

## DIRT, DUST AND DEVILMENT: UNCOVERING FILTH IN THE WORKHOUSE AND CASUAL WARDS

Laura Foster

(Cardiff University)

### *Abstract*

In an era of increasing anxiety about the filth of the slums and the threat of disease, it is little wonder that ideas of dirt and cleanliness come to prominence in discussions about the nineteenth-century workhouse. Cleanliness, with its long-standing associations of health and morality, was an integral part of the disciplinary mechanism of the institution, functioning to contain and control the disorderly pauper body. Many workhouse representations, however, suggest that the ostensible cleanliness of the workhouse space is nothing more than an oppressive facade that obscures a crueller and dirtier reality. In narratives of the workhouse casual wards, descriptions of dirt intensify and the excess of filth is shown to pose a bodily and psychological threat to the poor. This article explores the representation of the workhouse and casual wards through the lens of cleanliness and dirt, and analyses the connection of filth to ideas of contagion; sexuality; the body; and social class.

The 1834 New Poor Law overhauled the provision for the destitute. It sought to reduce drastically expenditure on outdoor relief, usually dispensed in the form of money or food, by making the workhouse the main form of support offered to the poor. In order to avoid any possible enticement to indoor pauperism, the workhouses were to be made institutions of discipline and so 'intolerable to the indolent and disorderly'.<sup>1</sup> Within the workhouse, paupers were segregated by age and sex, made to wear a uniform, follow a timetable that dictated meal, work and bed times, eat a regulated diet and, in the case of able-bodied adults, carry out physically-demanding work. The tenet behind the disciplinary workhouse was that, whilst the genuinely impoverished would be grateful for the shelter, idle claimants would instead choose to support themselves independently.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*, Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed 21 February 1834, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the New Poor Law and its workhouses, see M. A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834–1929: The History of an English Social Institution* (London: Methuen, 1983).

The rules of the workhouse, included in an appendix to the *First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales* (1835), suggest that cleanliness was an inherent part of the disciplinary regime. They stipulate that, before admittance to the house, paupers must first be ‘thoroughly cleansed’.<sup>3</sup> Within the workhouse, paupers were supposed to be subjected to daily scrutiny; it was the duty of the master ‘[t]o inspect and call over the names of all the paupers immediately after morning prayers every day, and see that each individual is clean, and in a proper state’.<sup>4</sup> Punishment, in the form of ‘confinement or alteration of diet’, would be meted out to anyone who did not ‘duly cleanse his or her person’.<sup>5</sup> The workhouse, and its staff, were also under the surveillance of the board of workhouse guardians, who periodically inspected the house and oversaw the master and matron. The rules instruct the guardians to check that the house is ‘clean and well ventilated in every part’ and that ‘the inmates of the workhouse, of all classes, appear clean in their persons, and decent and orderly in their language and demeanour’.<sup>6</sup> This latter instruction associates bodily cleanliness with ‘decent and orderly’ behaviour and draws attention to the assumed link between cleanly habits and moral character. The surveillance of cleanliness in the workhouse links it to ideas of discipline and control. As Michel Foucault points out, ‘[h]e who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself’.<sup>7</sup> The subjection of the inmates to the inspecting gaze of the master, and the master to the gaze of the guardians, creates a ‘field of visibility’ in the workhouse. This awareness of being visible, and the threat of punishment or dismissal would, in theory, ensure that the residents conformed to the workhouse rules.

The idea of cleanliness as a disciplinary mechanism, and its association with ‘decent’ behaviour, is nowhere more evident than in Harriet Martineau’s

---

<sup>3</sup> *First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales*, Ordered by the House of Commons to be Printed, 10 August 1835, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> *First Annual Report*, p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> *First Annual Report*, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> *First Annual Report*, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 202. Foucault is discussing Jeremy Bentham’s late-eighteenth-century plan for a panopticon prison. Early architectural designs for New Poor Law workhouses incorporated the central supervisory hub that was integral to the panopticon. See Kathryn Morrison, *The Workhouse: A Study of Poor-Law Buildings in England* (Swindon: English Heritage at the National Monuments Record Centre, 1999).

*The Hamlets: A Tale* (1833). This fictional narrative is one of four tales in the propagandist series *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* (1833–34), commissioned by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge to expose the supposed iniquities of the Old Poor Law, and to promote the principles that would form the basis of the New Poor Law.<sup>8</sup> As Oz Frankel notes, each of the tales ‘purported to demonstrate the supposed abuses and corrupting effects of parish relief and the benefits of reform’.<sup>9</sup> *The Hamlets* is set within a small community that has been ruined by a lax system of outdoor relief. In order to remove the enticement to pauperism, the new overseer, Mr Barry, replaces this system of relief with the offer of the workhouse. The existing workhouse, which is thought of by paupers as ‘no bad lot to live in’, is transformed under Mr Barry’s instruction into a deterrent institution.<sup>10</sup> Inside the house, the paupers are segregated by gender, made to work, wear a uniform and denied luxurious food and drink. A brick wall shuts off their view of the road and they are no longer allowed to come and go as they please.

A regime of cleanliness operates within the overhauled workhouse. When Adams, a work-shy pauper, is admitted to the institution, he is confronted by a space in which there is ‘[n]ot a speck, or a crack, or a cobweb [...] to be seen along the whole range of the whitewashed walls’ (p. 38). Lauren Goodlad points out that, in her Poor Law fiction, Martineau’s ‘intent was clearly to present deterrence as a means by which working-class habits might be almost instantaneously transformed’; interestingly, it is the cleanliness of the institution that seems to have the most immediate effect on the behaviour of the paupers.<sup>11</sup> Adams finds the thorough cleanliness disconcerting: so unused is he to ‘so clean a place, that he looked round him with some degree of awe, and walked as if he trod on eggs’ (p. 38). The ‘awe’-inspiring cleanliness implicitly exerts control over Adams’ body, making him exercise self-restraint in his movements.

---

<sup>8</sup> For more information on Martineau and her politics, see Elaine Freedgood, ‘Banishing Panic: Harriet Martineau and the Popularization of Political Economy’, *Victorian Studies*, 39:1 (1995), pp. 33–55.

<sup>9</sup> Oz Frankel, *States of Inquiry: Social Investigations and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the United States* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated: The Hamlets. A Tale* (London: Charles Fox, 1833), p. 36. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>11</sup> Lauren Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 57.

The cleanliness demanded in the workhouse has connotations of parental and religious instruction: Adams is made to '[beautify] himself with soap and water, to a degree which he had not practised since his mother taught him how to dress on a Sunday morning' (p. 38). These associations are seen once again when the male paupers, having finished their stint grinding corn, are sent through to the dining hall; the text relates that

[t]here was something [...] in the aspect of the apartment which at once quieted their glee. The cleanliness and order put them in mind of Sunday; of the old Sundays, which they did not like to look back upon (p. 40).

The reluctance of the paupers to remember these 'old Sundays' suggests that they are evocative of chastisement and restraint. It seems that the cleanliness demanded in the workhouse exerts control over both the bodies and minds of the poor, covertly disciplining them into "good" behaviour; cleanliness suppresses the paupers' riotous nature and, psychologically, returns them to a state of disempowered childhood.

