive to declare an economy depressed while its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) continues to grow. A significant portion of the difficulty in describing the depression comes from a lack of agreement during the nineteenth century about what a depression is or should be.

The 1870s and 80s saw a continuation of smaller business cycles within the larger frame of restrained growth. In particular, the end of the 70s through the mid-80s saw a full business cycle that included a strong growth period followed by fairly severe retraction. No longer were the problems of the earlier 70s to be viewed as a cycle unto itself that had undergone correction. People began to wonder if what they were living through was actually a lasting downturn in British economic dominance. Likewise, his language betrays confusion. Many aspects of the economy are depressed yet the economy is not depressed. A paradox shows itself to be forming within the economic data at his disposal and that paradox finds expression through his discourse. For lack of a better term, a “weirdness” invades the logic and rhetoric of the era, one that is part of both official and unofficial languages.

In 1886, as a result of this growing unease, the government established the “Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the Depression of Trade and Industry.” After formulating a final review of their conclusions, the commission found “a very serious falling off in the exchangeable value of the produce of the soil” and “a tendency in the supply of commodities to outrun the demand” (“Royal Commission” 37). The report goes on to explain that the repercussions of these data are most relative to “the producing classes” because those “in receipt of fixed salaries or who draw their income from fixed investments have apparently little to complain of.” The division between producers and consumers seems apparent. The consumers had lower prices for goods and unchanged income, while the producers were feeling the brunt of the lower prices and drowning in excess inventory. The contradictory nature of the “Long Depression” signaled a turning point in capitalist evolution and discourse about economics that can be seen in formal cultural documents like political proceedings and artistic ones such as literature. The depression (or “contraction” or “correction”) that struck England during those

years left an indelible mark as experienced through a pervasive sense of ambiguity. As compared with the many preceding panics, the trouble from 1873-1896 was much less obvious and the language surrounding the entire saga paints a sketchy portrait. Originally called the “Great Depression,” the period was later relabeled the “Long Depression” in light of the major downturn of the 1930s, but the newer name calls attention to the event’s defining feature: its duration. Economic historians throughout the twentieth century question the status of this depression. The title of one of the most-cited books on the topic, *The Myth of the Great Depression, 1873-96* (1969) by S.B. Saul, speaks to this uncertainty. Strangely, the biggest question surrounding this depression is whether or not it happened. The haziness about the causes and effects of the three decades that bring the Victorian period to a close were and still are a point of contention. As economists struggled to corroborate the trends in prices and wages, a cultural moment filled with economic confusion was born.

While uncertainty pervades the formal rhetoric that attempts to label its circumstances, references to the depression and economics ooze out of *Earnest* in surprising ways. For example, Cecily’s declaration to Miss Prism that she does not wish to study “Horrid Political Economy!” after her tutor has explained to her the day’s curriculum gestures towards a veiled acknowledgement of the persistence of economic matters and a foreshadowing of a coming critique (274). On the one hand, Cecily does not wish to engage *any* of the standard disciplines, however, Miss Prism’s description of her assignment as to exclude the “chapter on the Fall of the Rupee” due to its “somewhat too sensational” content proves conspicuous in a play about the superficialities of high society life (274). She continues, “Even these metallic problems have their melodramatic side,” conflating the exoticism of the romance genre with its potential for influencing young Cecily’s character with a statement that alludes to the less respectable aspects

of international finances many networks and connections (274). This is a very explicit reference to the devaluation of the Rupee, which had been occurring for twenty years or so. It also demonstrates the range of Wilde's reading habits and how they supply material for his writing, but the selection of economic topics can be easily overlooked as a constant presence that hides in plain sight.

As when, at the end of Act II, Gwendolen derides life in the "country" as inferior to that in the city due to the overabundance of flowers boring her "to death." Cecily follows with the question, "This is what the newspapers call agricultural depression, is it not? I believe the aristocracy are suffering very much from it at present. It is almost an epidemic amongst them, I have been told" (Act II, ll. 677-680). What was actually happening within the commodity markets remained hazy at best, and Cecily's tone of inquiry speaks to the opacity. But the haziness helps underscore the trouble that both Victorian and latter economists can encounter despite their best efforts to standardize a narrative for the complex of events within a financial system. The distinction is even more noteworthy when this debate is placed into the context of the theoretical economic developments of the 1870s. The manner in which political economy and explicit concerns with the financial state of England popup throughout the text serve as reminder of their ubiquitous position in Victorian society, but also the experiential influence of a seemingly disconnected aspect of culture.

Explicit references to economics pervade the text, but the characters also enact a number of concerns with theoretical parallels to the emerging tensions displayed by Marshall and the difficulties with locating definitive terms. One of the more well-known examples in *Earnest* comes with Jack and Algy's Bunburying schemes, especially the engineering of alternative names to be employed during their exploits. When Algy becomes "Ernest," during the second

act, he situates himself into a pre-made narrative about Jack's "wicked" brother (275). This process certainly echoes an actor adopting a role and scripted lines for a stage production. But it also reveals the façade of modern identity. As Cecily notes just prior to Algy's entrance, a wicked person is not so frightening because of his deeds but his mystery. He cannot be readily identified because he probably appears "just like everyone else" (274). Jack and Algy, Ernest and Ernest, are interchangeable. The identity exchanges could prove confusing in a more traditional comedy, but in *Earnest* they are almost foreseeable. The similarities between one's actual and simulated identities have been dissolved to a point of sheer ceremony. Names can be exchanged like hats or gloves but serve a fleeting practical function. Ironically, to be "Ernest in town and Jack in the country" proves to be no different than being Jack in town and Ernest in the country (257). This is the point about value under marginal utility that will be re-addressed below, on the linguistic level. The dandy trades in identity, substituting one name for another, one life for another. Although Wilde flirts with punishment for their inventions, it is merely for mawkish effect. Penalties from the prospective fiancés or authority figures are never realized. And when Algy requires Jack to produce an "explanation" for his adventures he requests him to "make it improbable" (257). The truth is pointless when a fiction is possible.

There are many lessons to be learned from the Long Depression, not the least of which are the ubiquitous consequences of economic change. While our instinct may be to reorganize modern British economic history into an orderly set of occurrences, the Long Depression provides a well-known series of events through which to question fundamentals of professional economic thinking. This piece of history supplies a reminder for the potential pitfalls of labeling periods as economically "good" or "bad," scarce or abundant. Where the discourse lacks specificity, it opens a space for unsophisticated labels, and the ethical troubles that burden such

categories face critique through the literature of the fin de siècle. Wilde's writing captures the constant presence of uncertainty and exploits a shifting character within late-Victorian economic identity. The dandy embodies that distinctive economic generation. On the one hand, the dandy *is* anti-utility in the older sense of the term, protesting the inducement to labor and production through a passive aggressive refusal. On the other, he is a type of ideal for the Marginal Revolution wherein unending desire feeds an ability to choose wisely and recognize distinction between commodities. The dandy exists in a liminal space between the two incarnations of Economic Man and embodies the combination of distinct, yet related, subjectivities. Despite the theoretical distance from ordinary citizens created by the dandy's habits and purchases, the liminal position he comes to occupy can be read as common to many, and his methods of interacting with the world not very far from our own. If nothing else, Wilde exposes the equivocality of names and labels that are often accepted without consideration of their unstable potentials.

Waiting for a Boom

It is not surprising to find that a belief in business cycles and patterns of booms and busts began to take hold within Victorian thinking, despite considerable resistance to the premise for several decades. Although the earlier panics sent plenty of shockwaves through the financial system, by the 1870s, it had become accepted doctrine that these difficulties present themselves about once a decade and are unavoidable. Lord Overstone's plotting of the business cycle in 1837 had come to be taken as gospel: "a state of quiescence" followed by fair improvements, leads to growing confidence, then prosperity, before a state of excitement generates overtrading, then convulsions and pressure upon markets create a panic before finally returning to the original state of quiescence that begins the whole thing again (Peart 43). The convulsions were simply

necessary, albeit unpleasant, aspects of the cycle. The apparent regularity helped to reinforce the premise amongst those within the financial sector that the economy was under control, at least tamed if not domesticated.

While the acceptance of economic cycles may seem an elementary acknowledgement today, for most of the nineteenth century this was not the case. Classical economists operating in the varied yet fundamental traditions of Adam Smith and David Ricardo promoted a trust in market factors that could only be derailed by major “external” factors such as war, social upheaval, or mismanaged centralization. Early claims to a cyclical nature implied a potential flawed principle within capitalism. Overstone’s, or the Swiss thinker Jean Charles de Sismondi’s, models were dismissed as straying from the privileged goal of moving political economy into an objectively determinable position as found through empirical data. However, half-a-century of panics and recoveries had formed a historical pattern that could not be ignored and had allowed business-cycle theory to slip into acceptance. After all, the great “Victorian Boom,” beginning around 1850 and appropriately marked with the Great Exhibition in 1851, brought two decades of steady expansion of industry and capital. Every year from 1850 to 1870 saw a 1-3% increase in gross national product for England—clothing, cotton, and steel markets were dominated by British merchants and producers (Broadberry 404). Working-class wages, in many industries, rose to heights never before seen and a notion of stability permeated the culture. This does not mean that crises did not exist. Simply that taken as a whole, the periods of prosperity were extended and the periods of contraction shorter, making the averages as high as they had ever been. Progress seemed to have won the day, until 1873.

Beginning with the collapse of the Vienna stock exchange in May, followed by a railway bubble in the United States, which burst and crippled a major bank in the United States in

September, the year became one of economic transformation for not only England but the Western world. Just as the prior decades had seen prolonged phases of growth and minimized stagnation, the next two would tend towards deeper trenches and smaller crests along with a greater frequency of crisis. However, trouble had not been completely unforeseen. Writing in *The Economist* during January of that year, Walter Bagehot predicted that the coming year would “not be happy” due to several looming issues with price levels in both agriculture and industry. His forecast is correct in the sense that the year would soon become unhappy, but also wrong in that he presumed the contraction to be merely a worse version of prior crises, and ultimately beholden to the trade cycle. However, as with the depression, the process of labeling, defining, and verifying commercial business cycles proved challenging. The rhetoric that would come to surround the theory of these events had to turn abstractions into a legible system.

One of the more infamous attempts of business cycle promotion can be found in Jevons’s *The Periodicity of Commercial Crises, and its Physical Explanation* (1878). Within this short essay, Jevons responds to the “depression of trade” that has caused so much anxiety over the past five years amongst economists, the business community, and laymen alike (334). His goal is to outline the presence of “a regular periodicity” that justifies his intuition of a “well-marked decennial periodicity,” which “can be traced in the activity of trade and the recurrence of commercial crises” (335). After explaining the history of crises and noting their dates by beginning in 1720 with the South Sea Bubble and continuing through most of the nineteenth century, Jevons concludes (with quite a bit of statistical manipulation) that a pattern emerges. According to Jevons, a “period of...10.44 years” seems to introduce a new financial crisis of some sort. And while other economists like John Mills and J.A. Broun have reached similar timeframes for “the frequent recurrence of excitement and depression,” none has been able to

find a definite cause (in Jevons's mind) for the seemingly regular development of such occurrences (qtd. in *Periodicity* 341). Jevons's ultimate conclusion rests in perhaps the greatest "external" economic force available to him: the sun.

After noting scholarship on Germany's grape harvest, which identifies the best seasons with less sunspots, Jevons builds a case that sunspots must be influencing European economic cycles through a crop like corn. He admits that no such evidence yet exists, but by combining a number of other known factors into a composite theory, the sunspot effect becomes more readily comprehensible. With the application of an accepted theory about the demand of goods being driven by the levels of their availability and price, Jevons claims that although the sunspots cannot be proven to be directly effecting English business cycles the influence is coming through the larger connection to India (see "Figure 1" below). He explains the graph as illustrating how the "period of disaster is recurring almost as inexorably and regularly as the march of the seasons" and while the exact explanation may be in doubt, it cannot be doubted that cycles are playing themselves out in incredibly consistent rotations (342).

Jevons's diagram resembles a seismological graph more than an economic table. It is difficult to distinguish between the upturns and downturns due to their regularity and equanimity. The cycles feed into each other, relieving pressure after reaching a pointed buildup and reconstructing an apex after the drop. The series of rises and falls might be just as easily classified as the ebb and flow of waves along a shoreline. The graph's plotting seems to be demonstrating a soothing naturalness about the consequences of the "sunspots." As much as the contractions lead to unpleasant conditions there is no talk of correcting or stopping them. They serve as an inevitable stage within the process. However, the desire for balance through counterweighted forces is not an idea born of British economics, which had long promoted the

premise of sustained growth for as long as government and national interests were prevented from interfering.

Wilde structures *Earnest* to permit his dandies to flourish within this atmosphere of perpetual waiting. Is the dandy a reliever of capitalist pressures? Does he dodge the work of the system? Or is he an inducer of such pressures? Does he actually derive pleasure from *preventing* relief? This is where my reading of the dandy as an economic villain or rogue departs from prior assessments of his function. His apparent laziness is certainly an important aspect of the dandy's construction. However, when situated within the marginal understanding of value and business cycle thinking, the ends of that philosophy tend in the direction of contradictory substitutions and a futile exchange system, which, I argue, do more than passively avoid capitalist industriousness. Instead they form an unusual paradox wherein actions are prompted but never fulfilled, which leaves a residue of futility, but also fuels much of the structure of the dandy's subversive economic performance.

The play's use of teaching brings several of these aims to the forefront. When Lady Bracknell interrogates Jack about his engagement to Gwendolen, she presents the estimation that "I have always been of the opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing" (265). She establishes a model for knowledge that is at once totalizing (an "all or nothing" choice) but also contrary in its two options. By conflating "everything" and "nothing" through this rhetorical structure, Lady Bracknell forms an implicit connection between their values. Both, although typically understood as contradictory to each other, join into a relationship, which actually estimates their benefits as sharing a common exchange value. Wilde manipulates Jack's response, "I know nothing Lady Bracknell," into one that plays off of silliness and embarrassment (265), however, he is simultaneously being instructed by Lady

Bracknell. The interview provides comic wordplay and illustrates the desire for categorical disclosures about identity. Her humorous interviewing elicits laughter but also serves as a formal introduction into the family. Initially, Jack becomes nervous with providing the “correct” responses to the strange queries, although the play’s conclusion reveals a type of futility regarding the anxiety surrounding naming and family lineages. Jack has been a family member since the start (by birth), and has adopted the same tendencies towards pretense and dual selves through social osmosis.

Likewise, when Jack declares himself, in Act One, as occupying the “position of guardian” for Cecily, it proves ironic and foreshadows Algy’s de facto educational role in Act Two (258). When Algy arrives as Jack’s brother, he interrupts Cecily’s lesson with Miss Prism. He immediately begins a witty banter regarding love, prettiness, and the hazards of attractiveness (276-77). The initial premise appears to be that he will be the corrupter of a “sweet, simple, innocent girl,” as Jack later describes her (292). But as the action progresses, it becomes clear that Cecily is far more perceptive to the ways of “modern culture” than her guardian gives her credit. As she records Algy’s praise for her into her diary (intended for publication), he promises to “love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly” (283). She then corrects him, “Hopelessly doesn’t seem to make much sense, does it?” To which Algy can only respond: “Cecily!” His attitudes toward relationships and men are fully formed despite having led a secluded lifestyle in the countryside. In the end, Algy revises Jack’s portrayal of Cecily as a naïve child and determines her to be a “brilliant, clever, thoroughly experienced young lady” (292). As with Algernon’s instructions about Bunburying, the lesson proves, at once, appropriate and useless. The pupil and the teacher are interchangeable and maintain their positions through sheer custom. Identities can be transferred between people and undermine a

system of authority and cyclical control. Wilde dissolves the traditional hierarchy of productive knowledge that relies upon a generational model in favor of a levelled and, ultimately, unnecessary one. But the futility also seems to be an important implicit argument within the play and for the dandy's purpose within the Victorian economy. Beyond merely avoiding productive labor, they actually exert energy towards an inefficient, noncyclical agenda.

These examples speak to a larger theme of ineffective comic action that operates on the narrative level as well. The teaching moments highlight an exploitation of the cultural theme of cyclical exchange wherein characters regenerate their values through each other despite the fact that they already generally share them. *Earnest* employs its generic structure to establish a set of expectations. Although those expectations are usually met, they are satisfied through a set of ironic convolutions. Wilde provides a comedic "happy ending" with a series of proposals and revelations. But his insistence on filtering a conventional conclusion through superficial swaps and hollow sentiments leaves an audience in an unusual position of spectatorship. As Balzac's theatergoers thought they should distinguish between the commotion of business life and recreation only to blend the two, Wilde's audience has a dissident economic ethos forced upon it. He makes the audience laugh at the ironic and experience it in a personal way.

Besides a lack of formal participation, the dandy is a disrupter. His language, behavior, and manipulation of social norms for his own entertainment push against the system's measurements and planned discharges. Wit is the fundamental tool in this project. The unconventional use of language serves to prevent the releases from occurring and disrupts the cycles from flowing through their desired progressions. Is it business or pleasure? The question is the answer; the answer is the question. The unknown is the greatest fear in the market economy and the dandy promotes the unidentifiable, the unpredictable. Originality is also a

major factor in this project. Wit is, in many cases, the recycling of pre-established, known ideas and phrases. The dandy acknowledges the rhetorical models of language that can be manipulated for release (or to increase pressure), all the while refusing to stabilize the larger cycle. His actions and language call attention to the lack of a genuine originality, perhaps even its impossibility, through a process of creation founded upon a belief in a system more dependent on timing than novelty.

Business cycles, bank runs, economic crises, stock market crashes, bubbles, manias, trade depressions are all labels that describe the same cultural anxiety about a deep instability. The sunspot theory may not be the highpoint of Jevons's career, although it is marked with many important contributions to economics, logic, and mathematics.¹⁸ However, the approach strives to "prove" detrimental economic events as part of a larger, safe system. This devotion to cycles complements a larger shift related to the principles of exchange. A faith (whether accurate or not) that a good stretch will meet with a bad, a depression with a boom, changes economic confidence into a quality that accepts impermanence as a styling of reassurance. The cyclic perspective promotes a long-term view of economic activity as part of an understandable continuum wherein losses are (naturally) followed by gains, gains temporarily stunted by deficits. Taking fluctuations in the market as a cycle's normal course permits a determination of value founded upon substitution and interchangeability. The business cycle, regardless of its suggested causes, provides a belief in the future: i.e., although the economy is depressive it will rebound. However, the other side of that theoretical coin displays an inherent acknowledgement, albeit subconsciously, that prosperous times *will be* offset by lean ones. Instinctively, Victorians

¹⁸ Somewhat appropriately, "sunspots" have come to be used as a descriptor for random shocks to an economy, synonymous with "black swan events," which Nassim Nicholas Taleb coined in the early 2000s.

come to accept that depression, stagnation, and even destruction are necessary components of the capitalist life cycle.

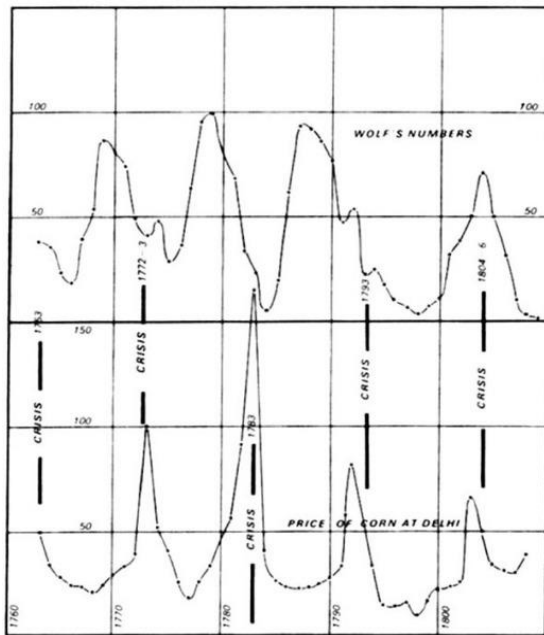


Figure 4. Jevons's illustration of the effects of

sunspots ("Wolf's numbers") on the price of corn in Delhi.