The discipline enforced in the workhouse is such that the paupers decide that a life of work outside the institution is preferable to an idle one living off the state. After one night in the workhouse, the paupers rush out of the gates and, at the end of the tale, pauperism has been eliminated from the community. A grateful magistrate says to the overseer:

[l]et there never be an end of honouring Howard for having explored the depths of prison-houses; but he achieves a yet nobler task, who so sweeps out the abominations of our pauper-houses as to leave no temptations to guilt and idleness to harbour there (p. 162).<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> In *The State of the Prisons* (1777), John Howard exposed the poor conditions of prisons and advocated for reform.

The reformation of poor relief is couched here in the language of cleanliness. The implementation of a newly disciplinary system is akin to a moral broom that ‘sweeps’ the institution clean of the metaphorical dirt of ‘guilt’ and ‘idleness’. Advocating for a similar overhaul of the existing Poor Law, the text equates the inauguration of a system of disciplinary poor relief to an act of ideological spring cleaning.

Martineau’s fictional workhouse is the saviour of the community; it removes the enticement to pauperism while simultaneously providing for the truly destitute, who are ‘thankful to be saved from starvation’ (p. 46). In the anti-Poor Law literature that circulated in the wake of the passing of the New Poor Law, however, workhouses were characterised as ‘bastilles’, in which the poor were starved, neglected and beaten.<sup>13</sup> The intense debates about the New Poor Law led to the publication of articles that sought to assuage public anxieties about the workhouses. Favourable accounts of workhouses appeared, for instance, in *Chambers’s Edinburgh Gazette* and in the *Penny Magazine*. Amongst other strengths, such accounts note with approbation the cleanliness of the workhouse space. ‘Visit to an English Workhouse’, published in *Chambers*, is a first-hand report of a gentleman’s exploration of a workhouse near London. In the account, he relates that ‘every thing is kept as clean as a new shilling, and wears an air of comfort’.<sup>14</sup> An article in the series ‘A Few Weeks from Home’ (1841), also published in *Chambers*, is equally encouraging; it comments upon the ‘spotless purity’ of the Battersea workhouse and describes the wards of St George’s as ‘neat’ and ‘clean’.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in the article ‘Two Hours at a Union Workhouse’ (1841), in *Penny Magazine*, the narrator remarks that ‘the rooms are cheerful, light, airy, clean even to a Dutch housewife’s cleanliness’.<sup>16</sup> According to these texts, then, the scrupulous cleanliness of Martineau’s workhouse also existed in reality. The association of cleanliness with ‘comfort’, ‘purity’ and ‘cheerful[ness]’ serves to dispel disquiet about the treatment of the workhouse poor. Despite these positive associations, cleanliness remains deterrent. ‘Two Hours’ claims that, the ‘dirty

---

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, G. R. Wythen Baxter, *The Book of the Bastilles; or, the History of the Working of the New Poor Law* (London: J. Stevens, 1841).

<sup>14</sup> ‘Visit to an English Workhouse’, *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, 23 September 1837, p. 277.

<sup>15</sup> ‘A Few Weeks from Home: Visit to Workhouses’, *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, 13 February 1841, pp. 29–30; p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Two Hours at a Union Workhouse’, *Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, 9 October 1841, pp. 397–398; p. 397.

vagabond [...] likes not the cleanliness and order [...] abides not here'.<sup>17</sup> The article suggests that the cleanliness of the workhouse dissuades the idle poor from consuming the nation's resources.

The belief that dirtiness was synonymous with immorality gained the weight of officialdom in Edwin Chadwick's *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842).<sup>18</sup> Chadwick had gone to extraordinary lengths in conducting this influential social investigation; Priti Joshi explains that he 'contacted over two thousand poor law guardians, medical officers, factory inspectors, and local luminaries [...] and asked them detailed questions on the conditions of poor homes, streets, drains, morals, and manners'.<sup>19</sup> The subsequent *Report* revealed to the public the intrinsic connection between dirt, dissipation, and disease, and demonstrated the need for improvements in public sanitation.<sup>20</sup> In the *Report*, a brief mention of the workhouse serves to consolidate the idea that paupers had a natural, and dangerous, affinity to dirt. It is related that, when new paupers are washed prior to admittance to the workhouse, 'they usually manifest an extreme repugnance to the process'.<sup>21</sup> This objection to washing is not because it is a cold or otherwise uncomfortable experience but, the text suggests, because dirt is seen by them as a possession.<sup>22</sup> Thus, '[t]heir common feeling was expressed by one of them when he declared that he considered it "equal to

---

<sup>17</sup> 'Two Hours at a Union Workhouse', p. 398.

<sup>18</sup> In their analysis of the *Report*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White draw attention to a 'metaphorical language in which filth stands in for the slum-dweller: the poor *are* pigs'. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 131.

<sup>19</sup> Priti Joshi, 'Edwin Chadwick's Self-Fashioning: Professionalism, Masculinity, and the Victorian Poor', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32:2 (2004), pp. 353–370; p. 359. Chadwick, secretary to the three Poor Law Commissioners, had previously assisted in collecting information for the 1832 Royal Commission into the Operation of the Poor Laws.

<sup>20</sup> Chadwick ensured that his findings were widely disseminated by sending copies of the *Report* to newspapers and journals. See Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 117.

<sup>21</sup> Edwin Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, ed. M. W. Flinn [1842] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965), p. 316.

<sup>22</sup> As Nataalka Freeland comments, 'many Victorians considered the omnipresent coincidence of filth and poverty evidence that the poor chose to be dirty. Thus, Edwin Chadwick complains that sanitary progress is an uphill battle because the poor value their dirt as their only property.' Nataalka Freeland, 'The Politics of Dirt in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 42:4 (2002), pp. 799–818 (p. 802).

robbing him of a great coat which he had had for some years".<sup>23</sup> This comparison to a 'coat' invests dirt with ideas of warmth, protection and familiarity, all of which are stripped away by the workhouse. The ensuing text makes clear, however, that the enforced cleanliness is for the good of the poor; it claims that, when sick paupers are brought to the infirmary, 'the act of cleansing them is itself the most efficient cure'.<sup>24</sup> Dirt, then, is shown to be the direct cause of disease in the poor; in its role as remover of dirt, the workhouse heals the pauper body.

Collectively, narratives such as *The Hamlets*, 'Two Hours' and Chadwick's *Report* construct the binary opposition of clean workhouse versus dirty poor. This dichotomy is unsettled, however, by numerous texts that challenge the sanitary representation of the workhouse. In 1856, the cleanliness of the Chorlton union workhouse was disputed in the pages of the *Manchester Times* by a poor but educated woman who claimed to be a former inmate. Amongst numerous other ills, her letter draws attention to the deficiency of the facilities for personal hygiene in the institution:

In a well-conducted workhouse it is generally supposed there is every accommodation for perfect personal cleanliness for those who wish to avail themselves of the privilege, but this I soon discovered was a mistake. The morning after my arrival I wished to wash myself before breakfast, and followed the other women towards the washhouse for that purpose; but there was neither soap nor towel. Upon inquiring for them, they laughed at my simplicity in asking such a question, and said I must not expect a towel there, as they always used their aprons or petticoats for that purpose; and which I did while I remained there.<sup>25</sup>

The writer dispels here the public expectation that 'perfect personal cleanliness' is synonymous with the workhouse; the idea of soap and a clean

---

<sup>23</sup> Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition*, p. 316.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> 'The Chorlton Union Workhouse', *Manchester Times*, 22 November 1856, p. 7.

towel apparently provoked mirth amongst women used to drying their bodies with their petticoats.