Scientific Dreams

Jevons and others like him are seeking a permanent cycle that can define the shaky, random one with which they must live. Unable to find conclusive, data-driven correspondences between depressions and recoveries, he is forced to rely on a broader cultural rhetoric about "balance," "cycles," and the impermanent temperament of the modern world. The economists are desperate to represent economics as a science founded in the physical world and not purely upon abstract theories.¹⁹ However, there exists an additional tension within this project. What seems to cause trouble for economists dealing with business cycles and the justification of depressions is establishing a cause for all of this *motion*. A central tenet of the field holds that

¹⁹ Rankine makes the distinction between physical sciences and "hypothetical" ones when explaining the laws of thermodynamics in *Outline of the Science of Energetics* (120).

despite risk and unforeseeable interferences, the market should be, to a great extent, stable. Business cycles, although they provide a semblance of reason, are founded upon a rhetoric of movement and rotation. Sunspots, droughts, or agricultural trouble help to furnish visible instigations for the unseen forces that pull at the threads of the economy.²⁰ What Jevons and other economists seem to be looking for is what physicists had labeled the study of “energetics.” Exchange value is driven by substitution of one object or service for another and is a process that Nietzsche recognizes in the methods of scientific enquiry. As he explains, if one invents the definition for “mammals” and then identifies camels, dogs, and horses as “mammals,” then he has arrived at a superficial truth (25). After illustrating the mutability of truth with this example, he concludes that the believer of language “forgets the original perceptual metaphors are metaphors and takes them to be the things themselves” (30). Through language, we can exchange names and factual knowledge with a different “sphere,” if we so choose. We can potentially create our own principles, but a belief in the sanctimonious backing of our words prevents that freedom. His language turns explicitly to “substitution” and, towards the end of the essay, the inexplicable differences between waking and dream states of existence, which permit contrary modes of life to cooperate in a rotation not unlike a business cycle, unconscious psyche, or hydraulic system.²¹

Similarly, Wilde offers reminders of this metaphoric “condition” through an unconventional repurposing of language through wit. On a deep level he may even re-appropriate that very “lost” or forgotten truth about language and modern thinking that Nietzsche claims has been buried by our confidence in “systematizers” (*Twilight* 35). The “pride of

²⁰ Not unlike Fagin’s manipulation of value, these theories play off of the “invisible” nature of economic science.

²¹ This model appears on a grander scale in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) wherein he explains the need for “illusions” as described through the Apollonian realms of forms and structure as a necessity to balance the chaos of a world in constant flux.

knowing” comes under assault from Wilde’s wit (“On Truth” 16). Unlike Fagin and Sweeney Todd, who had trouble hiding and disposing of their accumulated property, the dandy is prodigal. Averse to saving, spending is the antidote to any economic situation. But it is not simply wastefulness or luxury that define the dandy’s expenditures. Via sudden breaks with rational, normative syntax, Wilde aims his dandies at the essence of accepted language and the belief in customary meaning. While the science of energy and its resultant effects upon conceptions of value helps to shape an important piece of Victorian consciousness, the symptoms of anxiety in regard to locating a justifiable balance within a culture of impermanence informs the arts and study of the self, as well. Wilde and several other prominent intellectual figures from the last decades of the century grapple with similar difficulties of representation as Jevons and the scientists.

Although their focus lies within the realm of personal relations, a brand of exchange presented through a rhetoric of substitution appears with striking consistency in these writers’ works. Wilde and Nietzsche both question the substantiation of truth through the function of opposites in similar ways, as Freud’s theory of dreams and the unconscious develops a model of the psyche dependent upon exchanging latent meaning with manifest, imaginary representations. Wilde’s wit forms a relationship with this anxiety while critiquing the development of marginal utility as a measurement for satisfaction. When read in conjunction with each other, these writers exhibit the ubiquity of the effects of the Marginal Revolution upon nineteenth-century thinking and rhetoric.

Nietzsche claims that the “art of dissimulation reaches its peak in man” (“On Truth”). Wilde emphasizes the “art” of this statement as much as anyone else. Algernon declares to Jack, in the beginning of Act 1, that he should be thankful for the fact that “[t]he truth is rarely pure

and never simple” because modern life would be unbearable without this arrangement (258). Wilde’s dandies acknowledge the difficulties of ascertaining truth, whether on the personal or political levels, and this becomes a common concern in the last decades of the century. As economists, scientists, and psychologists grappled with demarcating cycles of booms and busts in an attempt to cope with an impermanent state of being, so did philosophers and artists redefine value under marginal terms. The “intersubjective comparisons” permitted under the neoclassical model have been replaced with a commitment to individual satisfactions that may or may not be comparable. The result is the evolution of a subjectivity whose appreciation of value is founded upon levelled substitution. Jack and Algernon go as far as to divide their individual selves into two separate subjectivities, challenging the notion of a singular, “simple” truth. In *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), Nietzsche opens his “Maxims and Arrows” section with “‘All truth is simple’ – Is that not a compound lie?” (33). When in doubt of truth, Wilde’s play seems to argue, it is best to create one’s own.

Through Wilde’s wit, we can begin to see how his management of marginal value through a method of substitution aligns with Nietzsche’s treatment of truth and deception. *Earnest* is filled with instances of jokes, humor, wit, and irony, which rely upon substitution as the fundamental component of their success. The play maintains a certain level of self-consciousness in respect to the swapping of one type of knowledge for another. As when Gwendolen complains to Jack that when people talk about the weather she always fears “they mean something else,” or the several formal texts (diaries, manuscripts, schoolbooks, government documents) that circulate between the characters (262), the tensions between one representation of language and another is never far away. The witty banter often plays off of this pressure.

Many exchanges are loaded with doubled meanings and innuendos, and there persists a level of wit that features substitution as its primary component. For instance, Algy is anxious “to miss” business appointments and Jack’s distinctions between business and pleasure, familial and friendly, become ever more entangled (275). When Jack attempts to sabotage Algy’s Bunburying scheme, Algy describes himself as a “serious Bunburyist” (292). To Jack’s admonishment, he goes on to explain:

“...one must be *serious* about something, if one wants to have any *amusement* in life. I happen to be *serious* about Bunburying. What on earth are you *serious* about I haven’t got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have such an absolutely *trivial* nature.” (292, emphases added).

This passage offers a good example of the type of linguistic exchange through counterintuitive values, which drives much of Wilde’s wit. The dandy’s strange logic bends the syntax of English to his ineffectual will. Being too serious leads to a life of triviality, although being serious also proves a necessity for amusement. By manipulating word choice and reversing common sentiments, Wilde builds a set of interconnected paths that lead to the same confused, comic result. This particular conversation also captures the play’s central binary: seriousness/silliness. Thematically appropriate, the binary also enacts a value system wherein the two apparent opposites are merged into the same meaningless usage. To speak with candor, or to lie, becomes irrelevant. To know “everything,” or “nothing,” becomes the same state of mind. These dandies confront productive language’s tenets and revise them into futile ends. The revaluation of exchangeability is where the dandy makes his living as an economic figure. Algernon tells Jack, “It is awfully hard work doing nothing,” and on the following page shreds a handful of envelopes, without opening them, labeled “bills” (270-71). Apart from the economic

motif, these examples are typical Wildean setups for humor. The key element within all of these examples is contrary substitution, either rhetorical or performative. Cecily hates novels that “end happily” because they “depress her”; Gwendolen will wait for “all [her] life” so long as “you are not too long”; Algernon understands that one must be “serious”, if one hopes to find “amusement” (273, 304, 292). These constructions illustrate the culture’s grapples with the shifting factors that can determine significance or truth (in the colloquial and philosophical senses). Nietzsche describes truth as a “movable host of metaphors” that are actually a “sum of human relations” (“On Truth” 22). The *motion* of truth is a point of regard for Wilde. The positioning of veracity as a concept that lacks stability and without a locatable history is promoted and amplified by marginal thinking.

Likewise, the climax of the play, wherein Jack realizes that it is a “terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that he has been speaking nothing but the truth” showcases the ambiguity of factual knowledge in a world governed by comic diversion and social posturing (306). The entire third act features replacements that transpire through a confusion of documents and mundane objects, culminating with the definitive pun of Earnest/Ernest. The name(s) of the central figures become the theoretical locale for the plot’s ultimate reversal of identities and subversion of standard expectations. The conclusion brings with it a series of exchanges: a family name for a Christian name; a friend for a brother; a dandy for another dandy; a manuscript for a baby; and, finally, a proper name (Ernest) for an adjective (earnest). That the play’s final pun is reflected in both its title and the central characters’ naming is significant because it accentuates Wilde’s attention to the fluid possibilities of linguistic substitution. The narrative redirections of *Earnest* not only present social relations as “triviality” but form an alternative to reality wherein identity has been filtered through the comic device of enacted (and

embodied) wit (307). The characters' travails must be resolved through a set of substitutions that leads them through phases of lost and gained identity, despite an encompassing sense of uselessness for the endeavor.

Conclusion

Economics draws its modeling (unconsciously) from larger cultural perceptions about cycles, energy, and regulated releases. The subsequent discourse treats scheduled discharges and pressures as positive alterations. This sense of metaphoric "balance" finds parallel in many corners of Victorian culture. Sexuality, dreams, humor, and the economy are each meant to be regulated through a mechanism of voluntarily emitted tension, which allows an eventual equilibrium to occur. Likewise, everyday experiences of the Victorian public are shaped by similar aims of avoiding personal overindulgence and unpredictable social explosions through a series of lifestyle referendums (i.e., legislation to limit work hours, public parks, recreational sports, "weekends," etc.). Wilde's dandies challenge the aspiration for balance by overturning typical linguistic meanings and constructing a style of comic inversion that builds upon the ironic borders between reality and expectation, what should be and what could be. His project carries forward an agenda that, when compared to the realm of formal economic theory, finds complement. The particular sense of contradiction, embedded in certain types of humor, highlights the ethical concerns inherent to the concept of expected exchange. Wilde's witty artistic "exchanges" ultimately prove unproductive in finding balance because they disorient more than familiarize. The swapping of opposites and inverses forms a backwards system of interaction amongst characters and also between readers and the text, which questions the appraisal of cultural value within the metaphoric exchange of language's economy. The good may be bad (or vice versa), the important may prove trivial (or vice versa), or the funny may

become earnest (or vice versa). The play itself, then, leaves the door to understanding open for unlimited reassessments, whether on the linguistic or narrative levels. Often considered a paradigm representation of cultural minutiae, *Earnest* responds to a major Victorian rhetorical tension concerning meaning and value. By subverting its own importance in a final act of contradictory substitution, the play continues a process of oppositional circulation that validates its own worth and re-appropriates the margins as a center.

Chapter 4

Acting Partners: Corporate Identity and Parody in *Utopia, Limited*

“Here I was, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd—seemingly the lead actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind me.”

—George Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant” (1936)

Introduction: Writers & Actors

In an earlier draft of *Utopia, Limited* (7 October 1893), Gilbert had assigned Scaphio and Phantis (characters who would become “Judges of the Utopian Supreme Court” in the final version) the roles of opera house proprietor and editor of a society paper, respectively (Bradley 978). In another version of the play, Scaphio is made into a financial speculator, who helps force the king to maintain a secret alias to promote a set of “speculations on the stock market.”

Scaphio also forces him to write subversive articles for the society paper and pen comic operas that skewer his public persona for the playhouse (978). These earlier drafts reveal some important thematic undertones that persist in the final version, although less explicitly. The function of the newspaper and its strange relationship to King Paramount’s monarchy is the path that Gilbert ultimately kept, but the initial connection of investments to performance remained. During the first chapter of this dissertation, I compared Fagin’s fraudulent manipulations of character and appearances in order to further criminal gain to Victorian anxieties about the trustworthiness of “face” values within credit economies. Much of Fagin’s illicit behavior occurs within the underworld of Victorian London where clear lines of moral demarcation can be

sketched between good and bad, villains and heroes. But as the period progresses those borders between the safe and the dangerous evolve in myriad ways.

As seen with Wilde's dandies, one version of the economic villainy that appears through literary transmission derives from the disruption of cycles. As the standard, productive model of male behavior solidifies itself through the trope of *homo economicus*, the languid, sexually-suspect dandy interrupts those earnest systems with linguistic irrationality and inversion. The dandy may be classified as a cultural and literary trope specific to the latter decades of the period, but a different source of anxiety informs the villainy presented by Gilbert and Sullivan's opera. Although dandies can be classified as an oftentimes homogenous incarnation of economic subversion (the distinctions between Jack and Algernon are marginal at best), the corporate advisers, British bureaucrats, and lawyers fill the *dramatis personae* of *Utopia* construct a different version of affluent villainy. They appear as hyperbolic, yet readily identifiable, caricatures of British imperialists, but significantly for my purposes, operate as a group, not as lone individuals. They are the makings of a cartel and their power derives from the influence of the collective. Furthermore, they are of the professional classes: highly-educated, wealthy, socially-connected gentlemen, who also "work" in some specialized capacity as policymakers or executives. However, these are the very traits that make their iniquitous enterprises so successful, and permit them to spread economic trauma and existential confusion with such proficiency. Like *Oliver Twist* or the middle-class detectives of *Pearls*, they carry an inherent cultural capital of acceptance. But unlike those earlier figures, they exploit that trust to garner a false legitimacy. They function as the piece's scoundrels but are nevertheless informed by upstanding members of society.

As Fagin and Sweeney Todd harnessed principles of fiction-making and the power of deceptive narratives in order to swindle their marks, the corporate-imperial administrators of *Utopia* plot a path to conquest through legislature and contracts. The “author” of these schemes is the limited-liability company, which functions as the cultural impetus for villainy in the production. In this chapter, I will examine the implications of this phenomenon as they appeared in both civic and artistic representations. I will argue that the expansion of limited liability into a fundamental tenet of commercial ventures leads to a revaluing of agency and subjectivity in British culture. Gilbert detects that shift in identity and brings it into focus through his parodies of English social customs, which filter interpersonal relations through the philosophies of business initiatives. The points of entry into the text will be the many varieties of “acting” that occur within Utopian society, and the resultant comic confusion that Gilbert exploits through a sophisticated parody of corporate, public life. While limited liability begins as an economic premise, its effects reach far beyond the financial realm. Over the course of the opera, the *Flowers of Progress* prove how malleable the human imagination can be as the Utopians quickly take to performing British customs of courtship, fashion, and business protocol. Limited liability begins as an abstraction but provokes material changes, which then graft themselves onto individuals’ identities.

During this process, the Utopians manipulate their appearances, relationships, and values in ways that become increasingly absurd. The *Flowers of Progress* promote not only a company but a mode of being, one founded upon the contradictions of limited liability. The participants then become actors playing roles within this corporate model, which subverts difference in favor of a predetermined set of economic relations. Those relations transcend simple consumerism as they move into a realm that re-coordinates the affiliation between individuals and the economic

structure, the self and others, and, ultimately, individuals with themselves. They come to form a previously non-existent identity and, subsequently, villain: the corporation. The design of fictional financial entities, commonly referred to as limited-liability companies, would prove the instigation for a new anxiety. The markers for these villains are hidden by social custom and class respectability, which requires the comedy to adopt a satiric lens. Gilbert focuses his attentions upon the hypocrisy of the controllers of the economic superstructure in an effort to render the links between empire and incorporation visible. Like the original versions of the opera, which conflate financial affairs with the theater (performance) and imagistic representations (the stage and the newspaper), *Utopia* develops a system of critique regarding the individual's place in a corporate culture.

Within all of *Utopia's* prior versions, the creations of personae, storylines, and histories for both the conquest of the island and the king's reputation claim a central position. Gilbert's satire is incredibly direct and explicit, even citing the "The Joint Stock Company's Act of Sixty-Two" by name within a song from Act I (I.1277). The overt references to a specific piece of legislation are an unusual tack for him but speak to the pointedness of the critique. The act itself defines the terms for the "Incorporation, Regulation, and Winding up of Trading Companies," which serves as the culmination of two decades of legal maneuvering and permits "[a]ny seven or more persons [...] by subscribing their names to a memorandum of association,[to] form an incorporated company, with or without limited liability ("Companies Act" s.6). It consolidated the organization of the processes of incorporation begun with acts of expansion in 1844 and 1855, and furthered under the Joint Stock Companies Act of 1856 (Gower 536). The 1856 version contains most of the connotations we still associate with limited liability, and the Savoy

audience would certainly have been familiar with those tenets by 1893, but a particular point of parliamentary contention with the 1856 bill reveals a concern that may have been forgotten.

The initial purpose was to permit all partners within partnerships limited-liability protection, while the second issue of contention, and the one that would lead to the modern corporation, was the proposal allowing joint-stock companies to “enjoy the advantages of limited liability” (HC Deb, 1 February 1856, vol 140 col 111). As it stood at the time, the law granted “power in a partner, known to the creditors, to contract with those creditors that he shall not be liable to them beyond a certain amount” (col 111). The “active” partner was already granted limited liability. However, a dormant partner, “a partner not visible to the creditors and never known to them” could be pursued for any of the partnership’s debts via his personal assets (col 111).

In a long defense of limited liability, Robert Lowe, 1st Viscount Sherbrooke, outlines the issues at hand and offers reasoning (successfully) for the need of limited liability protection for partnerships and joint-stock companies. The two aspects of the bill contribute to a larger project of increasing the potential for incorporation to many more groups than was presently possible. The final claim holds a pair of premises: the first is that groups of individuals greater than twenty formed for the purposes of gain *must* be incorporated; the second is that partnerships greater than six but less than twenty members (including dormant partners) can file for complete liability protection.

According to Lowe and those that would be persuaded by his rhetoric, limitations of limited liability is a restriction on the “right of association among capitalists” (col 116). Lowe claims the government has a tendency to “look very jealously on these companies” (col 117), and promote an “absurd and ridiculous distrust” (col 117). The government’s and public’s opinions

of limited liability could be classified as suspicious at best and Lowe is fully aware of the need to soothe that angst. Pre-1844 a group needed a special charter from the government in order to begin a joint-stock venture. The trend is fairly obvious: a push in the 40s and 50s to allow easier establishment of corporations with less government oversight. It is not surprising then that the government recognizes these private organizations as potential competition to their own imperial and trading interests. Once the companies can be founded and operate without explicit approval, citizens with either sufficient capital or credit can embark upon enterprises in direct conflict with the crown. Associatively, if granted full-fledged liability protection, partnerships can then grow in number and size with greater backing from dormant (possibly aristocratic or landed) partners, who may not want their names written on the contracts but nevertheless could reap the profits.

Brought together, the seven or more shareholders are to sign a document called a “memorandum of association” (col 133). This is the official recognition of their new, collective identity and an agreement to print “Ltd.” after the company’s name in order for the public to recognize it as a limited-liability endeavor. The 1862 act marks the culmination of a long process of pushing an increasingly less regulated form of limited liability through the legislative system. During the second half of the Victorian period, the question was probably one of *when* rather than *if* such legislation would become naturalized. By the time of *Utopia, Limited* in 1893, English audiences would have been accustomed to the results of this unusual division between a corporate, public self and the ostensibly private identities of shareholders that lurk somewhere in the shadows. Gilbert’s satire moves past a general indictment of limited liability as a commercial philosophy that carries incredible potential for fraudulent abuses (although that is certainly one aspect). The opera takes great care to recognize the split identity issue. Just as the shareholders take on a public identity, literally scripted through documents and designated

titles, King Paramount and other characters must navigate their public personae and private lives with contradictory and troublesome results.