In addition to the lack of soap and towels needed for cleaning the body, this workhouse also apparently lacked the utensils needed to clean the space:

I cannot pass over the very poor supply of articles for cleaning, which are or were in the building. Upon every scrubbing day, everything had to be looked for, by which a deal of time was lost, and the unlucky cleaners reaped the benefit thereof. No pail! no scrubbing brushes! no floor cloths! in fact, nothing in a place where one would expect to find a plentiful supply of such things and a proper place for all of them.<sup>26</sup>

The depiction of missing and misplaced cleaning paraphernalia draws attention to, and subverts, the association of the workhouse with cleanliness and order. Not only this, but the process of cleaning the house seems to be doubly disciplinary: as well as being labour intensive, it is hinted that the 'unlucky cleaners', forced to waste time searching for lost items, are punished for completing their task too slowly. This lack of soap, towels, brushes and pails, the letter suggests, goes unnoticed by the workhouse guardians and other visitors to the institution: as the writer bitterly points out, '[a]nyone visiting this place on Friday (the guardians' day) would naturally say, – what a nice, clean, comfortable place it was'.<sup>27</sup> The text exposes the superficial nature of comfort and cleanliness, suggesting that it is a facade put on for the guardians.

Unsurprisingly, the letter was met with animosity by some of the guardians. An account of a board meeting, published in the *Manchester Times*, reveals that a Mr Markland contested the authenticity of the letter and its contents: Markland alleged that he had made a surprise visit to the workhouse that very morning, found the entire building to be clean, and a supply of fresh towels in the wash-house. If the women were not clean, he argued, then this

---

<sup>26</sup> 'The Chorlton Union Workhouse', p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



was their choice: '[t]hey had plenty of soap, and dried themselves in their own way, and if they had chosen to have gone into the wash-house, they might have had towels'.<sup>28</sup> His words suggest that any lack of personal cleanliness in the institution was the result of the dirty habits of the paupers themselves.

Provoked by these accusations of dishonesty, the woman responded with a second letter. Ideas of cleanliness come once again to the fore, as the writer contends that 'I did not say anything about the building being dirty; in fact, in my opinion, they carry their cleanliness to an excess there, as the rooms which are unoccupied are continually being cleaned'.<sup>29</sup> This idea of 'excess' cleanliness is intrinsically linked in the two letters to corporal punishment and cruelty. These accounts of the workhouse tell of 'sore knees', 'aching limbs' and freezing hands consequent upon completing cleaning tasks.<sup>30</sup> The act of cleaning it seems, is an indirect way of meting out violence upon the bodies of the women. While physical labour is a way to punish the pauper body, the knowledge that the endless scrubbing of empty rooms is pointless is also a form of psychological punishment.

Disturbingly, in the second letter, the writer alleges to have witnessed pregnant women 'within a day of their confinement [...] sent to clean the outside of the top windows, by sitting on the narrow stone ledge'.<sup>31</sup> This dangerous task suggests the little value placed on the life of an unborn pauper child; the pregnant pauper belly is implicitly seen to contain only another burden upon the poor rates. The writer also alleges that she saw a mother ordered from her dying child's bedside to work in the washhouse.<sup>32</sup> In these accounts of the workhouse, cleanliness is stripped of its positive associations of

---

<sup>28</sup> 'Chorlton Board of Guardians', *Manchester Times*, 29 November 1856, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> 'The Chorlton Guardians and their Workhouse', *Manchester Times*, 6 December 1856, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> 'The Chorlton Union Workhouse', p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> 'The Chorlton Guardians and their Workhouse', p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> The letters led to an official inquiry. The letter writer, identified in a report in the *Manchester Times* as a Mrs Clarke, was unable to substantiate her allegations. The nurse of the infant nursery testified that the mother of the dying child was not called away to the washhouse. During the inquiry, significance was placed upon Clarke's social class: it was stated that she was 'not one of the class which usually find their way into a workhouse' and that 'she was never brought up to scouring and washing'. The transcript suggests that perception of workhouse conditions is dependent upon social class: while the cleaning work demanded in the house may be gruelling for Clarke, it would not be found so by the other paupers. See 'The Chorlton Board of Guardians', *Manchester Times*, 20 December 1856, p. 4.

health and morality and instead takes on connotations of dehumanising cruelty and ‘excess’.<sup>33</sup>

The sense of excessiveness about workhouse cleanliness is also apparent (initially at least) in Anne Thackeray-Ritchie’s novella, *Jack the Giant-Killer* (1867–68). The story appeared in three parts in the middle-class family publication *Cornhill Magazine*. A contemporary rewriting of the classic fairy tale, the story features, not a mythical giant, but the monstrosities and inhumanities of the workhouse authorities. The protagonist of the narrative is Jack Trevithic, a clergyman, who initially visits the Hammersley workhouse because he is considering applying for the position of chaplain. Again, the ostensible cleanliness of the workhouse conceals a miserable reality. On a tour of the workhouse wards, Jack is depressed ‘by the sight of so much that was sad, and in orderly rows, and in a blue cotton uniform’; everywhere he looks he sees imposing whitewashed walls and, after leaving, he remains disturbed by the remembrance of ‘hopelessness, age, failure, all neatly stowed away, and whitewashed over’.<sup>34</sup> The text suggests that there is something unnatural and ‘haunt[ing]’ about the orderliness imposed upon the workhouse paupers.<sup>35</sup> Read retrospectively, the emphasis upon the whitewashed walls implicitly points to the ‘whitewashing’ of the systemic cruelties of this workhouse.

Though Jack initially refuses the post, the workhouse intrudes back into his life in the form of Davy Hopkins, a former pauper, who he discovers lying in a ditch. Davy explains to Jack that he has left the workhouse for good and claims that, ‘I’d rather die in the ditch any day than go back to that d— place’.<sup>36</sup> In answer to Jack’s protest that ‘[it] looked clean and comfortable enough’, Davy exclaims, ‘[c]lean, comfirable! [sic] [...] Do you think *I* minds a little dirt, sir? Did you look under the quilts? Why, the vermin was a-running all over the place like flies, so it were.’<sup>37</sup> The narrative suggests that a very different state of affairs lurks beneath the exterior workhouse cleanliness noted by

---

<sup>33</sup> Freeland demonstrates the equivocal meanings of cleanliness in Elizabeth Gaskell’s fiction and argues that, in *Mary Barton*, cleanliness is ‘morally suspect’. Freeland, ‘The Politics of Dirt’, p. 807.

<sup>34</sup> Anne Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 1], *Cornhill Magazine*, November 1867, pp. 589–608; p. 600.

<sup>35</sup> Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 1], p. 600.

<sup>36</sup> Anne Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 2], *Cornhill Magazine*, December 1867, pp. 739–760; p. 747.