The title of this chapter builds upon two aspects of corporate identity and its influences upon subjectivity. The first is the theoretical premise of “acting” as a term whose multiple meanings can be used as a tool for focusing a discussion about the self under incorporation. On one level, “acting” partners are invoked as the members of a business partnership that actively and publicly partake in its operation, as opposed to “sleeping” or “dormant” partners. They act on behalf of the company but, as *Utopia* demonstrates, that “acting” involves quite an “act” in the sense of theater and the stage. The Flowers of Progress, the group of seven British bureaucrats sent to found Utopia, Ltd., are fully aware of their performances as “English,” “professional,” “gentleman,” and, most importantly, “corporate.”

Additionally, the performances do not end with the Flowers. The aristocracy and citizens of the island kingdom of Utopia are quick to adapt these cultural performances for their own ends. Gilbert exploits the many senses of “acting” throughout the opera with patterned allusions to the stage in order to form a larger commentary about the insincere character of limited liability. The idea of a “company” becomes a double entendre for a limited-liability company and an acting “company” (troop), which eventually turns all members of the society into “actors” in both senses. The promotion of a divided self is one component of the corporation’s challenges to liberal individualism, but another is the group dynamic. Earlier in the period, Victorian heroes are often distinguished from villains by their stable, singular identities, but the corporation creates a situation wherein “gentlemen” can split their individual existences into two separate entities while blending into a collective dynamic that pushes against many deeply rooted notions of traditional agency. Although of different social lineage than robbers, counterfeiters, and

hustlers, the company men prove to be actors (in several senses) that create disguises for themselves through contracts and documents.

Strength in Numbers

Prior to the emergence of formal capitalism in the latter eighteenth century, the economic rights of individuals were tied to the body. Transactions and debts were associated with a singular, whole individual. While the legal debates about the “fiction” of incorporated entities dates to the middle ages, the Victorians took a huge step towards the economic, and eventual existential, splitting of an individual’s identity. As mentioned above, the growth of incorporation led to a push for changes in liability law and eventually a shift in the “social organization of capital” (Miller 141). The subsequent effects of that change built a critical tension due to an “increasing separation of agency and investment as elements of moral calculation” (141). A sharp distinction between “notions of subjectivity” and divisions between public and private identities were even recognized as “a sort of legal monster” during parliamentary debates (139). Gilbert captures the fear surrounding the loss of accountability succinctly with “‘Never mind – you needn’t pay,’/ So you start another Company tomorrow!” (I.1260-61). The slippery slope of limited liability seems to be that it can lead to a perpetual process of destroying and rebuilding artificial identities.

Even Lowe acknowledges the potential dangers inherent within limited-liability partnerships, if left unchecked. An individual with the power to declare himself a “corporator” (a corporation founded upon a single member), presents the hazard that his “acts would bear a double construction” (col 113). In other words, if a single person could declare himself a corporation, he could free himself of all debts by hiding behind the limited-liability logo. The goal then is to find a way to maintain the “liberal principles of our modern commercial system”

without creating a “constant ambiguity.” The topic is one that found thorough discussion not only within official debates but also popular culture. While anxieties over forgery and Jewish marketplaces could be found in “A Biography of a Bad Shilling” (1851) the corporate finds a counterpart with “The Autobiography of a Joint-Stock Company (Limited)” (1876). Written by Laurence Oliphant for *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, the piece adopts the first-person narration of a “company” in order to shine a light upon the shady dealings and conspiratorial associations that bring such an entity to life. Like the corrupted shilling, the company maintains moral reservations about its function in the world, acknowledging that it was “conceived in sin” and became accustomed to “deceiving those who trusted in me” (Oliphant 328). But several distinctions also emerge, which transmit important details about the understanding of company formation and cultural reactions to the development of limited liability.

Take, for example, the description of “Captain Hawk,” the imaginary company’s founder: “This gentleman is known in the phraseology of finance as my *Promoter*; and in spite of his many bad habits and general laxity of morals, after an extensive experience of city men engaged in providing investments [...] he did not conceal unknown villainies under the guise of respectability: having no profession he certainly made none; he was contented to live on the outskirts of the society [...] and rather picked up the remnant after the leaders of the profession had robbed the public, then stole from them himself” (Oliphant 331, emphasis in original).

This passage exploits a number of the fears about limited liability. While theft, fraud, robbery and the like were still points of concern in the latter decades of the period, the company came to stand for a developing set of anxieties between business and criminal activities. Outcasts such as the Captain have found a way to accumulate profits, which involves a

reimagining of the “work” of criminals. Interestingly, the promoter makes no effort to “conceal unknown villainies under the guise of respectability,” he merely attaches well-regarded individuals to his enterprise that create a collective esteem. His intrepid attitude runs in contrast to the disguises of underworld, street-level villains but also highlights the legality of the project. Writers like Oliphant and later Gilbert are emphasizing the acceptance of these partnerships. Despite a great potential for deceit, the members all function within the bounds of acceptability.

The group dynamic is a significant component within the construction of a corporation and the subsequent literary representations. In an examination of “financial and aesthetic” dimensions of Victorian theater (Moody 91), Jane Moody uses George Henry Lewes’s comedy, *The Game of Speculation* (1851), as an example of “the self-conscious convergence and playful collusion of capitalism and performance” (93). Her argument explains that some nineteenth-century drama that portrayed the financial world also implicated the audience through a “contract” of sorts, which allows the plays to be understood as assessments of the “psychological confusion” that modern capital was producing (103). As the fictional narrator of “The X.Y.Z. Co. (Limited)” explains to Sir Twig (the requisite titled member), a syndicate is “an influential combination of capitalists” brought together to “rig the market” (Oliphant 334). These individuals adopt official designations, pay guaranteed fees, and advertise themselves as available in an effort to “inspire confidence” in potential investors (334). The “rigging” occurs through collusion between the shareholders and the manipulation of “publicly” and “privately” known information. Gilbert and Sullivan go to lengths to celebrate an ironic appreciation for the legal permissibility. The song introducing the plan to incorporate Utopia proclaims “Some seven men form an Association, / (If possible all Peers and Baronets)” (I.1218-19), which Mr. Goldberg (the

promoter) has assured will succeed because “No scheme’s too great and none too small / For Companification!” (I.1159-60).

The Flowers of Progress arrive in Utopia with a specific mission and, as a syndicate, spread more than British business practices. In conjunction with their lessons in incorporation the Utopians hope to be “completely Anglicized” (I.35). Through a process of imperial parody, the king himself calls for his subjects to adopt “English institutions, English tastes, and oh, English fashions!” as directed by the colonizing forces (I.41-42). Some are explicit, such as a self-referential joke about “Burlesque Theatre” and “theatrical property” not being what it once was (II.264-65), but the most telling are those involving the romantic subplots, which are given significant stage time. When instructing her charges, Princesses Nekaya and Kalyba, the English governess, Lady Sophy, details the necessary preparations for encouraging a proper courtship with a gentleman:

“English girls of well-bred notions
Shun all unrehearsed emotions.
English girls of highest class
Practise them before the glass” (I.387-90)

Here we see the young princesses learning how to perform a privileged version of English femininity, which is founded upon one of the “most paradoxical moral instructions: act naturally” (Williams 342). Additionally, they must take note of “his titles” and “don’t forget the references” because “[t]his is business” (I.404-05). The scene provides an exceptional view of colonization’s totalizing effects over a culture because it stresses (like the comedy as a whole) the overt influence of business relations, language, and ideology. Additionally, it establishes an “absurd reversal of colonial resistance” wherein the colonized peoples invite the colonizers into

their lives (Williams 325). In conventional satiric style, the Utopians are portrayed in a manner as to reveal the shallowness of English norms. While fears about counterfeiting may prompt one understanding of *casting* coins as a chemical process earlier in the period, Gilbert's characters are *cast* as cultural performers needed to fill specific roles within the new system.

Upon returning from England, Princess Zara is polished in British custom and hopes to take Captain Fitzbattleaxe, the Flower responsible for the English military presence, as a husband. However, Scaphio and Phantis also have designs on the princess. The three men and the princess fill their speech with muddled language about the distinctions between emotions and the appearance of sentiment. When Fitzbattleaxe recommends a pistol duel in "the English fashion" Scaphio grows quite uneasy. However, his nerves are calmed through capitalist rhetoric. According to "The Rival Admirers' Clauses Consolidation Act," The princess will be "entrusted to [...] a stakeholder, who is bound to hand her over to the survivor (on the Tontine principle) in a good condition of substantial and decorative repair" (I.920-23). To which Schapio replies, "Reasonable wear and tear and damages by fire excepted?" (I.924). The men revert to the idiom of an insurance policy as a mode of protection for the princess but also to relieve their own anxieties about the stakes of the duel. They cloak personal feelings and subsequent liability in formal, public speech.

This style of discursive critique with romantic custom as its target is familiar terrain for Gilbert and Sullivan. While criticism specific to *Utopia* is fairly sparse, a good amount of discourse engages similar themes in Gilbert's other works. Allusions to acting and staged performance pervade the first operas. *Trial by Jury* (1875), *The Sorcerer* (1877), and *HMS Pinafore* (1878) all probe how "material realities impinge upon [...] romantic love" (Oost 84). They successfully join "the illusory ideal with the commonplace to expose the materialism

behind the romantic” (Troost 195). Scaphio, Fitzbattleaxe, the princesses, and rest of the cast circulate into and out of an insecure discourse community in which sincerity is filtered through the civic concerns of liabilities. Ironic linguistic combinations are a repeated model within the construction of satiric meaning for Gilbert’s aesthetic, which foregrounds parodic representation. The result in *Utopia* is an extensive treatment of parody that transcends standard modes and begins to shape a self-consciousness about acting and performance. Linda Hutcheon argues that parody is a “form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion” (Hutcheon 6). More than necessarily the revising or ““trans-contextualizing”” of another work of art, it targets “another form of coded discourse” (16), which permits the “inscribing [of] continuity while permitting critical distance” (20) She links this concept with a larger function of artistic production in the early twentieth century that promotes “modalities of self-reflexivity in modern art” (20). The successful parody should “rework those discourses whose weight has become tyrannical” through a “dialogic, parodic reappropriation” (72). This is precisely what happens between characters in *Utopia*. They distort typical meanings through discursive overlaps.

Combining rhetorical styles forms the basis of Gilbert’s satire of incorporation in *Utopia*, which helps to “expose the materialism behind the romantic” tendencies of a capitalist hierarchy (Troost 195). But it is a technique that appears in several of his other works as well. His burlesque often finds commercial endeavors to be a useful parodic tool in cases where it “marries a grandiose concept [...] to something ordinary, like shopkeeping” (195). *The Sorcerer* (1877), for instance, cloaks the mystery and appeal of magic in the “discourse of ordinary business and trade” (196). Likewise, in *The Pirates of Penzance* (1880) the pirates, ironically, conduct themselves in a “businesslike fashion” (197). Whereas the earlier ones regard money and trade as the focus, the later operas make “mechanization and finance” (199) the preferred tropes. This

marks a transition of purpose because works like *Utopia* and *The Gondoliers* (1889) implicate “capitalism itself” with their satire (194). More than commentaries about the effects of industry, these operas strike at the larger philosophy governing wealth accumulation. I would add that the emphasis upon group action is also significant. Pirates, corporations, gondoliers all depend upon the processes of a communal body to perform their parody and iniquitous schemes. This proves an especially noteworthy component of *Utopia* because corporations grant the complete legal and financial subversion of the individual.

The emphases upon groups of performers working together and the insincerity of emotion draw attention towards the constant need for performance within a limited-liability society, which seeps into the private lives of the participants. What are the characters performing for each other? For the audience? How is authorship/authority maintained or subverted within these performances? Gilbert opens the interpretative link between stage acting and the implied, public actions (predominantly negative ones) that a fledgling limited-liability company can impart upon human behavior. Beyond an elaborate literary procedure to exploit the similarities between two groups (actors and corporate investors), the double entendres of *acting* and *company* introduce an important relationship that will be discussed below in respect to the effects of incorporation upon the individual subject. The group dynamic is also a key portion of the company’s villainy. After creating a shielding device, which makes it nearly impossible to trace the individual’s responsibility, the corporation can operate as a unified whole. This entity, despite its very real impacts and common acceptance, is conceptual. The shift from earlier, demon-like villains to an ethereal idea correlates with the economy’s larger moves towards increasingly abstract mechanisms of financial interaction, which tend to operate through methods imperceptible to the senses.

One of Gilbert's tools for acknowledging and coping with the difficulty of representing such an intangible villain is parodic language. As with the merging of romantic speech acts with official, economically-sanctioned language, the technique calls to mind Bakhtin's notion of "double-voiced discourse." He describes it as a "dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages" (*Dialogic Imagination* 325). The premise of a dual-levelled rhetoric proves significant for instances such as this but also for a prominent component of my reading. The opera's dialogue intentionally fuses multiple rhetorical genres, which challenge the notion of linguistic authority within the confines of the stage as well as the concept of an *author* more generally. The characters speak for themselves but also, by default, for the larger group of which they are a part. The deeper effects of the collective, limited liability company form a dependence upon synecdoche. The "contract," the "memorandum," the "partnership" begin to stand for the public self of the individuals who comprise the group and blur conventional distinctions about agency and subjectivity. Kenneth Burke describes synecdoche as "part of the whole, whole for the part, container for the contained, sign for the thing signified" (Burke 507). The breakdown of distinctions between associated, connected, but dissimilar, aspects of an entity occurs wherein previously independent elements become joined in an existential tangle. To explain the phenomenon through Gilbert's metaphor, the actors and the stage become indiscernible from the actual lives of the players. The "acting" metaphor exposes a link between insincerity and corporate identity, but also draws attention to the constant substitution which becomes possible under limited liability. The private can replace the public, the public supplant the private, whenever convenient. The company is constructed of a group of individuals but each individual also carries (promotes?) a part of the company.

The Subject ex nihilo

The issues with a collective dynamic of this sort strike at a central concern with groups at the end of the century. As Gustave Le Bon wrote in his influential book *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895): “Being anonymous,” a crowd is “in consequence irresponsible”; “the sentiment of responsibility which always controls individuals disappears entirely” (14).

Although not speaking of corporations, Le Bon’s words express a similar concern as to their implications. If the individual can live as he would in a group, then accountability becomes a difficult status to determine. In *Utopia*, one central character embodies the difficulties of split identity more thoroughly than any other: King Paramount. His construction involves both the monarchy and the corporation, and his position within each depends upon a profound devotion to individualism. Before incorporation, the monarch is inherently divine and functions as a singular avatar for the will of a greater power. After incorporation, he becomes a de facto CEO of sorts, but his identity has also become completely secularized and comparable with the existential condition of everyone else. Gilbert represents this tension through the depiction of the king’s contradictory obligations, which vary between a loyalty to the stewardship of the kingdom and the evolution of an Anglicized state. In particular, the act of writing features prominently in the subsequent confusion of ideals that perpetrate his life and the development of Utopia as a nation.

As the plot unfolds, Paramount becomes a metonym for Utopia. John Wolfson proposes that an omitted song from *The Grand Duke* (“The Stroller’s Song”) forms a theoretical correlate between a monarch and an actor (86), and *Utopia* forwards a more explicit, detailed version of that concept. The king becomes the ultimate performer with the most varied identities. The status of the island transitions from sovereign paradise into incorporated British colony through the documents of association, and his identity also undergoes a change closely tied to the effects

caused by public writing. When the opera opens, we find him trapped in a bizarre blackmail scheme orchestrated by Scaphio and Phantis. Paramount is revealed to be pseudonymously writing articles for a Utopian newspaper, the *Palace Peeper*. However, more unusual, is that his writing serves as a daily critique of the excesses of the monarchy and, in particular, “the King’s abominable immoralities” (I.89). Scaphio and Phantis, judges of the Supreme Court of Utopia, have also taken it upon themselves to monitor and judge the king for traces of “illicities” (I.119). Although Paramount never displays any tendencies towards such transgressions, he is nevertheless controlled though their conspiracy. He writes his own bad press, which is fabricated by him, under pennames like Junius Junior and Mercury Major. The confusion regarding his identity does not lessen as the narrative continues. It becomes layered with jokes, misunderstandings, and a strange accepting attitude of his conundrum.

Paramount’s situation corresponds to the theoretical contradictions that plagued the debates surrounding limited liability in England. The earlier presentations of limited liability to the public couched it in terms of a “social panacea” for the troubles between the working-class and capitalists (Loftus 84). The workers would now be able to form their own groups of investors and partake in the investments of the economy like a banker or broker would. This would ease class tensions and permit “liberal visions of community” to grow out of the newly unified economic structure (85). The impetus for this desire stemmed from what was already a well-rehearsed contention between forces of state intervention and laissez-faire economists. Paramount embodies the difficulty that Victorians had with placing the capitalist as a figure. Audrey Jaffe explains the tropes of “gentleman” and “beggar” as uncomfortably close to each other in the latter portion of the century. It came to be a well-understood notion that a gentleman could one day find himself begging or that a beggar could be a wealthy man in disguise (*Scenes*

of Sympathy 49). But more immediate was the obstacle the culture experienced when attempting to “define identity in relation to work” (49). The instruments of gain within financial capitalism, like shares and investments, are typically classifiable as part of systems that do not “appear at all” (50). The subject under limited liability seizes this as an aim—to disappear. The instinct to hide from financial liability soon extends to the moral and political. Villainy, then, is increasingly difficult to locate and quarantine. Anyone is potentially suspect but also protected. The individual is not merely part of a group but has *become* a group in the sense that his choices are now filtered through an artificial consciousness. The dual identity paradox of incorporation pushes the villainous and the respected uncomfortably near to each other, like the gentleman/beggar anxiety. If nothing else, this situation seems to be insisting that innocuous surfaces can disguise treacherous depths.

Paramount’s endeavors as a writer of fictitious articles about himself capture the misunderstanding and displacement of the situation with acuity. The confusion apexes during the first act when he declares his dedication to the “humorous side of things,” which he believes to be ubiquitous and “invaluable” (I.435-36). Even the *Palace Peeper* is held up as an inspiring example of comedy. Phantis declares Paramount’s “crowning joke” to be the “Comic Opera” he has written titled “King Tuppence, or A Good Deal Less than Half a Sovereign” (I.453-53). Paramount has written a comic opera—like Gilbert’s—wherein the economic is blended with the regal through the plays upon “two-pence” and the double-meaning of *sovereign*. He even amuses himself with his own creations (sometimes grotesque depictions of himself) while Scaphio encourages him to wallow in the “antithetical humour” of the whole enterprise (I.461). The king acknowledges this humor as “one of the funniest things” he has ever known and sees himself an individual split in half by two contradictory impulses (I.441). His public identity

must remain one of kingly, formal, grandeur in order to garner a sense of control. However, his private identity is warped through greater and greater manipulation and exploitation of his position by advisors. In other words, the public self is an image built upon stability while the private is a lived set of contradictions that are constantly in flux and hidden from view. If the backwards self-objectifying relationship of Paramount to his own identity were not enough of a stalled program, the king's articles are never actually read because he orders his servants to buy every copy of each newspaper's edition.