<sup>37</sup> Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 2], p. 747.

visitors. Though well meaning, Jack, in his position touring the wards as visitor, is unable to penetrate the guise of cleanliness.

When Jack decides to accept the position after all, he discovers first-hand the corruptions that exist in the workhouse. The hidden cruelties of this institution are represented in metaphorical terms of dirt and dust; though '[n]ew brooms sweep clean', Jack cautiously does not begin to 'sweep' for a week because he fears that he might 'stir up the dust, which had been lying so thickly, and make matters worse than before'.<sup>38</sup> Fittingly, one of the worst outrages to exist in the workhouse takes the form of literal sewage. The matron, horror-struck, at seeing Jack drinking 'mirky-looking [sic] water', exclaims

My goodness, it's the water from the tap, —we never touch it! I'll send you some of ours; the tap-water comes through the cesspool and is as nasty as nasty can be.<sup>39</sup>

The paupers, she continues, are 'used to it' and 'nothing hurts them'.<sup>40</sup> The matron's words conjure up an impression of the paupers as a different species that has adapted to live off the excreted filth of society. The text draws attention to, and criticises, this inhuman attitude displayed by the workhouse authorities towards the poor they supposedly care for. This idea of the drinking water laced with human excrement also plays upon contemporary anxieties about water and disease. As Erin O'Connor points out in a discussion of cholera and the Thames, '[d]ebates about water purification [...] centred not on whether the water was full of human waste – that was unanimously conceded – but on whether such water was safe to drink'.<sup>41</sup> The threat of cholera haunts the narrative: in part one, it is revealed that Jack's persistence in forcing through improvements to a town's 'neglected sewer' meant that the residents

---

<sup>38</sup> Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 2], p. 750. Jack's struggle to reform the institution is a long and uphill struggle, but it is eventually purged of its worst evils.

<sup>39</sup> Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 2], p. 750.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Erin O'Connor, *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture* (London; Durham, N. C: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 41.

escaped a deadly outbreak of cholera.<sup>42</sup> In light of this narrow escape, the dirty drinking imbibed by the paupers comes to symbolise the very real threat of cholera looming over the workhouse; readers are implicitly asked to imagine the devastating results such an outbreak would yield.

Thackeray-Ritchie's retelling of *Jack the Giant-Killer*, with its latent anxieties about drinking water and disease, appeared within a context of increasing concern about the sanitary conditions of workhouses and, in particular, the infirmaries for the sick poor. Two years earlier, in 1865, the *Lancet* medical journal had announced its intention for the newly formed *Lancet* Sanitary Commission to investigate the state of metropolitan workhouse infirmaries, in order that 'public opinion should be fully enlightened and deliberately directed'.<sup>43</sup> The Sanitary Commissioners visited workhouses, first in London and later across the country, compiling information about the incidence of disease, the salaries of nurses and the system of nursing, the cubic feet of wards, and the diets of sick paupers; their reports detail the (un)sanitary state of individual workhouses and demonstrate the need for urgent reform.<sup>44</sup>

In the first report, it is suggested that 'the metropolitan workhouses illustrate in a most striking way the two distinctive features of London life – comfort, if not luxury, in close companionship with filth and misery'.<sup>45</sup> The lack of a standardised system of care across Poor Law workhouses is made very apparent; in contrast to City of London union workhouse, which is described as having 'almost every sanitary requirement', in the workhouse of St George-the-Martyr 'almost all these desiderata are wanting'.<sup>46</sup> The report prepares readers for some shocking revelations about the sanitary state of the workhouses inspected:

---

<sup>42</sup> Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 1], p. 595.

<sup>43</sup> "'The Lancet'" Commission to Inquire into the State of Workhouse Hospitals', *Lancet*, 15 April 1865, p. 410.

<sup>44</sup> The *Lancet* reports were instrumental in bringing about the improvement of workhouse infirmaries. Kim Price points out that 'the very public agitation led to the Metropolitan Poor Act of 1867'. See Kim Price, *Medical Negligence in Victorian Britain: The Crisis of Care under the English Poor Law, C. 1834-1900* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> 'The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses: Reports of the Commissioners; No. I.; Metropolitan Infirmaries', *Lancet*, 1 July 1865, pp. 14–22 (p. 14).

<sup>46</sup> 'Metropolitan Infirmaries', p. 14.

the crucial test, after all, of good ward-management is the amount of attention bestowed on *cleanliness*, and on this point we confess we have been fairly horrified. Some readers will be startled. There is (to the superficial observer) rather a special air of *bescrubbedness*, rather a powerful odour of soap-and-water, about the wards of workhouse infirmaries. So much for the surface; now for the inside of the cup and platter.<sup>47</sup>

The text seeks to demonstrate that the atmosphere of ‘bescrubbedness’ is a veneer that distracts from the real state of affairs.<sup>48</sup> Unlike the visitors of ‘Visit to an English Workhouse’ and ‘Two Hours’, who may well have been taken in by the ‘air of soap-and-water’, the Sanitary Commissioners are not ‘superficial observers’; the text makes it clear that their intention is to delve beneath the surface in order to examine the ‘inside of the cup and platter’.

The report on the Shoreditch workhouse is characterised by this tension between surface and reality, exterior and interior. In this workhouse, ‘the shell is good, although the kernel is rotten’ and ‘scandals [...] exist here under the surface’.<sup>49</sup> The description of the paupers’ bed linen, examined by the Sanitary Commissioners, mimics the sense of movement from exterior to interior: the report finds that

[t]he outer surface of the beds [in the imbecile ward] was clean, and the linen generally, through the able-bodied wards tolerably so; but as to the lying-in wards, they were frequently filthy with

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> In a poem, *Punch* comments upon the maltreatment of the workhouse poor and draws attention to the idea of hidden dirt. Two lines read: ‘Visiting Guardians arrive – quick, ere they pass the doors,/Have the filth swept below the beds, the sheets drawn o’er the sores!’ See ‘Fast and Humiliation; or, Sick Beasts v. Sick Paupers’, *Punch*, 7 April 1866, p. 142.

<sup>49</sup> ‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses. Reports of the Commissioners. No. III. Metropolitan Infirmaries. St Leonard’s, Shoreditch.’, *Lancet*, 29 July 1865, pp. 131–133 (p. 132).

crusted blood and discharges, and in the sick wards also they were far from being well kept.<sup>50</sup>

While the beds for the imbeciles and the able-bodied are clean, those of the most vulnerable paupers (the expectant mothers and the sick) are found in a state of neglect, coated in bodily secretions. In one bed the Sanitary Commissioners discover a bed-bound patient with ‘a fearful and very extensive sore, in a state of absolute putridity’, who has been left ‘covered with filth’.<sup>51</sup> Pamela K. Gilbert suggests that ‘[t]he scandal of filth in the heart of the modern city was an actual scandal [...] of the uncivilised, grotesque, leaky body persisting in the midst of managed civilisation’.<sup>52</sup> The sick beds, then, with their evidence of the ‘leaky’ body, undermine the idea of a ‘civilised’ and sanitary society. The ‘rotten kernel’ of the workhouse and, implicitly, society, is nowhere more evident than in the depiction of the living human bodies left to rot in the infirmaries.