As with the conflation of romantic and financial considerations, the linguistic traits of the king's predicament enact a parody of official discourses. Journalism and gossip are clearly present, but so are deeper questions about authorship and readership that build upon a timely cultural tension. It is not difficult to read Gilbert and Sullivan's professional disputes with publication rights and literary piracy in these situations. In an article about *Pirates*, Monica Cohen discusses the team's intentions towards "redressing literary and dramatic piracy in an emerging and generally unregulated mass market" (Cohen 342), which had been costing them large sums in the United States. However, there is also a broader cultural conversation taking place about authorship and its malleability within the contexts of capitalism and parody. What can be believed, or should be believed, becomes increasingly unclear. Paramount, and his writing, serve as ideological touchstones regarding the instability of authors and identity, generally. Whereas in *Pirates*, the pirates become satirical "agents of that legal and ethical discipline that has become associated with middle-class culture" (341), in *Utopia* the distinctions between heroes and villains, the trustworthy and the deceptive, are much hazier. Gilbert forces a novelistic style of rhetoric that is "more hybrid, more dialogic, indeed more parodic" and creates mass confusion as to which group is "right" and which "wrong" in their actions (357).

It may be fitting that *Utopia* was the second-to-last of the Savoy operas for Gilbert and Sullivan because the duo seems to have reached a point of exhaustion in terms of satire and the bending of social mores into deformed ironies. The inversions that define much of the Savoy work do not hold in *Utopia*. The “the traditional comic hero” that resists an “obedience to externally imposed laws or codes” does not even appear in *Utopia* (Fischler 81). Rather, Paramount declares his articles part of the “only really comic paper” in *Utopia* (I.1115-16). Take, for instance, his admittance of the newspaper forgeries:

Be just—the time is now at hand

When truth may published be.

These paragraphs were written and

Contributed by me! (II.567-570)

He has written himself into and out of a fictional existence in a manner not unlike the Flowers of Progress that incorporate *Utopia* or the individual citizens who do the same for themselves. A type of performance founded upon writing and the power of documentation pervades the text (performance) of the operetta and King Paramount embodies the culmination of the strange paradoxes such a condition implies.

The cultural performances of authors and readers emerge as the trickledown effect of the acting “company” metaphor, and blur the lines of distinction between “straight” language and parody, but also between actors and audience. The supposed original purpose of incorporation—to combine individuals into a coherent single identity that functions under a unified self-interest—has been traded for its inverse. The Utopians have split themselves into an unconnected collection of individual companies that function through the narrow desires of personal gain and frivolity. This conception of the self is founded upon a contradiction at best

and deception at worst. The result is a sense of agency that only can be understood through a comic convention like parody. In Gilbert's hands, the corporate subject provides fertile ground for the exploitation of the façades of tradition and prudence. Ironically King Paramount remains the most genuine and self-aware character. He lives in a constant state of distress but copes with it through an appreciation of the comic temperament of an illogical culture. It is at moments like these where Gilbert's parody of limited liability, empire, and the effects upon subjectivity comes into its most immediate (and absurd) focus.

Despite the relative nature of truth and systems of knowledge within Victorian culture, incorporation aims to produce an intense homogeneity of subjectivity. The authorial issues and subsequent moral ambiguity embedded in the king's writing highlights another important factor of industrial and financial capitalism, which also helps to usher in the twentieth century: automated reproduction. This time the reproductive capacities direct their efforts at actual people. Gilbert demonstrates the potential ironic success of that enterprise. The natives of Utopia quickly adapt to a fresh set of ostensibly universal laws for governing exchange, value, and general social interaction, but in the process redesign their culture into one founded upon the contradictory model of the British subject, which turns a king into a pawn and average citizens into liability-free royals. As opposed to a dialogic, colonial situation, Gilbert creates a monoculture with incorporated, non-individualized subjects at its center.

Conclusion: Utopian Inverses

The subject's position in *Utopia* builds upon a paradox between traditional liberal notions of personal responsibility and the development of a newer thread within capitalism's conception of liability as something different, impersonal. The opera's title implies an obvious sense of irony for the "utopia" that the British bring to Utopia. However, I believe the title holds a key to

another dualism about the social construction of Victorian utopias. In the final section, I would like to explain the relationship between the concept of utopia and the level of economic meaning in *Utopia* as conveying important consequences for modern art as it transitions into the twentieth century. While the subject's role can be understood as a version of satiric parody, the rhetoric surrounding utopias derives from a different technique. What *Utopia* presents is two separate and distinct visions of utopia, which each find precedent in other literature of the time. As the individual subjects are split by an extensive application of parody, so is the social level divided between pre-Colonial and postcolonial conditions. Each citizen embodies the transition into a personal corporation, and the society as a whole progresses through a change in economic status. The result is a type of cultural eclecticism that borders on pastiche.

As with many of the Savoy operas, British institutions are a target and *Utopia* directs its satire at two of the most prominent in Anglo society: monarchy and incorporation. At the conclusion, one of the opera's final puns signifies the transformation of Utopia from a failed "Monarchy (Limited)" into a triumphant "Limited Monarchy" (the finest, most efficacious form of government) (II.666-67). But this conclusion neglects the prior state of Utopia before the arrival of British customs and colonists. Utopia's original incarnation was as that of a functioning utopia. When critics argue that "modernity came into being as a self-consciously distinct historical period," they are typically referring to the period's awareness of its place within the ideological continuum of industrial and financial progress (Schmitt 24). Through *Utopia*, audiences and readers are presented with the impossible dream of two separate, but equally utopian, visions in bold material form. One is the tropical paradise of relaxation wherein industriousness is unknown; the other, a type of automated corporate nirvana wherein liability

has been eliminated. Despite extreme literal differences, both societies profess to share the same utopian requisite: to function outside of ideological considerations.

The initial circumstances, found at the work's opening, can be understood as representative of the pre-industrial "noble savage" variety that became very popular during the Romantic period and has persisted to varying degrees since then. Dickens famously critiqued this idea in "The Noble Savage" (1853) in strong colonialist and racist terms, but nevertheless his sense of need for such a blatant discrediting of the concept helps to prove its broad acceptance. But, I believe, there is another ideology embedded within that of the noble savage as portrayed in *Utopia*. Part of the pre-industry, salt-of-the-earth, pre-modern model of non-Europeans is an implication that they exist and function pre-ideologically. They live "The life of Lazyland!" (I.14) and "dream of nothingness" (I.16). The "lotus-eating fashion" in which their consciousness has been shaped befits a world without labor, capital, or ideology (I.4). Assets have not accumulated and it seems as though social problems and traditions have not either. They live in a present that moves endlessly forward with "simple joys" (I.26). The lack of history and unconcern with the future is conflated with a lack of capital.

At the other end of the spectrum is the British version of utopia, which is represented through a different set of values. As opposed to a nation founded upon a lack of memory, Gilbert presents the incorporated England as a "powerful, happy, and blameless country" (I.1049). This utopia is much more in line with William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) and H.G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905), which offer views of British civilizations that have been improved upon either in the future or some alternate dimension. With the limited-liability account of utopia, the corporation offers correction (albeit satiric) of current social ills, but it is also evolved into a state free of ideological backings. Like the depiction of pre-ideological life,

wherein the uniformity of “half-clothed barbarians” provided a single set of relations (I.1074), the latter representation also achieves utopia through a sameness of identity. Under the new “reforms,” all persons may reestablish themselves as a different LLC, if debts or obligations intrude. In an ironic turn, the final stage of capitalist development (the private incorporation of all beings) leads to an egalitarian socialist state. All are incorporated and functioning under the same modes and relations within the economy. In a second irony, the Utopians’s “natural talents” are permitted “full play,” which is language reminiscent of Morris’s arts and crafts movement and the larger social aspirations of individuals breaking free of commercial bonds (II.58).

These two versions of desire serve as a counterbalance for the economic representations. It is important to remember that during *Utopia* the audience is never shown an unchallenged version of utopia, rather there is an exchange between two simulations of “utopias.” “We’ll presently hit on a capital plot!” that will resolve the problems to which Utopia has fallen victim (II.368). The phrases “capital plan” and “capital plot” are repeated as reminders of the need for an economic solution to undo the trouble that has been caused by incorporation (II.385; 389). But the “troubles” are not what one might assume. Scaphio has realized that “war’s impossible” and all the “doctors dwindle, starve, and die!” because sanitation has become so thorough (II.634). Additionally, “lawyers starve” because the new social order has “extinguished crime and litigation” (II.636). In other words, the Utopia, Ltd. project has been a smashing success and resolved all of the ills that plague actual British society. But this is nothing more than a “dull Prosperity” to the Utopians. They demand to rectify the mistake by including what they have “omitted” (II.647). Both utopias become ironic dystopias.

The satire strips away the mythology of a king, the illusions of tropical paradises and shows the people that populate those fantasies as ordinary fools. Likewise, the English characters of respected social standing are brought down to a plainly corruptible level. It is significant that Gilbert kills these dreams at the theater. The stage is the most temporal and explicitly financial of artistic venues. The theatergoers exchange money for performance, often of an escapist variety. Gilbert openly assaults the notion of a non-ideological, escapist theater through a satiric art form that includes the audience within its critique. In spite of its subject matter and economic situation, *Utopia* does not allow itself to be co-opted. It resists the mechanisms of consumption and sales with a type of self-destructive impulse towards traditional meanings. Gilbert does not permit the dominant hegemony to be aestheticized and forgotten. Instead, he establishes a series of confrontations at the very locales that appear to provide an escape from economic oppressions. Gilbert reminds us that both utopias have cracks in them. The pleasures, desires, and extreme individualized consumerism lead to a strange dystopian paradox within the fictional society and the subjects it creates. In a twist appropriate to the original aims of the “dormant partner,” identity under limited liability has been wound into a knot of corporate interests. Gilbert’s utopias illustrate how the company ethos disembodies and reassembles the late-Victorian subject in a manner that promotes the group over the individual and the devious over the responsible.