Having completed a thorough investigation of metropolitan infirmaries, in 1867, the focus of *Lancet* moved to country workhouses. Like many of the reports, the one on the Walsall workhouse draws attention to various shortfalls, amongst them inadequate washing facilities, overcrowding, ‘defective’ ventilation and ‘stink[ing]’ waterclosets.<sup>53</sup> Despite these various ills, the *Lancet* claims that the workhouse has been ‘favourably reported to the Poor-law Board for more than twenty years’ and implicitly accuses the Poor Law Inspector of deliberately whitewashing the workhouse.<sup>54</sup> If the Inspector’s reports are misleading, however, then so too is the appearance of the workhouse: the ‘tidy appearance of the wards’ is stated to be ‘superficial and

---

<sup>50</sup> ‘St Leonard’s, Shoreditch’, p. 132.

<sup>51</sup> ‘St Leonard’s, Shoreditch’, p. 133.

<sup>52</sup> Pamela K. Gilbert, ‘Medical Mapping: The Thames, the Body, and *Our Mutual Friend*’, in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust and Modern Life*, eds. William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 78–102, p. 80.

<sup>53</sup> ‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses. Country Workhouse infirmaries. No. V. Walsall Workhouse, Staffordshire’, *Lancet*, 9 November 1867, pp. 585–586, p. 586.

<sup>54</sup> The report provoked a backlash. The writer, J. H. Stallard, was accused by the Poor Law Inspector of being intentionally sensational. In a letter published in the *Lancet*, Stallard defends himself against this accusation and describes the pains taken to ensure a truthful account of the workhouse. See ‘Correspondence’, *Lancet*, 1 February 1868, pp. 176–177.

deceptive'.<sup>55</sup> The conclusion reached by the Sanitary Commissioners is that 'the Walsall Workhouse presents an example of cleanliness and order calculated to deceive a superficial observer'.<sup>56</sup> Cleanliness, it seems, is not just 'superficial' but also intentionally deceitful. The neglect uncovered in the Walsall workhouse was commented upon in the pages of *Punch*. In 'A Satisfactory Workhouse' (a deliberate comment upon the so-called 'satisfactory' condition of the Walsall workhouse), the work of the medical journal is praised: '[n]ever did lancet let out anything worse than the *Lancet's* disclosures'.<sup>57</sup> The institutions are imagined here as purulent boils on the body of society, finally pierced by the attention of the *Lancet*.

Though the *Lancet* reports are primarily interested in the state of workhouse infirmaries, they also often foreground the appalling conditions of the casual wards. In the report on the Walsall workhouse, for example, the male casual ward is described as 'something like a hound-kennel, though neither half so clean nor comfortable'.<sup>58</sup> The casual wards, situated nearby the main workhouse building, provided overnight accommodation for the transient poor. The vagrants and itinerant workers who sought the shelter of the wards were expected to pay for their accommodation with labour the next morning, usually in the form of stone breaking or oakum picking.<sup>59</sup> While the *Lancet* reports suggest that a trained eye was needed to detect the hidden dirt of the workhouse infirmaries, no such professional gaze appears to have been necessary to uncover the filth of the casual wards. In January 1866, the squalid conditions of these wards were brought into the public eye by the investigative journalism of the *Pall Mall Gazette*.<sup>60</sup> Frederick Greenwood, the editor, was inspired by the *Lancet* reports to commission an undercover investigation. As

---

<sup>55</sup> 'Walsall Workhouse', p. 585.

<sup>56</sup> 'Walsall Workhouse', p. 586.

<sup>57</sup> 'A Satisfactory Workhouse', *Punch*, 7 December 1867, p. 236.

<sup>58</sup> 'Walsall Workhouse', p. 585.

<sup>59</sup> An image in the *Illustrated London News* depicts the various stages of a night in a casual ward. The vignettes that make up the image include the queue for admission, the washing room, the sleeping quarters, the disinfectant room and the task of stone breaking. See 'A Casual Ward', *Illustrated London News*, 19 November 1887, pp. 585–586, p. 586.

<sup>60</sup> Investigative journalism became a recognisable genre in the nineteenth century. Its practitioners sought to expose hidden social ills and to agitate for reform. For more information, see Stephen Donovan and Matthew Rubery, 'Introduction', in *Secret Commissions: An Anthology of Victorian Investigative Journalism*, eds. Stephen Donovan and Matthew Rubery (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2012), pp. 9–24.

Seth Koven points out, Greenwood ‘believed that the *Lancet* had hit upon a story he could transform from a worthy public-health controversy into a media sensation’.<sup>61</sup> He tasked his brother, James Greenwood, with spending the night disguised as a pauper in the Lambeth casual ward, in order to experience the conditions therein. ‘A Night in a Workhouse’ is a three-part narrative of James Greenwood’s experiences and sensations within the ward. As well as making infamous the ward and its residents, the report ‘overnight created a new mode of journalistic reporting – incognito social investigation using cross-class dress – and a new style of sensational and self-consciously theatrical writing about the poor’.<sup>62</sup> ‘A Night in a Workhouse’, with its melodramatic descriptions of filth, degradation and nakedness, brought the casual wards, the unseen domains of society’s most destitute, into the homes and consciousness of the public.

In part one of the narrative, James Greenwood assumes the costume of an impoverished engraver, ‘marked with every sign of squalor’.<sup>63</sup> He reports to the clerk of casual ward and, upon admission, is shown to a room set up for bathing. There he immerses himself in a bath ‘containing a liquid [...] disgustingly like weak mutton broth’.<sup>64</sup> The purifying function of the bath is subverted; as Koven points out, ‘[i]nstead of cleansing Greenwood, the water fouls his body with the dirt of at least a dozen tramps who have entered the workhouse and the tub before him’.<sup>65</sup> Next, Greenwood is led to a crowded sleeping room that is ‘roofed with naked tiles which were furred with [...] damp and filth’; horribly, the floor is ‘so thickly encrusted with filth’ that Greenwood claims to have ‘mistook it first for a floor of natural earth’.<sup>66</sup> The casual ward is constructed here as a monstrous, primitive space in the heart of ‘civilised’

---

<sup>61</sup> Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 25.

<sup>62</sup> Koven, *Slumming*, p. 26. Donovan and Rubery also credit Greenwood as a ‘[pioneer]’ of the practice of ‘incognito investigations’. They point out that a disguise enabled reporters to gain a first-hand experience of their subject matter and to insist upon ‘the right to speak for individuals [...] who had no means of representing themselves’. Donovan and Rubery, *Secret Commissions*, pp. 17, 23.

<sup>63</sup> [James Greenwood], ‘A Night in a Workhouse’ [part 1], *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 January 1866, pp. 9–10, p. 9. The following parts were published on 13 and 15 January 1866.

<sup>64</sup> [Greenwood], ‘A Night in a Workhouse’ [part 1], p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> Koven, *Slumming*, p. 39.

<sup>66</sup> [Greenwood], ‘A Night in a Workhouse’ [part 1], p. 10.



London. The depiction of the bath and sleeping ward aim to revolt and thrill readers.<sup>67</sup>

The loathsome nature of the surroundings is matched by the text's construction of the moral filthiness of the men who populate the ward: they swear, sing offensive songs, and spit. Most worrying for Greenwood, however, seems to be the possibility that the male paupers might be engaging in illicit sexual activity. Many of the casuals 'clubbed beds and rugs and slept together' and Greenwood's discovery of 'a stain of blood bigger than a man's hand' in the middle of his bed is covertly construed as evidence of homosexual intercourse.<sup>68</sup> The homoerotic energies of the text are focalised upon the figure of Kay, a young boy with 'soft and silky' hair, 'large blue eyes' and a voice as 'soft and sweet as any woman's', who enters the ward during the night.<sup>69</sup> When the space starts to fill up, Greenwood's fear of physical violation becomes palpable: he is gripped with horror at the thought of having to share his sleeping place with 'some dirty scoundrel of the Kay breed'.<sup>70</sup>

'A Night in a Workhouse' made the casual wards a matter of national concern. However, moral unease about the behaviour of male casuals was nothing new. In the article 'Destitution in the Metropolis' (1848), published in the *London Journal*, an account is included of a night-time visit made to the casual ward on Gray's Inn Lane by Mr Cochrane, the chairman of the Poor Man's Guardian Society. In this account, he describes being shown down flights of stairs to a dark and crowded underground room in which men sleep together beneath rugs. Cochrane says to some of these men:

---

<sup>67</sup> The narrator of *Jack the Giant-Killer* leaves the horrors of the casual ward to the imagination of a reader familiar with 'A Night in a Workhouse': '[t]he sight Trevithic saw is not one that I can describe here. People have read of such things as they are and were only a little while ago when the *Pall Mall Gazette* first published that terrible account'. [Thackeray-Ritchie], *Jack the Giant-Killer* [part 2], p. 752.

<sup>68</sup> Greenwood, 'A Night in a Workhouse' [part 1], p. 10.

<sup>69</sup> Greenwood, 'A Night in a Workhouse' [part 2], 13 January 1866, p. 10. Koven's analysis of 'A Night in a Workhouse' focuses upon the erotic subtext of homosexuality. In his discussion of Kay, he notes that, by feminising him, 'Greenwood makes him into a somewhat more acceptable object of male admiration and lust' - see Koven, *Slumming*, p. 44.

<sup>70</sup> Greenwood, 'A Night in a Workhouse' [part 2], p. 10.

Now, my friends, I have come into this place for your benefit, to see if I cannot succeed in having introduced such alterations as it may be advisable to adopt. Will you feel offended if I pull down the rugs which are covering you? <sup>71</sup>

On their acquiescence, Cochrane relates that,

I pulled down the rugs, and there, as I suspected, beheld the seven persons lying in a complete state of nudity, and so closely huddled together [...] that they could not have occupied a space of more than five feet in width. It was impossible not to feel a deep sense of disgust at witnessing so indecent and humiliating a sight.<sup>72</sup>

The men explain that they sleep naked so they can easily ‘wipe off the vermin’ that infest the rugs. Cochrane’s reaction, however, suggests his unspoken suspicion that homosexual relations might occur between the men.<sup>73</sup> It seems that the dirt of the casual ward is intrinsically connected to the subversive sleeping arrangements. The dirty conditions of the ward push the poor to enact behaviour that is then labelled as immoral.<sup>74</sup> The article’s condemnation of the casual wards for ‘sanctioning and encouraging the disgusting practice of the male poor sleeping naked together in bed’, implies that the desire to inaugurate improvements manifests from an urge to police the bodies and sexual proclivities of the poor. <sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> ‘Destitution in the Metropolis’, *London Journal*, 26 February 1848, pp. 412–413.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Destitution in the Metropolis’, p. 413.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* The sleeping men are given visual expression in one of six vignettes accompanying the article. In the image, six naked men lay side by side, their lower-halves covered by a rug. The image sensualises and feminises the men, and the interconnection of their bodies suggests the covert narrative subtext of homosexuality.

<sup>74</sup> In regards to ‘A Night in a Workhouse’, Koven notes that the sensation of the text stems from Greenwood’s suggestion that ‘public authorities were using public money to create the conditions that encouraged the most vicious male members of the metropolitan underclass to engage in sodomy’, Koven, *Slumming*, p. 27. ‘Destitution in the Metropolis’ seems to suggest that a similar facilitation of homosexual intercourse exists in the Gray’s Inn Lane casual ward.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Destitution in the Metropolis’, p. 413.

In the wake of Greenwood's sensational exploration of the casual wards, the workhouse reformer J. H. Stallard employed a poor woman to conduct an undercover investigation into the female casual wards.<sup>76</sup> Stallard's introduction to *The Female Casual and her Lodging* (1866) asserts that disorderly vagrants 'drive away the decent poor' and that 'we can scarcely wonder that in Bethnal Green an honest woman should prefer to spend a cold December night in the public water-closet rather than enter one of these dens of infamy and filth'.<sup>77</sup> The introduction explains the difficulty of selecting a suitable woman to undertake the experiment; she must be someone 'accustomed to dirt and rags' in order to endure the vagrant ward, but should also be 'sufficiently familiar with cleanliness, honesty, and plenty', so as to be able to comment accurately upon the conditions (p. 3). Stallard's words conflate cleanliness with honesty and, implicitly, dirtiness with dishonesty. The woman selected for the job was an impoverished widow who, in her narrative, initially goes by the name of Ellen Stanley.<sup>78</sup> Disguised in filthy clothes, Stanley stayed overnight in the casual wards of the Newington, Lambeth, Whitechapel and St George's-in-the-East workhouses respectively. The narrative of her experience is set within the frame of Stallard's introduction and conclusion; the professional, masculine voice works subliminally to legitimise and contain this poor woman's account of filth and vermin.

A more threatening form of filth exists in Stanley's accounts than in the *Lancet* reports or even Greenwood's 'A Night in a Workhouse'. Contrasting Greenwood's erotically-charged narrative with that of Ellen Stanley's, Koven points out that '[i]t is hardly surprising that Ellen Stanley, a poor woman, felt no attraction to dirt. She lived far too close to dirt to romanticise it; her very survival and self-respect depended upon the daily struggle to keep her body and clothes clean'.<sup>79</sup> Filth is shown to pose a constant threat to the bodies of

---

<sup>76</sup> Stallard authored the later *Lancet* report on the Walsall workhouse.

<sup>77</sup> J. H. Stallard, *The Female Casual and her Lodging: With a Complete Scheme for the Regulation of Workhouse Infirmaries* (London: Saunders, Otley, 1866), p. 5. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>78</sup> Jane Long argues that '[t]his example of nineteenth-century imposture in the cause of capturing 'authentic' experience is more grimly ironic than most. Ellen's own circumstances saw her 'performing' a role which in many ways may have been close to her own already, starring in some strange Victorian semi-autobiographical melodrama', Jane Long, *Conversations in Cold Rooms: Women, Work and Poverty in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Northumberland* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1999), p. 9.