Conclusion

This dissertation attempted to demonstrate that the economic influences upon literature of the Victorian period can be understood in new and significant ways through a reading of comic texts. Villains were the starting point and the grounding literary trope. The fundamental questions addressed were:

1. How does the economic climate of the nineteenth century influence understandings of villainy within comic literary representations?
2. How do those representations, over a period of about fifty years, transform in parallel to the surrounding economic conditions?

Villains of the economic sort appear in many different guises and offer an alternate set of representations to the heroes and celebrated characters of literary productions. Who (or “what” later in the period) provokes economic anxiety varies, but does so in ways that may be unexpected. These particular villains are interpreted as violators of the period’s economic tenets. Like many economic norms, comic incidence often defines cultural boundaries according to moral considerations. However, comic representations create a unique textual entryway for the understanding of villainy and iniquitous economic behavior. Due to comedy’s generic history and the discrepancy of its applications (satire, wit, stereotypes, etc.), its function can vary in purpose. This dissertation joins these two considerations, economics and the comic. Under a framework of literary historicism, the reflection of economic values can be found within comic literary structures, which reveal the dedication to social and moral evaluation that both share.

In these final pages I would like to explain the larger trajectory of Victorian literature as it pertains to the texts I have chosen to examine. First, I will map out the fundamental conclusions for each of the four main chapters, then explain their broader links in terms of questions regarding genre and the transition from the novel to the stage, which prove important considerations for this project. Complementarily, I will situate those broader changes with respect to the evolution of English economic history, which proves especially vigorous during the nineteenth century. Finally, I will briefly reflect upon the present state of this style of criticism and explain its potential for future scholarly interpretations of literature.

The first chapter, “Fagin’s Coin of Truth: Economic Belief and Comic Representation in *Oliver Twist*,” scrutinizes Fagin as a villain whose construction joins Victorian anxieties about Jewish counterfeiting and economic deceptiveness with separate yet related concerns about the author’s role in representing criminal life. Dickens triangulates Fagin’s identity through cultural fears about Jewish participation within secondary markets, increased distance between purchaser and seller in an expanding credit economy, and moral ambiguities in respect to fiction-making. In contrast, he aligns honesty and truth with the middle-class, normative characters. Throughout, he marks the distinction between these two groups with comic incidence. The marginalized figures are fodder for humor and irony, while the conventional heroes are sincere.

Similarly, Chapter 2, titled “The Barber’s Dilemma: Banking Crisis and Laughter in *The String of Pearls*,” investigates the first appearance of Sweeney Todd and is a study in the economic anxieties provoked by a working-class figure who embodies conflicting class identities. Again, lines of demarcation are drawn between genuine and deceitful characters through a comic mechanism: in this instance, laughter. By focusing on the bodily aspects of Sweeney’s identity, I begin to trace a practice within modernity of linking economically corrupt

behavior with embodiments of the irrational, especially, via uncontrolled or disturbing laughter. The construction of Sweeney Todd, I argue, is informed by a Victorian instinct to eliminate the notion of somatic presence from the economy's formal processes. However, when read against very corporal cultural phenomena like bank runs, labor protests, and street-level crime, that goal appears far from attainable. While the general tendency of capitalist philosophy during the century is to suppress labor as a measurement of value, the uncontrolled laughs serve as stark reminder (like crisis and thievery) of the inability to purge raw, physical actions from economic considerations, despite a strong need to turn their occurrence into anomaly.

This tactic of using the comic to distinguish between both moral and economic standards is the primary feature of "Part I: The Demons." The earlier portion of the period retains a confidence in quarantine and social ostracization. Despite strong critiques of the legal profession and workhouse laws, Dickens and his middle-class readers favor this model for a regulatory aesthetic, but it also relates to the novel's comedy and its participation in the literary marketplace. *Oliver Twist* and *The String of Pearls* grapple with villainy within the ambiguous moral system of capitalism and the tension created therein bespeaks the period and its literature. William Blake said of Milton's depiction of Satan in *Paradise Lost* that he was "of the Devil's party without knowing it," and this may be a fitting epigraph for the two novels, as well. James Eli Adams notes that for earlier Dickens "psychic depths are the province of villainous or inept schemers" (60). Ironically, the heroes and upstanding characters are wooden and unmemorable. This is a frequent manifestation within comic representations from the earlier portion of the period, which absorbs a heavy influence from melodrama and the stage. It also highlights a function of the novel as commodity. The novel helps individuals to organize a private sense of control over characters and action. It also promotes the façade of a separation from public,

formal affairs such as its status as a purchased, consumed object. This conservative thread invites isolated reading experiences and privatization in a manner that befits industrial capitalism's dedication to separate spheres of life. Machines and specialized labor offer economic equivalents of the novel, which provides the appropriate form for this agenda.

Part II of the dissertation, "The Dandies," begins with the third chapter and is entitled "The Liar's Dream: Marginal Utility and Wit in *The Importance of Being Earnest*." The chapter's goal is to situate Wilde's economic ethos within utilitarian thinking. Conventional standards hold that work and leisure, pleasure and pain, private and public, are distinct realms, but they often overlap and even replace each other. In *Earnest*, a deep confusion begins to form about normative assertions and believability, fueled by an increasing acceptance of deception and contradictory substitution as legitimate aesthetics. I use the work of three prominent intellectual figures: William Stanley Jevons, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud to center a discussion on the broad implications of language founded upon the premise of substitution. Wilde's dandies employ wit as a tool to disorient normative notions about the nature of truth and deception. They function as economic villains in the sense that they are anti-productive (in several senses), but also because they disrupt the orderly substitution binaries of private/public, good/bad, truth/lies. The play itself becomes an irrational, unpredictable locale for substitutive tendencies. During an era that saw a renewed faith in business cycles, the dandy's subversive rhetoric destabilizes the processes of capitalism's desire for distinct social realms.

The final chapter continues the dismantling of economic logic by expanding the discussion from individual subversive perpetrators to the "body" of a limited-liability company. It considers a Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera and is called "Acting Partners: Corporate Identity and Parody in *Utopia, Limited*." The general premise is that the difficulty of navigating a course

for truth becomes nearly impossible after the enactment of limited-liability statutes. As the “Flowers of Progress” help to initiate corporate law into the fabric of Utopia’s society, they also bring a set of values that revise accountability. The detection of villainy becomes problematic because of constant inversions via ironic humor and a lack of regulatory social retribution, which is critiqued through a parody of English identity. This is an important step in the transition from “demons” into “dandies.” The new villain is the corporation, and its members are able to shield themselves as a group, leaving individuals to flounder. The corporate body becomes a site of confusion and anxiety within Victorian culture, which Gilbert seizes and turns into a target of satire. The parliamentary debates surrounding the Joint Stock Companies Act of 1856 provide critical source material for understanding the cultural conversation about limited liability that would become familiar to Victorians. In a pointed critique, Gilbert conflates performed, corporate identity with genuine, private selves until life and language begin to reflect the same fragmented (and comic) doctrine as property.

As the novel provided the appropriate literary form for the earlier villains, so does the theater fit the latter constructions. The novel tends towards a greater desire to record and account (in several senses) for everyday emotions and activities, with an aim of capturing objective reality through a scientific-inspired concern with detail. Writers and readers come to truth through narrative, which favors descriptive prose and established lines between consumers and producers. The novel can generally provide these separate spheres, and its popularity is a testament to the enduring attractiveness of such literary market relations. However, the end of the century witnesses a robust return to the stage and its many accoutrements. This dissertation joins the theater’s renaissance, from the 1880s forward, with the shifting economic understanding of value. Whereas production, rationality, and control had often been privileged

within earlier economic models of inherent, labor-based value, the system underwent a revision stemming from marginal utility, which favors choice and demand as determining factors of worth. The villains of the two dramas—dandies and corporate legislators—reflect critiques of the dangers of marginal utility and a financial sector that has become a more ethereal, global system with fewer immediate physical or personal connections. According to Wilde and Gilbert, villainy need not derive from physical coercion, but can have greater effect through manipulations of the complex, unseen economic networks through which money and information flow.

The novel's dominance is challenged by the stage because it offers a forum of representation that can break apart the conventional, atomized system of reading experiences that was shaped through the first two industrial revolutions. The stage forces a blending of binaries like work/leisure, social entertainment/commentary, and authenticity/performance within a larger, actual framework of commercial, monetary exchange. The private, internalized practice of buying and reading a novel is replaced by the overtly communal gathering at the theater's box office. But perhaps most antithetical to the novel (and most "modern" in conception), is the intentional divorcing of pleasure from beauty. In order to expose the subjective, marginal rules of capitalist thinking that have reshaped commercial and, subsequently, literary value, Wilde and Gilbert present falsifiers, thieves, and con-artists with social respectability fully intact. The stage demands a physical and obvious presence (of both performer and spectator). Actors embody the contradictions of the social order and the drama exposes those lies to the spotlight of truth, which shines on the audience as well.

Taken as a whole, the four chapters demonstrate two of the most common applications of comic art. The first two chapters display the potential for comedy to serve as an exclusionary

tool through discrimination and cultural stereotypes. The latter two chapters display writers seizing the genre in order to critique social institutions through an inclusive social energy, which resists the received tenets of progress and capital. The distinction, in these cases, derives from fundamental political and cultural changes but include important adaptations of the economic continuum. Economic influences upon literature neither begin nor end during the Victorian period, but this dissertation endeavors to explain how villainy, comedy, and the financial sector develop in conjunction with each other. Although these three elements are brought into a singular study, a secondary aim is to demonstrate the importance of each component within interpretations of culture and art. Literary form draws inspiration from many sources, but the historical, cultural, and generic find themselves in regular conversation during the nineteenth century. The above dissertation aspires to prove how the readings of literary texts in coordination with the rhetorical and theoretical implications of a society's formal economic system, or the history of comedic tropes, or a case study in a character type, can contribute to an expansion of literary studies and foster a cross-disciplinary quality within academic scholarship.

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