<sup>79</sup> Koven, *Slumming*, p. 187.

the women: when Stanley enters the Whitechapel ward, the porter who gives her a soiled shirt to wear cannot allay her fears of catching disease because, as he says, the women who frequent the ward are a 'dirty lot' (p. 32). Stanley's anxieties about the contagion of disease are realised when both she, and the other casuals, begin to suffer with diarrhoea. It is not only the bodies of the female casuals at risk from the diseased space of the ward, however, but the body of the city also. As Erin O'Connor suggests, '[c]holera [...] became [...] a figure for the fluidity of boundaries in metropolitan space'.<sup>80</sup> This idea resonates in Stanley's bitter observation that it is '[n]o wonder there is cholera at the East of London, for it is generated every night in the Whitechapel casual ward' (p. 37). The casual ward is pathologised here as the producer of dangerous disease. Physical boundaries collapse in the idea of disease seeping out of the casual ward to infect the body of the metropolis.

In the narrative of the St George's workhouse, descriptions of filth intensify. Gilbert notes that, in the mid-century, '[b]odily wastes were seen no longer as simply byproducts of the life process, but as animated and hostile filth that would, given the chance, attack the body itself'.<sup>81</sup> This idea of excrement as 'animated and hostile' holds true in Stanley's representation of the water-closet:

I thought it must be the dead-house, and that I had made a mistake; and when I lifted the seat-lid I flew back, for there was no pan, and the soil reached nearly to the top. I felt too ill to remain, for even the floor was saturated and wet with the filth which oozed up out of it. (p. 48)

The casual ward is itself imagined here as a leaky body. The human waste it produces is active, oozing up through the floor and over spilling the boundaries meant to contain it.<sup>82</sup> Not only this, but the conflation of the

---

<sup>80</sup> O'Connor, *Raw Material*, p. 41.

<sup>81</sup> Gilbert, 'Medical Mapping', p. 79.

<sup>82</sup> Alison Bashford points out that, in sanitarian discourse, 'bodies and buildings were mutually affective' and analyses the idea suggested by the sanitary reformer John Simon that buildings actively fouled themselves. Alison Bashford, *Purity and Pollution: Gender, Embodiment and Victorian Medicine* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 17.

water-closet with the dead-house associates this excess waste with the abjection of the corpse. According to Julia Kristeva, 'the corpse [...] is cesspool and death; [...] [i]t is death infecting life'.<sup>83</sup> Thus, in its association with the decay of the corpse, human excrement works symbolically in this narrative to unsettle the boundary between life and death.

The vermin, described obsessively by Stanley, represent a more insidious attack than even the oozing filth of the water-closet. Lice speckle the walls, cover the bread, infest the beds and rugs, and cover the bodies of the women.<sup>84</sup> The physical suffering induced by the insects has a psychological impact; in the St George's workhouse, Stanley describes how 'I felt stung and irritated until I tore my flesh till it bled in every part of my body' (p. 50). Driven to distraction, Stanley attacks her own body, piercing the skin-deep boundary between the inside of the body and the living filth of the casual ward.<sup>85</sup> While disease collapses the border between ward and city, the descriptions of vermin seep out from the boundaries of the text, afflicting readers of the narrative with phantom itches. The filth and vermin of the casual ward, unknown to most readers, becomes a more threatening reality as they are made to share in Stanley's physical discomfort.

As demonstrated by Stanley's own reaction, the vermin push the women into behaviour associated with psychological collapse. The connection between vermin and madness is most poignantly manifested in the description of a woman in the Lambeth workroom:

After sitting at her work for an hour and doing very little, this woman became suddenly frantic; she jumped up, and rushed about the ward, as if she were insane, crying piteously, 'I cannot bear it – I cannot bear it.' (p. 25)

---

<sup>83</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 3, 4.

<sup>84</sup> In the Lambeth ward, Stanley notes that the vagrants 'all seem accustomed to vermin, and they look for nothing better' (p. 24); this implied acceptance is belied, however, by the narrative's repeated focus upon how the women pick lice from their dresses and bodies.

<sup>85</sup> Gilbert discusses the boundaries of the body in relation to the idea of the middle-class self and suggests that '[t]he pulpiness within was always threatening to burst the bounds of the skin, which defined, contained, and disciplined the individual'. Gilbert, 'Medical Mapping', p. 83. In *The Female Casual*, 'pulpiness' erupts through the broken boundary of a working-class woman's body.

Unable to cope with the constant irritation caused by the lice, whether real or imagined, the woman, 'roaring with madness', strips off all her clothes and rips them to shreds in order to be issued clean ones (p. 26). But when the assistant matron inspects the rags of clothing, she proclaims that 'they were clean and free from vermin; that she had seen much worse; and that it was not through dirt she did it, but devilment' (p. 26). Though the conditions of the ward are shown to push the women into criminalised behaviour, the representative of power suggests that the fault lies instead with the 'devilment' of the individual.

One of the conclusions drawn by Stallard is that the casual wards are largely filled with hardened vagrants who 'wallow in filth and look upon vermin as their natural companions' (p. 63). But Stanley's narrative seems to be at odds with this assertion. Rather than revealing myriads of vagrants happy to 'wallow in filth', the text seems instead to be a narrative of their struggle for cleanliness. Those Stanley meets are far from being unaffected by the dirtiness of their shelter: in the Whitechapel ward, '[t]he principal subject of conversation was the filthiness of the place' (p. 35). Although many of the women encountered by Stanley express their desire to cleanse their bodies and clothes, they are prevented from doing so by the dearth of facilities inside the wards and the prohibitive cost of the public wash-house. The desperation to wash is movingly articulated by 'Cranky Sal', a beggar who is 'more rogue than fool', in the St George's workhouse (p. 28). Sally laments 'I want to buy a clean gown [...]. I am so dirty now that I do not know what to do; and I want some soap to wash me and my clothes, more than food' (p. 56). Sally's hunger for cleanliness is such that it exceeds her need to eat; in an act of compassion from one woman to another, Stanley promises Sally a penny to buy a piece of soap. Repeatedly, Stanley's accounts demonstrate that the uncleanliness of the women is not through choice. In the Whitechapel ward, a bucket of water is provided in the morning, but the attendant checks the women's ablutions, 'continually driving them on by saying "be quick," "be off," "get on," ect. ect.' (pp. 37-8). Likewise, in the St George's workhouse, a girl who pleads for 'a drop of water in a pail just to swill our faces' is refused because the assistant has 'no orders' (p. 58). Rather than encouraging cleanliness, the workhouse authorities actively prevent the women from washing; it is the workhouse system that forces the women to remain physically unclean.

Dirt and vermin in this narrative are not simply matters of physical and psychological danger. They are also linked to the policing of class boundaries. When Stanley is told by the other casuals in the Newington ward that there is no water allowed for washing, one of the hawkers expresses her regret, explaining that ‘it was a shame that they might not wash themselves, because their hands were dirtied by the oakum, and it was impossible to sell her bits of lace without soiling them’ (p. 15). The hawker’s comment that the workhouse task leaves her unable to sell her lace draws attention to the hypocrisy of a system that hinders the poor from being self-sufficient and so makes them more reliant upon a state that condemns them for this reliance. It is the dirt of the casual ward that implicitly entraps the women in a cycle of vagrancy.<sup>86</sup> The criminalisation of these women is suggested in the advice given to the narrator:

The young woman advised me to stay as long as I could over my work, “for”, she said, “it is the only chance of making yourself clean.’ I asked her why, and she explained that in the fields men were often about and drove you away, and that “if you did it in the streets the police are down upon you, you are so well looked up” (p. 15).

The woman is referring here to the opportunity to pick lice from her dress. The sense of social oppression is tangible; the male labourers and state authorities are united in a concerted effort to move the homeless poor on. Stanley experiences this social displacement for herself: after leaving the casual ward in the company of the young hawker, they ‘tried at several cottages to get some water to wash, but they all refused us’ (pp. 15–16). According to Mary Douglas, dirt is ‘matter out of place’ and ‘the by-product of a systemic ordering and classification of matter’.<sup>87</sup> It seems, however, that it is not the physical muck

---

<sup>86</sup> Writing on a later undercover investigation into the casual wards by Mary Higgs, Koven notes that Higgs’s narrative ‘demonstrated first, that dirt could and did control poor women’s economic fortunes, and second, that the economics of dirt were closely bound up with laboring women’s sexual vulnerability. [...] Each time a woman resorted to the casual ward (or cheap lodging house), she left it a dirtier, shabbier person and hence less eligible for paid employment. In this way, workhouse regulations trapped female inmates in a vicious downward cycle whose logical endpoint was prostitution’, see Koven, *Slumming*, p. 188.

<sup>87</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: ARK, 1989), p. 35.

on the clothing or skin of the women that is out of place in the eyes of society, but rather the bodies of the women themselves: whether in the fields or in the streets, the women are driven away and prevented from making themselves clean. In a society in which they have no function, these women, and implicitly the destitute poor in general, have become, like dirt, 'matter out of place'.

What emerges from a study of workhouse representation is a sense of both the centrality and instability of ideas of dirt and cleanliness. While cleanliness was supposedly an intrinsic part of institutional discipline, numerous workhouse narratives suggest that dirt lurked beneath an outer veneer of sanitation. Typically associated with health and morality, cleanliness acquires new meanings of cruelty and deception. Moreover, the idea of the poor as naturally dirty is often destabilised. Within a society that reviled dirt, in representations of the workhouse it is often the institution itself that imposes uncleanliness upon the poor and pushes them into behaviour that is then labelled as dirty. By making the poor fulfil this socially-ascribed role, the workhouse implicitly justifies the cruel treatment of the poor within the institution. An examination of the workhouse space through the lens of cleanliness and dirt reveals the social and politically-charged values that informed the representation of the poor in the nineteenth century.



## Bibliography

‘A Few Weeks from Home : Visit to Workhouses’, *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, 13 February 1841, pp. 29–30.

‘A Satisfactory Workhouse’, *Punch*, 7 December 1867, p. 236.

Bashford, Alison, *Purity and Pollution: Gender, Embodiment and Victorian Medicine* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

Chadwick, Edwin, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, ed. M. W. Flinn [1842] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965).

‘Chorlton Board of Guardians’, *Manchester Times*, 29 November 1856, p. 7.

‘Correspondence’, *Lancet*, 1 February 1868, pp. 176–177.

Crowther, M. A., *The Workhouse System 1834–1929: The History of an English Social Institution* (London: Methuen, 1983).

‘Destitution in the Metropolis’, *London Journal*, 26 February 1848, pp. 412–413.

Donovan, Stephen and Matthew Rubery, *Secret Commissions: An Anthology of Victorian Investigative Journalism*, eds. Stephen Donovan and Matthew Rubery (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2012).

Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: ARK, 1989).

‘Fast and Humiliation; or Sick Beasts v. Sick Paupers’, *Punch*, 7 April 1866, p. 142.

*First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales*, Ordered, by the House of Commons, to be Printed, 10 August 1835.

Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991).

Frankel, Oz, *States of Inquiry: Social Investigations and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the United States* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2006).

Freedgood, Elaine, ‘Banishing Panic: Harriet Martineau and the Popularization of Political Economy’, *Victorian Studies*, 39:1 (1995), pp. 33–55.

Freeland, Natalka, ‘The Politics of Dirt in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 42:4 (2002), pp. 799–818.

Gilbert, Pamela K., ‘Medical Mapping: The Thames, the Body, and *Our Mutual Friend*’, in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust and Modern Life*, eds. William A. Cohen

and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 78–102.

Goodlad, Lauren, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

Greenwood, James, 'A Night in a Workhouse', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 January 1866, pp. 9–10.

Greenwood, James, 'A Night in a Workhouse', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 January 1866, p. 10.

Joshi, Priti, 'Edwin Chadwick's Self-Fashioning: Professionalism, Masculinity, and the Victorian Poor', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32:2 (2004), pp. 353–370.

Koven, Seth, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

Long, Jane, *Conversations in Cold Rooms: Women, Work and Poverty in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Northumberland* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1999).

Martineau, Harriet, *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated: The Hamlets. A Tale* (London: Charles Fox, 1833).

Morrison, Kathryn, *The Workhouse: A Study of Poor-Law Buildings in England* (Swindon: English Heritage at the National Monuments Record Centre, 1999).

O'Connor, Erin, *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture* (London; Durham, N. C: Duke University Press, 2000).

Poovey, Mary, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Price, Kim, *Medical Negligence in Victorian Britain: The Crisis of Care under the English Poor Law, C. 1834-1900* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

*Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws, Ordered by the House of Commons to be Printed, 21 February 1834.*

Stallard, J. H., *The Female Casual and her Lodging: With a Complete Scheme for the Regulation of Workhouse Infirmaries* (London: Saunders, Otley, 1866).

Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986).

Thackeray-Ritchie, Anne, *Jack the Giant-Killer, Cornhill Magazine*, November 1867, pp. 589-608.

Thackeray-Ritchie, Anne, *Jack the Giant-Killer, Cornhill Magazine*, December 1867, pp. 739–760.

‘The Chorlton Board of Guardians’, *Manchester Times*, 20 December 1856, p. 4.

‘The Chorlton Union Workhouse’, *Manchester Times*, 22 November 1856, p. 7.

‘The Chorlton Guardians and their Workhouse’, *Manchester Times*, 6 December 1856, p. [7].

“‘The Lancet’ Commission to Inquire into the State of Workhouse Hospitals’, *Lancet*, 15 April 1865, p. 410.

‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses. Country Workhouse infirmaries. No. V. Walsall Workhouse, Staffordshire’, *Lancet*, 9 November 1867, pp. 585–586.

‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses: Reports of the Commissioners; No. 1.; Metropolitan Infirmaries’, *Lancet*, 1 July 1865, pp. 14–22.

‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses. Reports of the Commissioners. No. III. Metropolitan Infirmaries. St Leonard’s, Shoreditch’, *Lancet*, 29 July 1865, pp. 131–133.

‘Two Hours at a Union Workhouse’, *Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, 9 October 1841, pp. 397–398.

‘Visit to an English Workhouse’, *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, 23 September 1837, p. 277.

Wythen Baxter, G. R., *The Book of the Bastiles; or, the History of the Working of the New Poor Law* (London: J. Stevens, 1841).